Sacred Travel in the Himalayas: some Durkheimian considerations

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Abstract
This paper will discuss the practice of sacred travel in the Himalayan region. This will involve considering the evolution of the practice – from the elementary forms of wandering ascetics to institutionalized pilgrimage, to contemporary spiritual tourism. I will then explore the potential relevance of Durkheim’s concept of collective representation in regards to this phenomenon. This exploration is intended to help inform the theoretical backdrop of my upcoming ethnographic field research with contemporary pilgrims in the region.

Keywords: pilgrimage, religion, collective representation, modernity

I have a twofold agenda for this paper. Firstly, I will discuss my current area of research – sacred travel in the Himalayas. Secondly, I will explore the potential relevance of Durkheim’s concept of collective representation for understanding religious phenomena. While I am at an early stage in my research project, this exploration is intended to help inform the theoretical backdrop of my upcoming ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary pilgrims in the Himalayan region.

Despite having roots in the ancient world, sacred travel, or travel motivated by and carried out principally for religious or spiritual purposes, continues to be practiced in traditional religious centres, as well as in more recently constructed or appropriated sites with supposed ‘spiritual magnetism’ (Reader, 2007). Research suggests that sacred travel, both of the religiously-motivated and more secular varieties, has experienced growth in many parts of the
world - from quasi-religious visits to Stonehenge and Machu Picchu, to neo-pagan goddess pilgrimage in Malta, the el Camino Santiago in Spain, and the perennial pilgrimages to the river Ganges and Mecca (Cohen, 1992; Coleman & Eade, 2004; Coleman & Elsner, 1995; Devereux & Carnegie, 2006; Digance, 2003; Fox, 2008; Rountree, 2002, 2005; Swatos, 2006).

Research in this area is often interested in explaining why contemporary individuals choose to undertake pilgrimages – a pre-modern practice – in late modernity. Geertz ((1972, p. 26) and Turner and Turner (1978) describe modern pilgrimage as a ‘meta-social commentary’ on the troubles of the epoch and a search for the roots of ancient, almost vanishing virtues. In Weberian terms, contemporary sacred travel could be seen in relation to the growing ‘disenchantment of the world’ that has accompanied modernity. Similarly, Lowenthal (1997, p. 6) views the rising popularity in pilgrimages as a reaction to the “sense of isolation and dislocation along with dismay at the pace of technological change and the loss or neglect of natural landscapes”. Greenwood (1989) claims that many middle-class tourists “thirst for cultural authenticity” due to the cultural impoverishment that has accompanied economic success. In the same vein, Hellas (1998, p. 3) observes that in late modernity, western populations have become progressively consumed by notions of ‘authenticity’, ‘being true to oneself’ – central themes in contemporary sacred travel.

In spaces and places of transition and liminality, removed from the profane concerns of everyday life, pilgrims explore themselves and search for identity, authenticity, spirituality and meaning. This experience of liminality, where individuals find themselves existing “neither here nor there”, however, is much the same as in pre-modern pilgrimages (Turner, 1982; Turner & Turner, 1978). While many structural aspects of pilgrimage remain in place, newer modes of sacred travel – often hybrid or adapted forms of older ones – raise new questions. In late modernity, characterized by individual choice, autonomy and market culture, people appear to construct pilgrimages based on complex combinations of personal, cultural, historical, political and economic factors which in many ways reflect the times. The intersections of these factors and variables, along with how pilgrims narrate the contingency and cogency of their experiences are issues of the utmost interest to the researcher.

A destination with one of the longest traditions of sacred travel is the middle Himalayan region, encompassing northern India, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Since the 11th century BCE, wandering ascetics were drawn to ‘holy sanctuaries’ located amidst the secluded valleys,
glacial rivers and hot springs of the world’s highest mountain range (Bhardwaj, 1973; Singh, 2005). Over the centuries, both Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimages in the region became institutionalized and accessible to greater numbers of visitors. In more recent times, the area has seen exponential growth in visitor numbers – both domestic and foreign - who can be classified on a continuum of religiously-motivated to more secular pilgrims and mass tourists. As the fieldwork component of my doctoral thesis in social anthropology, I plan to carry out ethnographic research in northern India and Nepal, investigating contemporary pilgrim and tourist motivations, attitudes, perceptions, experiences and reflections on the transformative effects of their journeys.

