# Spiritual tourism as a quest

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## ABSTRACT

The academic literature on spiritual tourism is often limited to taxonomies of travel, and reasons for spiritually oriented tourism are analysed largely according to their economic, social and historical aspects. Despite the recent growth in interest in spiritually oriented tourism it has become increasingly apparent that to fully understand the practical implication for the field of spiritual tourism, a theoretical discussion on the discursive shift from a 'religious' to 'spiritual' experience of travel needs to be addressed. Although these concepts have only recently been touched upon in academic travel literature, they have been richly explored in literary travel-focused memoirs.

It is the intention of this paper to conflate the theoretical discussion of spiritual tourism with personal accounts written by writers of literary travel memoirs. The first part of the paper will discuss the reasons for travelling for spiritual growth, as opposed to the traditional notion of religious pilgrimage supported by Michel Foucault's theory of the heterogeneous aspects of discursive formation. The second part of the paper looks into the existing typologies of spiritual tourism and compares them to Joseph Campbell's (1973) stages of a mythic quest. Lastly, the third part supports the academic discussion with brief excerpts from three literary spiritual travel memoirs.

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## 1. Introduction

The growing interest among scholars in spiritually oriented tourism as opposed to traditional pilgrimages undertaken within the constraints of particular institutionalised faiths raises some interesting questions about the shift from 'religious' to 'spiritual' experiences and their definitions, which too often overlap, adding to confusion rather than to conceptual clarity. Broadly speaking, if pilgrimage is often situated within the constraints of established religions, spiritual tourism is prompted more by a desire for a spiritual experiences and personal growth, rather than the devotional aspects prescribed by traditional religions and their motives for pilgrimages.

There have been several interesting ethnographic studies (Fedele, 2013; Hall, 2006; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Wilson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013; Wood, 2007; Taylor, 2002, among others) conducted in various geographical locations focusing on spiritual, rather than traditionally religious, pilgrims, their destinations and their reasons for undertaking their spiritual tourism. Too often, however, these studies have seemed to come under the illusive term of 'New Age' studies (Wood, 2007) while encompassing large and diversified audiences, and have been analysed purely from sociological or anthropological approaches. Although their sociological value is undoubtedly important, they do not attempt to define individuals' underlying subjective or internal reasons for spiritual tourism.

Thus, despite of the richness of ethnographic studies of spiritually oriented travellers as well as the amount of spiritual travelogues which capture the imagination of wide audiences, there is still a need for a fuller conceptualisation of this relatively new field. This fact suggests 'a visible cultural change' (Fedele, 2013; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) in perceptions of both spiritual toursim and spirituality itself, and how different they are from religious experiences and traditional religious pilgrimages. Thus, this analysis of ethnographic studies as well as spiritual travelogues or memoirs will focus on shifting through the perceived differences between travelling for 'spiritual experiences' and the undertaking of traditional religious pilgrimages.

## 2. Spiritual tourism and spiritual experience as a discursive shift

Two questions that need to be asked here are: who are the spiritual (rather than religious) tourists and what are their motivations for spiritual (rather than religious) tourism? These two questions will help to delineate the new parameters of spiritual tourism as distinct from religious tourism. Fedele (2009, 2012, 2013), for example, calls the phenomenon of spiritual tourism 'new pilgrimages' and those undertaking them 'new pilgrims'. In her study of pilgrimages to the sites associated with Mary Magdalene; e.g. Sainte Baume, Saint Maximin and Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in Southern France, Fedele (2012, 2013), provides new reasons for spiritual tourism as verbalised by the spiritual pilgrims themselves. This study reveals a common longing for spiritual

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experience associated with Mary Magdalene, who is seen as a counterpoint to a patriarchal and dogmatically organised Christianity.

The new pilgrims from Fedele's study believed that achieving a connection to the figure of Mary Magdalene envisioned in this way would not be possible (or desired) via a traditional pilgrimage. Most interestingly, however, the participants' desire to undertake this new pilgrimage is not based on the readings of traditional religious sources (e.g. the Bible) but on a combination of readings of various alternative spiritual sources, such as *The Course in Miracles* (1975), Buddhist works, the writings of Margaret Starbird (1993, 1998) and other religiously and spiritually diverse sources. Study participants stressed their discontent with the institutionalised religions, which they consider dogmatic, and do not describe themselves as 'religious', yet are vehement about calling themselves 'spiritual'. At the same time, they actively and creatively construct their own rituals, which are an eclectic combination of both orthodox and unorthodox beliefs (Fedele 2012, 2013).

Similarly, Hall (2006), uses traditional terminology (such as 'religious experience' and 'pilgrimage') to describe an alternative approach to travelling for spiritual reasons. Indeed, he unequivocally states that 'religious experience' is central to spiritual tourism. Since he is arguing from the perspective of religious humanism, he proposes that religious experience is 'arguably also significant' for people who do not belong to any institutionalised faith or even to religious faith per se (p. 65). He operates according to Geering's (2002, p. 147) extremely broad definition of religion as 'a total mode of interpreting and living life', which helps lead him to reach a conclusion that the spiritual experience can include 'different notions of god and the spiritual' for even those who do not believe in the existence of a god 'or a being independent of themselves' (Hall, 2006, p. 66).

