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# Religious Tourism in the Hill of Tepexpan: A new research approach - from dedifferentiation

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This theoretical and methodological paper presents research undertaken to comprehend the social dynamic of religious tourism in a traditional sanctuary located in the Hill of Tepexpan, Mexico. Visitor experience, as tourist or pilgrim, has been little studied in Mexican religious tourism literature, which has focused mainly on quantitative and economics aspects. For this reason, a more holistic and comprehensive way to understand the phenomenon is desirable, especially in destinations that receive a variety of visitors with different practices and motivations.

The Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary has been a sacred place since Colonial times for two ethnic groups: Mazahuas and Otomíes. Their rituals and celebrations are good examples of syncretism between Pre-Hispanic and Catholic beliefs. However, in recent years there has been a rise of visitors that do not belong to the traditional pilgrimages, which may lead to the existence of secular activities and motivations in the hill. Hence, there is a need to understand the social practices of visitors, sacred or secular, in different spaces during their stay in the sanctuary.

Using Collins-Kreiner's dedifferentiation concept (2010) enriched with contributions from Smith (1992), this research attempts to understand the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary as a 'third space' where tourism and pilgrimage practices coexist (Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, 2006). Ethnography seems to be the most suitable method of qualitative research as religious tourism implies a quest for meaning in the visit. Studying the similarities and intersections between tourism and pilgrimage is useful for visitor management in religious sites. To achieve a sustainable management of the sanctuary in the future, the proposed research can help to maximise benefits while minimising social and cultural conflicts between actors with different interests in the destination.

**Key Words:** religious tourism, dedifferentiation, pilgrimage, Mexico

## Introduction

In the view of international tourism research, religious tourism is a social construction that combines elements of two different kinds of journeys: pilgrimage and tourism. Visitors' experience, as tourist or pilgrim, has been little studied in Mexican religious tourism literature, which has focused mainly on quantitative and economic aspects. Hence, a more holistic and comprehensive way to understand the phenomenon is desirable, especially in Mexican destinations that receive a variety of visitors with different practices and motivations.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of a dedifferentiation approach to understanding religious tourism's social dynamics in the Hill of Tepexpan. The document is based on both documentary and field research. Firstly, a search of

religious tourism information was carried out in Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic-American sources, to be classified and analysed. In a second phase, the information was complemented through direct observation in the sanctuary and semi-structured interviews with two festival organisers.

The paper is organised in four parts. The first provides a review of important works about religious tourism in Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic-American sources, identifying some trends and categories. In the second, dedifferentiation in religious tourism is conceptualised as a contrasting theory to that of the pilgrimage / tourism dichotomy. The third part argues that an interpretative paradigm and ethnography should be considered as useful tools for approaching religious tourism. Finally, the Hill of Tepexpan's social reality is described as a research object suitable to be studied by dedifferentiation postulations.

## Religious Tourism Research: A General Perspective

The origin of religious tourism studies dates back in the 70's, starting with research about pilgrimage (Turner and Turner, 1978), and issues about the sacred and the profane (Eliade, 1981), which have an anthropological perspective. From these beginnings, there arise two positions that seem to be opposed: the first one, establishing a clear differentiation between the categories of tourist and pilgrim; and the second one, denying the separation into the mentioned categories. Within the first position, the works of Smith (1992), Cohen (1979), Morinis (1992) and Vukonic (1996) are particularly representative; whereas within the second one, the works of McCannell (1973), Graburn (1977) and Eade (1992) are notable.

Smith (1992) proposes a continuum; at one side are placed pilgrims and in the other tourists, as two opposite poles linked to the sacred and the secular respectively. The intermediate point is named 'religious tourism', being a trip based on knowledge derived from the confluence of sacred and secular practices. On the other hand, Cohen's typology (1979) is based on the place and significance of the tourist experience, in which he proposes five modes: recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental and existential; relating the last one to the pilgrim, due to the commitment to the visited spiritual centre.

