

Religious Common Culture and Religion Tourism

Hans Geybels

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is defined in several different ways. There are other authors who explore the subject in more depth than I.¹ In this contribution, I will use the term religious tourism to denote those occasions when people on holiday visit religious sites or festivals without religious or existential engagement. I am aware that in sociological research of tourism, pilgrimages of both long duration and distance and short duration and distance are classified in the category of religious tourism, but I believe there is a distinction to be made.² When going on a pilgrimage, the 'traveler' has explicit religious intentions. According to my definition, the label applied to the traveler is dependent upon their intention, not their destination.³ In other words: the aim of a pilgrim is a religious experience and the aim of a religious tourist is to explore religious heritage or similar.⁴ Strictly speaking, in my definition a religious tourist may for example be a Westerner who travels to Varanasi purely out of curiosity or a quest for learning and acts as an 'objective' observer while there, even when they participate in a ritual or celebration.⁵ Therefore, I will use the concept of 'religion tourism' instead of religious tourism.

¹ G. RINSCHEDÉ: 'Forms of religious tourism', in *Annals of tourism research* 19 (1992) 51-67; M.L. NOLAN: 'Religious sites as tourism attractions in Europe', in *Ibidem* 68-78 and J. MCKELVIE: 'Religious tourism', in *Travel & tourism analyst* 10/4 (2005) 1-47. Publications generally consider pilgrimage as religious tourism. On the other hand, present-day tourism can take on religious characteristics: J.B. ALLCOCK: 'Tourism as a sacred journey', in *Loisir et société* 11/1 (1988) 33-48. The spiritual dimension of tourism is explored in R. SHARPLEY: *Tourism, tourists, and society* (Huntingdon 2008⁴) chapter 7: 'Tourism, the spiritual dimension'. For criticism of the theorem that tourism is *ersatz* religion, see: M. STAUSBERG: *Religion und moderner Tourismus* (Berlin 2010) 13-28.

² Pilgrimages can be short prayer trips to regional devotion sites or alternatively much longer journeys to major pilgrimage sites far away. Traditional destinations for long distance pilgrimages are Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago.

³ The majority of visitors to Santiago de Compostela are simply tourists who are curious about the site and its rituals: X.M. SANTOS: 'Pilgrimage and tourism at Santiago de Compostela', in *Tourism recreation research* 27 (2002) 41-50.

⁴ This distinction is also made by M. BYWATER: 'Religious travel in Europe', in *Travel & tourism analyst* 2 (1994) 39-52. Religious and other motivations: A. SOMMER & M. SAVIANO: *Spirituelles Tourismus. Religiöses Reisen in Deutschland* (= Heilbronner Reihe Tourismuswirtschaft 2) (Berlin 2008) 53-55 and 147-155.

⁵ This trend even existed in medieval Christendom. Bishop Jacques de Vitry wrote in the year 1097: 'Some light-minded and inquisitive persons go on pilgrimages not out of

Of course there is almost always a common ground between pilgrims and religion tourists: pilgrims are also consumers and have other interests besides praying. Religion tourists may well have spiritual intentions when entering a sacred site or participating in a ritual. Tourism can even inspire a new religious interest.⁶ There is hardly such a thing as a pure pilgrim or a pure religion tourist. These are extremes on a sliding scale.⁷ To quote Victor Turner: 'A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist'.⁸

I would like to introduce two sharp hills, two 'Montaigus'. The first is a site in the Walloon municipality Rendeux, in the North of the province of Luxembourg. The village is bisected by the river Ourthe. On the left bank of the Ourthe lies a hill called Montaigu (from the Latin *Mons acutus*) which dominates the valley opposite the village of Marcourt. Located on the summit of the hill are the chapel and cell of Saint Thebaldus (Saint-Thibaut). The buildings currently on the site date back to the seventeenth century. Most tourists ascend directly to the summit on foot, but the locals take a small, hardly noticeable turning about halfway up the hill. This path leads to the allegedly miraculous spring of Saint Thebaldus. Around 1600 a local lord, Laurent de Marcour, placed a crucifix near the spring to offer thanks for the healing of his son. After that miracle, numerous believers sought out the spring seeking healing. An imposing ash tree used to grow nearby, supporting a white crucifix in 1949.⁹ At the start of the twentieth century a remarkable ritual was first noted, which persists to this day. Pilgrims create a crucifix out of twigs and sticks they find in the area. They make a hole in the middle of one stick to fit the other stick through, or use long leaves of grass to tie two twigs together in the shape of a cross. They then place the crucifix onto the moss-grown remains of the old ash tree. When I visited the site several years ago, I carried out the same ritual. I had no specific intentions in doing so, but the ritual is so extraordinary and the place seems so 'magical' that I simply did it.

