The search for spirituality in tourism: Toward a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism

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The geo-psychological separation from the everyday that is embedded in spiritual travel practices, can be seen as a laboratory in which individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality in a way that is not always available in daily life. This feature of the tourism experience is arguably the reason for the popularity of spiritual tourism experiences among novices to spirituality-driven endeavours, as well as to those who wish to develop and deepen their ongoing transcendent engagement through and during travel. If spirituality is the goal, traveling seems like an ideal setting within which it can be sought and, sometimes, even found. This Special Issue has identified the emergence of a binary between spiritual tourism performance as intrinsically religious and conversely, as secular practice. Considering secular motivations firstly, it is clear that underlying the many specific drivers are deliberations focused on the self with motives like wellness, adventure or recreation predominant. Conversely, religious motivations for spiritual tourism largely leverage links to religion and are centred on specific drivers that are underlined by religious observance, ritualised practice, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance.

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1. Introduction

In light of broader transformations in the way people are searching for transcendence in life, travel has become an important practice in the emerging spiritual marketplace (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Paul Brunton holds the mantle as one of the pioneers in the West in the quest to understand spiritualities in the East, and in embarking on his journeys, he critically explores the work of gurus, mystics and spiritual teachers among others to elucidate their wisdoms. First published in 1934, Brunton’s spiritual voyage not only foresaw the emergence of spirituality as a driver for tourism, and he in many ways inspired and paved the way for readers to expand their spiritual horizons while traveling. Brunton exemplifies what Roof (2001) defines as ‘reflexive spirituality’ best described as a cultural movement or a contemporary attitude toward spirituality that promotes the use of reason while exploring spiritualities. This reflexive and critical examination of spiritual paths is considered one of the hallmarks of the contemporary spiritual movement, and spiritual tourism is one of its manifestations (Besecke, 2014). The papers in this volume demonstrate that the geo-psychological separation from the everyday that is embedded in spiritual travel practices, can be seen as a laboratory in which individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality, like Brunton did, in a way that is not always available in daily life.

Another way to comprehend the central role that travel plays in the contemporary spiritual movement is by focusing on its key characteristic – as a tempo-spatial interruption from daily routine. This feature of the tourism experience is arguably the reason for the popularity of spiritual tourism experiences among novices to spirituality-driven endeavours, as well as to those who wish to develop and deepen their ongoing transcendent engagement through and during travel. If spirituality is the goal, traveling seems like an ideal setting within which it can be sought and, sometimes, even found. If spirituality is a practice or an attitude of connectivity then, again, travel offers many opportunities to experience our renewed connection with others, with life in general.

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and, most importantly, with ourselves. Either way, spiritual tourism appears to engage people on many levels that other forms of tourism only touch upon. As in the past, the debate about the distinction between a ‘traveller’ and a ‘tourist’ has preoccupied scholars, so now the numinous yet palpable distinction between a ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ tourist emerges.

The search for meaningful and spiritual experiences in the theorising of the tourist experience also goes far beyond the narrow window of religious and/or spiritual tourism. In his pioneering and celebrated theoretical model of the tourist experience, Cohen (1979) developed a typology of five modes of experiences which he anchors around the concept of the ‘centre’. The centre in Cohen’s conceptualisation is a cosmological metaphor for the core values around which every society is organised. In his model, tourism practices are viewed as conduits through which people can manage tensions with the centres that govern their home societies; therefore, they are powerful settings for meaningful engagements.

In the same vein, Norman (2011, 2012), Fedele (2012), Robledo (2015) and Stausberg (2014) attempt to define the ‘notoriously difficult’ relationship between ‘spirituality and religion’ (Stausberg, 2014: 355). Stausberg (2014: 355) argues that spirituality is ‘semantically located both within and beyond’ religion as it has the same inward direction but it also strives to distance itself from religion. This desire to distance oneself from traditional religiosity among modern spiritual pilgrims is apparent in the new typologies for spiritual travel, notably by distance oneself from traditional religiosity among modern spiritual pilgrimage but it also strives to distance itself from religion. This desire to distance oneself from traditional religiosity among modern spiritual pilgrims is apparent in the new typologies for spiritual travel, notably by

Others refer to this as ‘unchurching’ (Wood, 2007), as ‘discursive shifts’ (Fedele, 2012; Kujawa, 2012) or ‘subjective turns’ (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) from religion to a broadly defined spirituality.

