
**‘SERVICE DELIVERY’ AT SACRED SITES
POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF MANAGEMENT
SCIENCE**

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Abstract

Many sacred sites, in all religious traditions, attract large numbers of non-worshipping (‘tourist’) visitors. This frequently causes problems, as the managers of such sites are unaccustomed, or unwilling, to deal with commercial issues although they may be increasingly reliant on revenue generated by visitors to maintain the function of the worshipping community and conserve the site. This paper examines some of the underlying issues involved and asks how these may be approached from a service delivery perspective to improve the quality of the experience that both worshippers and non-worshippers receive at sacred sites. The main focus of the remarks being made here is on Christian sites in Europe.

Keywords: sacred site, visitor management, theology of place, cathedrals, cultural tourism, *heterotopia*

1. Introduction

Part of the diversification of the late 20th century quest for religious experience in Europe includes a resurgence of interest in visiting sacred sites, which can be measured not only by increased visitation to shrines, cathedrals and churches but also by increased numbers of people involved in pilgrimage and religious retreats throughout Europe. It is estimated that 3.5 million pilgrims visit Santiago de Compostela each year [1] but this is only a fraction of the 12 million ordinary tourists who visit the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris each year, making it the most popular tourism attraction in Europe [2].

Much of the analysis of religious travel has come from the perspective of the social sciences and concentrated on pilgrimage, including classifications of sites, discussion about the travel patterns of religious tourists or differentiation of different pilgrims groups [3]. Much of the literature on pilgrimage also concentrates on definition – the best probably being that a pilgrim is one who

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strives to obtain the salvation of his/her their soul through a physical journey in which *caritas*, love for God; and not *cupiditas*, love for material things, drives them. Such journeys are found in all the great religions of the world. On a global scale, pilgrimage probably attracts 250 million people/year [4]. Within Europe religious tourism is more focused around urban centres, churches, cathedrals and monasteries than shrines. Tourists visiting urban centres which typically contain many sacred sites as well as secular visitor attractions, are able to gain the cultural and artistic and historic input often lacking in the contemporary and commercialised world of shrines.

Eade [5] notes that tourists may also be moved by religious emotion as well as pilgrims, but these may not necessarily be 'religious tourists', defined as those 'who set out to visit a destination of religious significance for a specifically religious purpose' [6]. These differ from religious heritage tourist who visits for cultural and historical interest rather than a search for religious meaning. Much of the recent interest in religious travel has come from the (belated) realization that such activities are of major economic importance although the interesting relationship between religion and tourism has also received attention from different authors [7-9]. Many writers [6, 10, 11] project a significant increase in religious tourism in the near future.

In an earlier work the writer has classified the many different kinds of Christian religious site in Europe, which include everything from small parish churches to major national shrines [2]. Shrines can grow quickly in popularity and create huge volumes of tourist business - after the death of the Capuchin Friar Padre Pio in 1968 the mountain-top friary where he spent his life in the remote town of San Giovanni Rotondo (southern Italy) became the number-one pilgrimage destination in Europe, attracting 7-8 million visitors/year to its newly-built basilica. The Marian shrine at Knock, western Ireland, receives 1.5 million visitors/year; it is of immense economic significance to a relatively undeveloped area of western Ireland, and a major element in the Catholic pilgrimage network of Europe.

2. Visiting sacred sites

The nature of the experience which a sacred site offers to its visitors is highly complex; being both intangible and including such elements such as nostalgia, a closeness to God, 'atmosphere' and the gaining of spiritual merit, on which it is impossible to put a monetary value [12]. But sacred sites are also in the business of providing visitor services (literally as well as metaphorically), although their core business remains the provision of a focus and facility for those who wish to worship, pray or meditate. However, revenue from visitors is often vital to the maintenance of their fabric and facilities although the generation of such revenue by methods that can be direct (donation or admissions fee) or indirect (from catering or merchandising) is often highly controversial [13]. The church authorities, which manage such issues, are often

made uncomfortable by the need to think of their visitors as 'customers' and to envisage the activities that they perform as providing a visitor service.

Sacred sites and their worshipping communities welcome visitors for many reasons; an opportunity to showcase the building, an opportunity to generate cash, share faith or enhance a sense of community. And visitors go to such sites because they offer a sacred space, which is perceived as 'unchanging' in a rapidly changing world, often including some quiet space, a place to pray and often someone to talk to or the opportunity to get information about faith. The concept of 'place' had been largely eliminated from discourse in western society and yet recent work suggests that interest in the theology of place may be reviving. Place has very much more influence upon human experience than is generally recognised and that this lack of recognition, and all that results from it, are dehumanising. Identity is a problem in a society where the individual is often no longer part of a stable social network. The resulting search for meaning can take place in a number of ways, including both the pursuit of consumption and also the search for religious experience [14]. This can involve an unfocused 'New Age' spirituality but can also be a reversion to organised religion and the safety of traditional religious practices, which bind individual to group identity and reinforce community bonds. For some people, joining a church community and becoming a regular worshipper is a manifestation of this phenomenon. Yet, for example, church worshipping communities in the UK are declining at exactly the same time as tourist numbers are rapidly increasing. More than 50 million visits are made annually to English parish churches and cathedrals. It is tempting to suggest that in today's pressured world some people are seeking a quick-fix spiritual experience by being a temporary tourist entering a place of worship for a transient, but none the less significant, encounter with the numinous. Inge recently wrote about the need to demonstrate how Christian theology should take 'place' seriously, arguing that community and places each build the identity of the other [15]. This increased search for rootedness and a desire to experience sacred space is at the heart of all visits to sacred sites and implicit in the growth of interest in pilgrimage. But for a sacred site such as cathedral or major shrine to welcome such visitors it must also function as a business within a network of increasingly complex commercial relationships. And those who manage the site (who have generally been trained as career clerics) are often uncomfortable with the commercial realities thus imposed.