devotion but out of mere curiosity and love of novelty. All they want to do is travel through unknown lands to investigate the absurd, exaggerated stories they have heard about the east'. Quote from J. SUMPTION: *Pelgrimage. An image of mediaeval religion* (London 1975) 257.

⁶ This idea is explored further in STAUSBERG: *Religion und moderner Tourismus* 66-68, indicating an opposite trend to the theory that tourism is becoming increasingly secular. Theory by the Israeli sociologist E. COHEN: *Contemporary tourism. Diversity and change* (Amsterdam 2004).

⁷ B. VUKONIC: *Tourism and religion* (Elmsford, NY 1996) 72. Also see the schematic in V.L. SMITH: 'Introduction. The quest in guest', in *Annals of tourism research* 19 (1992) 1-17, p. 4.

⁸ V. TURNER & E. TURNER: *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture. Anthropological perspectives* (New York 1978) 20.

⁹ More about this special site in Wallonia: Ph. SON: *L'ermitage de Saint-Thibaut et le site de Montaigu, Carnets du patrimoine* 61 (s.l. 2009).

The second sharp hill is the place I have made my home. With roughly 800.000 visitors a year, it is Belgium's largest Catholic pilgrimage destination: Scherpenheuvel (Montaigu in French or English) in Flemish Brabant.¹⁰ The town was founded at the start of the seventeenth century as a Counter Reformation stronghold of Mary devotion.¹¹ I deliberately use the term visitors and not pilgrims, even though most visitors are pilgrims. During the month of May, observation at the site revealed two remarkable practices: most visitors light a candle and many people receive a blessing for their car or motorbike. When I visited this pilgrimage site with colleagues theologians, they were surprised at the existence of this level of religious common culture. The amount of people partaking in rituals is astounding given that only three à four percent of the Flemish population are practicing Catholics.

2. Analysis of religion tourism in Scherpenheuvel

Scherpenheuvel is visited mainly by people who are relatively familiar with Christianity and who recognize the basilica as a place of worship. Most visitors to Scherpenheuvel have a religious motivation, albeit limited. Most of them can be described as pilgrims. Usually their motivation is utilitarian: they come to beg Mary for health, good exam results, work Visitors who are interested



Illustration 1: On the first day of May, countless groups and individuals – both faithful and others – go by foot to Scherpenheuvel. When they arrive, they sometimes celebrate in a secular way [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

exclusively in the cultural heritage of the basilica are a small minority. If this is their sole reason for visiting the shrine, they usually do not participate in any of the ritual repertoire. There is also a large amount of hobby cyclists who pass through Scherpenheuvel in spring and summer-time. Most of these will partake in rituals. What I am interested in is the impact of religion tourism on common religious culture.

¹⁰ I interviewed the rector of the shrine, Luc Van Hilst and his secretary, Michael Hanne on 2 June 2012.

¹¹ L. DUERLOO & M. WINGENS: *Scherpenheuvel. Het Jeruzalem van de Lage Landen* (Leuven 2002).



