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Review: Wiseman, Graham: Corporate Designing Religion. Transforming the Visual Identities of Religious Institutions in the Digital Era

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Aizhana Khasanova

Reviewed Work

Graham, Wiseman. 2023. Corporate Designing Religion. Transforming the Visual Identities of Religious Institutions in the Digital Era. Vienna: LIT Verlag. 452 pages, 54,90 €, ISBN: 978-3-643-91241-1.

In his book, religious scientist Graham Wiseman explores a topic that is rarely approached in the field of Religious Studies—how contemporary religious institutions use corporate design to construct and communicate their identity. This study, part of Wiseman's doctoral project at the Paris-Lodron University in Salzburg, combines his background in graphic design with Religious Studies, making a significant contribution to the field.

Corresponding Author: Aizhana Khasanova, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, aizhana.khasanova@ruhr-uni-bochum.de. Um diesen Artikel zu zitieren: Khasanova, Aizhana. 2024. » Review: Wiseman, Graham: Corporate Designing Religion. Transforming the Visual Identities of Religious Institutions in the Digital Era« Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft 19 | 2024. S. 83-88. DOI: 10.71614/zjr.v19i1.1582

The author's question is how and to what extent corporate visual design influences the identity of religious institutions in the digital era. The author follows Pnina Werbner's definition of identity as a way of »approaching difference,« a discourse of »boundaries, relatedness, and otherness, on the one hand, and encompassment and inclusiveness, on the other« (p. 2). Corporate identity and its relation to design are central to his investigation. Corporate design, he argues, helps an organization facilitate itself and gather its members through a sense of belonging (p.15) by incorporating rationally chosen meaningful symbols (pp. 20-47).

The author posits that religious organizations increasingly use design to shape their identities, reaffirm existing communities, and attract new members through branding. Wiseman's holistic approach examines four influential areas of visual design. First, visual representations of religion can potentially communicate organizational identity through rationalized choice of logo. Second, branding activities influence the adaptability of religious institutions to changes and, as a result, how visible they are to different demographic groups. Modern design can be a way to appeal to new, younger audiences (pp. 48-60). Thirdly, religious institutions need to follow the transformations of communication methods happening with the development of digital technologies by, for example, recognizing the role of the designer as an essential link in the construction of reality or navigating the affordances and challenges of digital substitution of religious symbols (pp. 74-100). Last, religious institutions need to comply with ethical standards of design, the application of which can enforce or impede the communication of institutional identity (pp. 100-117).

To aid this ambitious project, the author includes cases from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and the UK, covering Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and a multi-religious facility. The data consists of literature on historical benchmarks of religious and institutional identity; the official institutional documentation regulating communication and marketing activities; interview data with the representatives of communication departments of the selected organizations; selected digital visual content produced by the institutions, e.g., logo and images; and focus-group interviews with members of the institutions to investigate their perception of institutional visual strategies (pp. 128-146). Graham Wiseman followed the principles of semiotic analysis of visual elements outlined by C. S. Peirce's theory of signs and R. Barthes's semiotic structuralist approach – well-justified methods in the light of identity is primarily constructed through language¹.

¹ Ringrow, Helen. 2021. Identity. In: *Analysing Religious Discourse*, ed. by Stephen Pihlaja, 276 – 291. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

One of the most significant findings of the research is that religious organizations perceive branding and corporate design as necessary instruments generating tangible and intangible capital, similar to commercial institutions (p. 377). Logo design provides institutions with a means of expressing their identity, creating a bond between their members, and representing themselves to the outside world. By using meaningful visual elements, some of which required previous knowledge for understanding, institutions outline their boundaries and establish a commitment to a particular strand of faith and tradition. Visual design elements, therefore, act as tools for negotiating visibility – a way to acquire presence and recognition in the overall context². At the same time, Wiseman observes that the adoption of corporate design strategies leads religious institutions to engage in reflective processes of redefinition of their substance (p. 377). Design elements embody a spectrum of spiritual, communal, and political ideals. These elements have the power to resonate with or repel diverse audiences, influencing their responses to the institution. By carefully crafting design elements, the author argues, religious institutions communicate their core values and engage with various stakeholders while also potentially sparking debate or controversy among different audience segments. Interestingly, the findings show that despite design elements being formed in resemblance to traditional religious symbols, such as the Christian cross, their meaning and function are mostly not perceived as sacred by institutions and community members (p. 379). Thus, corporate design fulfills a different function compared to other forms of visual religious culture, as indicated by David Morgan³. While design elements can construct a sense of community through shared symbols and influence thought and behaviour, they are not considered capable of representing or communicating with the divine. For instance, the Christian cross in a religious institution's logo evokes associations with its religious tradition and organizational history, but it is not perceived as possessing divine power, unlike a cross placed in a church.