Why is this so? The reasons why site 'managers' sometimes feel uncomfortable with business-related issues are complex. Some are biblical, and stem from the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the money lenders (Matthew 21.13), which is often interpreted in a simplistic way to mean that the church should have nothing to do with money. Some reasons are historical, especially in Protestant churches, where the history of practices such as simony and the pre-Reformation selling of indulgences are remembered as unacceptable. And there may be a third reason, derived from consumer psychology, which describes why visitors themselves may feel uncomfortable with commercial transactions in a sacred site. The writer argues that conflicts over revenue

generation within a sacred site may also stem from the nature of the spiritual experience expected and received by its visitors. A fundamental concept here is that of sacred space as *heteretopia* (a ritual space which exists out of time) [16].

Sacred space and sacred buildings are identified as such by the majority of their visitors even if they are unable to articulate the significance of its seeming immutability as a component of their experience. It becomes important that the site appears to be untouched by the modern world, even if in practical terms this is romantic but impossible since the building will have been continually modified since its construction. The tourist, however, sees it as a space to be preserved rather than used, to be gazed upon but not changed [17]. Thus, when attempts are made to radicalise the use of that space, whether by the physical modification of the site or by the introduction of some commercial activity, a dissonance arises. Exactly the same phenomenon is seen at any sacred site when attempts are made to modify it by the addition, subtraction or alteration of a feature, perhaps to allow for some more contemporary use or the changing nature of a worshipping community. Because the space has become something to be gazed at, a space to be preserved intact much like a painting, the idea of altering the frame or adding a few more strokes of paint is generally fiercely opposed. This partly accounts for the controversy surrounding admissions charges. The experience of visiting a sacred site, even when one is not actively involved in its 'ownership' undeniably inculcates a sense of history and tradition, a grounding in a particular belief system which the casual visitor can reject or convert into worship.

Christian sacred sites such as churches and cathedrals allow their visitors to rediscover the joys of ancient space. The echoing, dark, cavernous and mysterious interior of a cathedral divorces the visitors from the external (real) world by allowing them temporary entry into another world where the sense of time is lost and the visitor removed from the constraints of their day to day life. Contemporary humanity has a fear of chaos, produced as a result of modernisation when both society and human relationships may be temporary. Ritual space, *sensu strictu*, should divorce the participant from his/her surroundings so that the space becomes complete on its own, achieving a sense of timelessness (or perhaps timefullness) in which all sense of time is collapsed into a particular time frame. It is this sense of timefullness that visitors to sacred spaced remark on but are unable to describe, which creates a powerful 'spirit of place' that affects visitors, and is affected by them. Foucault developed the term *heterotopia* for such ritual spaces, commenting that "There also exist, and this is probably true for all cultures and all civilizations, real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other arrangements that can be found within society are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable." [16]

To penetrate a *heterotopia* needs special permission and takes place after performing a certain number of gestures. Gatekeepers control access to such sites, but the rules for access are generally well known. However, when these rules are changed (perhaps by the introduction of a pay perimeter) or when the nature of access to the site is altered, both observer and site user become concerned and uncomfortable. The sacred *heterotopia* exists out of time; attempts to lock it within a temporal framework and manage it as a business are doomed to failure. Sacred space is complete and self-referencing, a system composed solely through signification of itself that creates nostalgia though “a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality” creating “a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared” [18]. This is analogous to Foucault’s final characteristic of *heterotopia*, “creating a space of illusion that reveals how all real spaces is more illusory” [16]. The space offers compensation to those whose identity and history cannot be found or experienced in the realm of everyday life [19].

3. Commercial reality at sacred sites

Issues related to this concept of *heterotopia* may underpin many commercial decisions taken at sacred sites. For example, over the last few years there has been a great controversy in England about the decision by some of its 42 Anglican cathedrals to charge admission. Running a cathedral is expensive. Few English cathedrals have an operating budget of less than £500, 000/year with which to fund the conservation and management of a complex building as well as provide a wide range of services for visitors, pilgrims and worshippers. It is not surprising that cathedrals look to their visitors as sources of extra income. Cathedrals receive no formal government support in England and often need to generate substantial sums of money from their visitors. During the 1980’s a great debate took place about whether admissions charges to cathedral should be levied, but at present only 5 Anglican cathedrals do so, the remainder partly relying on revenue generation from associated commercial activities. An ecclesiastical report commissioned to examine the future role of Anglican cathedrals also recognized that tourism was of great significance, firstly as part of the cathedrals mission of Christian evangelism and witness and secondly as a source of income through donations, admissions fees and revenue from retailing and catering operations [20].

