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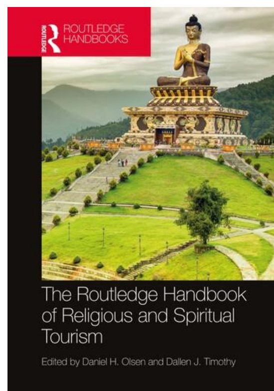

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Daniel H. Olsen, Dallen J. Timothy

Religious and spiritual retreats

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14
RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL RETREATS

Brooke Schedneck

Introduction

The idea of a religious retreat is a fairly modern phenomenon, with its roots in traditions of religious monasticism and pilgrimage. The desert hermit, forest monk, and ascetic who leave the householder life behind are tropes in early Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Fleeing cities, societies, and civilizations for the tranquil wilderness or desert is a common theme for the elite practitioners of these religions. This separation from society to an isolated quiet space remains an impulse inside and outside religious traditions. However, monastics were not always so distant from nearby cities and villages. The support from lay members of religious communities was needed to maintain monasteries. Most important, for those who remained in the world became an inner silence and external space that at least supported tranquility and contemplative practices (Adler 2006: 16–17). Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau began the work of substituting nature for enclosed religious spaces and equating forests and caves with sacredness in North America (Adler 2006: 9). In Asia, the Buddhist monastic meditative traditions developed the possibility for intense lay practice beginning in the late 1950s (Schedneck 2015: 34). From here retreats outside of a formal monastery or religious tradition expanded so that today lay people without any religious affiliation participate in retreats of spiritual and religious origins.

A religious retreat involves travel to a space created and maintained by an institution where a person engages in "a limited period of isolation during which an individual, either alone or as part of a small group, withdraws from the regular routine of daily life, generally for religious reasons" (Lozano 1987: 7768). This isolation, in conjunction with certain religious and/or ascetic practices, is meant to create a time and space for people to connect with religious or spiritual phenomena beyond the ordinary routine of life, such as a divine figure, a more authentic sense of self, or a deeper understanding of the nature of reality. Although New Age retreats, which mix personal wellness with an eclectic hybrid of spiritual practices, exist and will be discussed below, for institutionalized religions, religious retreats are most common in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. At Buddhist meditation retreat centers and Hindu yoga retreats held in ashrams, non-adherents can participate with adherents because of the ritual and aesthetics focus on bodily practices. In contrast, Christian prayer

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retreats run by churches and monasteries are centered on belief and are usually attended by Christians hoping to deepen their relationship with the God.

Whether conducted in a group or individually, religious retreats are usually focused on intense religious and/or spiritual practices ranging from a period of a few days to a few months. Most retreats are held in a retreat facility (re)designed for this purpose. These retreat centers are found in both natural settings and in or close to an urban environment. Not everyone who attends or participates in a religious retreat does so purposefully, some people may accidentally stumble upon a retreat and decide to participate because they have time and space in their travel itinerary. At the same time, religious retreats tend to be more intense and reflective than casually visiting a religious site. However, experiences at religious retreats may not be as devotional as a pilgrimage undertaken by a religious practitioner.

Retreats are an alternative to a vacation because of certain perceived benefits, including therapeutic value, reduced stress, enhanced well-being, and possibly self-transformation (Kelly & Smith 2017: 140).[1] Newberg et al. (2018), in studying the neurophysiological effects of religious retreats, found that participants in a seven-day retreat had short-term positive impacts on their dopamine and serotonin functions. Tori (1999) found that Roman Catholic and Buddhist retreats had a positive influence on participants in terms of an increase in emotional maturity, sense of achievement, and sympathetic warmth. Heintzman (2013: 72) notes that the transformational benefits of retreat participation include restoration and spiritual transformation and well-being, among others. Fu et al. (2015: 86–87) surveyed guest experiences at wellness retreat centers through analyzing data from TripAdvisor and found that many people chose to participate in the retreat because the religious and spiritual exercises and experiences at the retreat would help them resolve a life challenge or hardship they were facing. As such, retreats offer safe spaces to undertake self-development, renew one's self spiritually, mentally, and physically, and to deal with negative life events through reflection and reassessment.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how different religious faith traditions utilize religious retreats. After examining the major issues and questions raised in the present scholarship on religious retreats, attention is turned to the religious retreat phenomenon within Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and New Age movements. The chapter concludes with a comparison of how religious retreats function within these individual traditions.

Orientations

While the idea of a retreat or an escape from the everyday world has traditionally been associated with religious institutions, in recent years retreat locations and experiences have tended to fall under the rubric of wellness (Stausberg 2011). Since the 1980s, wellness tourists have been using practices such as yoga and meditation along with eating organic food, which can also be found in some religious retreats. Stausberg (2011: 133) highlights the approaches the wellness industry uses to appropriate religious or spiritual vocabulary, such as transcendence, along with religious images and ritual forms. In particular, Asian religious iconography—usually from Buddhist and Hindu traditions—are often used at secularized wellness retreats as decorations.

