Alex Norman

**Guest Editor’s Introduction: Spiritual Tourism**

Alex Norman is a senior lecturer at the Graduate Research School, Western Sydney University where he oversees the Master of Research programme. His research focuses on the intersection of travel and religions, particularly “spiritual tourism” about which he has published a book, *Spiritual Tourism* (Continuum 2011) and a number of articles. His current research is looking at the role that retreat practices play in everyday life.

This issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* is about travel. It gathers together articles that examine phenomena involving tourism and travel directly, but that consider the category “religion” obliquely. Tourism is generally understood as a leisure activity, and like many other leisure activities it has often been neglected by religious studies scholars when it is not “obviously” religious in some respect (Cotter and Robertson 2016). This is a shame, as it appears that both categories are attempts to explain something most people do. However, where “religion” is often given an exclusive, or *sui generis*, yet universal definition (McCutcheon 1997), tourism is given a simple and encompassing one: an overnight visit to some place that an individual does not consider “home”. Indeed, this definition is used by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to estimate 1.3 billion international tourist arrivals in 2017 alone (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2018). It seems unreasonable that two categories of phenomena that are ubiquitous (or nearly so) in the behaviour of human populations can so rarely meet, and yet this is what the scholarly record would attest. What makes this so troubling is that, apart from the seeming ubiquity of phenomena captured by both categories, official governance bodies such as the UNWTO argue that “religion/pilgrimages”
is one of eight basic reasons for individuals to make a touristic journey (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2010). In other words, religion and tourism coincide in some respect on a massive scale all over the world. Scholarship in religious studies has largely missed this.

Tourism studies, in contrast, has been much more interested in the meeting of tourism and religion. Since the early 1990s, scholars working in tourism studies have been actively gathering data and developing theories with which to understand tourism and religion. This activity has given rise to the “religious tourism and pilgrimage” paradigm, which contains a collection of assumptions about both “religion” and “tourism”, most notably the world religions paradigm for the former and the “tourism-pilgrimage” divide for the latter. This period has also included the birth of journals like the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, numerous edited volumes and collections about pilgrimage, tourism and religion (e.g. Olsen and Trono 2018; Reader 2013), and the beginnings of interest in problematizing inherited theoretical models. While this scholarly effervescence has addressed important gaps in the literature, particularly the de-differentiation of tourism and pilgrimage, research focusing on religion and tourism often omits critical discussion of the category “religion” itself. More so, few publications have problematized the dimension of data collection on the part of the researcher. In other words, the ontological and epistemological question of what constitutes data on “religious tourism and pilgrimage”, and what we can make of it, is in need of discussion.

This special issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* contains articles that humbly seek to challenge monolithic conceptions of the category “religion” and problematize the “religious tourism and pilgrimage” paradigm by looking at what might be considered “unusual” data. Collectively, the articles do this by looking at the edges of what might be considered either “religion” or “tourism”. Each article represents the author’s response to my call for discussion about travel that approached the category of “religion” with caution or suspicion. What each achieves can, *mutatis mutandis*, be used to help further discussion about what the category and the term “religion” is in the context of field-based studies. What this collection as a whole helps to demonstrate, hopefully, is that attention to the specific details of an event or situation and the context of the phenomenon are key to understanding. In our study, we would do well to remember that theories are imprecise maps for navigation, and that categories are useful only as marshalling points in the investigation of nature.
References

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