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When Is A Journey Sacred? Exploring Twelve Properties of the Sacred

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One of the first definitive works on the concept of the sacred was Emile Durkheim's 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. In it, he defined the sacred in opposition to the profane. The next major work on the sacred was not until Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, in 1959. A review of the literature since that time reveals that the thinking on the sacred/profane dichotomy has changed little since these seminal writings. A useful tool for examining the sacred was created in 1989 when Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry explored the dichotomy as it relates to consumer behaviour. Here they identified twelve properties of the sacred: hierophany, kratophany, myth, mystery, sacrifice, ritual, opposition to the profane, contamination, communitas, commitment, objectification, and ecstasy and flow. These properties can be used to explore the sacred in the context of modern pilgrimage. One source of information about modern pilgrimage is travel narratives. Travel narratives are part of the quest genre, a romantic narrative where travellers are compelled to journey for that which is sacred. The quest genre is a metaphorical vehicle for narrating a spiritual journey composed of several stages, the call to journey, preparation, the journey itself, and returning. This paper explores the properties of the sacred, drawing evidence from travel narratives, to explore the qualities of sacred journey.

Key Words: Sacred, profane, pilgrimage, journey, travel.

Pilgrimage

Researchers, such as Hudman and Jackson (1992) and Vukonic (1996), propose that pilgrimages are important components of many religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism and have traditionally been defined as 'a physical journey in search of truth'. Early pilgrimages were associated with those who travelled to sacred sites, locales, or shrines to fulfil divine injunction or to show religious devotion. Hudman and Jackson did not consider these early pilgrims as tourists because they did not travel for pleasure and often experienced hardship and suffering, and some travelled for mandated reasons. They contend that the dividing line between pilgrimage and tourism became harder to draw in the fifteenth century, and some travelled to sacred sites out of acts of curiosity.

It was during the fifteenth century that the printing press emerged and travel accounts became available throughout Europe in most languages. Travel narratives were based on real or imagined pilgrim accounts. Hudson and Jackson make the claim that it became impossible to separate the pilgrims, those who travelled for piety, from those who travelled for

pleasure or recreation (Hudman and Jackson, 1992:107-121). Other writers, such as Cousineau (1998) suggest that any journey can be transformed into a pilgrimage if there is a commitment to finding something personally sacred along the road. In a more modern light, pilgrimage is a metaphor for any journey with the purpose of finding something that really matters. Some travellers long for self-purification, catharsis of an arduous journey, or awakened wonder.

Pilgrimage has long been associated with the sacred, however Hammond (1991: 118) says that

[the] separation of the spiritual from the religious has led to a reinterpretation of what constitutes the 'sacred,' where people are no longer constrained by religion in interpreting what spaces they view as sacred.

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One of the defining features of pilgrimage is that it is time and space set apart from ordinary life. It is through this aspect of the sacred that we may gain a better understanding of modern pilgrimage (Cousineau, 1991).

Properties of the Sacred

Not all who travel to sacred sites or journey the pilgrim trail are pilgrims or spiritual questers. Indeed, many may travel out of mere curiosity (Hudman and Jackson, 1992). It is the notion that pilgrims are intentional about seeking the sacred that sets them apart from tourists (Senn, 2002). Thus, a review of the sacred is in order to understand under what conditions may travel become sacred and pilgrims are distinct from tourists.

One of the first definitive works on the concept of the sacred was Emile Durkheim's 1912 work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. In it, he defined the sacred in opposition to the profane. In 1959, Mircea Eliade returned to the topic in his influential book, *The Sacred and the Profane*. A review of the literature since that time reveals that the thinking on the sacred/profane dichotomy has changed little since these seminal writings (Bloom, 2008). In Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) one may find a useful tool for examining the sacred, with which they explored the sacred as it relates to consumer behaviour. Here the concepts of Hierophany (the revelation of the sacred), kratophany (approach and avoidance response), opposition to the profane, contamination and commitment are drawn mainly from the synthesis of the work by Durkheim and Eliade. However, the authors expand their literature base in identifying the properties of sacrifice, objectification, ritual, myth, mystery, *communitas* and *ecstasy/flow*. These properties can be used to explore the sacred in the context of modern pilgrimage.

Hierophany is defined by Eliade (1959:11) as 'the act of manifestation of the sacred . . . i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us'. This sacredness is manifested experientially and is

defined as being sacred through a social process that brings a system of meaning to individuals, resulting in societal cohesion (Belk et al., 1989:6).