The precursor for formal recognition of spiritual tourism as a category or genre of tourism was the inaugural and so far only United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) summit on the topic at Ninh Binh City, Vietnam in November 2013. The conference was titled Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development outlining a specific focus on the contributions that it can make to the sustainable development of its various communities including both hosts and guests. This all-encompassing approach moved beyond secular or religious demarcations emphasising that the “cultural exchange and dialogue evoked by spiritual tourism are the very cornerstones of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, the fundamental building blocks of sustainability” (UNWTO, 2013: 2). The UNWTO’s utilitarian stance on spiritual tourism is unsurprising given the acknowledged potential that tourism in general is seen to have, especially in countries of the Global South. The unambiguous view put forward is that “the responsible and sustainable use of natural and cultural assets in the development of spiritual tourism can create employment opportunities, generate income, alleviate poverty, curb rural flight migration, prompt product diversification, and nurture a sense of pride among communities and destinations” (UNWTO, 2013: 2).

Our own journey in creating this volume was sparked by a symposium on spiritual tourism in November 2015, initiated and organised by Joseph Cheer at Monash University located in Melbourne Australia. This was conducted in conjunction with practitioners, World Weavers, an Australia-based organisation offering so called ‘Adventures of the Spirit’ including the unprecedented Monk for a Month experience – a 24 day spiritual adventure at a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastery in India’s Spiti Valley. The debates and ideas expounded on and discussed incited our curiosity, and we conceived of creating a Special Issue on this subject matter for Tourism Management Perspectives. We are thankful to Chris Ryan for his trust and cooperation in enabling this venture. As is often the case with academic initiatives that involve multiple contributors across the globe, the final result is not necessarily what we had envisaged at the beginning, and we have ended up with an eclectic and geographically diverse outcome that illuminates the multifaceted manifestations and iterations of spirituality and tourism in contemporary society.

2. Epistemic reflections on the special issue

Editing this Special Issue was a journey that started immediately after the symposium on spiritual tourism held at Monash. In order to share with our readers the essence of this process we have chosen to open this special issue with a dialogue between Ben Bowler, CEO of World Weavers and Yaniv Belhassen, a keynote speaker at the original symposium. The dialogue is entitled “A Conversation about Spirituality and Tourism: Theory and Practice in Dialogue.” It provides an unusual academic stage to discuss theoretical and practical issues related to the spiritual tourism phenomenon. The non-mediated dialogue demonstrates the applicability and relevance of Roof’s reflexive spirituality (2001) among spiritual tourism entrepreneurs, and we believe it exemplifies an authentic and representative voice of this growing market.

Joanna Kujawa’s work, “Spiritual Travel as a Quest,” provides an analysis of the spiritual travel memoir genre, ranging from her own spiritual tourist experiences in Jerusalem and analogous to Paul Brunton’s search for spiritual enlightenment in India and to what can be regarded as the new–age spirituality of Elizabeth Gilbert’s (2009) Eat, Pray, Love. This paper leverages Kujawa’s longstanding interest in spirituality and her 2012 best-selling book Jerusalem Diary: Searching for the Tomb and House of Jesus. In this book, Kujawa articulates a true story of a journey in search of Jesus’ house in Nazareth and his tomb in Jerusalem – spiritual tourism personified. Kujawa argues that spiritual travel memoirs as well as recent ethnographic studies point to a significant discursive shift from religiosity to spirituality and the demarcation between spiritual experiences versus religious experiences, and spiritual tourism versus religious tourism. This decisive delineation between ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’, Kujawa argues, opens a new door for both the conceptualisation and management of spiritual tourism.

