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**Revisiting the separation between sacred and profane:
Boundary-work in pilgrimage experiences**

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Abstract

Rinallo et al. (2013) have recently observed that interpretive consumer researchers have focused their attention on the sacralization of mundane consumption (Belk et al., 1989) outside of religious institutions and experiences, which are still theoretically and empirically underexplored. The long-neglected relationships between religion, market and consumer culture is however receiving increased theoretical attention (e.g., Mittelstaedt, 2002; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; McAlexander et al., 2014). In this paper, we contribute to such literature with some epistemological reflections on the complex relationships between religions and markets, which we support theoretically and with empirical illustrations from an ongoing study of two Christian pilgrimages in Europe (Santiago de Compostela and Lourdes). Our reflection is based on the concept of boundary-work which brings an alternative perspective to the sacred/profane opposition.

Introduction

The concept of boundaries is playing an increasingly important role in a wide range of literatures (Lamont¹). In social science, it is useful to understand several social relations as the study of nationalism, citizenship, immigration, ethnicity and race, gender and sexual differences. We have referenced two major papers presenting a literature review and a research agenda.

Lamont and Molnar (2002) synthesized disparate strains of social science research by analyzing the interaction between symbolic and social boundaries and discussing the many benefits of focusing on fundamental processes of boundary work across these areas. Pachucki et al. (2007) paper takes stock of the most recent scholarship on symbolic boundaries and shows how these interact with social boundaries.

The concept of boundary work was proposed originally by Gieryn (1983) who attempts to delineate between what is "science" and what is "non-science". Gieryn (1983) understands the practices of scientists as strategic actions to (re)claim scientific authority and jurisdiction over a contested field. He demonstrated how involved actors politically manage the symbolic and social borders of science.

¹ <http://educ.jmu.edu/~brysonbp/symbound/papers2001/LamontEncyclo.html>

In the same vein, this paper focuses on the problem of demarcation between the sacred and the profane. We want to show how the boundary between sacred and profane can be managed in one hand, by the institutions and the market, and in the other hand, by the individuals. Boundaries are to be found in interaction between people who identify themselves collectively in different ways; this interaction can in principle occur anywhere or in any context. « Identity is a matter of boundary processes rather than boundaries » (Jenkins, 1996, p.127). Concerning The Way, individuals create symbolic boundaries for separating pilgrims from hickers and for generating feelings of similarity and group membership.

In the same vein, Gieryn (1983) analyzes the way boundaries between “science” and “non-science” are constructed and defended, we identified how similar strategies can be deployed to create or to bolster support for religious approaches. The aim for religious institutions could be to fund religious beliefs and to nurture faith but in the same time, to take opportunity of the marketisation of religion (Mittelstaedt and Mittelstaedt, 2012). For their part, the pilgrim, as a consumer (Belk and al., 1989), could aim to live a sacralized experience or to perform it.

The sacred and profane separation

The ‘received view’, stemming from the work of Émile Durkheim (1915) and Mircea Eliade (1959), is one of complete *separation* between sacred and profane: religion is about ‘sacred things’ which are set apart and protected from profaning, mundane forces such as those represented by commerce. According to the separation metaphor, religion and markets are two mutually exclusive spheres of human life. In this paper, we propose that such dualistic, and in a certain sense romantic view of religion separated from the market is just one of many possible discourses about the relationship between the sacred and profane. As also suggested by Belk et al. (1989), with the secularization of society, individuals are increasingly finding the sacred in the spheres of politics, science, art, and consumption. Consumer researchers have also frequently found signs of the sacred in various nature or community-based mundane consumption activities. It does not come as a surprise that consumers can ascribe sacred properties to mundane (i.e., non religious or spiritual) ways of consuming the pilgrimage.

