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CASE STUDY

Chapter 20

Inclusivity and Religious Heritage in a Dutch St. Martin Celebration: A Helmet without a Cross

WELMOED F. WAGENAAR

St. Martin on the Rise

Every year in the early evening of November 11, the streets of various Dutch villages and neighborhoods are lit up by moving little lights. It is the evening of St. Martin's Day, where—similar to Halloween—young children go from door-to-door while carrying paper lanterns, singing special songs in exchange for candy or a tangerine.¹ Over the ages, St. Martin celebrations have taken various shapes and forms throughout Europe. In the Netherlands, the tradition became common in the northern and north-western provinces, as well as some locations in the south. In recent decades, however, there is a surprising rise in the popularity of St. Martin: more and more places celebrate the feast, and in several cities the celebrations are rapidly expanding.

In the context of religious heritage, Dutch St. Martin celebrations provide an interesting case study. In the Netherlands, the St. Martin feast has long since lost its religious connotations. Rather, the lantern walking is viewed as a “real Dutch” folk practice. Yet, as this chapter shows, the Christian provenance of St. Martin turns out to be rather tenacious in that heritage custodians feel they need to deal with it in some way—especially in the highly political heritage landscape of today. Looking at the local Utrecht St. Martin celebrations specifically, I describe how its heritage custodians deal with the Christian history in their quest to make the feast an inclusive heritage for all. I reflect on the choices they make, the reasons behind those choices, and their effects. Specifically, I aim to show how a secular stance of “a-religiosity” is neither neutral nor fully inclusive, as it leaves more room for some meanings and interpretations than others.

The Heritagization of Religion

One of the best examples of the current popularization of St. Martin can be found in Utrecht, the biggest Dutch city with St. Martin as its patron saint. Under the header “Feast of Sharing,” the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations have become an important, week-long event on the city's

annual festivities calendar. An increasing number of children go “walk the lights” (*lichies lope*) on November 11, and a variety of rituals and practices take place throughout the city in the weeks leading up to St. Martin’s Day. Next to the traditional lantern walking, festivities include lantern and music workshops, guided St. Martin city walks, concerts, lectures, theatrical performances, and story-telling events. Dialogue sessions are part of the program too, as are solidarity awards and charity events like collection campaigns for local food banks. The highlight of the celebrations is the Saint Martin Parade, a spectacular event drawing in thousands of people every year since its first edition in 2011. Over the course of two hours, this extravaganza travels through Utrecht’s medieval city center, parading brass bands, choirs, performance acts, and enormous light sculptures made from willow branches and white rice paper, carried around by the city’s local communities who made them.

The Utrecht St. Martin celebrations are remarkable not just because of their size; in 2012, the celebrations became inscribed on the UNESCO-associated Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands. This development fits a broader trend in Europe where religious objects, practices, and places become valuable because of their heritage status. Once important because of their religious meanings, they are now valued for the historical and cultural meanings they carry for specific communities or even humanity as a whole. In this context, the meaning of religious feasts, traditions, and rituals in the Netherlands is changing. Feasts like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are increasingly lifted up as “(Judeo-)Christian heritage” and perceived as being intrinsic to Dutch culture and identity (Van den Hemel 2017a, b; Meyer 2019). In addition, both heritage formations and religious traditions are increasingly the subject of heated debates about what (and subsequently, who) counts as “truly Dutch.” In part as a consequence of this, the Netherlands sees a broadly shared sense of protectiveness toward Christian holidays, including a growing anxiety about a perceived decline in knowledge about the “true meanings” of these holidays.²

These and similar developments in both the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe spurred the international research program *HERILIGION: The Heritagization of Religion and Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe*.³ In the context of this project, I did ethnographic research on the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations in the period from September 2018 to August 2019. I participated in a variety of activities and events, talked informally to practitioners and organizers, conducted interviews with key stakeholders and custodians, and analyzed policy papers and promotional material of parties involved in the celebrations, such as subsidy providers. Before moving on to present the challenges the heritage custodians of this particular heritage face and their responses to them—which includes the rather surprising comeback of religion as a topic of concern—first some background is provided about the St. Martin feast as it has developed in the Netherlands.

