

SPIEGEL ONLINE

Our Lady

The Profound Lesson of the Notre Dame Fire

As the flames shot out of the roof of Notre Dame de Paris on Monday evening, a global community of concern quickly formed. It shows that the idea of cultural heritage is much more than just a UNESCO list.

By Ullrich Fichtner



AP

The world watched as Notre Dame burned on Monday evening.

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When the Stari Most, the 16th century bridge in Mostar, fell victim to the Bosnian War, the author Slavenka Drakuli wrote a short but striking essay for the magazine *New Republic*. It was December 1993, and Drakuli described in the piece her emotions when looking at two images from the war. One of them showed the destroyed bridge over the Neretva River, an arch that had been a powerful symbol of the peaceful coexistence of Bosnians and Croats. The second picture was of a dead woman who had been killed in the war. In her essay, Drakuli was trying to find an explanation for why the pain she felt as a result of the demolished bridge was actually greater than her anguish over the woman's death. The answer she arrived at says a lot about the reactions on Monday when flames began pouring out of the roof of Notre Dame in Paris.

The collapse of the Stari Most, Drakuli wrote, made her aware of her own mortality in a way that the dead woman did not. "We expect people to die. We count on our own lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilization is something else. The bridge, in all its beauty and grace, was built to outlive us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity. Because it was the product of both individual creativity and collective experience, it transcended our individual destiny. A dead woman is one of us -- but the bridge is all of us, forever."

Fortunately, nobody died in the dramatic Notre Dame fire on Monday night. But the horror at what many initially feared could be the complete loss of a particularly significant "monument to civilization" spread across the world in an unbelievable outpouring of concern. It was afternoon in North America, evening in Europe, the dead of night in Asia, but time was of no consequence: News broadcasters and websites the world over interrupted their regularly scheduled programming and turned their full attention to Paris.

It wasn't an act of war, there hadn't been a terrorist attack, it wasn't about deaths and injuries, indeed it didn't seem that a crime had been committed at all. It was just an accident, perhaps a short-circuit, a spark at a construction site.

But in the Notre Dame fire, it seems that much more was in flames than just some old beams. Initially, of course, fears focused on the massive structure itself, then on the artworks inside and the invaluable relics. Beyond that, though, the fire very clearly touched on other, immaterial values that seem to be held dear around the world. Values that people manifestly share in common, no matter where they come from or what views they may hold. Something astounding took place on Monday evening: It became clear that humanity's concern about its joint cultural heritage

goes far beyond the carefully curated UNESCO list, rather it is an extremely material, real-life concern.

A Temporary Community

A large, disparate group, one that accurately reflected the urban diversity of Paris, quickly collected near the cathedral on Monday night -- on the quays along the Seine and on the bridges on both sides of Île de la Cité, where the City of Paris was once born. They had all come of their own accord, and they were bonded together in their dismay. Neighbors, locals, travelers, tourists: many just stood silently, others shed tears, still others spoke in myriad different languages into the microphones of TV broadcasters or took selfies of themselves as proof of their presence.

The crowd on the banks of the Seine, the multitudes watching on TV screens around the world, included Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, art aficionados, Confucians, news junkies and gawkers -- and as they stared at the flames, they formed a temporary community. Whether they were aware of it or not, they were connected, standing together on the central square of the global village. Indeed, the term "global village," coined by the Canadian Marshall McLuhan back in 1962, has rarely been as palpable as it was during the church fire on Monday evening.

Were it possible to learn what people were thinking and feeling as they watched the flames, one could produce a rather extensive catalog of all that humanity holds dear in this day and age. Devout Parisian Catholics would no doubt be included, as they spent Monday night worrying about the fate of the circlet of rushes that are held to be from the crown of thorns worn by Jesus as he was crucified. But the crowd also included party-hoppers from around the world, people who likely associate the cathedral more with Walt Disney than with Victor Hugo -- foreigners from far away who couldn't care less about the building's religious import. But they were all concerned about the grand, gray structure nonetheless, almost as if it were a loved-one in peril.



Stéphane Lagoutte/ MYOP/ Laif

Tears flowed on the banks of the Seine.

In an interview with a French newspaper several years ago, the historian Jacques Le Goff said that cathedrals speak both to the cultivated and educated as well as to the simplest among us. "They welcome everybody," Le Goff said, "and everyone can recognize their significance." Indeed, they are "packed" with significance, Le Goff said, with impressions and images. Cathedrals as monuments have the greatest wealth of significance of all, he said, analogous only to significant mosques or temples. "I don't know if it is possible to find anything comparable among modern structures," he said.

The Epitome of Overtourism

Such a broad fascination felt across all levels of society necessarily has unsavory, real-life implications in this era of EasyJet and Airbnb. Until the fire, Notre Dame de Paris hosted between 30,000 and 50,000 visitors each day, 13 million in a year. The church is officially still "*en service*," meaning masses are celebrated there; the cathedral has not been profaned. But unofficially, going to Notre Dame feels like a visit to an extremely worldly carnival. It is the epitome of "overtourism" -- a place that is overpopulated, provides no opportunities for quiet reflection and has made it to the top of global mass-tourism's To Do list. Among TripAdvisor's 2,516 "things to do in Paris," Notre Dame ranks fifth.

Knowledge of the structure's religious or cultural context isn't needed, much less required, to visit the place, though objects are stored here that are among the most valuable in all of Christianity. On this Good Friday, too, Christ's crown of thorns, which is usually locked away, would have been put on display from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. to receive the prayers of the faithful. What, though, is the source of the reverence we continue to have for such objects today? Is it just traditional piety? Is it their legendary renown? Or have such relics merely become props in the Gothically furnished, fictional worlds so hauntingly and beautifully presented by Dan Brown, J.K. Rowling and others?