Non-dualistic discourses about the sacred have however appeared in interpretive consumer research. O’Guinn and Belk (1989) were perhaps the first to highlight the merger of religion and consumption in the context of a religious theme park. Bilgin (2012) examined how religion and ideology intertwine in the marketplace, influencing in turn the meaning of global brands among religious consumers. McAlexander et al. (2014) proposed that religion and consumption are completely interwoven and not at all distinct in the context of the Church of Latter Days Saints. We contribute to such literature by resituating the separation of sacred and profane and suggesting that religious institutions, together with marketplace actors and consumers, at least in some circumstances engage in boundary work to keep the sacred separated from the profane – a task which is however difficult to achieve because of abundant evidence to the contrary. The examination of the discourses and practices that are at the base of such boundary work contributes to a better understanding of the sacred and profane in consumer culture, that is one of the key debates in interpretive consumer research.

Pilgrimage as a research site

We support our theoretical claims with introspections and selected observations from an ongoing ethnographic study on the intersection of market and religion in contemporary Christian pilgrimages. Our main research site is the Way of Saint James (or Camino de Santiago), which is a pilgrimage route to the shrine of the apostle St. James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Northwestern Spain, where the remains of the saint are believed to be buried. The first author

has conducted participant fieldwork walking as pilgrim the Santiago route for two to three weeks per year from 2010 to 2014. Our secondary sites is the Lourdes sanctuary, in Southwestern France, at a site where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared in 1858 to a local peasant girl, Bernardette Soubirous. The second author and a research assistant conducted participant observation in Lourdes for a combined eight days in 2013. Both authors kept detailed field notes and built a database of pictures documenting various aspects of their experiences. Observation data was supplemented with interviews to pilgrims and netnographic analyses of pilgrim blogs ??? and the web sites maintained by religious authorities and marketplace actors.

Our analysis seeks to understand how marketplace dynamics have transformed the age-old institution of pilgrimage, which predates the advent of capitalism, mass tourism, and consumer culture. While focused on the present day, we also immersed ourselves in the history of pilgrimage in general, and the two sites in particular. Early in our analysis, we realized that the vision of a rigid separation between sacred and profane is not supported by historical sources: countless examples can be found of the intertwining of religious and commercial activity in pilgrimages routes already in the Middle Ages (see for example Bell and Dale, 2011). Despite such evidence, pilgrim discourse, popular media, and academic writings often complain that consumerism and commercial forces are desecrating forces undermining the ‘true’, ‘authentic’, ‘sacred’ nature of pilgrimage. Also scholars have often diffused such romantic view, displaying a tendency to demarcate what pertains to religion in a strict sense (the sacred) from mundane aspects of existence, including those pertaining to commerce. This is also evident in theoretical attempts to distinguish ‘true pilgrims’ from tourists (e.g., Cohen, 1992). More recent research has however observed that commerce and pilgrimage are intertwined. In perhaps one of the best treatment of the subject, Reader (2014) propose that “the dynamics of the marketplace, with its themes of pilgrimages being promoted, reshaped, invented and exhibited to increase their custom, along with issues of consumerism and the acquisition of material goods and souvenirs, are not antithetical to pilgrimage (or to ‘religion’), but crucial to its successful functioning, development, appeal and nature” (p. 15). Still, the separation of sacred and profane remains a powerful narrative affecting consumer experience and the promotion of pilgrimage sites by both religious and lay actors.

The sacred and profane in pilgrimage

In this section, we provide some examples of how agents engage in boundary work to keep religion and market separated in ways that are sometimes peaceful and uncontested, sometimes conflict-laden. This is perhaps best exemplified by Lourdes. Outside the Sanctuary, hundreds of merchants sell religious objects (e.g., rosaries, statues of the Virgin Mary, candles). Inside, in contrast, there is no apparent sign of commercial activity. The candles that are sold by outside vendors, inside the shrine are available in exchange of a free offer (not a price – even though ‘suggested’ offers, depending on candle size, are listed in various currencies). More importantly, the water from the spring that emerged in connection to the Marian appearances is freely available to everybody at any time of day and night. Outside, vendors sell containers of various sizes (often in plastic: glasses, virgin-shaped bottles, flasks, etc.) but the water per se is not sold. For those who want to receive the water of Lourdes at home, the Sanctuary offers a shipping service – also in this case, however, the water is free: “The applicant only pays the postage and packing”. The rigid boundary between the Sanctuary – free from commercial activity – and the outside world, regulated by a commercial logic, does not however occur naturally: it is created, maintained and enforced by Sanctuary authorities that maintain a ‘vigilante’ approach and act swiftly in case of transgressions (see below) In other words, Sanctuary authorities prevents the sacred from being profaned by marketplace forces and actors at the discursive and material level.