In the context of the second position (of not differentiation), it is important to mention MacCannell's work (1973). The author considers that the tourist, like the pilgrim, is in search of authenticity; affirming that the current tourist incorporates many characteristics observed in pilgrimage. In the same idea, Graburn (1977) describes tourism as a 'sacred trip' in which the individual escapes daily life; tourist activity is synonymous with ritual in which knowledge and personal improvement are acquired through contact with the sacred.

In recent years, the compilation edited by Badone and Roseman (2004) constitutes an important work that demonstrates, across the cases addressed in its chapters, the intersection between tourism and pilgrimage from an anthropological perspective. The role of ethnography in the study of pilgrimages, the view of sanctuaries as part of a sacred land, the impact of pilgrimages in a pilgrim's daily life and the connections between pilgrimage, tourism and national identity in The United States, England and Spain are all

highlighted. Another important work is Margry's 2008 publication in which he approaches cases of pilgrimage which are different from traditional ones, focusing on visits to tombs of popular music icons, like Elvis Presley or Jim Morrison, or to war monuments. It is shown that this type of pilgrimage also involves an existential search and purpose of life for the traveller.

In a second stage, religious tourism research in the Anglo-Saxon world has approached more specific aspects of the topic from different perspectives, such as economic, geographic and cultural. Particularly notable are the books compiled by Timothy and Olsen (2006) and Raj and Morpeth (2007), whose chapters study diverse realities linked to religious tourism in several parts of the world. The first book contains important contributions by Bremer, Cohen, Shackley and Olsen. Bremer (2006) examines the meaning of place and space, as part of the construction of visitors' identity in religious sites. Cohen (2006) shows the intersection between religious tourism, educational tourism and religious education; as well as cognitive, affective and instrumental impacts derived from the activity. Shackley (2006) studies the commercialism of religious souvenirs in Knock, Ireland. Olsen (2006) reviews aspects of religious site management, with the purpose of satisfying both pilgrims and tourists.

These various researchers discussed heretofore, corroborate the inability to make a categorical distinction between the pilgrim and the tourist, interpreting these types of travellers, not as concepts or opposite poles of a continuum, but as complex models dealing theoretically with pilgrimage and tourism (Monterrubio, 2013).

Equally, important research has been undertaken in the Spanish language about the subject, mainly from Spain and Mexico. In the Spanish context, Gemma Cànoves and Genoveva Millán have contributed to religious tourism from economic and heritage perspectives, studying the Way of Saint James or sanctuaries like Montserrat. For Cànoves and Blanco (2011), religious tourism is a Post-Fordism tourism product which commercialises culture and heritage to generate development in rural communities. Vázquez studies the satisfaction of the tourist-pilgrim in the Way of Saint James through econometric models (Vázquez, Morales and Perez, 2010), as well as the life cycle of religious destinations in Europe and Mexico (Vázquez, Pérez and Martínez, 2012). In general, these works replicate the theoretical contributions of the Anglo-Saxon publications.

In Mexico, two of the institutions that have focused on religious tourism as an object of study are the University of Guadalajara and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. In the works *Turismo Espiritual. Una alternativa de desarrollo para las poblaciones* and *Turismo Espiritual II. Una visión iberoamericana* compiled by Rogelio Martínez, it is possible to appreciate a variety of approaches towards the phenomenon realised mainly from economic-management and geographical perspectives. It is worth mentioning the works of Propin and Sanchez (2011) about spiritual magnetism in the *Santo Niño de Atocha* sanctuary; Zacatecas; Macedo's work (2011), that uses a reticulated model to explain the geography of tourism in Juquila; the studies in the region of *Los Altos de Jalisco* about tourist profiles and socioeconomic indicators undertaken by Puebla (2011) and Ruezga (2011); as well as Rogelio Martínez's methodological approach for spiritual tourism (2012).

Other important research in the Mexican context are Anna Maria Fernandez Poncela's publications (2010, 2012), about cultural heritage and tourism in the sanctuaries of the *Santo Niño de Atocha* and the *Virgen de Juquila* respectively; where she aims at the complementation of culture/ identity and consumption/ tourism. Equally, Martínez's work (2013) on the development of the *Santo Toribio Romo* sanctuary; and the study of the visit effects of Benedict XVI to Guanajuato from an economic perspective (Ruiz and Trejoluna, 2013). These various works form some of the most recent contributions in Mexican religious tourism literature.