While this description contains elements of Eliade's mystical manifestation of the sacred, it goes on to include Durkheim's idea of the sacred as a product of society.

In addition to Hierophany, the concepts of kratophany and opposition to the profane round out Belk et al.'s three key properties of the sacred. Kratophany describes the ability of the sacred to elicit strong approach and avoidance tendencies in individuals, where the emotions of fascination and devotion are combined with feelings of repulsion and fear. This dynamic creates a sense of power drawing the individual to the sacred. The sacred is also defined partly via its opposition to the profane and loses its sacred status if impinged upon by the profane. True to Durkheim's formulation of the sacred, society plays a key role in maintaining the separation of the two (Durkheim, 1912).

Contamination and commitment represent the remainder of the characteristics of the sacred drawn directly from Durkheim and Eliade. Contamination represents the ability of sacredness to be spread via contact with a sacred time, place or object. For example, a particular item of clothing may be given sacred status by an individual because it is what he or she was wearing during contact with a sacred place. Commitment indicates that there is a feeling of focused emotional attachment to the sacred as the sacred becomes part of one's identity.

Of the characteristics drawn from works by other authors and qualitative research, sacrifice and ritual are the most similar to one another and, in fact, it may be possible to combine these two properties into one. Sacrifice establishes communion with the sacred through acts of abnegation and submission. Similarly, ritual establishes rules of conduct regarding how one relates to the sacred. This prepares one for communion with the sacred. If the sacred is a time, idea or experience, rather than a tangible object, the idea may be objectified, and a particular object will be representative of the sacred.

Communitas and *ecstasy/flow* primarily refer to the way individuals feel in the presence of the sacred. *Communitas* represents

a social anti-structure that frees participants from their normal social roles and statuses and instead engages them in a transcending camaraderie of status equality (Belk et al., 1989: 1-38).

Ecstasy and *flow* produce experiences with the sacred where one stands outside one's self. The individual in this state may experience feelings of immense joy, a centring of attention, and a loss of sense of self (Bloom, 2008).

Table 1: Quest Stages Aligned with the 12 Sacred Properties

Quest Stage	Sacred Property
Heeding the Call	Myth, Mystery, Opposition to the Profane, Kratophany
Preparation	Contamination, Ritual, Commitment
Journey	Hierophany, Kratophany, Sacrifice, Ecstasy/flow, Contamination, Communitas, Ritual, Opposition to the Profane, Commitment
Returning Home	Myth, Objectification

Finally, myth and mystery work together to identify the sacred and preserve sacred status. Myth serves to carry on the tradition of the sacred and to socialise newcomers to understandings of the sacred. Myth also preserves the mystery of the sacred, which is central to its survival. Once the sense of mystery regarding the sacred is gone, its sacred status is lost.

Travel as Sacred Quest

Although travel narratives are written in the form of a memoir or novel that is linear and chronological, the story is primarily about encounters with the sacred (Dann, 1999). Travel narratives are considered part of the quest genre, a romantic narrative where travellers are compelled to journey for that which is sacred. The quest genre is a metaphorical vehicle for narrating a spiritual journey composed of several stages, the call to journey, preparation, the journey itself, and returning home (Campbell, 1968).

Encounters with the sacred tend to occur most often within the journey itself, however, the sacredness of the quest is embedded within each stage beginning with the call to journey (See Table 1). Frequently, each property of the sacred may occur during several stages. Rarely do they occur just in one.

Heeding the Call (Myth, Mystery, Opposition to the Profane, Kratophany).

Quest narratives open with the call to travel. The potential traveller must make a choice, to heed the call to travel and depart into the mysterious unknown or turn a deaf ear and remain at home. By making the choice to travel, the traveller becomes the hero who

sets forth from mundane home and role in life, lured or called forth by desire or crisis. The departure is heightened by a call to adventure in which the hero accepts a proffered challenge, and is changed forever (Senn, 2002: 129).

This choice to journey is composed of four sacred components:

- mystery;
- opposition to the profane;
- myth, and;
- kratophany.

