

Notre-Dame: some reflections from Ground Zero

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Since I live in the suburbs and do not have a TV, I found out about the fire in much the same way that I found out about the 2015 terrorist attacks: I picked up my phone to discover a series of frantic text messages. For the terrorist attacks, they were mostly “are you OK?” and for the fire it was “I can’t believe what’s happening to Notre-Dame; you must be so upset.” During the evening of April 15, before the fire was under control, I feared along with everyone else that the building was not going to survive the night. Since I came to Paris to study and to teach medieval art, my first thought was that if it didn’t, I’d have to leave.

I have lived in Paris for almost 13 years. I have taken students to Notre-Dame every semester, and I have led countless private tours there as well. I developed my own routine. We’d go inside, admire the monocylindrical columns and the sexpartite vaults. We’d talk about 3-story vs. 4-story elevations. We’d go to the crossing to see one of my favorite statues of all time, the elegant 14th-century “Vierge de Paris.” Then we’d take a look at the Rayonnant rose windows in the transept from the inside. We would head through the ambulatory, looking at the recently cleaned 14th-century relief sculptures of the choir enclosure, contrasting them to the 17th-century woodwork in the interior, and talking about the former choir screen. Further along we’d look at the 2 wooden maquettes of the building, and the hypothetical reconstruction of the original working site. Recently they installed incredibly instructive panels based on the work of Andrew Tallon and Dany Sandron, outlining all of the major phases of the building of Notre-Dame. (Of course now they will have to add a new chapter, post-2019.) Then we’d go outside, and head towards the south transept. The south rose is by far my favorite part of the building, and the best way to understand the Rayonnant style. We’d then go around the back to admire the flying buttresses, impressive even if they aren’t original. The north side offered gargoyles (mostly not original either), and the 2 Theophilus reliefs, not to mention the Porte Rouge. We’d do the best we could with the west façade, although it was always difficult because of the crowds, so we’d see what we could from “ground zero,” the central point at which all distances in France are measured. This was usually a good place to discuss the original polychromy of the façade sculptures and the fate of the Gallery of Kings during and after the French Revolution. The last time I took a class there we all got to see the presentation of the famous relic of the Crown of Thorns. In 2016, I participated in a conference run by the British Archaeological Association organized by Meredith Cohen and Lindy Grant. A privilege rarely granted to those of us who are not architectural historians, we got to see Pierre de Montreuil’s signature on the south transept, to walk through the triforium, and yes, to climb up to the lower roof just above the buttresses for a calm, spectacular view of Paris. In so many ways, Notre-Dame was beginning to feel like it was “mine.”

With one big caveat. As a Jewish American, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame holds no religious significance to me. Although I have attended world premier organ concerts there, I have never attended a Mass. The fire at Notre-Dame made me reflect on the religious minorities of France, and how no monuments define us. For example, the early 20th-century “Grande mosquée de Paris” is located in the eastern part of the 5^e arrondissement; it is in central Paris, but certainly not “the center.” Its minaret is by no means “an iconic part of the Parisian skyline.” The law forbidding the head-scarf in public schools and government buildings makes it perfectly clear that being a practicing Muslim is “not French.” (Police fined two Muslim women for wearing burkinis on the beach a few summers ago, but subsequently French courts decided that they were legal.) If a fire ravaged this mosque, I couldn’t imagine the same kind of discourse—or fundraising—taking place afterwards.

Protestants have had a troubled history in France as well. My father-in-law, a French Huguenot, was always reminded on August 24 of the date of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. Mostly following the Calvinist tradition, French Protestant churches are modest and undecorated. The American Church of Paris, which is Protestant, is one block away from my office in the 7^e arrondissement. Constructed in the early 20th century in the Neo-Gothic style, it has a spire, but one that is easily dwarfed by the Eiffel Tower which is less than a mile away. It is known only by those who live or work in the neighborhood. A number of Protestant churches in France also have many parishioners of color, which is not something that I have observed at Notre-Dame.

The "Grande Synagogue de Paris" is located in the 9^e arrondissement, and its presence served as a comfort for me while I lived in that neighborhood while working on my dissertation research. Constructed in the 19th century in an eclectic, Neo-Byzantine style, it is now classified as a World Heritage site, but it is not "set off" from the street as a separate monument. Most other synagogues in France are forced into even more discretion. In the town where I currently live, the synagogue is a nondescript brick structure tucked away on a side street. Why? Although France has both the oldest and the largest Jewish population in Europe, anti-Semitism, present for centuries, has seen an alarming rise. On the Ile-St.-Louis, the island on the Seine right next to the Ile-de-la-Cité, a bagel shop was recently sprayed with Nazi graffiti. Similar defacements occurred on a poster of Simone Veil, and in a Jewish cemetery in Alsace. And these are just a few incidents from off the top of my head from the past few months. Sadly, if a synagogue in France burned, no one would assume that it was an accident.

Finally, everyone is grateful for the amount of funds that have poured in already to restore Notre-Dame. But this exacerbates the tensions over the huge economic disparities that are currently polarizing the population in France. The one salient theme of the "gilets jaunes" (yellow vest) movement has been dissatisfaction over sharp economic inequalities. As the French billionaire families Pinault and Arnault pledged 100 and 200 million euros respectively, many French people can barely make it to the end of the month with their pay checks, and unemployment remains high. Rather than bringing everyone together, these extraordinary pledges following the Notre-dame fire did nothing to stop the Saturday protests which are in their 23rd week. The situation creates ambivalence: on the one hand, I want as much funding as possible to restore Notre-Dame to magnificence; on the other hand, there are many other people and causes that also need this money very badly.

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame, heavily restored in the 19th century, was already an amalgam of centuries of styles prior to April 15, 2019. Martha Easton and Jennifer Borland have recently emphasized in a *Gesta* article that it is impossible to return to a "true" medieval original. Yet I hope that as much of the standing structure as possible can be preserved, and that the contemporary additions will remain in good taste and will "harmonize the old with the new," as Abbot Suger envisaged for his reconstruction of the abbey church of St.-Denis. President Macron's goal for Notre-Dame to be rebuilt in 5 years—not coincidentally in time for the 2024 Olympics that are scheduled to be held in Paris—seems too hasty to me. Surely restoration/rebuilding decisions for such a significant monument deserve time for serious reflections based on expert opinions from historians, architects, and restorers from all over the world. And important as it is for so many people for so many different reasons, we should also take a moment to remember that Notre-Dame is just one center among many.