Hall concludes that spiritual experience is still possible for a religious humanist as long as it 'comes from within' (2006, p. 75). And it is this 'within' or internal element that this paper suggests constitutes spiritual experience (whether it belongs to an institutionalised religion or not). Indeed, it is a peculiarity of spiritual tourism that external travel is needed to achieve an internal experience of spiritual meaning. The inclusiveness of Hall's (2006) definition is in agreement with the post-theist view of religious humanism as developed by Cupitt (1984) and espoused by Hall (2006). It also appears to support the Foucauldian idea of the heterogeneity of discursive shifts, which, in turn, create an opening for new spiritual structures.

Another definition of spiritual tourism which would support Hall's (2006) take on spiritual experience and spiritual tourism comes from Wilson et al. (2013), who describe the phenomenon as undertaken by an 'individual in the quest for personal meaning from and through travel' (p. 152). Wilson et al. (2013) claim through their 'phenomenological portraits' of people who undertake spiritual tourism that the fact these tourists feel 'energised', 'inspired' and 'uplifted' after their trips and also feel a sense of 'connectivity' with people from other parts of the world is a clear sign of the spiritual aspect of their travel for them (p. 160).

It is worth mentioning that the spiritual tourism the interviewees undertook was not to a religious destination but to Macchu Picchu, which is a destination more in keeping with the choices made by New Age groups than by traditional pilgrims. Indeed, all forms of connectivity are discussed in many other studies (Cohen, 2004; Miner-Williams, 2006; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Norman, 2012; Piedmont, 1999; Robledo, 2015; Schultz, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999, and more). Although such broad sociological studies have much to contribute to the field of spiritual tourism, it is perhaps an error to rely on them solely while discussing deeply intense internal experiences.

Other scholars have also attempted to define 'spirituality' as potentially and perceptually different from 'religion'. The empirical analysis of what Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 150) call 'tectonic shifts in the sacred landscape' suggests that the move towards 'spirituality' and away from 'denominational religions' is a result of 'the massive

subjective turn of modern culture' (p. 129) to focus on subjective life. This shift towards subjectivity, they argue, is a social phenomenon that will most likely grow for a number of years. Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) observations do not necessarily help to define 'spirituality' as such, since their study is sociological in nature and more concerned with social movements, estimating the numbers of such movements and predicting their longevity and influence for the future. Although undoubtedly spirituality can be considered a social movement towards subjectivity, it was beyond the scope of their research to define what the paramount reason is for this shift. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) approximate spirituality to 'catering for subjective life' (p. 130).

The implicit distinction here is between the formal, social structures associated with religions, and more fluid and personal approaches towards belief. The degree to which traditional religions (here, mostly Christianity) decline relates directly to the ability and willingness of the religions to address any 'subjective turn' in the general population. From Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) conclusions, it is possible to argue that it is the aspect of a person's interiority and the desire for a more palpable internal experience, rather than the external expression of faith, which is the driving force behind this shift towards subjectivity, and this is what differentiates spiritual tourists from traditional pilgrims (Figs. 1–4).

The 'tectonic shifts in the sacred landscapes' of Heelas and Woodhead (2005, p. 150) have been further analysed by Matthew Wood (2007). Wood (2007) participated in 'New Age' workshops at the Nottinghamshire fair and used this as a platform for his empirical
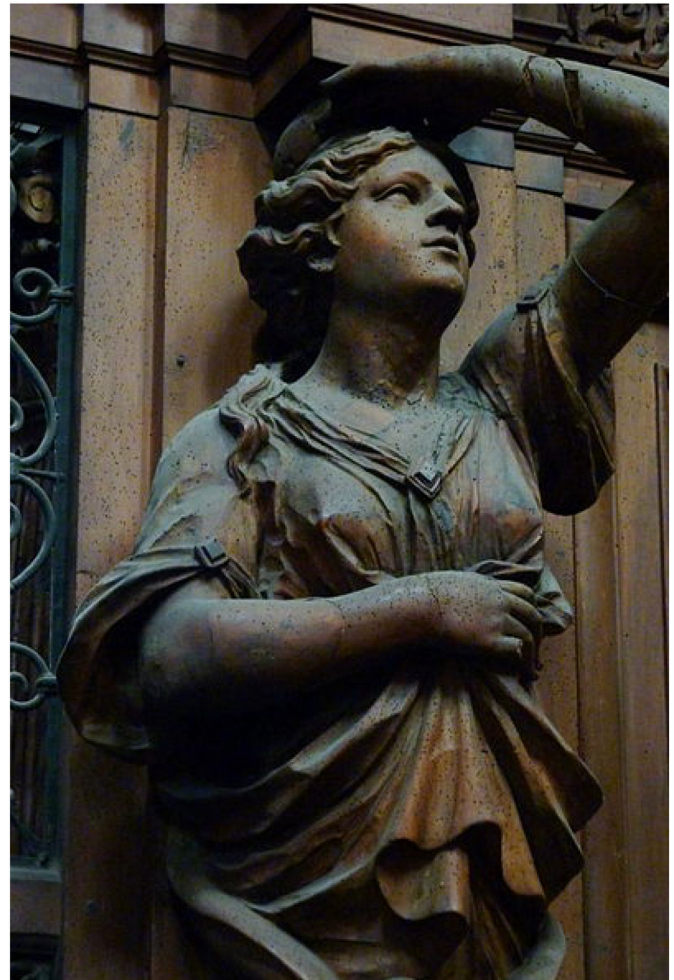


Fig. 1. Saint Baume.