While this empirical research will focus on contemporary approaches to sacred travel, it is important to contextualize these practices within a historical, or genealogical framework. In other words, we must investigate how the structure of sacred travel has evolved and changed over time, but also how it has remained relatively consistent. This will involve keeping a close eye on how contemporary sacred travel practices may be viewed as adaptations and reconfigurations of pre-established forms. In short, what I am interested in understanding is what these journeys mean to the people who take them, how they are conducted and what these practices might say about certain approaches to religion or spirituality in late modernity.

Looking to Durkheim, I wonder what he would have made of the forms of sacred travel being practiced in the Himalayas today. How might he interpret the Lonely Planet carrying, ‘authenticity’ craving global nomads hanging around Hindu ashrams – practicing yoga and meditation, trekking to ‘sacred’ peaks and ancient Buddhist shrines and smoking ganja on ‘holy’ river banks. What would it mean if these quasi-spiritual journeys also entailed watching Hollywood DVD’s and drinking imported beer in a hostel at night?

One useful tool I see from Durkheim for this research is his conception of religion as a symbolic system centred around collective representations. He writes, “Religious beliefs are those representations that express the nature of sacred things and the relation they have with other sacred things or with profane things...” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 38). Speaking more generally in Suicide, he wrote that “essentially social life is made up of representations”, and “these collective representations are of quite another character from those of the individual” (cited in Thompson, 1982, p. 61).
Durkheim’s approach to understanding religion as a unified system of collective representations was to trace it back to its origins, or *elementary forms*. Not going quite this far back in the tradition of Himalayan sacred travel, we can look to the early Hindu ascetics who first wandered through and consecrated various geographic features of the region; rivers, hot springs, waterfalls and mountain peaks. As Bharadwaj (1973) notes, “the exquisite locations of the Himalayan-scapes were consecrated as shrines for Hindu pilgrimages where nature overwhelmed the human psyche intro prayerful submission and existential humility”. Similarly, Singh (2005, p. 218) observes, “...the middle Himalayas in all their awesome scenery and awful solitude became a perfect sacrosanct for theosophizing, learning and writing”.

Over time, word spread of the ‘mystical’ Himalayas, which were represented as the ‘abode of the gods’ and the roof of the world. As the region saw increasing numbers of pilgrims, Himalayan pilgrimage became a Hindu institution, marked by the construction of temples and shrines, formal employment of priests and the establishment of rituals, ceremonies and a donation system. This occurred in conjunction with the spiritual fervour that caught India from the 11th to 5th B.C.E. with the spread of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabdaratha*. With the popularization of the *Mahabdaratha*, and the *Puranas* (Hindu scriptures on myths), “…pilgrimages were made an inevitable ritual of Hindu living” (Singh, 2005, p. 219).

Translated into Durkeimian terms, it would appear that the Himalayan region itself became a collective representation of the sacred. In other words, it became registered in the collective consciousness of society as a place of mysticism, divinity, enchantment and sacredness. Durkheim also made the important point that the sacred could only be accessed in a ritualized manner; in this case the prescribed routes and rituals of Hindu, and later Buddhist religious pilgrimages. Based on early tales from wandering esoterics, representations of the Himalayas as a sacred place extended first to the communities in the close proximity, gradually spreading throughout India, across the mountains of Tibet to China, to Mongolia, East and south-East Asia, and centuries later, to the West.

On my research agenda is to explore the historical transmission of these collective representations, focusing particularly on how they made their way into Western consciousness and what forms they then took. This will done by analyzing written accounts from the West’s contact with the region over the past two centuries and a half centuries – looking at how collective representations reinforced the image of the Himalayas a sacred
place *par excellence*. Tracing representations of the ‘mystic East’ in Western consciousness will involve contextualizing them within the discourse of western modernity. I hypothesize that the West’s general enchantment with the East was and is in many ways a counter-reaction to, or an expression of the disenchantment with various aspects of modernity. Moreover, I see the counter-cultural aspect of this phenomenon and the apparent search for re-enchantment very much indebted to early Romantic ideology – a thread that can be read through to the present.

Today, when a spiritually starved Western cosmopolitan wants to seek the sacred, places such as India, Nepal and Tibet register as almost automatic candidates. The question then is how these collective representations became so firmly embedded in Western consciousness? One approach to answering this question is to look at published travel account, as well as examples from literature and film. Novels like James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933), E.M. Forester’s *A Passage to India* (1924), Hesse’s *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Journey to the East* (1932), Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958), or more recently the Elizabeth Gilbert’s international best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) – all serve to reconfirm the image of the ‘sacred East’, as opposed to the apparently ‘profane West’. Regarding the last case, it is not difficult to guess that of all places a recently divorced, secular, middle-aged, middle-class western woman would go to pursue spirituality and ‘find herself’, would be India. Moreover, films like *7 years on Tibet* (1997, based on the novel), *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), travel guides such as Lonely Planet and travel blogs all appear to reinforce the same collective representation.