The literature review allows us to make some observations. There is a difference between the Anglo-Saxon and Spanish-American scientific publications, not only in their temporality but also in content. The first one has tried from its beginnings to establish a theoretical/conceptual frame for studying religious tourism, which is based on the tourism/pilgrimage dichotomy (or lack of). Though, in more recent years, researchers have diversified, applying approaches from other disciplines, always endorsed by a solid corpus that allows them to go deeply into the phenomenon.

In the Spanish-American sphere, some researchers have focused on showing the economic benefits of religious tourism, characterising visitor profiles and designing routes that satisfy their needs. The view of the religious-cultural heritage for almost all studies is tied to its use as a tourist product; whereas the studies that approach it from a geographical perspective,

analyse relationships between the sanctuary territory, the economic benefits and the pilgrim motivations, without making a significant distinction between pilgrimage practices and tourism practices. In general, there is a lack of theoretical treatment, which is evident in the fact that, specifically for Mexican research, there is not a difference between a pilgrim's practices and motivations and a tourist's ones. This difference is also absent in explorations of their interactions in destinations. A further feature of Spanish-American literature is that in the main, religious tourism treatment has been positivist, reflected in the provision of statistical information and attempts to 'control' the phenomenon's reality.

### Dedifferentiation In Religious Tourism

Religious tourism has as a scenery, places that have transformed into meeting points for visitors, moved by the pilgrimage - the search for religious experiences, appreciation of the place as it is and its cultural meaning, as well as for curiosity towards the sacred. This kind of tourism has been linked constantly to pilgrimage, since the latter is recognised as a precedent of tourist trips. Due to the fact that many sanctuaries are not exclusive places of worship anymore, but also spaces of visitation, it is difficult to separate visitors' motivations: the authentic pilgrims, who visit the place moved by faith; the tourists, who take advantage of the visit to approach the religious place and; the tourists who visit the place with patrimonial and cultural motivations. The religious margins between these groups are very mixed (Cànoves and Blanco, 2011).

In light of the multi-functionality of religious spaces and the changeable visitors' motivations,

*rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism or pilgrims and tourists no longer seem tenable in the shifting world of postmodern travel* (Badone and Roseman, 2004:2).

This has motivated the emergence of a theoretical position that proposes to blur the differences between tourism and pilgrimage, resulting in a type of trip with the characteristics of both categories: dedifferentation. It is posited that the differences between tourism and traditional pilgrimages is fading, while numerous aspects of similarity are emerging: both require spatial movement and imply an emotional desire on the part of individuals to visit sites which are significant to them (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Nevertheless, is recognised that visitors' experience in general, whether it is referred to as pilgrimage or tourism, is in fact not

homogeneous and includes different types (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). That is to say, the visitor's trip, without being classified as either pilgrimage or tourism, can be classified as both types in certain moments.

Dedifferentiation has a spatial connotation, that is, it conceives sanctuaries as a 'third space' with a dual purpose in relation to its sacred-secular nature, where the practices of secular tourists and pilgrims coexist. In support of this, pilgrims and tourists are linked by the shared space, giving place to an interdependent nature of both actors in the social construction of a simultaneously sacred and secular site (Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, 2006).

Therefore, the travel experience can be considered as the object of analysis in religious tourism. According to Collins-Kreiner (2010), dedifferentiation, as a theory inscribed in postmodernism, does not intend the formulation of typologies or scales to classify visitors. Rather it understands that a visitor can have diverse experiences, and therefore switch from one type of traditional classification to another, in this case from tourism or pilgrimage. It is understood that to appreciate dedifferentiation it is necessary to build upon theories from which it originates, so this approach is understood as an expansion and not as a contradiction of existing literature. Following this premise, in this study, Smith's (1992) characterization of tourist and pilgrim is used (See Table 1)

While the literature presents other characteristics about tourism and pilgrimage which are specific to a region or tourist type, many of them can be included within Smith's proposal. The categories of tourist and pilgrim reflect a rigid dichotomy from which it is possible to analyse dedifferentiation in visitors' experience at the Hill of Tepexpan. It is considered that the axes to identify the moments and spaces in which so varied pilgrim and tourism practices are inscribed would be the sacred and the secular, understood in terms of Smith's postulations.