Illustration 2: Bicycle tourists in front of the chapel where they light candles [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

on the intensity of the religious motivation of the visitor. Those visitors whose journey is truly a pilgrimage and who come for predominantly religious reasons, are most likely to partake in top rituals 1 and 2. The majority of visitors, among those the hobby cyclists, are most likely to partake in the more accessible rituals 7, 8 and 9.¹²

The ritual repertoire at Scherpenheuvel is quite extensive. Research reveals a hierarchy within this repertoire, dependent

1. **Rosary and/or Stations of the Cross.** There is a nineteenth century Rosary and Stations of the Cross route on the grounds of the basilica. Only pilgrim groups use this facility. The rituals carried out here are less accessible than a mass as they are quite lengthy and demand intense participation in prayer. A mass could be attended more passively. Stations of the Cross and Rosary are rituals that call for a high level of identification and familiarity with Christian ritual practice. They are difficult to access for those who have lost touch with the Church and completely inaccessible to outsiders.
2. **Mass.** A mass can hardly be considered a 'tourist attraction', unlike for example a religious procession (such as the famous Holy Blood procession in Bruges), but some visitors do enter the basilica while a mass is being held and make it a quiet moment of reflection.
3. **Prayer circuit around the altar.** This ritual still requires some familiarity with the ritual repertoire of common Catholic religious culture. Copying behavior is avoided because some recognition is needed. It is also presumed that this ritual requires a high level of true religious faith. This ritual is often performed in conjunction with tradition 4.
4. **Blessing medallions.** The blessing of medallions presupposes a connection to tradition. Visitors who ask for a blessing believe that blessed objects provide protection from misfortune and/or bring good luck. A religion tourist

¹² At Scherpenheuvel, it is not possible to touch the devotional statue. If it were allowed, it would also constitute a highly accessible ritual. It is possible to be blessed by being touched with the statue after the candle procession at the end of the pilgrimage season on the first Sunday of November.

may purchase medallions, but will not get them blessed. He or she buys it as a souvenir.

5. **Tossing coins towards the altar.** Upon entering the basilica, one can observe some visitors tossing coins (rarely notes) behind the balustrade surrounding the altar. The balustrade is an essential element of this ritual as it serves to safeguard the money. An interesting observation is that one person will initiate this activity and others will then copy the behavior.
6. **Offering photos.** A ritual that has gained popularity during the latest decade is the offering of photos. A picture of the person for whom prayer is requested (or for whom thanks is given) is placed near the holy statue. As far as can be determined, this ritual emerged spontaneously within the pilgrim community and was not introduced from 'outside'. It presumes some familiarity with the ritual repertoire of the *vota scripta*.
7. **Blessing cars, motorcycles, and bikes.** Visitors often let their vehicles bless by the priests. Most of them come as individuals and visit the shrine for that particular purpose. It happens that they come in group: clubs of motorcycles, tractors and so on. In that case, many of them have their vehicles blessed in a group context.



Illustration 3: At the shrine, people can always have their pets blessed [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

Illustration 4: The blessing of motorcycles [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

8. ***Vota scripta***. In a side chapel at the front of the basilica, several logs are kept in which visitors can write their intentions. Most intentions are request based, primarily prayers for healing. Only a small minority visits the largest Belgian pilgrimage site to give thanks (at least as far as the *vota scripta* are concerned). This is an easily accessible ritual, popular even with non-pilgrims.



Illustration 5: Writing *vota scripta* by a pilgrim or tourist? [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]



Illustration 6: *Vota scripta* thrown on the ground in front of a copy of the statue of Our Lady in the Basilica of Scherpenheuvel [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

9. **Lighting a candle**. The most well-known and easily accessible ritual is the lighting of candles in one of the candle chapels around the basilica. It is easy and quick. Someone who lights a candle is not immediately branded as Catholic: ‘everyone does it’. This is not unimportant as the Church suffers image problems in Belgium. People would rather not be associated with the institute of the Church. A note: lighting a candle is used as a near synonym for ‘going to Scherpenheuvel’. This is a noteworthy shift dating from the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to that time the traditional offering was money, not candles. The money was placed into an offertory box or tossed towards the altar



Illustration 7: Lighting candles: the most familiar ritual nowadays [Photo: Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuveel, 01/05/2014]