The History and Secularization of St. Martin

St. Martin of Tours (c. 316–397) is a Christian saint who was widely worshipped throughout Europe during the Early and High Middle Ages. He is probably best known for the legend of him sharing his cloak with someone in need. When the young Martin was stationed in the French town of Amiens as a soldier of the Roman army, he saw a beggar sitting by the city gates. The weather was dreadfully cold, and so Martin grabbed his sword, cut his cloak in half, and gave half

of it away to the shivering man on the ground. The story goes that in the night that followed, Jesus revealed himself to Martin in a dream, wearing the piece of cloak Martin had given away. In awe of this experience, the young soldier got baptized and left the army not long after. In the years that followed, he is said to have traveled through Europe to convert people to Christianity and destroy pagan temples and imagery. Ultimately, Martin settled as a monk near the area of Poitiers, established several monasteries, and became bishop of Tours around 370. He would maintain that position until his death on November 8, 397. His name day would be celebrated for centuries to come in various European countries on or around the date of his burial, November 11 (Nissen and Rose 1997: 12–15, 20).

Many of the rituals and practices that take place on November 11 are a symbolic reflection of St. Martin's charity. But whereas in the Middle Ages this charity was viewed as a Christian virtue, the St. Martin feast lost its religious character in the Netherlands after the sixteenth century. As a result of the Reformation, Protestant ministers sought to bring a halt to all Catholic celebrations. They failed miserably in their attempts, however, as popular feasts continued to be celebrated among the people. Unsurprisingly, the massively popular St. Martin was one of these feasts. The once Catholic celebration came to be viewed as a public folk festival, with St. Martin as "saint of the people" (*volksheilige*) rather than a Catholic figure (Helsloot 2001: 502, 508). Because of this, St. Martin's denominational character and the accompanying religious connotations gradually disappeared to the background: St. Martin became secularized.⁴

In the beginning of the twentieth century, folklorists started to describe St. Martin as part of Dutch folklore. St. Martin songs and lantern walking (preferably with hollowed beets) came to be viewed as authentic folk practices that had nothing to do with religion, instead being meaningful and worthy of respect because of their long history. From the 1920s onward, the feast developed from an event for the poor into an exciting evening for children. Kids were allowed to enter the streets to collect candy as soon as evening fell. At first, this happened freely, but after various disturbances in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s by older youth, St. Martin became more organized and focused on young age groups (Helsloot 2001: 498–503). The feast had become a locally celebrated tradition characterized by lanterns, special songs, and bags full of candy—religious connotations were nowhere to be found.

A New Meaning as Inclusive Heritage

The city of Utrecht has a remarkable relationship with St. Martin. While St. Martin is the city's patron saint and big celebrations were held in his name in the Middle Ages, the feast had almost completely disappeared from the highly Calvinist city in the eighteenth century. Interest gradually returned in the twentieth century, but it would take until 1986 before the city's cathedral, Dom Church (dedicated to St. Martin but in the hands of Protestants since 1580), would officially reinstate the feast (Breij 1988: 35–6). The popularity of lantern walking grew, but there was not much that distinguished the celebrations in Utrecht from those in other places in the Netherlands where St. Martin was celebrated. This, however, changed in the twenty-first century.

Chris van Deventer (1938–2016) was a pastoral worker from Utrecht who had always felt a deep affinity toward St. Martin. He believed that many of Utrecht's inhabitants no longer knew the story of the saint and worried about St. Martin losing its meaning in the city. In an attempt to change this, Van Deventer established the St. Martin's Assembly in 2001. The Assembly

developed into a working group of volunteers⁵ that started organizing special events and began promoting St. Martin activities that still existed within the city, such as lantern walking and small lantern processions that were organized in some neighborhoods. They are still doing this today, with the goal to “preserve the tradition and philosophy (*gedachtegoed*) of St. Martin and translate them to contemporary, modern society” and deploy them as a “unifying element in modern, pluriform society” (Sint Maarten Utrecht 2019; translation WW). For the Assembly, the choice to make this translation has been essential. In an interview published in the magazine *Immaterieel Erfgoed*, Van Deventer explained:

Saint Martin was of course a Catholic saint from the fourth century, long before the church split. But we believe his meaning transcends the religions. Saint Martin stands for the universal values of solidarity, peace, sharing together and is a feast of light. Feasts of light exist in many religions. We try to propagate that the spirit of Saint Martin goes beyond religions and politics. (Meier 2014: 47; translation WW)

In other words, the St. Martin’s Assembly views St. Martin as someone who is of value to everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, or religious background—a source of inspiration for an inclusive and meaningful folk feast.

