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Spiritual and Religious Outcomes of Leisure Travel and Tourism: A Framework for Synthesizing Empirical Research

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Introduction

In recent decades there has been a dramatic increase in empirical research on the spiritual outcomes of leisure travel and tourism, however there are few frameworks or models that synthesize this empirical research. Some researchers (Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015; Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2018) have applied Beeho and Prentice’s (1997) Activity, Setting, Experience, Benefits (ASEB) framework to their research on the spiritual outcomes of tourism. More recently, Cheer, Belhassen, and Kujawa (2017) developed a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism while Chhabra (2020) created a conceptual model of slow spiritual tourism. However, none of these frameworks are based on an extensive synthesis of empirical research. In this paper I provide a preliminary framework to organize empirical research that has examined the spiritual outcomes of leisure travel and tourism. This framework is based on a slight modification to an existing framework of outdoor activities and spirituality that includes antecedent conditions, setting, and recreation components, which together lead to short and long-term spiritual outcomes (Heintzman, 2016a). In the tourism context, the recreation component will be renamed the tourism component. A preliminary but not exhaustive review of empirical studies on the spiritual dimensions of leisure travel and tourism reveals that most of the elements of this framework are present (See Figure 1).

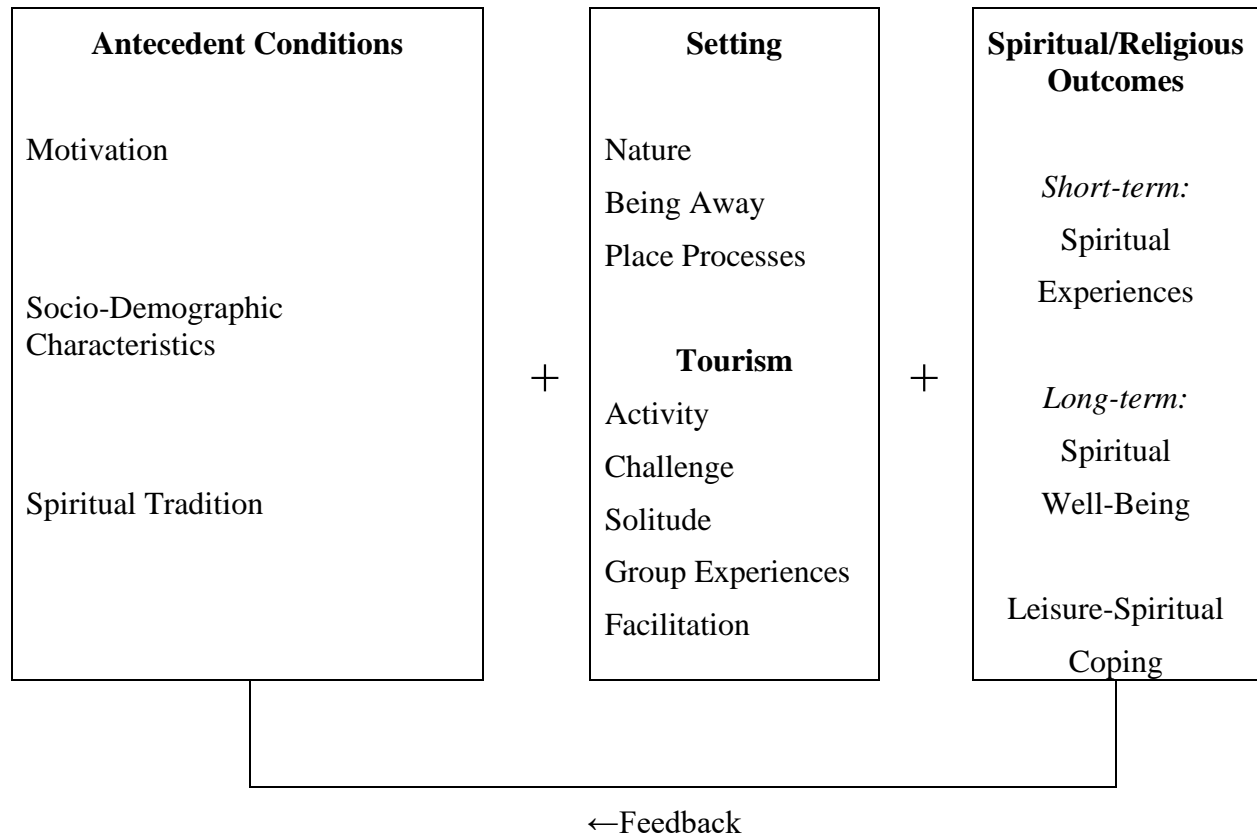


Figure 1. Spiritual Outcomes of Leisure Travel and Tourism

Defining Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality can be defined as “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (i.e., divine being, Ultimate Truth or Ultimate Reality) (Larson, Sawyers, & McCullough, 1998, p. 21). The primary purpose of religion, which is associated with the Latin word *legare*, which means to connect, is the facilitating of spirituality, and/or (1) a search for non-sacred goals such as identity and belongingness, and (2) “the means and methods...of the search that receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people” (Larson et al., 1998, p. 21). Although these phenomena are not identical, “the distinction between traditional religiousness and contemporary interpretations of spirituality may be less clear than is immediately apparent” (Sharpley, 2009, p. 242). Given that the primary purpose of religion is facilitation of spirituality and the distinction between the two phenomena is not entirely clear, this paper takes an inclusive approach that considers spirituality in religious and nonreligious tourism contexts.

