

### **MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS IN DIALOGUE III : MUSÉE INTERNATIONALE DE LA RÉFORME GENÈVE, APRIL 18, 2008**

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On Friday, April 18, 2008, the International Association of History Museums organised a visit for museum professionals to the *Musée International de la Réforme* in Geneva, Switzerland.

The museum choice was motivated by the apparent success of this private institution, which was awarded the *Council of Europe Museum of the Year Prize 2007*. The *MIR* presents the complex story of Protestantism, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on the bible and boldly visualising theological disputes. The subject is a difficult one, related as it is to theology and ideology as much as to history. Are presented manuscripts and books, portraits, liturgical objects etc.

The most obvious problem faced by the museum is that the reformation is a theological movement based upon speech and not upon image. Calvin, among the founders of Protestantism, found refuge in Geneva and helped turn it into a focal point of the reformation. The reformers' iconoclast and austere approach towards decoration and art, makes it very difficult for the museum today to present visually attractive objects. In order to make the visitor understand, it has to rely upon text – written and spoken.

The catching and bold introductory multimedia presentation, resembling a documentary film on the reformation, makes the main figures of the reformation, Luther and Calvin, speak for themselves through the voices of comedians. The many facts presented go to a considerable depth, while, in their main points, remaining intelligible to the young and the uneducated. The approach has been accused of being partisan and even sometimes violently so, while the museum, aware of this problem, and with its accumulated experience, is trying to move to a more moderate approach. On the other hand, it also gets negative feedback by hard-line conservative protestant visitors, who accuse it of being too cosmopolitan and ecumenical.

The interesting design and the agreeable atmosphere will help keep a memory of spaces despite the austere character of displayed objects, but is not sufficient for helping the casual visitor get the main knowledge the museum tries to transmit (for example the exciting multimedia presentation of the disputes around "predestination"). The museum certainly demands much intellectual concentration on behalf of the visitor, if he is to understand the issues involved. Placed low in each room are mechanical boxes with moving figures and objects. They display key elements from the discussed theme and make a successful attraction for the young – and for the not-so-young too. Guided visits by specially trained guides are available, and the museum is still in search of further ways to render information simpler, shorter and more immediately comprehensible.

The museum receives no public funding, and thus depends upon intense communication and publicity in order to attract visitors and sponsors. Space is limited to the permanent exhibition, and the first temporary exhibition, due in 2009, will have to find shelter in a temporary construction in the small entrance courtyard. While the building – belonging to the protestant church – is a spacious one, only part of the ground floor and the basement have been allocated to the museum.

On behalf of the IAHM and of all the participants to our third Museum Professionals in Dialogue day, I wish to thank the Musée International de la Réforme for its warm welcome and especially Director Isabelle Graesslé, with whom we spent this enriching day-long tour of the museum. We also thank Professor Olivier Fatio, honorary president and exhibitions commissioner for his fascinating introduction on the museum and on the contentions involved. We are finally grateful to museographers Sylvia Krenz and René Schmid, from the company *Etat des lieux*, who have designed the museum and who were present and willing to answer our questions during the afternoon discussion, as well as to administrative assistant Nicole Boissonnas for all the practical details she took care of.