What does this translation look like in practice? The Assembly chose to put the moral value of sharing, as materialized in St. Martin’s act of sharing his cloak, at the heart of the celebrations. This, they argue, is the essence of St. Martin and the foundation of his heritage. It also has the added advantage that it opens the door for a large variety of parties to join in on the celebrations. The Assembly actively approaches other organizations to organize activities and join what they call the “Feast of Sharing.” In 2007, this resulted in two of the city’s music centers organizing a small parade in one of the city’s districts. The event formed the basis of the Saint Martin Parade, as the city now knows it. In 2011, a broad range of city institutions cooperated in organizing the Parade’s first official edition, which in the years that followed quickly grew in prominence and size and turned St. Martin into a central event on the city’s annual festivities calendar. By expanding St. Martin with activities surrounding topical issues like diversity and economic inequality (e.g., via dialogue sessions, workshops in neighborhoods, and charity events), the Assembly has succeeded in turning the St. Martin celebrations from “just” a candy-focused children’s festivity into a dynamic and relevant event.

This brings us to the celebrations’ heritage status. In light of the expansion of Utrecht’s St. Martin feast since 2001, the Assembly managed to lobby for and successfully admit the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations to the UNESCO-associated Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands in 2012. This Inventory is a list of cultural practices, rituals, and events recognized by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is the organization that by order of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for putting into practice the 2012 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The center coordinates on a national level who is admitted to (and remains on) the Inventory and monitors the safeguarding of the listed heritage, whereas the actual safeguarding is being done by the heritage communities themselves. In the case of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations, the official custodian of this—now formally recognized—heritage became the St. Martin’s Assembly.

The Politics of Heritage and the Burden Called Religion

The heritagization of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations should be understood in relation to a broader (inter)national heritage landscape in which specific discourses, vocabularies, and (emotional) registers dominate (Bendix 2009; Van de Port and Meyer 2018: 12). Academics see heritage formation as a dynamic process in which a community—often via representatives, such as the St. Martin’s Assembly—repeatedly has to answer the question which buildings, artefacts, or practices are valuable to their own culture and therefore in need of preservation. This can result in custodians being required to translate material and immaterial aspects of a site or practice into cultural heritage values within broader societal or even global frameworks (see, e.g., Van den Hemel, Saleminck, and Stengs 2022: 5–6).

It is in the process of establishing St. Martin’s broadly shared history and relevance that the subject of religion makes its remarkable comeback in the Utrecht celebrations. Even though the majority of Dutch people no longer view St. Martin as a religious feast, the St. Martin’s Assembly and its partners are deeply concerned with St. Martin’s Christian origins and history. Van Deventer’s quote earlier, for instance, shows how he explicitly mentions the saint’s Catholic provenance, only to mirror it against the story of the Assembly in which, St. Martin stands for universal values. In interviews I held with Rien Sprenger, one of the central figures of the current St. Martin’s Assembly, and Paul Feld, artistic leader of the Sharing Arts Society (SAS), the art center responsible for the organization of the Saint Martin Parade, religion also got mentioned as an influential factor in the formation of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations as inclusive heritage. And a complicated one at that: both described St. Martin’s Christian provenance as an “obstacle” or potential “limitation.” Crucially, this notion got shaped by the current heritage landscape.

Firstly, the Assembly and the SAS worry that openly Christian elements and interpretations of St. Martin risk ostracizing non-religious or non-Christian people. Dutch society is one of the most secularized societies in the world. Since the 1950s, there has been a steady decline of organized religion; only 49 percent of the Dutch population today says they belong to a religious group and no more than one in six people regularly attends religious services (CBS 2018). These numbers include people who are not Christian, but Muslim or of other religious affiliations. In addition, it is a broadly shared view in the Netherlands, especially among those who experienced obligatory church attendance as a burden, that “religion” is synonymous with dogma, restriction, and religious institution. For many Dutch people, religion is—or at the very least has a serious inclination to be—exclusionary. Painting a too Christian picture of St. Martin Sprenger, and Feld fear, could result in exclusion and with that, potential controversy. This is something they absolutely want to avoid.

Secondly, there is the importance of finances. Religious elements can quickly become risky for the existence of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations due to what I call the “politics of funding.” Briefly put, heritage custodians like the Assembly and the SAS are highly dependent on subsidies obtained from institutions such as the municipality of Utrecht, the national Dutch Cultural Participation Fund, and local funding associations. To receive funding from these parties, organizations are required to pay attention to cultural diversity or need to make events accessible to a broad public. Religious activities, from the viewpoint that religion is exclusionary, do not match this criterium. Moreover, state-related institutions generally do not financially support religious activities on the premise that it goes against the Dutch separation of church and state.

