

TOURISM OF SACRED SITES, OR IS THAT PROFANE?

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism of sacred sites is a source of continuing controversy in many circles. Even the tourism industry is sharply divided about the merits or otherwise of the tourism of sacred sites. There is not even clear agreement by what is meant by the term "sacred site". This paper is in the form of an inquiry into the tourism of sacred sites, written in the form of a dialogue. The two speakers are the main characters from Robert Pirsig's "inquiry" books. Phaedrus, the central character in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, conducted Pirsig's inquiry into values, while Lila, a central character from the book of the same name, was the centre of his inquiry into morals. We therefore saw them as appropriate characters to conduct this particular inquiry.

The idea of a sacred site evokes interest in the importance of symbolism in human cultures, particularly religious symbolism, and for this reason the use of symbolism in poetry provides a backdrop to this inquiry. Judith Wright's poem "Legend" provides the material for this excursion into poetic symbolism.

THE INQUIRY

Lila: You want me to go where? To a sacred site? Whatever for? Why can't we go to somewhere more, well, interesting! You're always wanting to go to intellectual places, I'd rather go some place that feels nice. What is a sacred site, anyway – some church or monastery or something?

Phaedrus: Well, yes and no, I suppose. David Tacey suggests that a church is no more a sacred site than any other.¹ A sacred site is a place where the spirit is discovered, where the soul gets in touch with its source. They are

connected to perfect harmony, where all exists in unity. They're places of self-fulfilment, empowerment and renewal of self. They provide a connection to something beyond the self. You know, a bit like the time when we went back to where you lived as a child, and you cried.

Lila: Yes, but that was just because I was remembering the times when I lived there. You know, it was all mixed up. I could remember the fun and the laughter, but I could remember the times when I was scared and angry and stuff, too. But that's not a sacred place, why they've even pulled the old house down and built a new block of units. That's one of the reasons I cried. It was like they'd torn down a part of me.

Phaedrus: Well, in a sense they had. You know, it's pretty hard to pin down just what we mean by these things: spirit, soul, sacred. Let's see if we can make it a bit clearer. Emile Durkheim suggested that religious beliefs were caught up in the dualism of neoplatonic thought. You know, like Descartes, dividing things into this and that. Black and white, body and soul...

Lila: Male and female, up and down, in and out... but what's that got to do with anything?

Phaedrus: Well, he suggested that religious belief systems generally divide the world into two domains: profane and sacred.² The beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things.

Lila: But I seem to remember that he said a religion was something that unites people into a single community.³ That's what I really liked about going to church, you know, that sense of being part of one great big family. So how does that fit in with what you're talking about?

Phaedrus: He suggested that it was the unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, those set apart and those forbidden, that provides the unifying force for the one moral community we call a church. And he certainly supported your idea that religion is a collective thing. Does that make sense?

Lila: Yes, it does, and it reminds me that you were talking about spirit, before. I've always thought of spirit being something tied up with being in church. Hang on, let me look it up on the computer. See, there it suggests spirit is a synonym for ethereal, airy, holy or religious.⁴ Is that the way you think it is?

Phaedrus: Spirit is another one of those things that's hard to define, isn't it. The word itself is derived from words for breath or wind in many languages. That gives the impression of an invisible, yet powerful and life-giving force.⁵ But, really it defies definition. The best we can say is that it's a form of being that has no distinctively material properties.

Lila: I was reading *The Stirring of the Soul in the Workplace*⁶ the other day, and the author was suggesting that soul was the mediating mechanism between the material or profane and the spirit. How does that fit with what you are talking about?

Phaedrus: Well, that's one way of looking at it, but it's more usual to consider the soul as an individual manifestation of the holistic spirit, or to equate the spirit with soul. All Indian religions, including Buddhism, but excepting the materialists, propound theories of a soul. In the Hindu and Vedic religions, it is named *purusha*.

Lila: In Judaism, the soul is the animating element of living things, contrasted to the physical body, which is the soul's vehicle. And in animistic religions, don't animals, plants and other physical entities also have souls?

Phaedrus: Yes, but that's not necessarily a concept that is restricted to animistic religions. If we do consider the soul as an individual manifestation of the holistic spirit, then that spirit may pervade all of creation. This is where we begin to see some of the convergence between religious thought and quantum physics.

Lila: Well, that's taking us back to the point where we're just one big family, isn't it? So something sacred is something that unifies, something that brings together opposing parts. I feel good about that. It's something like Dirk Gently's "interconnectedness of everything".⁷

Phaedrus: Yes, and that's getting closer to Eliade's concept of the sacred.⁸ While Durkheim saw the sacred as being that which was so defined by people, Eliade inclined to the view that it was the sacred which acted upon the human subject. Something sacred "shows itself to us".