The "dark" Middle Ages, the gray stone, the pathos, the frankincense, the bestial gargoyles, the grotesque faces: One can assume that church visitors today no longer view such things as spiritual warnings from on high. Before the great fire, Paris tourists may well have seen the trusses and beams of Notre Dame's roof as being akin to the interstices of an exceptionally well-built amusement park ride. And the view from the top really is quite stunning -- no improvement needed from Pixar, Disney, Netflix or HBO.

What, then, did the diverse group of people see on Monday evening? What bonded them together as "*la flèche*," the grand spire, plunged burning into the nave? A sign of defeat? A message from God? A sneer from the Devil? A structural problem? A scene from a film? Did it feel to some like Sept. 11, 2001, feelings of impotence in the face of collapse?

Hyperbole can help understand the world and to recognize the paradigms -- mythological or anthropological -- that we all carry with us. On the day following the fire, many media outlets felt the need to borrow from the expansive stockpile of religious metaphors and newspapers produced headlines of ecclesiastical zeal. "France Bleeding Flames," for example. Or "Flames from the Heart." Or, even more bombastic, as only a tabloid can, the *Berliner Kurier* headline: "Hell Comes for Notre Dame."

But if the Devil was, in fact, involved, he lost once again. The TV teams on the Pont de la Tournelle found themselves jobless on Tuesday, because the fire had been extinguished. The structural substance of the church had been preserved and the first photos from inside the cathedral looked like the metaphors for the Eastertime triumph of God. They showed the undamaged altar and a large, upright cross glowing golden in the light.

A Hidden Triumph

The photos provided a stark contrast to the live reports from the previous evening that had raised fears that everything might be lost. For hours, it seemed as though the flames had turned the interior of the cathedral into a blast furnace. When flames also then appeared in the northern tower, which had been enveloped in darkness until that moment, all hope seemed to be lost. After all, nobody could see that the fire chief had sent 10 of his people into the tower to put out the fire by hand at risk to their lives. It took some time, but they were ultimately successful -- a triumph that couldn't immediately be seen from outside.

Journalists and onlookers alike were gripped by sullenness as they all sought information, but none was forthcoming. Those watching from afar, on television or online via Twitter or livestreams, got a taste for just how hysterical the business of news has become. Video footage, no matter what the occurrence, has become an expected element of coverage. We want to see what's happening immediately, just as soon as we are alerted by the push notification on our mobile devices. But the result is frequently the circulation of fallacies and erroneous conjecture -- and inaccurate, unfiltered information also flooded the information channels on Monday, where it was allowed to remain unchallenged for far too long.



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The Paris fire department, which apparently did their work with impeccable expertise, was blasted in furious online posts for being appallingly incompetent. The world-renowned fire-safety expert Donald J. Trump likewise joined the fray and recommended the use of "flying water tankers." Other gaps in knowledge that

couldn't immediately be filled were plugged by journalists and experts with far-fetched guesswork. In a live interview on the BBC, the writer Ken Follett offered the - incorrect -- certainty that all of the nave arches had collapsed. Desperate TV reporters on site turned up "former" firefighters, who were immediately interviewed as experts -- and many other onlookers with no knowledge of events whatsoever were likewise interviewed. Hours later, it was all nothing but ephemera.

As the week leading up to Good Friday progressed, Victor Hugo's old novel about Notre Dame moved up the Amazon charts in France, ultimately landing at the very top. The book is full of all the quotes that we have been hearing since Monday: the "old queen of our cathedrals" and the church as "a symphony of stone."

Legitimacy from the Rubble

Politicians have apparently been listening to that symphony. French President Emmanuel Macron, who cancelled an important televised speech that had been scheduled for Monday evening, held a completely different address on Tuesday. Such a surfeit of pathos is rare, even for France, even for Macron. But the president, who has struggled to find an answer to the "yellow-vest" protests, apparently hopes that he will be able to construct a new foundation for his legitimacy out of the rubble of the cathedral.

History is full of examples demonstrating the success of such efforts -- old cathedrals are imbued with that mysterious power as well. The reconstruction of Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral following a major fire in 1945 is part of the founding myth of postwar Austria. The restoration of the Duchess Anna Amalia Library in Weimar awakened the civic sensibilities of Germans far beyond the city's borders. Will the rebuilding of Notre Dame help bridge the divide currently running through French society? Will it contribute to a new sense of community? Such a thing cannot be forced. The fragile links that tied together the people in Paris as the light of the flames danced across their faces cannot be imposed from above. Feelings of togetherness cool off quickly if they are not allowed to develop on their own but are instrumentalized by those who stand to benefit.

It also didn't help that France's billionaires immediately began outbidding each other in an auction of vanity with donation pledges of 100 or 200 million euros. They may have meant well, but when it quickly became clear that the pot of donations would soon be crammed with over a billion euros, acid-tongued doubts could be heard as to whether the people of France were needed at all.

That, though, is a debate for the French. More important is the fact that the cathedral is still standing. It is covered in soot, full of rubble and soggy. But it has been saved. And the story of "Nine Centuries of Love," as the magazine *Le Point* headlined it, can continue. Perhaps even more important, though, is the fact that a radically diverse group of people came together out of concern for a building, out of concern for their joint heritage.

A church on Monday became an analog cynosure of stone, wood and lead in our increasingly digitalized lives. Fear spread that this authentic piece of the world could disappear, and with it, a piece of bona fide reality would have vanished. Maybe that's it: Just as real bars of gold used to be hoarded to substantiate the value of money, world-famous, historical monuments are needed today to authenticate all the images, films and postcards -- and the memories and emotions that go along with them. Notre Dame de Paris, as became clearer than ever on Monday, is one of the sources from which humanity derives its strength and validity.

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