From this perspective, pilgrimage is a trip based on spiritual or religious inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is considered to be more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object, with the intention of acquiring spiritual / emotional benefits or physical healing (Margry, 2008). The sacredness in pilgrimage involves a search for truth, enlightenment or authentic experiences with the divine, in sacrosanct places that have been ritually separated from the profane space of everyday life (Timothy and Olsen, 2006).

However, tourism involves a search for experience of unfamiliar places, leaving the familiarity of home, either for educational interest in learning more about the history of a site or understanding a particular religious faith. The secular has to do with pleasure, curiosity, relaxation and authenticity like that which is more aesthetically agreeable (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). The specific practices that typically constitute modern tourism include specialised forms of travel practice, including activities such as sightseeing, picture taking and souvenir shopping (Bremer, 2006).

Likewise, the concept of visitor for this study will include the traveller who can be a pilgrim or a tourist simultaneously depending on the space and time. In its most general meaning visitor is defined as a person who moves and visits a place different from the one that is his/her residence or habitual environment, with purposes different from exercising a remunerated occupation or realizing studies for a period not more than 12 months (Montaner, Antich and Arcarons, 1998). That is to say, his / her motivation can shift between recreation and faith and be considered a visitor.

Thus, based on the existence of pilgrim and tourist categories, it is possible to break down visitor experience into practices, i.e. activities that they realise

**Table 1: Pilgrim vs. Tourist**

| <b>Pilgrim</b>                                                                                                                             | <b>Tourist</b>                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| - Pilgrim as religious traveller.                                                                                                          | -Tourist as vacationer.                                                                                                                                                                 |
| -True pilgrim has faith in some type of divine order and with single-mindedness of purpose embarks in a journey of sacred wish fulfilment. | -Tourist's wish-fulfilment is supposedly joyous, measured in the hedonistic pleasures of good food and wine.                                                                            |
| -Pilgrimages are often thought as journeys undertaken in anticipation of a future betterment.                                              | -The secular tourist 'hopes' the use of discretionary money and leisure time will provide a wish fulfilment of pleasure, relaxation, a change, new friends or others desires of choice. |
| -Sacred, based on faith and belief.                                                                                                        | -Secular, based on leisure.                                                                                                                                                             |
| Source: Own elaboration based on Smith (1992)                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                         |

in space and time during their stay. Using the existing contributions about tourism and pilgrimage, the practices can be associated with each of these types of trip, bearing in mind the space and time in which they develop. This analysis from an interpretive paradigm will allow the research to determine the existence of differentiation in the Hill of Tepexpan, identifying this as a space which is simultaneously sacred and secular.

### Ethnographic Method and Interpretation in Religious Tourism

Generally, two paradigms have orientated the analysis of social life: on the one side is positivism and on the other is interpretivism or phenomenology. Under the logic of positivism, a unidirectional relation is sustained between subject and object, in which the subject is kept at a distance from the studied object. On the other hand, in the interpretive paradigm, an interdependent relationship between subject and object is prioritised, and this demonstrates the influence that the researcher has on the object (Cubides, 2004). In the positivist paradigm, researcher values and prejudices are eliminated where possible as these can influence the results of the studied object, while in the interpretive paradigm, researcher knowledge is developed and strengthened by a set of such interactions (Rincón, 2008).

To consider the human being as the centre of research and not only as an object to analyse, is precisely what enriches knowledge of religious tourism; the interpretive paradigm tries to understand the reality, the social processes and phenomena from the stakeholders' perspective. This approach is interested in understanding sense plots, the meanings and significances that social actors give to their life (Guerrero, 2002). Because religious tourism is a social phenomenon whose practices imply meanings, linked with the worldview of social actors, an interpretive approach seems to be suitable to uncover the senses given to different activities.