Notably, the research indicates the shifts of authority and agency in the construction of institutional identity. For one, it returns to the long-lasting discussion of the role of the artist in creating value-imbued signs and images. The importance of communication departments in the process of visual identity construction was evident from the restructuring processes witnessed at the investigated institutions. Questions of modern look and appeal often prevail in the design process, indicating the importance of the expertise of a designer. Additionally, the organizations face the challenge of resolving the dichotomy between national and regional levels: enforcing a

²Brighenti, Andrea. 2007. "Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences." *Current Sociology* 55 (3): 323–342.

³Morgan, David. 2014. *The Sacred Gaze. Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 55.

unified design or allowing diversity and self-expression on a local level. This emphasizes the role communities play in forming organizational identity. Wiseman notes that the lack of a unified design threatens institutional integrity and purposes of broader identification. At the same time, the engagement of local communities in decision-making and construction of visual identity allows for higher recognition and acceptance of design symbols (pp. 380-382). The issue is also evident in the use of images in institutional digital media. Responsible content production dictates the careful application of images displaying persons, for which reason many institutions opt for stock photos and de-personalized images. Importantly, Graham Wiseman points out how such a choice leaves community members outside the view, making the self-identification of individuals with the institution more complicated (p. 388).

The investigation concludes by presenting the religious Branding Compass, indicating four modes of visual identity strategies: tradetic, neoetic, neotradetic, and genetic. The model is a solid theoretical tool for recognizing the diversity of institutional design strategies. It also suggests the allowances and challenges of each strategy in communicating with religious communities and the wider society. Tradetic defines a traditional, conventional symbol choice, such as a cross in Christian traditions or other symbols well-known in particular geographical areas. Neoetic strategies appear when an institution introduces completely new visual markers; it is a sign of a fresh beginning or a new image direction, which requires getting familiar with new representations. Such design points towards the innovativeness of an institution, but it also puts it under the pressure of unacceptance by its members. Neotradetic strategy applies branding techniques to traditional images – it transforms historical visual identities with the means of modern design techniques to make them more appealing to contemporary audiences. Genetic strategy implies developing an established brand identity when recognizable organizational logos change only insignificantly following design trends (pp. 408-412). The author recognizes the fluidity of the categories of the compass and its ability to invoke variations of interpretations of corporate design features. Nevertheless, the categories underlie the directions that religious institutions chose to pursue to communicate their self-perception using visual tools.

In addition to the advantages mentioned earlier, a few limitations could be of significance for further research in this field. Firstly, as the author also acknowledges, while applying the interpretive semiotic approach to analyse visual design components can significantly deepen understanding of organizational meaning communication, the approach also allows for the considerable engagement of researcher bias (p. 133). While the author made all attempts to disclose his judgment and professional designer opinion, this necessity underscores the importance of developing a consistent approach in the analysis of visual digital content of religious institutions

to ensure the reproducibility of research results. By establishing standardized methods for analysing visual digital content, researchers can enhance the reliability and validity of their findings, advancing our understanding of how religious institutions communicate their identities through digital media. Secondly, to understand the impact of design on the identity of religious institutions through time, it would have been helpful to expand the overview of historical religious symbols in the chapter named Case Study Findings with the investigation into how these symbols were strategically chosen by institutions and what they meant for their social and political standpoint. Thirdly, while this study provides valuable insight into the visual identity of national and regional religious institutions, it does not address smaller or more marginal organizations. The present investigation already points to the differing institutional agendas that can be dictated by their size and structure. A further comparison of institutions in different socio-economic contexts (e.g., outside of Europe) and backgrounds (e.g., local or migrant religions) could yield helpful results. In addition, the results of Graham Wiseman's study bear important implications for the practice of religious communities. Precisely, a more profound link between the theory of corporate design of religious institutions and the practice of religious communities could become a significant topic for further investigation. For example, the question arises as to what extent marginalized religious communities can increase their visibility by adapting widespread design identities while sustaining their individuality. Lastly, it would have been desirable to see the author's elaborated opinion on the broader implications of the study, such as how the modern trends in marketing religious institutions are changing the substance of religiosity or whether political and societal questions are becoming more essential for religious institutions moving traditional existential concerns into the background.

Nevertheless, Graham Wiseman's *Corporate Designing Religion* emerges as a valuable addition to the field of Religious Studies. The project offers profound insights into the contemporary landscape of religious institutions by integrating sociology, economics, and the visuality of religion while relying on a solid theoretical and methodological framework. It contributes to our understanding of how religious institutions manage contemporary challenges of religiosity, such as the dropping numbers of religious adherents in Europe, the tensions between tradition and change, and the conditions of religious diversity. It also addresses the question of affordances, in Gibson's terms⁴, of material manifestations of religion in relation to their digital presence. It sheds light on the so far neglected field of how visual design contributes to the social, intellectual, and perceptual construction of the reality of religious

⁴ Gibson, James. J. 1977. The theory of affordances. In: *Perceiving, acting, and knowing*, ed. by Robert Shaw, John Bransford, 67–82. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

institutions. Addressing the discussed limitations could further expand and deepen the implications of the chosen research topic.