In the next contribution, “Spiritual Tourism at Meditation Retreats: Reflexive and Reflective Well-Being Interventions,” Alex Norman and Jennifer Pokorny outline a wider perspective on Buddhist meditation retreat practices in the West. They highlight the social dimensions of well-being that characterise the Buddhist retreat segment often localised in community or permanent centres in the West. The contribution of the paper to spiritual tourism lies in pointing out the new motivational themes in the field, such as a growing interest among Western Buddhist traditions in meditation retreats for the purpose of personal well-being as a part of a larger wellness revolution in the West. Notably, Norman is one of the pioneers in the development of spiritual tourism in the academic community with his 2011 book Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society having paved the way for this Special Issue.

Hana Bowers and Joseph Cheer take a similar approach in the following paper: “Yoga Tourism: Commodification and Western Embracement of Eastern Spiritual Practice.” Bowers and Cheer provide an inductive analysis of Yoga retreats in India, while emphasising how body and spirit interact in the tourist motivation. In many ways, yoga offers its followers a gateway to spiritual practice. Indeed Bowers and Cheer argue that the practice of yoga has become largely alien from its genesis steeped in spirituality and meditation, and in a contemporary sense has become highly fashionable. Just as Norman and Pokorny looked at the growing interest in meditation retreats among Western Buddhists, Bowers and Cheer’s focus was on spiritual tourism to India – more specifically yoga-related travel by Western practitioners. However, unlike Norman and Pokorny, Bowers and Cheers differentiate yoga tourism from wellness tourism, and focus on the commodification of the original yoga philosophy to accommodate Western practitioners and consumers. Bowers and Cheer assert that in the process of yoga’s commodification, the original gatekeepers or custodians of yoga in the Indian
subcontinent have appeared to have lost all sense of ownership of it. Thus, the links between spiritual tourism and the commodification of spiritual practice is discernible in Bowers and Cheer's offering.

Darius Liutikas’ “The Manifestation of Values and Identity in Travelling: The Social Engagement of Pilgrimage” analyses how spiritual tourism allows for the manifestation of tourists’ values and creates a sense of identity, both individual and social (what he terms ‘valuistic aspects of spiritual tourism’). Liutikas looks into two travel diaries: one from a 16th century Lithuanian nobleman Mikalojus Kristupas Radvila the Orphan and the other from the recent pilgrimages of a Lithuanian youth to Siberia in honour of the thousands of exiled Lithuanians. In his paper Liutikas argues that, despite the different motivations and time spans for the travel, both diaries reveal how spiritual tourism facilitates a sense of identity and belonging. The key theme emerging from Liutikas’ offering is that socio-cultural potential and importance of pilgrimage can fulfil the spiritual needs of travellers or at least help to recognize those needs.

The next two papers examine established pilgrimage trails (or routes) by focusing on spiritual aspects in the experiences of contemporary tourists who walk on them. “Spiritual Tourism on The Way to St. James: Motivations and Feelings,” by Lucrezia Lopez, Rubén González and Belén Fernández analyses the shift from religiosity to spirituality in the famous Camino in Spain and in light of the emotional process dynamics that characterised the tourists they interviewed. Indeed, The Way to St James is an exemplification of the trajectory from what was steeped in religiosity to what is now increasingly driven by non-secular motivations. Their discussion elaborates on the longevity and the continuing spiritual magnetism of ‘The Way’. The variety of reasons spiritual tourists undertake the journey relates to three factors: the mobility (both physical and internal), the experiential value (authentic, unique and cathartic), and the inherent qualities of the tourists’ route itself. Conceptually, the paper embraces the ‘polyvalent purpose of contemporary spirituality’ which reconstructs the image and purpose of the traditional tourist in a significant way.