Custodians therefore have to carefully manage the topic of religion in order to reduce the danger of being associated with or understood as religious practice.

In other words, to safeguard the broad societal relevance and financial resources—and with that, the existence—of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations, the Assembly and the SAS have to play it smart. They need to continuously navigate existing viewpoints and criteria surrounding religion and have to carefully think through any religious element or (potential) religious interpretation St. Martin may have. How does this manifest in practice?

A Secular Veil of Universality

The Assembly and its partners explicitly frame St. Martin as an “a-religious” feast. For them, this does not mean they are *anti*-religious, as they would never deny St. Martin’s religious origins and welcome religious communities to participate in the celebrations. Instead, they view this a-religious stance as a neutral position in which Christian expressions can be present, but should never figure too prominently or be overtly visible in ritual events like the Saint Martin Parade. In their attempt to be neutral toward religion, they have created what could be described as a “veil” to conceal religious elements just enough to keep them confined to the background. The veil that hides religion is, as argued below, a secular framework of universality that is only *perceived* as a political and social neutrality, which can lead to its own tensions.

The secular framework reveals itself most clearly in the Saint Martin Parade. Every year, the start sign of the Parade is given by a government official (in 2018, it was the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science) and its yearly theme is based on one of seventeen United Nations Global Goals: sustainable development goals that, according to the UN website, are meant to “build a better future for everyone” (The Global Goals 2019). Furthermore, the website of the SAS describes St. Martin as the “Roman soldier Martin,” a “worldwide icon” (Sharing Arts Society 2019). There is no mention of his saintly status, Jesus’ appearance to him, or any other religious element. This secularized interpretation of St. Martin becomes materialized in the *pièce de résistance* of the Parade: a larger-than-life light sculpture of St. Martin on horseback. The sculpture portrays an abstract representation of Martin as a soldier with a helmet and cloak. Any signs of Christianity, such as a cross or clerical clothing, have deliberately been left out. As Sprenger explained in an interview, “For a moment the cross does not go on the helmet, because for a moment, he [Martin] belongs to and is there for everyone.”

The careful, almost apprehensive attitude toward religion in the Christian, institutional sense of the word was something that kept emerging during the fieldwork. One relevant example is the story-telling event in the Utrecht Archive on November 10, 2018. Here, an actor gave a colorful account of St. Martin’s life story, including the dream encounter with Jesus. The actor explained this as Martin “hearing a voice” that told him that he had “done well.” When I asked him about it afterward, the actor explained that the appearance of Jesus was “too Christian” for his taste. During a guided tour of the city’s famous cathedral Dom Tower, I encountered yet another form of apprehensiveness. The guide told visitors openly about St. Martin’s religious past, but afterward explained to me that it is important to “not present certain things as fact,” because “you don’t want to preach.” Similarly, when I was present at the first official meeting of the network of Dutch St. Martin cities, representatives discussed tactics for applying for funding, concluding that it is sometimes better to refer to St. Martin as a “*schutspatroom*” (a patron) rather

than a “*beschermheilige*” (a patron *saint*). This is in order to prevent the possibility of triggering religious associations.

Thus, the custodians of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations and their associated parties approach St. Martin’s religious history cautiously and appear to be constantly on guard for an overtly Christian approach. However, a secular frame of meaning is not neutral and can result in complex situations and challenges just as much as religious frames of meaning (e.g., Engelke 2012).⁶ When the Utrecht based Dutch national museum for Christian Art and Heritage, Museum Catharijneconvent, proposed that two of the St. Martin relics they have on display be incorporated into the Saint Martin Parade, the SAS and the Assembly reacted hesitantly. One problem was that one of the relics, the Hammer of St. Martin, reminds of St. Martin’s past as a destroyer of pagan imagery—not exactly fitting to the narrative of Martin as an open and inclusive figure. More importantly, however, Sprenger clarified to me that incorporating relics might result in an event too similar to a religious procession. At the same time, references to religious traditions without Christian roots, such as the Hindu light feast Diwali, were enthusiastically embraced from the perspective of inclusivity. This seems to indicate a religious bias. Moreover, the strategy of a-religiosity sometimes resulted in anachronistic statements about St. Martin’s religious past. In the minutes of a meeting between stakeholders of the Parade of 2019, for example, Feld was quoted stating that the medieval St. Martin feast was “the biggest annual outdoor feast ... owned by the guilds, thus owned by the city and therefore secular.” This was a misconception that had to be corrected afterwards.⁷