The Framework

Antecedent Conditions

The presence and type of spiritual outcome that results from tourism activity may be influenced by antecedent conditions which refers to people’s characteristics prior to their tourist experience such as motivations, socio-demographic characteristics, and spiritual tradition. Huang, Pearce, Guo and Shen’s (2019) study of travellers to Buddhist destinations in China illustrates the notion of antecedent conditions which in this case included Chinese cultural values (interdependence, group orientation, external attributes, harmony) and inner beliefs (love, kindness, emptiness, equality).

Differences in religious tourist and pilgrim *motivations* have been extensively documented (Bond et al., 2015). Different types of religious settings attract different types of visitors, each looking for diverse experiences. For example, Bond et al. (2015) discovered that religious festivals and shrines appeal to those with a focus on spiritual interests, while grand cathedrals attract those with an interest in cultural heritage and religious history.

Socio-demographic variables may influence spiritual outcomes. Spirituality has been recognized as a determining factor in the travel motivations of senior tourists (Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014). This finding is consistent with studies of leisure and spirituality which suggest that spiritual outcomes are more likely with older populations (Heintzman, 2016a, 2016b).

Spiritual tradition may influence spiritual motivations and subsequently spiritual outcomes. Andriotis (2009) found that many visitors to Mount Athos, known as “proskinites” are motivated by their authentic Orthodox Christian faith and tradition. Visitors who identified spiritual reasons for visiting Mount Athos were more Orthodox than those who did not give these spiritual motivations. For these tourists the inner journey was more important than the outdoor journey as the pull motives for their journey included “to pray,” “to venerate,” “to meditate,” “to get closer to God,” “to be in a sacred shrine,” “to strengthen their belief,” and “to improve their religious faith.” They were not interested in secular activities and ignored the touristic elements of the site. Similarly, in a study of visitors to Mount Athos and Meterora, Orthodox “proskinites” encountered the holy through church attendance and a veneration of relic and icons, while the non-Orthodox and non-religious experienced a somewhat subconscious spiritual experience through stillness and aesthetic contemplation (della Dora, 2012).