Coleman and Elsner (1995, p. 214) write, “If we accept one aspect of a Durkheimian view of the sacred – the notion that the sacred is in some respects an embodiment and representation of societal ideals – we can argue that pilgrimage is currently taking on new forms that go far beyond standard religious practices”. This should come as no great surprise in late modernity, which is characterized by the decline of institutionalized religion, cultural hybridity cosmopolitan sensibilities, mobility, consumerist attitudes and individual autonomy versus collectivity (Bauman, 1998, 2000 2008; Beck, 2006; Beck & Willms, 2004; Bellah, 1970; Berger, 1967; Castells, 1997, 2’nd edition: 2004; Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1996; Luckmann, 1967). The endurance of pilgrimage, however, relates to the perennial, seemingly inescapable notion that humankind – despite advances in science, technology and philosophy – seems to need something like religion. This idea has been echoed by thinkers from Plato to Kant, Marx
to Weber, Freud to James and of course, Durkheim. In the conclusion to his *Elementary forms*, Durkheim writes,

“Thus there is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality” (cited in Thompson, 1982, p. 135).

Unlike other thinkers who saw religion as a disease, an illusion, or an opiate, Durkheim’s conclusions were less pessimistic. However, his optimism may be attributed to the *Elementary forms* being a more or less overtly moralistic work, constructed to prove his premeditated conclusion that society itself is the soul of religion and nothing more. As Bauman (2008, p. 32) observes, “...[Durkheim] strove to insert and settle ‘society’ in the place vacated by God and by Nature viewed as God’s embodiment – and thereby to claim for the nascent nation-state that right to articulate, pronounce and enforce moral commandments...” In his own words, Durkheim writes, “We must discover the rational substitutes for those religious motives that have, for so long, served as the vehicle for the most essential moral ideas” (in Giddens, 1978).

Where Durkheim surprisingly falls short in his forecast for the future of religion, however, was to consider the unprecedented individualism, social fragmentation, ‘liquidity’ and mobility that would soon epitomize late modernity. I say surprisingly because it is clear he was profoundly concerned about the fate of modern man, as his studies in suicide and his concept of *anomie* demonstrate. Durkheimian theory of religion seems to presuppose that societies are closed-off, isolated entities, into and unto themselves. This view may still have been tenable in Durkheim’s pre-WWI, 3rd Republic era France – an era when the nation-state could still be viewed as a container and purveyor of moral and ethical values. Contemporary social theory, on the other hand, has been forced to abandon the idea of society and the nation-state as integrated, cohesive containers. Instead, these have been replaced by notions of mobility, global flows, liquidity and networks - all of which have extreme implications for conceptualizations of ‘society’ and ‘culture’.

50 years or so after Durkheim’s publication of the *Elementary forms*, sociologists such as Peter Berger (1967) Thomas Luckmann (1967), Robert Bellah (1970) would observe that religious individualism was becoming the most common form of religion in modern
industrialized societies. This approach to religion, based on choice and personal preference, reflects many aspects of the consumer culture which mark late modernity. As Heelas (1998, p. 5) puts it, “The deregulation of the religious realm, combined with the cultural emphasis on freedom and choice, results in intermingled, interfused, forms of religious – or ‘religious’ cum ‘secular’ life which exist beyond the tradition-regulated church and chapel”. Along pragmatic lines, many individuals in late modernity take a supermarket approach to religion, selecting not what is authoritatively handed down, but taking bits and pieces and constructing personalized systems ‘that work for me’. Thus, Heelas (1998, p. 5) makes the important point that contemporary individuals may have what they take to be ‘spiritual’ experiences without having to hold religious beliefs”.

Going back to Durkheim and in conclusion, contemporary sacred travel may not necessarily be representative of the society worship he hoped for, though in many cases it appears to be a step away from the religious dogmatism based on the worship of what he saw as collective representations of symbolic, and thus illusory gods. Contrary to the worship of society, contemporary sacred travel often appears to be one more modern celebration of the expressive individualism first championed by the Romantics. As Reader (2007, p. 226) notes, contemporary sacred travel may be part of a modern ‘spiritual revolution’; albeit one of a more autonomous, individualized and personalized spirituality. If this is the case, Durkheim’s much cherished notion of ‘society as sacred’ would in late modernity have to be replaced with the ‘self as sacred’.
References