
Guest editorial: Sacred journeys: moving in, out and around sacred spaces

Guest editorial

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Even while the Earth sleeps, we travel.

Khalil Gibran

Humanity's insatiable thirst for travel has been recorded across the disciplinary spectrum for millennia, from historical accounts of the brave explorers of our past to anthropological, zoological and botanical records of seemingly exotic worlds and cultures. Artists, poets and writers sought to capture the breath-taking qualities of these new worlds for others' delight, becoming the storytellers of these far-away lands. Once reserved for the elite, the nomadic or the bellicose wishing to conquer new terrain, travel now lies much more within our reach, making us all the storytellers of our journeying. Odysseys get narrated through our blogs, our online reviews, our Facebook stories and our Instagram feeds, as we share the journeys we take through life for all to see.

The pursuit of the sacred is one such journey, which feeds both the explorer and the pilgrim that dwells within us all (Cousineau, 2012). As an ancient and global practice, sacred journeys traverse time and space and our scholarly appetite of said journeys traverses disciplines and academic perspectives. *How* and *why* we pursue sacred journeys has been at the heart of a plethora of research across disciplines (Coleman, 2022; Coleman and Eade, 2018; Barkan and Barkey, 2015; Reader, 2014; Badone and Roseman, 2004), including in our own "home" disciplines of marketing and consumer research (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020; Cova and Cova, 2019; Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019; Santana and Botelho, 2019). Moreover, the question of *what* makes a journey "sacred" has puzzled researchers specialising in religion and spirituality. In fact, sacred journeys are not limited to traditionally religious and heritage sites, such as Mecca, Lourdes, El Camino de Santiago, Jerusalem and Varanasi. In our New Age era of spirituality, we understand sacred travelling to include secular, spiritual, physical, affective and even digital spaces. The pilgrim within us seeks out sacred (if not extraordinary) experiences in a multitude of spiritual settings, from locations commonly associated with the occult (Rinallo *et al.*, 2016) to ancient histories and esoteric myths (Scott and Maclaran, 2013) and even shamanic travel in the depth of the Amazon jungle (Dean, 2019). As the mundane is commonly sacralised (Belk *et al.*, 1989), we see how the market carves out new sites of pilgrimage, including Christian theme parks (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989), holy-land simulations (Crockett and Davis, 2016), shrines for celebrity culture (Frow, 1998; Graves-Brown, and Orange, 2017), commodified sites for experiencing dark tourism (Sun and Lv, 2021) or (re)enchancements of our past (Goulding *et al.*, 2018) as well as venues of counterculture that act as a respite from our commercial world (Kozinets, 2002). Recent Netflix docuseries, such as *(un)well* (2020), are a testimony of our hunger for something sacrosanct in the market, as consumers search for healing if not enlightenment from an array of products and services from bee venom to extreme fasting.

We can therefore think of sacred journeys, including pilgrimage as a rite of passage, as current consumer practices in our postmodern world and we have witnessed a renaissance of sacred travel with accounts of slowing down as a means of spiritual renewal (Huseman and Eckhardt, 2019), of enduring pain and the gift of communal healing (Cova and Cova, 2019), of the sharing our affective responses with (equally vulnerable) others as a means of



emotional recovery (Higgins and Hamilton, 2018), of a spiritual awakening that shapes who we are (Moufahim, 2016; Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019) and of a journey that is materialised through other-than-human actants (Terzidou, 2020). Even before our arrival, we paint a detailed picture of these sacred journeys through the shared storytelling of fellow travellers (van Laer and Izberk-Bilgin, 2019). As well as unidirectional, moving to and from sacred spaces, our spiritual journeys may be cyclical, mercurial and driven by multi-faith experimentation (Steil, 2001) as we transit across the varied religious landscape in search of spiritual solutions for our material problems (Rodner and Preece, 2019). Others experience religiosity as a toing and froing between the sacred and the profane within a confined geographic space, as they negotiate the liminality of their (religious) identity (Appau *et al.*, 2020). Beyond the realm of consumer culture, anthropological and psychological accounts of spirit possession are tale telling of how a medium's body can house the sacred, even without the need to physically displace ourselves (Maraldi, 2014; Seligman, 2014), so that the body acts as a permeable space through which the sacred travels (Espirito Santo, 2016).