Ethnography, of anthropological origin, is a qualitative method that allows the analysis of complex social phenomena that develop in micro environments. It is defined as the description and analysis of daily activities to understand the universe of senses and the logics of social actions, revaluing the need to understand 'other'. The knowledge of human diversity, gathered directly from fieldwork, allows the researcher to construct generalisations, always heuristic, of social reality (Guerrero, 2002).

**Figure 1: Pre-Hispanic dances in Mexican Catholic Festivities**



Source: Authors (2016)

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), the importance of ethnographic methods lie in the existence of diverse cultural patterns within societies and their meaning, to understand social processes. Even if researchers study realities that are familiar to them, they have to endeavour to make explicit the presuppositions that they make as members of the culture under investigation. To ensure that ethnographic research will be valuable, it not only influences the comprehension of social reality, but also, in the application of its discoveries, it can induce change.

Applying ethnographic methods in the study of religious tourism seems to be useful. Firstly, because the social dynamics of religious tourism generally develop in micro environments, whose characteristics differ considerably from one region to another. As an example, we can mention the Mexican pilgrimage context, where elements of pre-Hispanic worship and traditional Catholic practices coexist, giving them a distinctive flavour compared with religious activities in Europe or even in other parts of Latin America.

Secondly, the ethnographic method allows researcher inclusion as a subject that takes part in the construction of a religious tourism reality. In fieldwork, the social scientist can operate as a pilgrim / tourist and participate in rituals and use tourist services; to the extent that is possible to explain the senses that orientate religious actions inscribed in religious tourism practices. An approach like this has a major influence on the findings derived from research, due to researcher involvement with / ownership of the phenomenon under exploration.

Finally, prioritizing the use of ethnographic method to stimulate comprehension of cultural diversity, is evident in dimensions such as rituality and mythical constructions. This generates real knowledge about the context where this kind of cultural manifestation is carried out and emphasises the importance that they have in identity construction of the involved actors. This is particularly important in cases of religious manifestation in indigenous communities, where it is necessary to break with the paradigm of the exotic, to propitiate an intercultural dialog that fosters the conservation of values.

### Religious Tourism In The Hill Of Tepexpan

Santa Cruz Tepexpan, a community that belongs to Jiquipilco Municipality, in the State of Mexico, shelters the Sanctuary of the Lord of the Hill and other constructions that date back of different epochs. From pre-Hispanic times it constitutes a place of worship linked to nature and is considered 'the sacred mountain' of the *mazahua* people (Hernández, 2008). The two festivities that are celebrated in the sanctuary

**Figure 2: Location of the Hill of Tepexpan**



Source: Own elaboration

**Figure 3: The Sanctuary of the Lord of the Hill**



Source: Authors (2016)

during the year are the Lord of the Hill's Festival, which is carried out on May 3rd; and the *Teresa de Jesus* Festival, on October 15th. In both festivities, the presence of pilgrims is common. Traditionally, pilgrims come from places as diverse as *Almoloya de Juárez*, *Temascalcingo*, *Almoloya del Rio*, *Ixtlahuaca*, *Ocoyoacac*, *Huixquilucan*, *Lerma* and *Santiago Tianguistenco*, all of these towns are located in the State of Mexico. Most pilgrims come accompanied by a religious leader of their community, undertake traditional dances and carry holy images which are representative of their place of origin (Hernández, 2013).

According to Hernández (2013), the Sanctuary of Tepexpan's Hill is the second most visited in the Toluca's Valley region, after the Sanctuary of the Lord of *Chalma*. Though the flow of visitors is constant during the year, during the festivities, the number of visitors rises, to twenty five thousand individuals on average for celebration (Hernández, 2008). It is now possible to find visitors, different from those that come as part of identified traditional pilgrimages. This situation is perceived as a positive, both for inhabitants and the municipal authorities, who are enthusiastic about visitors who want to know about the sanctuary or take part in celebrations.