Setting

Factors related to tourist settings, such as being in nature, being away to a different environment and place processes, may influence spiritual outcomes. Whether it be hills and lakes (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011), mountains (Andriotis, 2009, Huang et al., 2019), the seaside (Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017), the ocean (Jirásek & Hurych, 2019), a rainforest (Bidder, 2018), or the dessert (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018), *being in nature* has been found to be conducive to spiritual outcomes. The quantitative portion of a study on outdoor adventure tourism determined through multiple regression analysis that the nature setting of an old, bio-diverse rainforest characterized by wildness, minimal human impact, beauty and peace, contributed more significantly to the participant's spiritual experiences than the recreation activities that they took part in (Bidder, 2018). Qualitative findings provide rich detail about the nature and spirituality relationship. For example, one participant in Andriotis' (2009) study of visitors to Mount Athos explained "Sitting on the wall overlooking the forest and the sea beyond, gazing at distant peaks and trekking to the summit, offer me a glimpse of the sacred. I feel as though I'm connecting with God" (p. 77). In a study of spiritual retreat tourism, all participants described the New Zealand landscape in spiritual terms (Bone, 2013). A facilitator at one of the retreat sites explained that the environment at the site was helpful to the visitors' spiritual well-being: "people may meditate using a rock to look at, or using a horizon to look at....There are the rocks, the mountains, there's the estuary and the water, the green and the trees. So yes, it does help to have that environment, to be in it" (as quoted in Bone, 2013, p. 301). At this retreat center, the juxtaposition of both the natural, geographical elements with the human-made features of the retreat landscape were explained by the participants as being beautiful, healing, and sacred. For example, one participant recounted how the surrounding natural features along with the architecture of the retreat center facilitated a sense of connection.

Being away to a different setting is also conducive to spiritual outcomes. For example, being away to nature in England's Lake District, allowed for a simpler way of living without contemporary society's superficial overtones, that triggered explicit spiritual experiences (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Jarratt and Sharpley (2017) discovered that seaside visitors benefit from something beyond their everyday life. At Mount Athos, pilgrims were able to escape the distractions, cares, and pace of their everyday lives in order to receive spiritual sustenance (Andriotis, 2009). Pilgrimage trips from a Californian community to a Greek Orthodox monastery in Arizona removed participants from everyday concerns to do spiritual work (Klimova, 2011). Similarly, for retreat tourism participants in New Zealand, the retreat centers offered a place to be away from the city, work, and home as well as distractions such as technology and unhealthy habits associated with daily life. The participants described leaving their everyday life at the entrance to the retreat center and participating in a new way of life that offered a holistic retreat experience of a home away from home, spiritual practices, transformational learning, and healthy foods (Bone, 2013). For outdoor adventure tourists, the isolated and remote location of a field center in Borneo, along with the absence of telephones and internet, contributed to the participants being present in the moment and thus sense the timelessness dimension of spiritual experiences (Bidder, 2018).

Spiritual outcomes have been associated with *place concepts*. For example, a study by Preston (cited by Andriotis, 2009) found the majority of visitors thought that Mount Athos had a spiritual magnetism. Travelers to the Four Great Buddhist Mountains found these to be sacred sites that provided peace and spiritual support (Huang et al., 2019). Nearly half of the participants in a study

of visitors at Apostle Islands National Seashore focused on sacred sites as spiritual places (Salk, Schneider, & McAvoy, 2010). Likewise, four-wheel drive travel in the Australian desert was discovered to have a spiritual dimension, perhaps due to the journey being perceived as a pilgrimage to a sacred space (Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009). Descriptions of tourists' experiences in England's Lake District suggest an interrelationship between place attachment and spiritual experiences that are dependent upon or enhanced by a sense of place (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015).