The first of these, mystery:

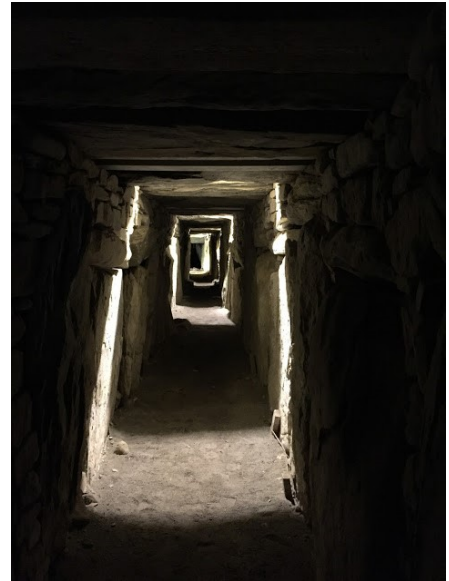
is characteristic of phenomena that do not fit human behaviour models based on presumptions of self-interest or competition, but rather derive from a desire for more profound experiences and meaning (Belk et al., 1989:7).

Mystery is further explained by opposition to the profane. The routines and rhythms of one's regular life are considered ordinary, or profane, as there is a predictability of one's daily schedule of going to work or school, paying the bills, shopping for groceries, and daily chores, whereas the moment a person chooses to cross the threshold from home and ordinary life and leave on a journey, the experience of life becomes in opposition to the profane because it will become extraordinary. Seeking the sacred during travel is manifested as the desire to seek a higher power, higher form of self, and meaning, and this is in direct contrast to what is experienced at home (see Figure 1).

The final sacred component of the call to travel is when one decides to engage in myth-making and play the role of the modern-day pilgrim.

the idea of a hero setting out, experiencing trials and adventure, and returning home victorious and changed . . . Here the myth has been displaced by the traveller as a puny alien crawling over a territory with no roots, then returning to discover his/her true self. Thus, the travel book, as a type of successful literary

Figure 1: Mystery and Contamination (Newgrange, Ireland)



Source: Authors ~ Goodnow

Figure 2 : Commitment and Ritual (Machu Picchu, Peru at the end of a 5-day journey along the Inca Trail)



Source: Authors ~ Goodnow

performance, is a happy blend of reportage and parable, of landscape plus incident doing the symbolic work of fable (Dann, 1999:163-164).

Heeding the call is choosing to seek the sacred, whereas remaining at home is a choice to remain in the profane or ordinary. Weighing this choice between the sacred and profane might suggest kratophany as the traveller may feel compelled to remain at home and follow established and rewarded social structures and norms, whereas the potential traveller feels the fascinating pull and devotion to seek the sacred and a life of meaning.

Preparation (Contamination, Ritual, Commitment).

The second stage of the quest is preparing for the journey (Campbell, 1968; Dispenza, 2002; Senn, 2002). During this time, travellers are engaged with many rituals or 'rules of conduct'. Preparing for the journey includes determining and accumulating material possessions, physical ability, and emotional strength and knowledge that will be needed throughout the journey (Goodnow and Ruddell, 2009). Material possessions may include money, transportation, shelter, food, and other gear. Physical and skill training may be necessary for activities or forms of self-propelled travel. Developing emotional strength and knowledge may include reaffirming one's sense of courage, reaffirming the goal of the journey, and researching and planning how the journey may unfold.

During preparation for the journey, would-be pilgrims plan their quest so they may experience contamination, or the spread of the positive through contact with the sacred. This may be through travel to places that have been traditionally considered sacred. However, in modern society, new sacred sites may be developed outside the context of religion, and travel to these sites is still often termed pilgrimage, or a journey in search of some imagined ideal state (Olsen and Timothy, 2006 - see also Figure 2). Commitment is an integral part of the preparation stage as individuals begin to separate themselves from the ordinary and instead of identifying themselves with their job, life stage, or other normative identities, they begin to identify self as traveller. As further integration into rituals and sacrifice occurs, commitment to the sacred and pilgrimage increase.

The Journey (Hierophany, Kratophany, Sacrifice, Ecstasy/flow, Contamination, Communitas, Ritual, Opposition to the Profane, Commitment).

The third phase of the quest pattern is the journey itself (Campbell, 1968). Travellers step out of their door, metaphorically crossing the threshold from ordinary to extraordinary, and depart for experiences and places unknown. They leave the safety, predictability, and routine of daily life and journey into the mystery with hopes of having the sacred revealed to them (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Communitas (Travelers in Costa Rica)



Source: Authors ~ Goodnow

Goodnow and Ruddell (2009) suggest that rarely is a spiritual goal attained without effort. This leads directly into Belk's *et al.*'s sacred property of sacrifice.

