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Travel and religion have long been colleagues (e.g., Siddhartha’s travels seeking enlightenment, Abraham’s journey to the promised land). From internationally known contemporary pilgrimage sites such as Amritsar (Sikhism), Mecca (Islam) and Jerusalem (Abrahamic faiths) to the small shrines of local saints and deities, individuals have considered religious travel to be a positive contribution to their faith lives. But what about those people who travel to such sites without affiliating with the religions with which the site is associated? Why are they traveling to engage in religious practices they could engage in closer to home? What do they do there? What are their objectives? And what does such travel have to say about western society? These are the questions that Alex Norman sets out to answer in *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (2).

*Spiritual Tourism* begins with an overview of the study of spiritual tourism and then explores Norman’s fieldwork on spiritual tourism, the academic study of travel and religion, and a contextual exploration of his two research sites. His conclusion aims to bring fieldwork, case studies and theory into conversation to help us understand the phenomena of spiritual tourism.

Norman defines spiritual tourism as “tourism characterized by an intentional search for spiritual benefit that coincides with religious practices” (1). To address a relative lack of scholarly field-based study of spiritual tourism from a religious studies perspective (3) Norman collects data in Rishikesh, India and on the Camino de Santiago in Spain using participant-observer, interview and survey methods. He focuses on western tourists “engaged in religious or spiritual practices” on location for the purpose of “spiritual betterment” (12).

In “Part 1: Finding Spiritual Tourism in the Field,” Norman provides ethnographies of Rishikesh, India and of the Camino de Santiago in Spain. He finds three recurring themes in the experiences of spiritual tourists: a “concentration on the self,” a “focus on religious practice,” and an implicit cri-
The themes Norman encounters in his ethnographic exploration of spiritual tourism in Rishikesh will be familiar to anyone who has studied western interest in eastern religion. Norman’s discussion of the physicality of the Camino experience and the different responses to it is one of the best parts of the book.

In his second section, “Travel and Religion.” Norman explores the idea that travel can lead to transformation in order to understand why individuals travel to consume religious products that can be obtained close to home. Norman discusses tourism as a metaphor of the social world through an exploration of the development of travel literature and its themes. He compares and contrasts this with ethnographic approaches and shows how this literature came to be an opportunity for self-reflection. Norman discusses theories of leisure travel including “tourism as a tool of meaning and identity” (91) and pilgrimage as a form of tourism (93) that does not need to be connected with institutional religion (99). “[C]ontemporary western spiritual practice,” he argues, is related to identity, meaning, self help, and community (112).

In his final section on “Understanding Spiritual Tourism in Context,” Norman aims to “create a theory of spiritual tourism” (138). These two chapters are among the most engaging and interesting of the book. Their discussion of various types of popular and scholarly literature and the valuable connections made between the book’s thesis and the actions of spiritual tourists contributes to our understanding of why people engage in spiritual tourism in the first place and what they get out of the experience. It was also enlightening to read how these sites were depicted in travel books, blogs and government promotional literature. These histories and contemporary descriptions develop our understanding of how these two sites became valuable for “secular,” that is non-institutionally religious, objectives.

Norman summarizes his book as describing, “how tourism is used as a tool of spiritual practice” (183). Participants, he explains, are concerned with “self-improvement, self-realization, personal identity and purpose in life” (182). Using this understanding Norman compares and contrasts spiritual tourism with religious pilgrimage (184) and religious tourism (185). Of interest here is his argument that “leisure is now understood as key to the project of the self” (196) and thus it is not surprising that travel has become a context for self-examination (197). Travel plays this role, in part, because it disorients people in moral and social space forcing a “re-discovery” of the self (198). Such spirituality, explains Norman, is both syncretic in how it freely borrows from multiple sources and secular in how it rejects institutional “practice and
authority” (199). Participants are conscious of all this (200). Thus, Norman, following Jonathan Z. Smith, concludes that this type of tourism is “an exercise in personal map making” (205) which is a fitting way to summarize what is going on in the lives of spiritual tourists as understood by Norman.

This book derives from Norman’s Ph.D. dissertation (viii). As a dissertation the product is excellent. It includes an interesting thesis, relevant methodology, applicable fieldwork and some helpful exploration of the discipline and theory along the way. As a book it would have benefited from an additional round of editing, some reorganization and a bit of tightening of his argument.

The kind of back-story that is necessary in a dissertation (e.g., the nature of religious studies as a discipline) becomes a distraction in a book. On many occasions I wondered why Norman was telling me what he was telling me. Editing details like too regular repetition of points, technical language used without adequate explanation (e.g., 29), and terminology used in an outline of points that is not used in the subsequent discussion (e.g., 32-41) call out for attention.

Organizational issues include an entire chapter explaining the history of travel literature and specific applications to his ethnographies that is too long and would have been a more useful context in the introduction (69). Another example is material exploring the context of spiritual tourism in Part III which would have been helpful as an introduction to the ethnographies in Part I (e.g., the histories of the different sites).

Argument problems include the need for more explicit connections to his main thesis (83-85), and long descriptions of ideas that ultimately are dismissed or should have been briefly summarized (14, 94, 113, 118). His argument would be better served with a clear defense of the position he has chosen rather than a description of the route he took to arrive at that position.

Scholars of new religions will appreciate Norman’s ethnographic work, his comparisons between an eastern and a western location, and his discussion of how these locations are framed online and in tourist books and brochures. Norman’s discussion of the role of popular literature and blogs in spiritual tourism choices is a contribution to the literature and will be helpful to any scholar trying to understand the choices of religious consumers. In particular, his discussion of how these sources laud the exotic location and the travel itself help to explain why individuals travel to consume religious traditions they could access at home.

While Norman acknowledges new religious movement literature he does not substantively draw from its insights except that he draws from some of
the same theorists. For example, Norman’s emphasis on the importance of self-identity development in spiritual tourism would benefit from attention to similar themes in new religious movements literature (e.g., Palmer 1994).

*Spiritual Tourism*’s editing and organizational issues make it a frustrating read. However, part of that frustration is because Norman is on to something. His work to bring together diverse disciplines and histories is valuable and his discussion of spiritual tourists has application beyond this particular study. Contemporary religious practice is changing and some of Norman’s conclusions could be productively applied to research on, as one example, religious exploration in North American Evangelical churches (e.g., pub churches, house churches, new monasticism). Furthermore, his attention to the role of popular literature in how people understand their spiritual tourism is a focus that should be applied to our understanding of religious practice more broadly.

*Spiritual Tourism* is valuable because there is so little written about individuals who go to religious sites for apparently non-religious reasons. Norman does a nice job addressing the topic by bringing together scholarly work on spirituality, pilgrimage, tourism and secularization as he addresses the questions that were the impetus for the book. For scholars who want to consult the book for descriptions of specific aspects of the problem as a sort of annotated bibliography of works relevant to this topic this book excels. Unfortunately, editing and organizational issues detract from the readability of the book and reduce its value for the casual scholar who just wants to get a sense of the discussion.

I will keep *Spiritual Tourism* on my shelf as a useful reference for scholarship on spirituality, tourism and pilgrimage and I look forward to reading what Norman produces in the future.

Reference