Lila: Now I'm getting confused again. Are you suggesting that being sacred is in the place or the things in a place? It's not just because you or I or somebody else says it's sacred, or holy or whatever?

Phaedrus: I think my answer to that would be, yes and yes. In one sense, we humans designate a place, or an object, or a time for that matter, as sacred, because of its strategic significance to us. In this way we create the sacred by virtue of our observance and ritual participation. And in the other sense, we acknowledge the superhuman connection of a particular place or time.

Lila: Is that like the Australian Aborigine's Dreaming story of the Sky Heroes depositing *djang* in various parts of the landscape, and so making them into sacred places?

Phaedrus: Yes, that's one way of looking at it. The Chinese concept of *feng shui* is another, as is the idea of ley lines. What I'm in fact arguing is that the delineation of sacred and profane is a lot more blurred than Durkheim was

suggesting. The way in which a place comes to be sacralised will vary from culture to culture.

Lila: So, in a so-called indigenous culture, where the natural world is usually experienced as a medium of revelation, features of the landscape would be regarded with reverence. And in our more complex cities, where centralised political power is so important, we have more grand scale temples and ceremonial centres. In both cases, they are likely to be recognised as sacred because of their connection with great events in the history of the community.

Phaedrus: Yes, the scriptures, myths and legends tell of miraculous or world-founding deeds of gods and ancestors performed at certain places. These then become sacred sites. But sacred sites could also be created by an act of ritual.

Lila: Hang on a minute. What about heritage sites? Aren't they places where we recall significant parts of our community's history? How far back in time do we have to go for something to be considered sacred? Does it have to be prehistoric?

Phaedrus: A good question. Heritage sites act as memory banks for the community, and so allow it to more readily recall a time when a significant interconnecting event occurred in that place. In this sense, it may be connecting the present with the past that is significant.

Lila: Well, then, what about the Sydney Cricket Ground? I'm sure that there would be many in our community that would recall significant interconnecting events that took place there. Does that make it a sacred site?

Phaedrus: In the sense that it creates a stable orientation in the midst of a changing world, and gives intensified meaning to all actions and objects within it, yes. The sacredness of a place may be related to its immediate

impact on the interconnectedness of the people living in, or otherwise using that space.

Lila: Well, that means we may have a lot more sacred places than we normally acknowledge. I'm intrigued by the idea that the people using a place can make it sacred, as well as the place being sacred in its own right. So, if we're going to visit some sacred sites, are we going to become more spiritual? And will our going there make them more sacred?

Phaedrus: Well, I'm sure the tourism industry would like to think so. It would be a great promotional line. But I'm not sure it's that simple. Carroll suggests that tourism involves a "quest awakening the age old belief in a journey that will lead in the end to a fundamental truth. The metaphors to suggest the truth vary – Holy Grail, rainbow, Mecca, Fountain of Youth, knowledge, sacred site."⁹

Lila: That reminds me of that Judith Wright poem, *Legend*. Do you remember it?

Phaedrus: Is that the one about the blacksmith's boy?

Lila: Yes, that's the one. He went out into the bush with his dog and his rifle, and even when "the sky turned into an unlucky opal", "he didn't mind". In a sense, he's a bit like the tourist who goes out unaware of what it is they are encountering. They go to "see" the places they visit, and even when visiting sacred sites are unlikely to acknowledge any spiritual reason for doing so.

Phaedrus: Yes, I suppose that's true. Some of the statistics I've seen on the reasons people give for visiting heritage sites supports that notion. I seem to remember some studies done in the UK which found that the most common reason given for visiting historic sites in Wales was general interest, followed by "enjoy sightseeing".¹⁰ Carroll suggests that tourists find out that the dream and excitement of travel is a fraud, and that they do not

become reborn as was hoped for.

Lila: But the blacksmith's boy in the poem encountered his "dark night of the soul" in the bush. "Mountains jumped in his way, rocks rolled down on him, and the old crow cried, You'll soon be dead." And he remained defiant. Perhaps the visitors to sacred sites are just as defiant of the spirit of the place?

Phaedrus: I'm sure that's the case. In some cases, of course they are defiant to the point of vandalism of the site. And they are defiant in resisting the sacredness of the place. Even when interpreters are available, the visitors tend to accept the version of reality provided by that interpreter, and that's often a very distorted one.¹¹ In the absence of interpretation of some kind they seem to be very creative in their speculation. But, as I remember it, things got even worse for the boy, didn't they?