In the context of Santiago de Compostela, marketplace actors, working in tandem with tourism development authorities, re-packaged pilgrimage as heritage tourism, downplaying its religious significance in order to make appeal to a wider audience. Despite the traditional emphasis on pilgrim devotion and contemplation, which is still evident in the hardships suffered by those who walk the route by feet, burdened by backpacks, sleeping in Spartan communal lodging, and avoiding alcohol, and frequently attending Mass, many tour operators now sell hyper-real, glamorous version of the Camino experience (luxury hotels, fine dining, bags sent from one stop to the other, etc.). The Way of Saint James today attract a very diverse group of consumers for a variety of reasons – often attributing limited importance to religion or spirituality. Still, some consumers describe their experience as “true pilgrimage” and, despite being immersed in a market environment, do of their best to avoid what they perceive as inauthentic, watered-down, profane version of the Camino experience. Their sacralizing boundary work often entails resentment and criticism of those consumer who are tempted by the market and “do not understand the true nature” of the pilgrimage. Also marketers are very frequently criticized for being animated by excessively commercial goals and often treating ‘true pilgrims’, who are less profitable than other market segments, disrespectfully.

Boundaries-work and actors strategies

Religious institutions are caught between two positions: An activist approach to evangelize and make converts to the religion (to run after the lost sheep) or a marketisation of their practices. One of the sign of the Catholic Church’s declined religious authority is the re-signification of the sacred nature of pilgrimage by marketplace actors and consumer alike. Some consumers, while still ascribing sacred meanings to pilgrimage, do so in ways that are very far from the Catholic Church’s “official” teachings. As suggested by critics of the Turners’ influential work (Turner and Turner, 1978), pilgrimage is indeed a realm of competing discourses (Eade and Sallnow, 1991), and those emanating by the Catholic Church are not necessarily the most relevant for the actors involved.

The Santiago route is often seen as a pathway to self-transformation; a rite of passage; a way to get into contact with nature or the authentic self; and an experience brotherhood/sisterhood or community thanks to authentic encounters with fellow-minded individuals. This way of experiencing the sacred (which, for lack of a better alternative, we might term the ‘mundane’ sacred) is just one of many. The Santiago route can also be experienced as sacred based on religious or spiritual meaning systems distinct from those supported by the Catholic Church. For example, best-selling author Paulo Coelho’s (1987) autobiographical book *The Pilgrimage* (also known as *Diary of a Mage*) describes the route in terms of its significance for the Western mystery traditions and esoteric Christianity, whereas some of our informants undertake the route with Neopagan or New Age sensibilities. For example, in the movie *The Way, Tom* (Martin Sheen) honors his son's desire who died on the Camino, by finishing the journey. Inexperienced as a trekker, Tom soon discovers that he will not be alone on the Way. He meets other pilgrims from around the world, each with their own issues and looking for greater meaning in their lives. Through Tom's unresolved relationship with his son, he discovers the difference between the life we live and the life we choose.

In contrast, in Lourdes many consumers experience the sacred in ways mostly consistent with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Some of our atheist and agnostic informants told us “you can feel there’s something there”. Others, raised as Catholics but turned non-believers, suggested that the elements of the Church rituals brought them childhood memories and back to a time where they ‘used to believe’, as long-forgotten words and gesture were spontaneously, albeit mechanically, repeated. At the many shops surrounding the Sanctuary, only very occasionally we observed the sale of merchandise not aligned with official Church teachings: in one case, it was

crystals, thought to bring luck or have healing properties according to various New Age teachings; in an other, a statue of the Archangel Uriel who, while still very important in contemporary occultism, unlike Michael, Gabriel and Raphael is not mentioned in the Bible and, as a result, is not considered eligible for veneration.

