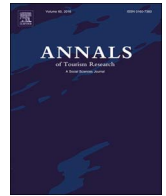


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Research Note

Volunteer tourism and religion: The cult of Mother Teresa

Ranjan Bandyopadhyay

Independent Scholar

Volunteer tourism has lately received a lot of scrutiny. While majority of volunteer tourism studies have acknowledged the significance of volunteer tourism and challenged conventional understandings of socio-economic change in the Global South, the ways in which idea about “religion” flow through volunteer tourism discourses is rarely spoken about. Indeed, religion is an important factor in volunteer tourism. Then why the invisibility of religion in volunteer tourism discourses? Perhaps within a discourse framed around philanthropy to humanitarianism and aid, which is a modern growing trend, raising religion is too disruptive? Or does the silence of religion conceal the complicity of development with religious projects? Encouraged by [Said's \(1979\)](#) work *Orientalism* and [Bhabha \(1983\)](#) and [Spivak's \(1990\)](#) notion of *Post-colonialism*, this research note is part of a larger project understanding the relationship between volunteer tourism and religion in the Global South.

[Van der Veer \(2001, p. 12\)](#) explained, “Missionary movements in nineteenth-century Britain, for example, created a public awareness of the fact that there was a larger world beyond Britain and that British Christians had an imperial duty towards the rest of the world.” In fact, majority of missionaries saw colonialism as a Christian virtue ([Falola, 1998](#)). Alluding to that, [Van Engen \(2000\)](#) and [VerBeek \(2006\)](#) emphasized that evangelism is a main goal of many volunteer tourists today who are more interested in spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching. Influenced by Durkheimian idea, [MacCannell \(1976\)](#) commented on the westerners’ continuous quest for a new paradise which involves a much broader sacralisation process where tourism validates not only the cultural values of societies but also the cosmologies of Christianity. [Bandyopadhyay and Patil \(2017\)](#) added fuel to this sensitive issue by arguing that similar to the role of Christian ideologies which were very active during the colonial times, such ideologies continue to be important in contemporary volunteer tourism practice. It is important to note here how the colonial logics and discourses have shifted over time, from the erstwhile “civilizing mission” to the subsequent mandate for development to contemporary depoliticized social causes such as “saving the environment” in which in the name of voluntourism global North volunteer tourists seek to “save” and “help” the [less fortunate] others in the global South.

[Muehlebach \(2013\)](#) examined this growth of Neoliberalism and its volunteer culture (how socialist volunteers are interpreting their unwaged labor as an expression of social solidarity) as it combines with traditional Catholic practices (how Catholic volunteers think of their volunteering as an expression of charity and love) to oppose extensive market rule and the anti-welfare actions of the government. [Wilson and Janoski \(1995\)](#) found out in their study that among Catholics, the connection between church involvement and volunteering is formed early and remains strong. A prominent example of this is Mother Teresa, then a young woman, was sent on a mission by a Roman Catholic religious order in her homeland Macedonia to serve the poor people in Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) in India. In 1952 in Kolkata, Mother Teresa founded an organization known as Missionaries of Charity to offer palliative care to the poorest of the poor in the city. She won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work and was canonised in September 2016. Apart from Malcolm [Muggeridge's \(1971\)](#) *Something Beautiful for God* that elevated Mother Teresa to sainthood, Dominique [Lapierre's \(1985\)](#) bestseller book and Roland [Joffe's \(1992\)](#) epic direction, *City of Joy* transformed Calcutta in the Euro-American thought as the very exemplar of poverty and filth and this imagery possibly contributed to stimulating it as an attractive opportunity for volunteer tourism.

The data used in this study were collected in the city of Kolkata and its surrounding areas in two consecutive years (i.e., 2016–17) by conducting intensive interviews with western Christian volunteer tourists who were volunteering at different branches of Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa. This study mainly focuses on fieldwork carried out in one such branches ([Fig. 1](#)). Mother Teresa’s work stimulated the growth of voluntourism – she opened her work to thousands of annual volunteers – a model that

E-mail address: ranjanb_27@yahoo.com.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2017.12.006>

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now inspires waves of evangelical trips to India. Today, hundreds from different countries still feel drawn to Mother Teresa and to Catholicism – to work with dying destitutes, orphans, leprosy victims (Mohanka, 2016). Similar to her program, individuals are still enticed by voluntourism organizations to volunteer at Mother Teresa’s place – Kolkata. Two voluntourism organizations based in the UK and US (*Volunteering Journeys* and *GoAbroad*) echoes the following sentiments:

Kolkata is the place where Mother Teresa dedicated her life to the poor. It’s a place of both symbolic and spiritual importance for the philanthropist, or just anyone who wants to give back to poor and disadvantaged communities of the world. As a volunteer in Kolkata, you will be making a difference to the lives of slum children and women trapped in poverty. Walk the footsteps of Mother Teresa and do your bit by working with our dedicated teams in East India’s poorest and most run down slum neighborhoods.

Become part of a highly enriching program in Kolkata, where Mother Teresa spent her life living and working with the poor. You will make a lasting impact on the lives of children and women living in slums and trapped in poverty.

The above quotes explain how mass-media disseminates news relating to miseries, disasters, mass-death even poverty into western imaginaries to remind these audience how special and superior they are (Bandyopadhyay, 2009; Bandyopadhyay & Dann, forthcoming). In a similar vein, Korstanje (2017) talks about “Thana-capitalism” to denote the formation of a new allegory where the “suffering of others” reinforces the western supremacy, which is enmeshed into a visionary discourse of salvation. As a result, we see every year thousands of young adults from the global North (approximately 200,000 young people from the United States alone) flocking to the global South in the name of “helping” the less fortunate by teaching in schools, building orphanages, saving turtles, or nurturing street children (Mostafanezhad, 2013).

The above sentiments were reverberated during the interviews with the young Christian volunteer tourists from the west who were visiting Kolkata to serve the “poorest of the poor.”

“While people from across the world visit Kolkata to support Mother’s cause in serving the poorest of the poor, Spain holds her in special



Fig. 1. One of the branches of Missionaries of Charity (photographs by author).

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