



## To pray and to play: Post-postmodern pilgrimage at Lourdes

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the factors that religious pilgrims draw upon when constructing a personal meaning of their visit to Lourdes. Through an ethnographic examination of twenty-five individuals it finds that their experiences may be characterized by the common themes that comprise 'lived connections', unexpected 'encounters', 'visual' and 'curative' content.

These themes parallel those that feature in the seminal account of Bernadette Soubirous' vision of the Virgin Mary in 1858, which we collectively term 'Echoes of Bernadette'. Those who successfully navigate the apparently contested spaces and interact in meaningful encounters are partaking of a pilgrimage that is rooted in the religious and the historic.

The study provides a contribution to the theory of pilgrimage by declaring that it may be enacted in a post-postmodern duality that accepts the freedom of the individual but recognizes their need for experiences that are grounded in a sociohistorical 'truth'.

### 1. Introduction

Both the practice and the research of pilgrimage have undergone considerable change in the last few decades. The concept of pilgrimage has been extended from one of religious or spiritual inspiration to include many other quasi- and secular forms of tourism (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009), including inter-faith (Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015), literary (Robertson & Radford, 2009), death and war (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Hyde & Harman, 2011; MacConville, 2006), slavery (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015) and sports centered activities (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003; Ritchie & Adair, 2004). Falling attendance at traditional, localised places of worship across all the major faiths (–31% attendance at Catholic Churches between 1990 and 2003 in the UK for example - Faithsurvey, 2017) has been mirrored by a rise in less traditional, individualistic engagement in postmodern touristic-pilgrimage activities to more distant locations (Andriotis, 2011; Badone & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; Palmer & Gallagher, 2007; Reader, 2007). Timothy and Olsen (2006) recognized this transference and noted that contemporary spirituality can now be characterized by experimentation and hybridisation. While religious and spiritual pilgrimage has long been a topic of academic study the shift in practice has been mirrored by a shift in research that has undergone a refocusing from the physical aspects of pilgrimage, and the intended structuration of the experiences

of many, to the study of the qualia of the individual pilgrim (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). However, it is argued that this has resulted in an ironic fixation upon the 'tourist' and a dismissal of the 'pilgrim' and that there is a need to return to attempting to understand the pilgrim's religious identity (Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; Feldman, 2017).

This study recognizes this shift in practice and research focus, and attempts to further our understanding of the factors that individuals draw upon when constructing a personal meaning of their pilgrimage through a micro-ethnographic examination of the 'lived experiences' of twenty-four visitors to Lourdes.

It finds that a sense of *communitas* is formed around a common respect for the preservation and authenticity of Lourdes, and in navigating its spiritual and secular spaces, meaningful experiences are gained by both religious and touristic pilgrims. While the 'actual meanings' that individual visitors derive from their visit are as multitudinous and heterogeneous as the number of visitors themselves, there are several themes that pervade the stories that are frequently told and retold, and thereby indicate the types of content that they draw upon when constructing their account of the meaning of their travels. These themes comprise deeply 'lived connections' that the narrators have with the subject of the story, unexpected 'encounters' whereby events unfolded that were outside the pre-visit expectations of the pilgrim, considerable *visual* content that may even include supernatural visions, and a degree of *curative* or healing and supportive content.

These themes are more than mere descriptions/characteristics of their told and retold lived experiences, they are hermeneutic reflections

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of the site of Lourdes and the apparition of the Virgin Mary. Thus, modern day pilgrims appear to re-experience the events that are said to have surrounded the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. It is these 'Echoes of Bernadette' that afford liminal experiences that are unfettered by the topological boundaries of the site and offer the pilgrim deep-rooted, authentic attachment to the religious and the historic. We proffer that the postmodern concept of pilgrimage as an individual's quest for meaning is incomplete and that contemporary pilgrimage may be conceived of as a post-postmodern search for spiritual meaning that is individually derived but is also rooted in an authentic past.

## 2. Pilgrimage

The early seminal literature in the study of pilgrimage and religious tourism places emphasis upon the objectivity (external and generalised) of the pilgrimage experience. Turner and Turner (1978) present pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon, reflecting earlier interpretations by van Gennep (1960) the French ethnographer and folklorist that view "the overall sociological features of the community undergoing a liminal process, or, the sites themselves (location, characteristics and meaning)" (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, p7). The objectivity of early pilgrimage research presents a view of the activity, whether religious or touristic, that centralises the site as the object of significance. The work of Nolan and Nolan (1989) is perhaps the most obvious example that examines pilgrimage through a structured, external, objective and generalised lens. Their study presents the systematic inventory of some 6150 pilgrimage shrines in Western Europe, providing the reader with statistical evidence of the growth patterns and wider communal implications of pilgrimage as both a homogenous activity and as a phenomenon that is dependent upon location.