The revenue generated by cathedrals varies in accordance with a range of factors including their location, size and profile as visitor attractions. Large cathedrals with significant levels of international visitation such as St Paul’s, Canterbury Cathedral York Minster generate visitor income from a number of sources, including admissions charges and income derived from a portfolio of commercial activities of which catering and retail outlets are the most significant. Such foundations have many more opportunities than a small parish church cathedral whose visitation levels are lower and dominated by the domestic and diocesan market [2, 21].

Visitors to cathedrals expect a range of facilities associated with the cathedral itself which include information, parking, tours, a coffee shop and a bookshop, and also anticipate that their visit will include the opportunity to browse neighbouring streets, visiting other cultural and heritage attractions and indulging in speciality shopping. But charging for admission remains the only certain way of generating substantial revenue, though opposed by most cathedral administrations. It is argued here that this debate over admissions charges is not simply a straightforward reluctance to pay up on behalf of the visitor, but intrinsically related to the nature of the spiritual experience expected and received by visitors to cathedrals, whether consciously or not. In earlier times, visiting a cathedral meant an encounter with the holy, and a visitor experience that might include a call to move beyond the self. The vast majority of today's cultural tourists do not have such motivations, but part of the challenge of managing visitors to cathedrals lies in difficulties associated with an interface between the sacred and the profane.

It may be that part of the public's reluctance to accept the imposition of admissions charges to cathedrals stems not from inherent meanness but from some deeper reason, intrinsically related to visitor motivation. Part of the mystery of cathedral as *heterotopia* is its otherness, its removal from the world of time constraints and commerce. Charging for admission brings the visitor down the earth since he or she is unable to place a spiritual and temporal perimeter around the site. This becomes confusing since the site no longer represents a space apart from the everyday world, but merely an extension of it. The cathedral loses its other-ness and both visitor and visited become uncomfortable. It has been interesting to note, in recent years, the increasing popularity of houses of religion as place of retreat and even as training grounds for battle-weary businessmen. This phenomenon is matched by an emergent literature of business texts drawing on the sacred as a means of interpreting the values of the modern world, and changing them.

There is long tradition in anthropology of the structural examination of events and institutions as markers of the passage of natural and social stages in life. This stems partly from Durkheim's notion of the contrast between the sacred (the non-ordinary) experience, and the profane [22]. The alternation of these states, and the importance of the transition between them, was first used in the last century in various analyses of the almost universal rituals that emphasized the process of leaving the ordinary, whether for a long time (as a pilgrimage) or a short visit to a cathedral. And the same is true for all other categories of sacred site.

4. Management Science Implications?

There are a number of ways in which management science can assist in balancing the priorities of visitors, conservation and service provision at sacred sites. Although adoption of the term 'service delivery systems' (in its business sense) as developed by Schmenner will be repugnant to many clergy, the fact remains that sacred sites can no longer be managed in the way that they have for the preceding millennia [23]. Money is tight, worshippers are few, tourist visitors are many, buildings are expensive to maintain and budgets must be balanced. Those involved in the management of sacred sites are, whether they like it or not, in the religion business and in the business of delivering services (in both senses) in highly challenging times. The bottom line is the need not only to balance the budget but also to present the mission and ministry of the site to its staff and visitors as well as possible. This may involve the conservation of an ancient building, but it also may involve the construction of a new visitor centre or the development of commercial outreach activities in catering, merchandising or the staging of exhibitions and concerts. The particular contribution of service sector management here could come in several fields. Firstly, there is a need for managers of such sites (especially their clergy) to be trained in coping with contemporary human resource issues within the rigid hierarchies and accountability systems in their various churches, and to evolve ways in which such procedures might be flexed out for different circumstances. A second area of interest is financial management training for decision-making, and a greater reliance on information technologies. In the past church managers have tended to be naïve about contemporary political issues such as Health and Safety and Employment legislation but this can no longer be the case. Moreover, unpleasant realities such as crime, vandalism and theft need to be considered (together with the financial implications of their prevention). As with any large business churches, cathedrals and shrines have varied staffs (clerical, lay and volunteers) and have traditionally been quite opportunistic in hiring, training, firing and ensuring their employees' welfare - as have many other charitable organisations. But times have changed. Such foundations must in the future optimize the potential of their employees and be prepared to prune where necessary. In order to maintain the quality of the provision of religious services they also need to maintain (and improve) the quality of their secular services as well, and to be able to respond to consumer demands. This is never easy where money is tight and management unworldly but an understanding of the motivation of visitors, as sketched out in this short article, may be helpful. The theological justification is quite clear – sacred sites must be managed effectively as part of the mission of the Christian church.

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