It is interesting to mention that on the one hand, whereas Catholic Church states clearly that it must exist a formal separation between the sacred and the profaned (to fit with the Holy Scriptures), it allows market organizations around its religious practices. For it, the boundary between the sacred and the profane is blurred, leaving space for marketisation. It needs the market. On the other hand, pilgrims deplore that religion increasingly has introduced profaned activities and call for the resacralization of the religion. This double opposite movement is at play in each f of our research fields as the below table shows:

| | Santiago (The Way) | Lourdes |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Religious institutions... | develop a marketisation of the pilgrimage | advocate for a clear separation from the profane |
| Pilgrims ... | take offence and regret a lost of spirituality | |
| Who enact the boundary-work ? | The pilgrims who strive for less secularity | The institutions which ghettoize the shrine |

Protecting the sacred from market profanations

We observed limited Church reactions to pilgrimage marketization in the case of Santiago. Those in charge of running pilgrim hospices routinely ask questions to ascertain whether those who demand lodging are ‘true pilgrims’ or simply profane tourists who want to exploit the low prices of these facilities. On the contrary, in Lourdes – where the city has grown exponentially thanks to the Marian appearances – religious institutions still hold significant power and have been able to exert their authority on marketplace actors. For example, we were told by hotel managers that in the 1960s it was not possible to equip rooms with TV sets, because of a concern that television might distract customers from a proper pilgrimage experience. Similarly, hawkers are strictly forbidden inside the Sanctuary.

In Lourdes, we also observed an interesting case of marketplace appropriation and re-signification. A commercial operator created in 2009 an organic cosmetics brand (Crème de Lourdes) that employs the spring water from the grotto of Lourdes. Four years later, shrine authorities took notice and, while not bringing the case to courts (the claim ‘water from Lourdes’ would apply to tap water from Lourdes, making it unlikely to win the battle), publicly condemned the commercial exploitation of the water and warned the brand owner to remove from his website all pictures and videos from, and links to, the official shrine website. Additionally, the Church denies that the grotto water has any healing properties; the many miracles experienced by the faithful in Lourdes are, based on Catholic theology, to be ascribed to Divine intervention. Without an official religious sanction, Crème de Lourdes has to justify the water’s healing properties (and the premium price applied to its products) to a competing meaning system, based on New Age views and unorthodox science on the electromagnetic properties of water.

Conclusion

Pilgrimage exists in symbiosis with the marketplace. We are not the first to highlight this and to raise the more general point that the sacred and profane are and have always been interwoven.

However, boundaries between them fluctuate differently according to the cases. In Lourdes, the Catholic Church has created a strong border. It drives away « the merchants from the Temple » and separates the sacred from the secular. In Santiago de Compostela, the hirelings have invaded the religious shrine and quite all places ; all activities are marketed.

So, in the first case, Lourdes, the sacred is limited in a dedicated space, on specific objects (the water), in a closed organization. In the second case, Santiago, the sacred loses its central position and becomes transformed in profane services (to pay for Confession or for stamp on Credential), in marketed products (religious trinkets), in commercial places (La Cruz de Ferro de Foncebadon for touristic destination). On the other side, the consumer either accepts and even contributes to the marketisation of the holy pilgrimage, or he/she wants to perceive the sacred as separate from the profane and actively aspires to this split (Santiago). Consumers, as religious institutions and marketplace actors alike similarly engage in boundary work.

Both Lourdes and Santiago de Compostela are (to a varying extent) dominated by the Roman Catholic Church; had we observed Jerusalem, which is a holy city for the three Abrahamic religions, or Glastonbury (Maclaran and Scott, 2009), which has special significance for Christianity, Neopaganism and the New Age, such variety would have been more evident. By “opening the black box” of the sacred/profane boundary, we hope to advance literature on the marketing and consumption of religion and spirituality.

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