As well as embodying the sacred, we have also seen researchers reflect on their *own* bodies and positionality, taking into account how our gendered bodies shape and are shaped by the sacred contexts of our fieldwork (Rinallo *et al.*, 2023). An intersectional approach to researching the sacred, including sacred journeys, therefore helps us foreground our own vulnerability as researchers and draw our attention to how we “land” in these affective spirit-infused atmospheres (Preece *et al.*, 2022). As well as these embodied approaches, we see how materiality plays a part in our sacred journeys (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020), where objects, souvenirs and gifts evidence their material and spiritual agency as they travel with us to and from these sacred locations (Moufahim, 2013; Santana and Botelho, 2019; Turley, 2013; Terzidou, 2020). Brought into our homes, carefully curated objects are transformed into shrines, whereby the sacred comes to *us* rather than us travelling to *it* (Espirito Santo, 2019).

In the wake of this dynamic body of work on consuming and experiencing the sacred, our special issue on spiritual and religious journeywork continues this rich trajectory and foregrounds a variety of issues regarding human and other-than-human mobilities. We were keen to explore, among others, questions related to different forms of religious travel and the associated rituals and consumption practices; human and material entanglements within sacred contexts; the transformation and sacralisation of spaces, places and objects; the relationship between sacred spaces and the body; and alongside preoccupations for solid qualitative methodologies. The collection of papers included in this special issue address key questions related to sacred spaces and the journeys to, within and from those spaces by both humans and other-than-humans actants.

We are delighted to include two commentaries, four competitive papers (including a teaching case) and a conversation piece, which together provide rich and diverse contexts, different theoretical underpinnings, cross-disciplinary lenses and methodological approaches that feed into our understanding of the sacred and sacred mobilities, not least sparking further discussions about sacred journeys.

We lead into our special issue with expert opinions on the sacred that reach beyond the boundaries of marketing and consumer research, with invited commentaries from social and religious anthropologists John Eade and Diana Espirito Santo. John Eade, a social anthropologist who has extensively studied pilgrimages throughout his career, offers his reflections on mobilities of humans (pilgrims) as well as other-than-humans (statues, springs, rocks and so on), where pilgrimage brings these actants together in a dual process of sacralisation. To illustrate this process of sacralisation, he takes us on two very different sacred journeys: first on the renowned Roman Catholic pilgrimage of Lourdes (France) and

second through the spiritually infused English countryside. Through his pilgrimages, John reveals how the sacred is constructed through the process of sacralisation of space, noting how other-than-human agents help shape this process and influence human behaviour, beliefs and values. In representing his scholarly journeywork, he sheds light onto the relationship between mobility, space and agency.

Diana Espírito Santo's contributions to social anthropology have focused on spirit possession and mediumship practices of Afro-diasporic faiths, where she has examined concepts of selfhood, agency, embodiment and ontological plasticity of human and other-than-human assemblages including spirit-person relations. In our special issue, Diana brings a fresh approach to studying (sacred) mobilities, inviting us to look beyond a narrow notion of travelling *to* sacred spaces, which necessitates an assumption that the sacred lies elsewhere and can be reached through movement. Acknowledging a legacy of religious transnationalism and movement of cosmologies through space (and time), Diana's contribution draws our attention to micro-ethnographic dimensions of mobility using the context of Afro-Cuban Santería to illustrate how the sacred may "imbue things, animals and persons" and as such be located *within* the body and our own material culture. This suggests an ontological fluidity between spirits and mediums and as such a fresh approach to selfhood and the "inner ontologies of movement and creation".

Our empirical contributors cover a range of sacred contexts that cross geographies, socio-material environments, theoretical lenses and methodological approaches, thus affording new insight into our understanding of religious and spiritual journeys.

Ateeq A. Rauf explores, through a multi-site ethnography, the sanctity of mundane spaces he occupied during his travels and sojourns within the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) preaching movement. Drawing on Mary Douglas's constructs of (im)purity, his study provides interesting insights about the consumption, maintenance and boundaries of sacred spaces (the mosques) and faith-adjacent spaces (the ablution area, lavatories, the bazaar) and the market. Rauf shows how meanings of the "sacred"/"less sacred" are relationally constructed and how these spaces configure into the TJ projects of disciplining the religious consumer and achieving internal and external purification through movement across spaces.