Tourism Factors

Diverse *tourism activities* have been associated with religious and spiritual outcomes, and range from the more traditional to the novel: pilgrimages to the Holy Land (Belhassen et al., 2008); visitors to Mount Athos Eastern Orthodox monastic community (Andriotis, 2009); pilgrimage trips to a Greek Orthodox monastery (Klimova, 2011); spiritual retreat visitors (Bone, 2013, Gill et al., 2018; Voigt, Howat, & Brown, 2010; Voigt, Brown, & Howat, 2011); leisure travelers on independent journeys (Little & Schmidt, 2006); rural tourism activities (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015); seaside tourists (Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017); tourists staying in a desert camp (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2017); four-wheel drive tourism in the desert (Narayanan & Macbeth, 2011), sailing tourism (Jiráseka & Hurychb, 2019), outdoor adventure tourism (Bidder, 2018), and dark tourism (Zheng, Zhang, Qiu, Guo, & Zhang, 2020). Thus, spiritual outcomes are not limited to one type of tourism activity.

Challenging activities can facilitate spiritual outcomes (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). The physical effort of climbing mountains combined with the scenic view from the mountain-top made the tourist experience explicitly spiritual for some participants (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Although there were variations amongst participants, the challenge of physical activity and physical achievement led to spiritual fulfillment and spiritual feelings. For outdoor adventure tourism participants in Borneo, overcoming physical, emotional, and mental challenges was one dimension of their spiritual experience (Bidder, 2018). Challenges included travel to the remote field center, living without modern conveniences, isolation, rudimentary facilities, possible encounters with poisonous insects, potential wildlife attacks, toxic plants and most importantly, long, and difficult treks during hot and humid weather conditions. Persevering through these challenges, increased the participants confidence in overcoming limits, enhanced their sense of worth and capability, and broadened their perspectives.

For visitors to Mount Athos and Meteora, *silence and quietness* leads to introspection (della Dora, 2012). Retreat center visitors in New Zealand found peace and quiet to be helpful (Bone, 2013). For the tourists to England's Lake District, silence and solitude facilitated spiritual experiences especially when combined with physical activity (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). In some cases, a balance of solitude and *group experiences* were helpful to spirituality (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). The importance of others and inspiration from others were spiritual themes in a study of travelers to Buddhist mountain destinations (Huang et al., 2019). Community was an important theme in the research on New Zealand retreat tourism (Bone, 2013). Community included friendship, group safety, a sense of "being at home," a sense of belonging, caring for others, spiritual companionship, unity of goal, and camaraderie. Community was viewed as fostering the spiritual dimension of interconnectedness: "Community fosters a sense of interconnectedness, an aspect of spirituality. Being on a retreat was seen to aid in one's connection to self as well as connection to external things such as other people, nature, divinity, God, or something transcendent" (Bone, 2013, p. 299).

While *facilitation* may play an important role in spiritual outcomes for participants in group or programmed outdoor activities (Heintzman, 2016a), there is less research on the facilitation of spiritual outcomes within the tourism context. In a recent study, Parsons, Houge Mackenzie and Filep (2019) discovered that spiritual tourism guides in addition to facilitating in ways common to all tourism such as providing access to sites, encounters in and outside of the travel group, understanding, empathy and self-development, also facilitated a five-stage chronological process more directly related to self-development and spiritual outcomes: preparation, enclave development, mentoring, reflection and integration of the spiritual lessons learned. This process began before the travel and continued after the travel.

Spiritual Outcomes

Many studies (Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Bidder, 2018; della Dora, 2012; Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Klimova, 2011; Little & Schmidt, 2006; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Narayan & Macbeth, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011) have explored the tourist outcome of *spiritual experience* which is characterized by affective dimensions, cognitive processes, transcendence and a high level of emotional intensity. For example, Little and Schmidt (2006) investigated the spiritual dimension of tourist experience for 10 independent leisure travelers. Through a phenomenological approach that explored the nature and meaning of the travel experience as it was lived, the researchers discovered that leisure travel was a multifaceted experience that had spiritual effects and meaning for the participants. Participants obtained a greater awareness of self, others, or God; experienced an enhanced sense of relationship with something greater than the self; and their leisure travel experience--characterized by release, fear, awe and wonder--was intensely spiritual. Likewise, Bidder (2018) found that outdoor adventure tourism settings contributed significantly to spiritual experiences of a new sense of meaning, timelessness, overcoming challenges, connectedness, and ineffability. Another example is a study of Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land where participants identified peak moments when they felt connected to their faith's history and to Jesus (Belhassen et al., 2008). Examples included baptism in the Jordan River and visiting the tomb where the body of Jesus was thought to have been placed. The authors write, "the tour was steeped in moments in which toured objects, tourist performances, socialization, and faith merged to produce powerful spiritual experiences" (p. 682). Haluza-Delay (2000) criticized these types of studies as focusing on pleasant emotional states and urged investigation of whether these experiences lead to life transformation.