Similarly, “Muslim perspectives on spiritual and religious travel beyond Hajj: Toward understanding motivations for Umrah travel in Oman” by Hamed Mohammed Almuhri and Abdulaziz Mohammed Alaswafi utilizes spirituality as a conceptual device with which they examine the motivations for Umrah travel in an Omani context. In articulating Muslim conceptualisations of spiritual tourism, Almuhri and Alaswafi draw on Umrah, the lesser known counterpart to the Hajj, both key rituals for devout Muslims. Unlike the Hajj, Umrah is a pilgrimage that Muslims undertake at any time of the year except during the time of Hajj. Almuhri and Alaswafi conclude that the main driver for Muslims to undertake Umrah travel is to be thankful to Allah. This paper is particularly insightful and timely given the contemporary global political landscape where adverse interpretations and reportage of Islamic faith have become increasingly commonplace.

In the last paper of the collection “Spiritual (Walking) Tourism as a Foundation for Sustainable Destination Management,” Kumi Kato and Nicolas Progano focus on the Nakachehi Kumano pilgrimage trail in Wakayama, Japan as an example of ‘slow tourism’ and its connection to sustainability and engagement with local communities. The Kumano Kodo is an exemplary case of an ancient pilgrimage trail that continues to arouse pilgrim interest in the pursuit of spiritual nourishment and Kato and Progano emphasise how this mode of walking leads to the creation of communities of compassion. ‘Slow tourism’ is understood as that undertaken ‘on foot’ or as walking tourism on natural trails associated with spiritual qualities of serenity, natural beauty, sustainability and holistically understood wellness. As in other papers included in this Special Issue, Kato and Progano separate these qualities from other motivations associated with particular religions. The healing and caring aspects of ‘slow tourism’ tap into the more positive aspects of spiritual tourism, such as mindful engagement with nature, local communities and sustainability. Japan is also our next destination as the authors of this last article were kind enough to host a symposium in Wakayama University Japan in 2017 signalling that the prospects for the examination of Spiritual Tourism are bright.

3. Toward a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism

The development of a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism abides by the academic practice of integrating complex, multivalent and continually evolving concepts toward the development of underlying understandings that help guide scholarly discourse and further research. This Special Issue has identified the emergence of a binary between spiritual tourism performance as intrinsically religious and conversely, as secular practice. From a theoretical perspective this underlines the development of theory and guides the construction of a conceptual framework for further scrutiny of spiritual tourism.

In proposing a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism, outlining the drivers that underlie spiritual tourism practice is arguably a critical first step (see Fig. 2). As evidenced in the emergent themes from papers in this Special Issue and as earlier emphasised by Norman (2011), the demarcation between secular and religious drivers are foremost. A reasonable assessment is that the continuum of spiritual tourism motivations presents the two drivers at distinct ends with an additional acknowledgement that for some, motivations are predicated on both religious and secular foundations. (See Fig. 1.)

Considering secular motivations firstly, it is clear that underlying the many specific drivers are deliberations focused on the self with motives like wellness, adventure or recreation predominant. Additionally, focus tends to be on the attainment of some kind of spiritual benefit, such as getting in touch with one’s inner self or achieving an altered state of consciousness. Further, such opportunities are shaped by the commodification of spiritual tourism experiences either as a package of travel components or payment for some facets (accommodation and food). In emphasising the self, secular drivers for spiritual tourism are consumptive by nature attributing beneficial outcomes to the traveller.

Conversely, religious motivations for spiritual tourism largely leverage links to religion and are centred on specific drivers that are underlined by religious observance, ritualised practice, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance. Here, the purposes for spiritual tourism link to reverence and connectivity to a higher authority or deity with the rewards underlined by religious practice predicated on institutionalised and genuine participation, with beneficial outcomes over and above the self. Indeed the focus is very much on the institutional or religious frameworks that govern travel for such purposes.

A conceptual framework of this type sets out to make generalisable assumptions in the full knowledge that in practice, some exceptions will occur that fall outside or barely inside the characterisations made. Such frameworks are assumed to be evolutionary and will respond to further developments on the topic over time.