Common to all ‘religious’ visitors to Scherpenheuveel are the mixed motives for their visit. It is rare to see visitors arriving with purely religious motives and excluding all but ritual actions. In fact, the visit or pilgrimage is usually combined with a short walk through the center of town and patronage at one of the many restaurants and cafés. The market stalls near the shrine testify to similar mixed motives: besides typically religious articles they also sell ‘general souvenirs’.¹³



Illustration 8: At the shop with religious articles [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuveel, 01/05/2014]

In contrast with other religious sites, Scherpenheuveel suffers very little from the ‘nuisance’ religion tourism can cause. This is probably due to the fact that a certain amount of identification remains, no matter how small. Average visitors are aware that they should be quiet in the basilica and they recognize the ritual of lighting candles. In this respect, Scherpenheuveel cannot be compared to for example the Notre Dame in Paris, which attracts 13.5 million visitors a year, most of whom are tourists first and foremost. The cathedral is therefore quite noisy and there is little participation in ritual. Even a fairly simple ritual such as lighting a candle is rarely performed. It appears the Notre Dame has lost its identity as a sacred site and has become a top tourist attraction. The same goes for the Sacré Coeur, also

¹³ On the souvenirs: J. EADE: ‘Pilgrimage and tourism at Lourdes, France,’ in *Annals of tourism research* 19 (1992) 18-32, p. 27-28.

in Paris.¹⁴ Tourists have various reasons for visiting those sites, but not religious ones: the central location, its status as a major attraction, art historical interest, exhibitions and concerts, passing the time, sheltering for the rain ...¹⁵

I have two observations to make regarding religion tourism in Scherpenheuvel. The first is this. It is noteworthy that the 'true' pilgrims are usually indistinguishable from tourists. This is of course related to the local monoculture. Visitors to Scherpenheuvel are almost exclusively 'white'. To put it frivolously, there are no busloads of Japanese tourists at Scherpenheuvel. Most visitors share the same cultural semiotics and know the rules to follow and what is acceptable behavior.

Not all religion tourism destinations are so lucky, witness the famous *tak bat* in Laos. On the tourist website www.about.com, in the section Southeast Asia travel, tourists are now instructed in all the do's and don'ts at the *tak bat*. This is the famous ritual performed by Buddhist monks who beg for food and alms every morning, mostly in Laos and Thailand. For a long time the ritual was described simply as a 'must see' in guidebooks. For hundreds of years it symbolized the symbiotic connection between the monks and the local population. No-one spoke. Giving and receiving happened in complete silence with people approaching the monks with the utmost respect. In Luang Prabang (Laos) this ritual is in jeopardy because of tourists who interpret the sacred ceremony as a cultural event. Tourists attempt to give the monks all sorts of things, bothering them and disrupting meditation. They pose for photographs and make noise. The level of disruption has led some of the local population to give up on the tradition, with far-reaching consequences for the monks. Attempts are being made to redress the balance by teaching tourists the correct code of behavior: this is a sacred ritual, not a photo shoot; it is better to keep your distance from the ceremony, wear appropriate clothing If tourists wish to give alms, they

¹⁴ On this phenomenon: M.L. NOLAN & S. NOLAN: 'Religious sites as tourism attractions in Europe', in *Annals of tourism research* 19 (1992) 68-78. Some authors even go so far as to claim that the entire Holy Land has become a biblical museum: S.R. SIZER: 'The ethical challenges of managing pilgrimages to the Holy Land', in *International journal of contemporary hospitality management* 11/2-3 (1999) 85-90. The major pilgrimage sites in France are acutely aware of the increased relevance of religion tourism and are attempting to adapt. They have formed the Association 'Villes-sanctuaires en France'. Their statutes aim to promote collaboration between town, pilgrimage site, and tourist board to create promotional material, welcome visitors, and coordinate other activities. All cathedrals, that are also top tourist attractions, have an extensive tourism policy: M. DODDS & G. FRESSON: 'L'enjeu de la gestion touristique des cathédrales. L'exemple de Chartres', in M. LEENHARDT-SALVAN (éd.): *Sites religieux et tourisme* (= Les cahiers espaces 96) (Paris 2007) 36-48. Profits made from tourism are often spent on maintenance and restoration of the buildings and on employee wages. The tourism label has political consequences for most pilgrimage sites. Activities relating to 'tourism' are eligible for subsidised restoration or extension works etcetera, while religious activities are not.