A lack of scientific information is evident with regard to religious tourism in the Hill of Tepexpan Sanctuary. Pilgrimages have been an object of study by some researchers (Barrientos, 2004; De la Cruz, 2010), but, until now there are no scientific approximations that study the tourism facts. An increasing number of visitors is observed, who cannot be inscribed as traditional pilgrims, therefore, it is necessary to

**Figure 4: Traditional Pilgrimage Dancers**

Source: Authors (2016)

identify the activities and practices that are carried out during their stay. This has implications related to the destination's spaces for undertaking religious practices, the consumption of some products and / or services and the experiences derived from the visit.

In addition, it is imperative to understand the development of coexisting activities linked to tourism and pilgrimage, and if these differentiated categories exist in the visitors' experiences. The Hill of Tepexpan contains spaces of material and patrimonial richness, where a series of practices can be carried out to facilitate the interests of every type of visitor. For sustainable management of the sanctuary in the future, it is necessary to determine what activities, both sacred and secular, are realised in certain spaces; if pilgrims interact with tourists and which are the meanings derived from the pilgrim's and tourist's activities. Considering this would lead to reflecting about a connection between tourism and pilgrimage, according to the new paradigms in religious tourism research.

Therefore, though the posed research question on dedifferentiation has important empirical implications in the Hill of Tepexpan's situation, it also presents a theoretical and methodological challenge at the level of religious tourism studies. This is explained in two aspects: the first one has to do with the application of a theoretical approach (dedifferentiation proposed by Collins-Kreiner, 2010), which has barely been worked in the context of religious Mexican destinations. Thus, this approach will help to generate information about Mexican religious sites. In the second aspect, the methodological approach cannot accommodate the positivist paradigm due to the nature of the phenomenon; thus it should be studied from an interpretative paradigm that facilitates an understanding of the configuration of visitor experiences, depending on the combination of tourism and pilgrimage in a religious tourism space, such as the Hill of Tepexpan.

## Conclusions

Considering that many Mexican sanctuaries present visitor flows with varied motivations, which cannot all be inscribed into traditional pilgrimage (a journey motivated mainly by contact with the sacred); it is necessary to incorporate theoretical religious tourism approaches to the research of Mexican destinations. Nevertheless, the reality presented in each sanctuary is unique and unrepeatable. Hence, theoretical models must guide the study of social phenomena to constantly develop both theory and fieldwork. In this way, the theoretical body is strengthened by the experiences obtained in practice, without claiming an exact adjustment of the results to certain theoretical frames.

The trend towards dedifferentiation of tourist and pilgrim is one which is considered to possess major explanatory potential, given the nature of the phenomenon. This approach can contribute to knowledge generation of coexistence between these categories in the context of Mexican religious destinations; analysing the socio-spatial practices under which their displacement and stay is ruled. Accordingly, the present project delineates an approach rarely employed in Mexican scientific research, which will facilitate an explanation of the practices linked to religious tourism in a specific context, the Hill de Tepexpan's Sanctuary.

Likewise, the study has an applied nature that will lead to the religious tourism destination's sustainability. Taking into consideration that sustainability's



principles have to permeate in different tourist modalities, studies about dedifferentiation, similarity and intersections between tourists and pilgrims, can be useful for visitor management in sites considered as sacred. For sustainable management of the sanctuary into the future, research can help to maximise benefits, but in turn minimise the social and cultural conflicts between actors with different interests in destinations. Therefore, the project has sustainability implications, in intervention opportunities derived from the conclusions.

Finally, the trend towards dedifferentiation of tourist and pilgrim categories represents an opportunity to critique religious tourism knowledge. Firstly, it implies an exercise of reflection orientated towards a reality that does not allow a clear distinction between these two traveller types. Secondly, it fosters the study of individuals and their experiences derived from religious tourism, through the knowledge of activities and motivation meanings linked to the trip. And thirdly, in a Postmodernist logic, it invites the enrichment of religious tourism's theoretical body from interdisciplinarity, not transposing theories from other areas, but, constructing a knowledge according to the reality that does not yield itself to the rational criteria of traditional science.

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