Manoël Pénicaud and Anne-Gaëlle Jolivot focus on both the movements of pilgrims *into*, *within* and *away* from sacred sites and the movement of relevant objects used as part of the pilgrimage. They studied two forms of pilgrimage via participant observation and a visual anthropological approach: Muslims performing a pilgrimage to St George, in a Greek Orthodox monastery located in Turkey, and the so-called Regraga pilgrimage in Morocco. Their rich data allowed them to explore and discuss at length the materialisation, consumption and circulation of the divine grace via the ritualistic performances involved in the use and reuse of the votive offering of sugar. They extend their discussion by raising the issue of sustainability, in relation to the overabundance (and disposal) of the votive offerings generated in those pilgrimages and ultimately pointing at the legitimate concerns regarding the ecological impact of pilgrimages in general. John F. Sherry Jr. and Hilary Downey provide an evocative account of how gifts, sacrifice and a sense of community shape the sectarian context of Northern Ireland. Set against an ephemeral temple structure in the religiously divided and emotionally scarred city of Derry-Londonderry, this ethnography of ceremonial gift-giving and sacrifice captures a quasi-spiritual pilgrimage on part of local communities on both sides of the religious spectrum (Catholic/Protestant) and their pursuit to "exorcise trauma" and "build a platform for future cross-community cohesion". Tens of thousands of pilgrims in search of healing, closure and transformation visited the temporary structure and fuelled the gift-chimney with messages and artefacts "conveying thoughts,

emotions and intentions” which then became sacrifices in the ritualised burning of temple. In this circulation of people, artefacts and intentions, the temple-as-chimney funnelled the sustained trauma and entangled loss experienced by the city.

Jannsen Santana, Rodrigo O. Pimentel, Halana Adelino Branão and Antonio M. Valdevino put together a novel and religiously inspired teaching case study about the creation, commercialisation and consumption of water bottles in the shape of Father Cicero, the key figure at the heart of a pilgrimage attracting millions of visitors to Juazeiro do Norte in Northern Brazil. Besides the pedagogic value of the case to generate reflections and discussions in the classroom around the strategies and challenges of producing and commodifying religious products, the paper provides valuable insights regarding the sacralisation and consumption of objects (here water bottles) as part of the pilgrimage and as a keepsake to take home. Not only auspicious in context but this teaching case is also blessed with practical teaching notes and complementary material to help weave this material into any marketing syllabus.

Our special issue closes with a conversation with scholars of the sacred Russell Belk, Samuelson Appau and Diego Rinallo who together provide an insightful multivocal genealogy of consumer culture work on religion and spirituality. Because this area of research can indeed be fraught with challenges, in and out of the field, we have asked them to reflect on key questions, issues and conceptualisations in the scholarship of the “sacred”, contemplating the past and mapping future research avenues. More than a gospel, their reflections provide “food for thought” for scholars drawn to the sacred, both experienced and new to the field. Their discussion highlights the importance of both phenomenological and scholarly curiosity when entering the field and the need for an open mind (and heart) towards what constitutes the sacred, where we witness new spaces, practices, humans and other-than-humans becoming (de-)sacralised and (de-)institutionalised through consumer society.

When we published our call for papers for this special issue on sacred journeys, we outlined several questions and topics, some being addressed by the articles and commentaries in this special issue. More needs to be and can be done. We thus wish to conclude this editorial commentary by reiterating areas that we believe need to be explored. Further research could explore questions related to the digitisation of sacred spaces and religious/spiritual consumption, in contexts of limited access to sacred spaces, as well as the (im)possibility of religious travel. We have seen most local and international religious journeys coming to a screeching halt at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and its related restrictions. In a world where mobility may still significantly change (due to conflicts, political instability, health crises, natural disasters), what does our embodied experience of sacred spaces look and feel like when done remotely? In the case of pilgrimages or religious services, we have been fascinated not only by the ingenuity of some religious groups in their use of technology to reach worshippers during the pandemic and its related restrictions but also by some others’ staunch denial of danger and their “business as usual” approach. Both the use of technology to facilitate worship and the resistance to any transformations of practices in the face of crises may be fruitful areas for further exploration.

With the digitisation of institutions – from HE to religion – there come new debates on religion’s influence on sustainability (El Jurdi *et al.*, 2017), along with a growing call for accountability for sustainable consumption, including religious travel. Briefly addressed by Pénicaud and Jolivot is the question of waste, but also the emergence of so-called “green” pilgrimage (Elgammal and Alhothali, 2021), the impact of sacred mobility needs to be fleshed out further. The sustainability agenda of religious travel, alongside managerial and

practical implications, needs to be at the forefront of researchers' and tourism practitioners' agendas.

We see this special issue as another voice trying to spark further multidisciplinary conversations in this dynamic research space. We are looking forward to future work looking at the topics we have highlighted here and beyond.

As a final word, we would like to thank all our reviewers for their rigorous and supportive feedback throughout the process, our contributors for their continued passion and scholarly curiosity for all that is sacred and our readers for embarking on brand new sacred journeys with us through our special issue.

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Further reading

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