¹⁵ STAUSBERG: *Religion und moderner Tourismus* 64.

must offer quality rice, never touch the monks and never raise their own head above the monk's head, bow respectfully, etcetera.¹⁶

Catholic places of worship with a higher religious than cultural-historic value are barely affected by religion tourism in this way. This is apparent from the case study of Scherpenheuvel and is also confirmed at similar pilgrimage sites in other countries. The rector of the shrine in Ars tells me he receives between 500.000 and 600.000 visitors a year. Most of them are pilgrims. Few tourists participate in the masses that are held. They pass through and visit the basilica and the home of the pastor of Ars. This popular shrine of course boasts a number of easily accessible everyday rituals, but even these are rarely performed by tourists.¹⁷ A similar situation exists in the pilgrimage destination of Sainte Anne d'Auray in Bretagne, according to the local caretaker, Dominique Josse. Tourists – who may be passing through on a coach trip – light a candle, say a short prayer, or write something in the intention ledgers.¹⁸ The same is true at Pontmain.¹⁹

Santiago de Compostela does experience high volumes of tourists, but this has not led to any significant changes to the ritual repertoire. For example, the ritual swinging of the *botafumeiro* has not been increased to appease tourists. Only one tradition has been stopped, but this was due to conservation concerns. Since the twentieth century, pilgrims used to touch the twelfth century statue of Maestro Mateo with their heads. This has now been banned in the interest of conservation. Protecting the heritage prevails over its ritual usage.²⁰

This brings me to the second observation. The ritual repertoire at Scherpenheuvel is therefore safe. As there is no pressure from tourism, there is no impulse to make adaptations. Pressure from tourists has been known to cause significant changes to traditional ritual repertoires, by adapting them to become more accessible to outsiders.²¹ A striking example of this is the *pūja* in Pushkar (Radjasthan, India). The main attraction in this small town is an enormous Brahma temple where various *pūja* (rituals) are carried out. In the 1970's the first tourists, mostly hippies, discovered the area. Initially, the local population and domestic pilgrims avoided interaction with tourists, believing their

¹⁶ The well-known touristic publisher Routard gives tips on its website (www.routard.com) under the header 'Le tourisme religieux' about appropriate clothing for visiting religious sites. The French tourist organisation *Atout France* has a 'Club Tourisme et Spiritualité'.

¹⁷ Correspondence of 6 June 2012 with Jean-Philippe Nault, rector at the shrine in Ars.

¹⁸ Correspondence of 6 June 2012 with Dominique Josse, caretaker at the shrine of Sainte-Anne d'Auray.

¹⁹ Correspondence with the secretary of the rector of the shrine at Pontmain on 8 June 2012.

²⁰ Correspondence of 6 June 2012 with Xosé M. Sánchez, responsible for the archives at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

²¹ D.H. OLSEN: 'Heritage, tourism, and the commodification of religion', in *Tourism recreation research* 28/3 (2003) 99-104.

presence would defile the sacred site. However, soon the *pandas* (priests) realized that they could charge exorbitant prices for performing rituals for tourists. In the 1990's the amount of tourists grew so large that the ritual was adapted. English phrases were added, and the ending was simplified.²²

It is no coincidence that the two main examples of the effects of tourism are located in the East.²³ Religion tourism is increasingly attracted to that region (barring some notable exceptions in the West like Compostela, Chartres, or Stonehenge). Westerners are leaving familiar traditions behind to explore the strange and exotic. These days, Western tourists no longer 'travel'; instead they are looking for 'experiences'. This conclusion is easily drawn from the many websites and brochures attracting customers by promising high levels of participation in local traditions. Besides the usual natural or cultural wonders – which used to dominate such brochures – websites explicitly describe how tourists can actively partake in religious festivals, rituals, or traditions.