Lila: Yes, in the third verse, at the end of the day, "up came the night ready to swallow him", and there were images of the black hat and the black dog to reinforce the darkness. Is that the sort of experience we can expect if we visit a sacred place? I'm not too sure I'm any keener than I was when we started this conversation.

Phaedrus: Well, according to my understanding of the spiritual journey, that will only happen when your soul is ready for it, and willingly allows it to be. That's not to say that you will be in total agreement with it, but at the very least you have to be open to it. In most cases, it's much more likely to be a sense of awe and wonder. I remember having a feeling like that when I visited the Tower of London. It was nothing dramatic, just a sense of being connected to all of the events that had taken place there. It was as if I could feel the piety of Edward the Confessor, the agony of Thomas More, and the horror of the cruelty administered there.

Lila: That sounds a little more encouraging. I remember the feeling of awe I

had the first time I entered the Crown Casino in Melbourne. That's really mixing up the sacred and the profane, isn't it? So the encounter with the sacred doesn't have to be terrifying, at least not in the long run. The blacksmith's boy moved through his "dark night" and discovered the rainbow. That's what reminded me of the poem when you mentioned the rainbow as a symbol of the fundamental truth. This is the symbol of transcendence for him isn't it?

Phaedrus: Yes, in the rainbow, he has found the sacredness of the place, and it transforms the world for him.

Lila: So he returns to his life after his peak experience with his rainbow replacing his gun. And the rainbow, unlike any of the material items he took out with him, or encountered on the way, is not diminished by his taking it with him. So, if the only thing we take from sacred sites is the encounter with the sacred, it in no way diminishes the sacredness of the place.

Phaedrus: Yes, I think that's true. Further, I suspect that our acknowledgement of the sacredness of the place, and our attitude of respect towards it will enhance its sacredness. It's a bit like the story of the Rabbi's Gift that Scott Peck uses in *The Different Drum*.¹² There, of course, he was referring to respecting the sacredness of people, but I think we can extend the metaphor to places.

Lila: Well, I think I'm ready to visit some sacred sites now, but those questions are still tumbling out of my brain and gathering around the rock. Maybe, "Camus was right to imply that if travelling is not a spiritual testing it is nothing.... Travel, as spiritual testing, is an art, and has to be worked at, in the mode of vocation."¹³ Is it the role of sacred sites to address this?

CONCLUSION

As is often the nature of rigorous inquiry, the outcome is more in the nature of questions than answers. What are sacred sites? Some authors suggest that all natural environments. e.g., mountains, rocks, link to Gaia. Gaia was the Greek goddess who drew forth the living world from chaos. The Gaia hypothesis has been developed by James Lovelock, who believes that the earth is like a living organism. "Earth could be considered a vast living system in it's own right." (web site Gaia hypothesis) Are sacred sites somehow focusing or picking up some of earth's energy and directing it so humans have a greater understanding, awareness and sensitivity to Gaia?

What is the tourism of sacred sites? What pictures do we see when we consider sacred sites? What sites are considered sacred and for what reasons? Why do tourists visit sacred sites? Who are attracted to sacred sites? What is their motivation for the visit? Is it appropriate to regard them as tourists or are they pilgrims?

The question is, can we, or how can we use sacred sites (both European and indigenous) to create greater understanding of the "common" sacredness of all peoples? Is there a "common sacredness"? Can sacred sites be used to rewrite history? Can we, Australians, find broader, common terms and concepts to describe, examine and appreciate sacred sites (like Hofstede's cultural dimensions) so that we do not dominate other cultures and their meanings?

This inquiry has served only to unearth these questions rather than to answer them. The answers will require a much more extensive inquiry including a significant amount of structured research.

REFERENCES

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- ² Durkheim, 1912 (trans. 1961), p. 52.
- ³ op. cit., p. 62.
- ⁴ Microsoft Word 7, thesaurus.
- ⁵ Hinnells, John R, 1984, p. 310.
- ⁶ Briskin, A, 1996, *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ⁷ Adams, Douglas, 1988, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, London: Pan.

⁸ Smith, Jonathon Z (ed), 1995.

⁹ Carroll, John, 1998, *Ego and Soul*, Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 137.

¹⁰ Herbert, David T, Prentice, Richard C & Thomas, Cohn J (eds), 1989, *Heritage Sites: Strategies for Marketing and Development*, Aldershot: Avebury, p. 82.

¹¹ Jacobs, Jane M & Gale, Fay, 1994, *Tourism and the Protection of Aboriginal Cultural Sites*, Canberra: AGPS, pp. 57-62.

¹² Peck, M S, 1990, *The Different Drum: Community-making and peace*, London: Arrow, pp. 13-15.

¹³ Carroll, p. 148.