Sacrifices prepare one to commune with the sacred experience, and indicate appropriate deference to reinforce the extraordinary character of the sacred (1989:7).

Senn (2002) further suggests that there is a telic quality, a movement towards a goal. Senn also contends that the route is delineated for the pilgrim, unlike for others who may be questing, and the route is often difficult and portrayed as an unfamiliar and difficult traverse through desert, wilderness, or wasteland. The tie to kratophany is strengthened as one delves deep into the liminal nature of pilgrimage. There, within the limen and period of transition, the pilgrim may experience transformation, its determining quality. This transformation is usually anagogic as pilgrims metaphorically battle with spirits, physical handicap or sickness (Senn, 2002). They wrestle with doubt. Turner's (1966:95) depiction of liminality suggested that

liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.

Physical hardship, where the traveller focuses on survival and pushing through ordeal, often induces experiences of flow, characterised by a loss of self, centring of attention, and feelings of control over self and environment. Time often stands still as one is fully engrossed in the moment. After the ascetics of travel, the traveller is open and discovers a different world than the one previously known (Goodnow and Ruddell, 2009).

Self-perceptions and one's place in the world shift, and insights or deeper understandings of one's purpose in life represent the traveller/seeker's spiritual attainment. The experience itself is revealed as sacred to the traveller via Hierophany. Dispenza described journeys as

always about going from where we are now to another place. We go literally, but we can also travel figuratively as we search for another, higher level of consciousness. Seen this way, all our travel has a spiritual character (Dispenza, 2002:14).

Ross suggests that travellers submit themselves to certain environments with the intent for transformation (Ross, 2010). Pilgrims often travel to sacred sites and

places that contain sacred objects. The space and object may emit contaminating spiritual power. Spaces can also be contaminated by previous events that are considered sacred, or where sacred people were born, or performed miracles. Often at these sacred sites, pilgrims conduct rituals of reverence or sacrifice. Sacred spaces are often natural places full of beauty, majesty, and power that evoke ecstasy and flow, even without the help from myth, ritual or contamination (Belk *et al.*, 1989). *Communitas* built within, in the liminality, is considered one of the most transformative elements of travel, as it provides space and shared experience conducive to ecstasy and flow (Ross, 2010). Built into pilgrimage is a ritualised, institutionalised, and symbolic antistructure that serves to preserve and heighten the most normative and definitive aspects of the particular society. Ross suggests that antistructure creates freedom to be in ways not possible during ordinary daily life:

Travellers leave behind their usual mode of dress, means of transportation, social order, dwelling place, and rules of interaction (Senn, 2002:133)

and they exchange their previous norms for new norms and often enter in to *communitas*. Ross suggests that *communitas* accentuates bonds and 'relieves pilgrims of socially sanctioned roles and hierarchical division' (Ross, 2010:56).

Returning Home (Myth, Objectification).

The final stage of the quest is completed when the travellers return home and tell the tale (Goodnow and Ruddell, 2009). Telling the tale, says Dispenza (2002), elevates the journey to the level of myth. The great heroes of mythology left the comforts of home and embarked on epic expeditions into the unknown. The accounts of their travels, celebrated in song and passed down through the centuries, form the wisdom of the ages. In myth, the journey of life is an adventure of unparalleled drama and excitement calling forth courage, integrity, generosity, and endurance and giving back a deep spiritual understanding.

When returning home, mundane and profane objects that were picked up on the trail or at sacred sites, are elevated to the sacred as they are understood through the creation myth. The objectification of seemingly ordinary tourism souvenirs, such as a rock from the ancient Inca Trail leading up to Machhu Picchu laid on the mantel below a framed picture of the trail, further perpetuates the sacredness of the journey and its elevation to myth.

Conclusion

The elements of a traveller's quest can be closely tied to the experience of the sacred. As the traveller or pilgrim forges his or her journey, characteristics of the sacred are pieced together. It must be acknowledged, however, that all of these elements may not be present for every individual. While these properties provide a context for understanding the journey, they do not address the intent of the traveller. Furthermore, while this paper explores the sacred via the archetype of the quest, future research should explore specific components of a given trip to examine how the sacred is experienced on an individual level and may or may not be influenced by intent.

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