I return to Scherpenheuvel for the last time, because one element has changed indeed. And it was under pressure of the general public. Pilgrims come to Scherpenheuvel in the month of May, because it is the month of Mary. Now, people visit the shrine during the whole year, most of them from about April to September. It often depends on the weather. The priests had to adopt themselves to that prolongation of the pilgrim season.



Illustration 9: People walk around the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel in the Basilica while they pray [Photo Hans Geybels, Scherpenheuvel, 01/05/2014]

²² STAUSBERG: *Religion und moderner Tourismus* 54-55.

²³ Of course adapted rituals are not limited to the East. All 'exotic' destinations are vulnerable to this phenomenon, for example voodoo dances that have been commodified under the influence of tourism in Haiti: STAUSBERG: *Religion und moderner Tourismus* 140 and A.B. GOLDBERG: *Commercial folklore and voodoo in Haiti. International tourism and the sale of culture* (PHD Dissertation, Indiana University) (Bloomington, IN 1981).

3. Festivals

This overview has shown that few traditional pilgrimage destinations or their ritual repertoires are affected by the pressures of religion tourism. Visitors are predominantly pilgrims and have mainly religious intentions. Real tourists only participate in the most accessible and recognizable rituals. However, this does not mean that the entire Christian culture remains unaffected by tourism.

Religion tourism does affect the Christian, i.e. Catholic festival culture. I take this to mean mostly parades and processions. Initially, especially the large well-known parades and processions appeared to adapt to the demands of religion tourism. They felt the need to attract as many as possible spectators. Usually there is pressure to do so from the local town council which will become involved with the organization of such a large event. Good examples would be the seven-yearly festivals in Tongeren or Hasselt, or the Hanswijk procession in Mechelen. The religious subject matter is supplemented with historical and topical tableaux, in the interest of increasing tourism to the town. Other activities are also on offer, in order to extend the length of stay.

This is not necessarily a negative evolution. Numerous small parades and processions survive only because of religion tourism and a secular audience of tourists. The large amount of spectators encourages organizers to continue holding regular processions. I refer to the Saint Evermarus procession in Rutten or the Horse procession in Hakendover. If those events attracted only pilgrims, the processions would probably have been cancelled by now. It is worth noting that precisely those processions offering a little extra, are the ones who survive. In Rutten there are the folkloristic atmosphere and the Evermarus games; in Hakendover there are horse races.

4. Conclusion: commodification of religious rites and festivals?

In this contribution, I have used the term religion tourism to mean travelers who visit sacred sites as outsiders or who come to witness religious rites and festivals. This is a very specific definition. I am well aware that a truly detached religion tourism does not exist anymore than a true pilgrim exists. It is often a question of mixed motives.

The central question of this contribution was whether tourism can bring about the transformation of religious rituals and traditions. The answer is complex and often dependent on the type of location or religious festival. If it is considered to be a major tourist attraction that draws large crowds of religion tourists, there is a big chance adaptations will be made. When a location is frequented mostly by pilgrims, transformations are smaller or even non-existent. Religion tourists are often attracted by important religion tourist destinations that also welcome many pilgrims, but their participation in ritual is minimal.

This is best illustrated by the thousands of tourists who touch the medieval statue of the apostle Paul in the Saint Peter's basilica in Rome every day. The next day they will thoughtlessly also place that same hand in the Bocca della verità in the portico of the Santa Maria in Cosmedin.

Christian festival culture appears to be affected more readily by tourism than traditional pilgrimage destinations. Thousands of tourists attend Good Week in several Spanish towns purely out of curiosity.²⁴ Those events and locations are most vulnerable to commodification. Many visitors consider the religious ritual repertoire as nothing more than a tourist attraction or an aesthetic spectacle. In contrast to pilgrims, tourists do not seek salvation or healing, but touristic satisfaction. They are titillated by accounts from other travelers or travel guides.

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²⁴ A. GERMAIN: 'Tourisme religieux en Espagne. Un secteur prometteur', in LEENHERDT-SALVAN: *Sites religieux et tourism* 54-64.