Spiritual well-being, another spiritual outcome, is defined as:

A high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment which includes connectedness with self, others, and a higher power or larger reality. (Hawks, 1994, p. 6)

A few studies of tourists have utilized the concept of spiritual well-being. Analysis of Brazilian pilgrims on the Way of St. James of Compostela, discovered that they exhibited four key dimensions of spiritual well-being: transcendence, a life of significance, a community of shared values and support, and intrinsic values (Reis, 2007). Sailing tourism experience was found to be associated with five factors of spiritual health: relationship to oneself, relationship with others, relationship with nature, meaning in life, and transcendence (Jiráseka & Hurychb, 2019). In the study of New Zealand retreat tourism, a workshop facilitator noted that participating in a retreat contributed to the participants' spiritual well-being (Bone, 2013).

Heintzman (1999, 2013, Heintzman & Mannell, 1999) based on a sample of 248 participants, investigated the relationships between numerous leisure activities, including travel and tourism activities, and spiritual well-being. Frequency of participation in the overall travel and tourism category of activities, and the specific activities of travelling to foreign countries, boat cruises, or visiting resorts, were not correlated with either behavioral or subjective spiritual well-being. However, frequency of participation in adventure trekking had a significant negative correlation with both behavioral and subjective well-being. A specific leisure activity that did have a positive correlation with spiritual well-being was attending a retreat, which was categorized as a personal development activity in the study, but has also been considered as a tourism activity (e.g., Heintzman, 2013). Why might there be a negative correlation between adventure trekking and spiritual well-being? First, adventure trekking was significantly correlated with competence-mastery leisure motivations, while spiritual well-being was significantly correlated with intellectual and stimulus-avoidance motivations (Heintzman, 1999, 2013; Heintzman & Mannell, 1999). Second, the negative correlation is consistent with Morgan's (1994) explanation that not all adventure recreationists have a spiritual relationship with nature, but rather view nature as something to be conquered.

Another spiritual outcome is *leisure-spiritual coping* that refers to the ways people receive help, in the context of their leisure, from spiritual resources (e.g., higher power, spiritual practices, faith community) during periods of life stress (Heintzman, 2008). An illustration of this outcome is Voigt et al.'s (2010) discovery that some tourists visit retreat centres to deal with or to overcome negative life events, such as death of a loved one, marriage break-up, or a serious illness. Another example is desire for personal transformation by visitors to Mount Athos such as a middle-aged man who was apparently experiencing some sort of crisis: "My main objective is to strengthen my faith in a way that will enable me to continue my life back home with new energy and a feeling of purpose" (as quoted in Androit, 2009, p. 74).

Conclusion

This paper has documented some of the complexity of how leisure travel and tourism influence spiritual and religious outcomes. Many factors such as antecedent conditions, setting factors, and tourism components influence whether there are spiritual outcomes and whether these outcomes are short-term or long-term. The components of this framework have some overlap with the activity, setting, experience and benefit components of the ASEB framework of visitor experience (Beeho & Prentice, 1997), however unlike other frameworks the one presented in this paper is based upon a synthesis of empirical research. Future research on the spiritual and religious outcomes of leisure travel and tourism may serve to strengthen and modify this framework.

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