Conclusion: Religion and Inclusive Heritage

The Utrecht St. Martin celebrations demonstrate that religion continues to play an important role in contemporary heritage management, even when it concerns heritage that has long since lost its religious connotations. In a society where many associate religion with institution and dogma, where religious feasts and traditions have become the subject of heated public debates about national identity, and where a heritage’s (financial) right to exist depends on broad societal relevance, religion has become a risk factor. In the case of the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations, it is Christianity in particular that causes hesitance and that does not seem to resonate with the custodians’ perception of what it means to create an inclusive form of heritage in the Netherlands. In other words, even though the Netherlands sees a growing anxiety about a perceived decline of knowledge about Christian holidays, religious dimensions of heritage are also treated with extreme caution.

Again and again, the parties behind the Utrecht St. Martin celebrations have to answer the question: how do we deal with St. Martin’s Christian provenance in an inclusive immaterial heritage? What does it mean to be truly inclusive? Their solution has been to centralize the moral value of sharing and to translate and incorporate this value in a variety of St. Martin activities, giving the feast an alluring meaning and relevance and opening it up to a broad range of participating organizations. Moreover, in the attempt at making it a heritage for all, they feel the need to explicitly frame St. Martin as an “a-religious” feast, presenting it instead through a secular framework of universality. While this in many ways turned out to be a successful and sometimes necessary move, the attempts to veil religion sometimes lead to situations and challenges that seem biased against Christian interpretations and meanings of St. Martin. Despite

this being in no way the intention of the celebrations' custodians, as a case study it does reveal the power with which secular frames of reference impose themselves upon the contemporary heritage landscape and shows how challenging it is to create a truly inclusive heritage. It asks heritage custodians to adopt a dynamic approach that is not just dynamic but also dares to push the boundaries of a landscape where specific registers and frames of meaning are privileged over others, shaped by the economics and politics of heritage.

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Notes

- 1 The lantern walking also occurs in the form of processions, and bonfires too were for a long time part of Dutch St. Martin celebrations, for example, in and surrounding Amsterdam (Lauvrijs 2004: 260–2).
- 2 Cultural elements increasingly became symbolic of national identity after the Second World War. Sociologists Jan Willem Duyvendak, Peter Geschiere, and Evelien Tonkers (2016) call this process the "culturalization of citizenship." Citizenship has become less understood in terms of political and social rights and more as being about cultural values, norms, and practices. Because of this development, ritual practices and feasts have become extra powerful in establishing group identity and defining the boundaries of groups (e.g., Stengs 2012).
- 3 For more information about the project and the different (inter)national case studies, see www.heriligion.eu. The Dutch research team partnered for this project with Museum Catharijneconvent, the Utrecht-based Dutch national museum for the art, culture, and history of Christianity in the Netherlands.
- 4 The development of St. Martin is in this regard comparable to that of the Dutch *Sinterklaas* or St. Nicholas feast, although in contrast to St. Martin, *Sinterklaas* would become a nationwide celebration (see, e.g., Balkenhol and Van den Hemel 2018: 9–10).
- 5 Initially, the St. Martin's Assembly consisted of representatives of different cultural and religious organizations, such as the Utrecht Archive, the Tourist Information Office, and protestant and catholic church parishes. Over time, this model disappeared, and at the time of this research the Assembly was run by eleven volunteers, many of them with personal religious backgrounds but primarily active in the city's cultural sector. The Assembly is part of the Association Saint Martin, a (slightly) broader organization that also organizes the annual Open Garden Day Utrecht.
- 6 Although secular positions are often viewed as politically and socially neutral rather than as anti-religious (Engelke 2012: 161), this viewpoint is not a universal one. Rather, it is a perspective deeply grounded in the typical European, post-Enlightenment separation between church and state. This separation resulted in religion being viewed as something that belongs to the private domain, whereas the public domain is assumed to be secular (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994).

- 7 When the minutes of the meeting were sent around, Museum Catharijneconvent rightfully commented on this statement by saying: “This is factually incorrect, in the Middle Ages the concept ‘secular’ did not yet exist, everyone and everything (thus also the city) was Christian.” Feld agreed to remove the “and therefore secular” from the minutes; the “statement without the conclusion” was fine.

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