The intermediate literature is punctuated by the work of Smith (1992), Stoddard (1996), Santos (2003) and the positions of Marnham (1980), Sallnow (1981), Eade and Sallnow (1991), Eade (1991 & 1992) (competing discourses) and Reader and Walter (1993) (pilgrimage and popular culture) that are opposed to the Turnerian view that *communitas* is a central and unifying element of the process of pilgrimage. Marnham (1980), Cohen (1972 & 1974 & 1979), Urry (1990) and latterly the work of Badone and Roseman (2004) were part of an academic movement that advocated the 'Similarity Theory' between pilgrims and tourists (Andriotis, 2011; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; della Dora, 2012; Palmer & Gallagher, 2007; Poria, Airey, & Butler, 2003). Similarity Theory is based upon the view that postmodern travel negates the 'conceptual opposites' of pilgrims and tourists that was favoured by the early theorists and proponents of pilgrimage studies. It is Graburn (1977) who first presents the notion that the tourist was experiencing a parallel process with the pilgrim. He claims that both are 'metaphorically' taking part in a sacred journey that is about self-transformation, knowledge and status (Graburn, 1983). Eade's (1991) study claims that pilgrimage sites, in reality, are places of order, structure, power and conflict. Eade (1991), and the other proponents of anti-*communitas*, while not totally dismissive of the Turner and Turner (1978) thesis, support a position that place *communitas* as but one dimension of the pilgrimage experience. Smith's (1992) conceptual framework places tourists and pilgrims at opposing ends of a continuum of 'individual' motive and meaning on which one is able to 'artificially' delineate the pilgrim and tourist based upon measurable, conditioned and controlled points. He recognizes that the pilgrim/tourist continuum, potentially at least, offers innumerable possibilities for sacred-secular combinations. This view is supported by Stoddard (1996) who puts forward a revised framework that creates a central 'intermediate' ground termed 'religious tourist'. The intermediate position is, according to Stoddard (1996), the result of two separated phenomena, tourism and pilgrimage, brought together in a central 'interacting' ground. It is this central ground, according to Santos (2003), where most pilgrims/tourists are situated.

### 2.1. Toward personal pilgrimage

The shift in practice of pilgrimage and realization of the importance of the individual in the construction of its meaning has been recognized (Reader, 2007; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), and some headway has been made in addressing the need to study the phenomena of individualistic pilgrimage. della Dora (2012) for instance makes an interesting study of pilgrim-tourists to Mount Athos and Meteora, garnering information primarily through the use of semi-structured interviews and open questionnaires, supplemented by visitors' books, travel blogs and photographs. The study attempts to "gain insight into 'lived experiences'" (p959) focusing specifically upon how the real and imaginary boundaries in the landscape of the region preserve the sacred or let it be "contaminated...by technological intrusions from the world" (p971). The geography thus serves to differentiate and separate pilgrims, and their areas of pilgrimage, from tourists, and their areas of tourism. Andriotis (2011) examines the authenticity of pilgrimage to Mount Athos, employing participant observation and fieldnotes, noting how commercialization and mass tourism are seen to erode the religious authenticity of the location. Importantly, and citing Collins-Kreiner (2010), he also recognizes the importance of the individual in the perception of authenticity, that it is dependent upon their own unique and subjective perceptions. Later, Willson, McIntosh, and Zahra (2013) undertake a phenomenological study of a single spiritual-tourist's experiences of travelling to Peru (from a sample of several such tourists to various destinations). The approach, in allowing the individual to offer evidence that enables them to enunciate their thoughts and feelings, is found useful in revealing fascinating insight into the effect of the individual's wider life in their construction of positive and negative meaning from a journey, or from an event within a journey. Recently, Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli and Manual-Navarette (2014) conduct focus groups with Kumbh Mela pilgrims in order to understand their motivations, actions and experiences. In contrast with the majority of prior studies they find no touristic motivation among pilgrims and suggest that pilgrims motives are driven by deeply spiritual devotions and a need to gain spiritual knowledge from religious elders and leaders. Also in contrast to the extant literature, especially in light of the presence of a "pronounced level of social stratification" (p15), there is a high degree of *communitas*, although discord seems to have been suspended rather than annihilated. Higgins and Hamilton (2016) contemporary ethnographic work at Lourdes epitomises the importance of the individuals' pilgrimage experience when highlighting the 'mini-miracles' that may have a greater impact upon them than the officially recognized miracles of the Church. They identify the *physical*, *social* and *peaceful* forms that these events may take and the significance of the word-of-mouth sharing of these experiences between individuals that act as a driver for further pilgrimages.

These studies are most valuable in furthering our understanding of individuals, the interconnectedness of their lives and journeys (whether spiritual or touristic), the uniquely subjective nature of the meaning of travel, along with the value of adopting methods of study that elicit the necessary insight into those individuals. However, there is a need to take heed of contemporary literature that points out that much of the postmodern research has lost sight of the pilgrim. Willson et al. (2013) remind us that the spiritual dimension of tourism still remains under researched and has in fact tended to fetishize and reify the touristic dimension of pilgrimage to the detriment of the spiritual to such a degree that the 'pilgrim' in pilgrim-tourism research is "rarely mentioned" (Feldman, 2017). Inspired by these works, and in order to address Collins-Kreiner's (2010) observations of the gap in the current literature, this study aims to focus its epistemological gaze toward exploring the experiences that individuals draw upon when constructing personal meaning of their visit to Lourdes.

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