4. Conclusion

The papers in this volume echo previous attempts to conceptualise shifts in the spiritual tourism market by collectively demonstrating that the dynamic circumstances of modern life are not only a source for the growing demand for spirituality, as emphasised by many spirituality scholars, but also that the realm of contemporary tourism is a central platform from which spirituality can be experienced and studied. Indeed, each one of the papers in this Special Issue illustrates that tourism can be viewed as a convenient setting within which one can examine different forms of spirituality—whether it is the bubble-like setting that gives modern people the time and space to reflect on life, or whether it is the safe environment to explore new forms of spirituality without the risk of being labelled as ‘odd’. As reflected in this Special Issue, spiritual tourism is multivalent and comprised of diverse categories that can include practices, such as attending New Age and music festivals, participating in meditation and yoga retreats and in neopagan and shaman
ceremonies, as well as by following ancient pilgrimage trails such as the Kumano Kodo in Japan or The Way of St James in Spain.

Taken as a whole, this special volume endeavours to further highlight the spiritual dimension of tourism practices around the world. The eight papers that comprise this Special Issue clearly demonstrate the need for tourism researchers to lead the way in advancing a more nuanced understanding of the spiritual dimensions of tourism and concomitantly the role of tourism in the spiritual movement. All of the authors have raised questions surrounding the blurring and demarcating of boundaries between religiosity and spirituality in the context of

**Fig. 1.** Spiritual tourism in motion: Monk for a Month participants. (Photo reproduced with permission from World Weavers/Ben Bowler).

**Fig. 2.** Conceptual framework for spiritual tourism. (Source: Authors).

modern tourism generally, and to spiritual tourism specifically. We hope that this Special Issue will provide readers with the opportunity to deepen and extend their understandings of the spiritual tourism discourse and to continue exploring the relationship between spirituality and tourism, and to consider its implications for future research.

As a final point of our epistemic journey, it is important for us to express gratitude to all the people who help us during this process. Firstly, to Chris Ryan for providing the platform for the publication of papers in this Special Issue. We are conscious that it is always a gamble giving over responsibility to others for the delivery of a quality outcome and we hope we have vindicated your decision. Thanks are due to the National Centre for Australian Studies (NCAS) and the Australia and International Tourism Research Unit (ATRU) at Monash University for hosting the symposium on Spiritual Tourism in November 2015 that kick-started this Special Issue. Thanks are also due to Ben Bowler and Hana Bowers at World Weavers for enabling the link between theory and practice. Damien Williams and Keir Reeves participated in the inaugural symposium in 2015 and lent moral support to this endeavour. Bruce Scates and Natalie Nguyen at NCAS were also instrumental in lending institutional support via the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. But most of all, we reserve our biggest thanks to the authors of the collection of papers in this Special Issue. Lastly, we owe a great deal of thanks to our family and friends who, as is always the case with endeavours of this nature, bear the brunt of our physical and mental absence. As a trio of guest editors based in different locations around the world, the development of this initiative required a great deal of patience, tenacity, open-mindedness and most of all good humour. We now look forward to the second symposium on Spiritual Tourism to be held at Wakayama University in Japan in 2017.

Acknowledgment

As should be custom, especially befitting the spirit inherent in work of this nature in Australia, we wish to acknowledge the people of the Kulin Nations, on whose land we gathered to conduct the formative stage of this research. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present and acknowledge that this land ‘always has and always be will Aboriginal land’.

References


Joanna Kujawa is an Academic Head for Management Studies at Kaplan Business School, Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of a spiritual travel memoir, Jerusalem Diary: Searching for the Tomb and House of Jesus. An avid spiritual tourist herself, she pursues research related to spiritual tourism, spiritual travel-memoirs, spiritual experience, women travellers and women and spirituality. Her previous academic publications include contributions to Literature and Aesthetics (vol. 22), Journeys and Destinations (2013) edited by Alex Norman. She is a regular contributor to the Religion Section of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and is inordinately passionate about her ‘Goddess News’ blog.