The connection between religion and wellness, as Norman (2011) points out, is part of the rise of secularism and (post)modernity, where "cultural deregulation" (Beyer 2007) has led to people increasingly interacting with religion in an individualized fashion. Individual choice, experimentation, self-spirituality, and the "sacralization of the self" (Heelas 1996)

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have taken precedence over religious tradition and group belonging (Olsen 2019). As such, wellness tourism and spiritual tourism have become closely connected. Because of this, and the fact that many religious faiths open up their retreats to more people than just ones who identify with a particular religious affiliation, it can be difficult at times to differentiate between retreat practitioners that follow the norms of the faith tradition and practitioners who seek peace and relaxation independent of the religious structures in place. What makes these retreats attractive to wellness and spiritual tourists is that they are not designed to function as a missionary conversion tool. Instead, the focus is on being open and available to all people as a place of respite in the world.

Kelly and Smith (2017) have suggested that there are several categories of retreats, including spiritual, religious, yoga, and body–mind–spirit retreats. The spiritual category in this schema includes Buddhist retreat centers and Hindu ashrams and under the religious category are Christian settings such as monasteries and convents. Vipassana meditation retreats, as part of the Buddhist tradition, are included in the category of body–mind–spirit-based retreats. As useful as this typology is to understand the different types of retreats, it is very difficult to distinguish between spiritual and religious retreats. Buddhist retreat centers, Hindu ashrams, and yoga retreats can be considered religious by participants while an experience at a Christian monastic retreat can also be considered spiritual in nature. Indeed, this separation or distinction of the religious from the spiritual follows work by many scholars studying retreats. In trying to parse out the categories of individual tourist and religious practitioner, Heintzman (2013: 68) has classified tourists who visit retreat centers as spiritual travelers or seekers, asserting that this type of tourist can fit into both categories of religious and wellness tourism. Rather than categorizing retreats by participant type, Shackley (2004) notes that in the developed world, most religious retreat houses are either Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian, and offer accommodation for people seeking quiet, peace, and spiritual nurture. Whether these sites are spiritual, wellness, or religion oriented is difficult to classify as their characteristics, practices, and experiential offerings are so varied.

To better understand the different types of religious and spiritual retreats, the rest of this chapter focuses on comparing the practices, beliefs, and formats of religious retreats within the traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, as well as the New Age movement. While there are retreats within other traditions, research within these four groups is most prevalent.

Buddhism

Buddhism is arguably the religion most compatible with the retreat format (Tori 1999), as vipassana meditation from Southeast Asia, Zen meditation from Japan, and Tibetan forms of meditation from the Himalayan regions all recommend various periods of time away from everyday life to focus on meditative practice in a deep, transformative, and intensive way. To facilitate this, Buddhist retreats have been developed to create the time and space needed to reach the soteriological goal of Enlightenment or *nirvana*. Historically, Buddhist retreats were more closely connected to monastic life. However, since the introduction of what scholars call "modern Buddhism" (Lopez 2002) or "Buddhist modernism" (McMahan 2008), Buddhist retreats have democratized, with non-Buddhists—who may have different motivations for participating in these retreats, such as solutions to personal problems, enhancing life experiences, and escaping daily pressures—being allowed to participate along with lay and monastic Buddhists.

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More recently, interest in and the popularization of Buddhist meditative retreats for wellness purposes has increased due to the innovative use of Buddhist temples as accommodations during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, which South Korea co-hosted with Japan. With the expected influx of millions of people to attend the World Cup, the South Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism was concerned the country might not have enough accommodations. Eventually the idea of housing them at Buddhist temples of the dominant Chogye order was proposed. Buddhist leaders decided that instead of just using their temples as temporary hotels, they would create a whole spiritual and cultural experience (Kaplan 2010: 131–132). Since then, the Korean "Temple Stay" program has grown in the number of temples and visitors they accommodate each year. This growth has resulted in several studies being conducted on different aspects of this program, ranging from Temple Stay marketing and branding (Kaplan 2010; Kim 2017) to the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction levels of domestic, foreign, non-Buddhist, and Buddhist participants (Shin, Jeon & Rha 2014; Ho-Sung 2015; Song et al. 2015; Yoon 2016; Chun, Roh & Spralls 2017; Chun et al. 2018; Bae, Lee & Chick 2019; Ross, Hur and Hoffman 2019); from the role of temple food and religious personalities in branding (Moon 2008; Ji et al. 2010; Son & Xu 2013; Park, Bonn & Cho 2020) to the environmental impacts of Temple Stays (Shin & Shin 2011).

Another area of interesting research has been the psychological and physical effects that occur in participants in Temple Stays. Emavardhana and Tori (1997: 203), for example, in measuring for the "development of a healthy and individuated self-concept" among Thai Buddhist participants at a seven-day vipassana meditation retreat in Bangkok, suggest that those who participated in the retreats experienced increased feelings of worth, benevolence, and self-acceptance after the retreat as well as a heightened belief in Buddhist precepts and less self-criticism (Emavardhana & Tori 1997, 201). Tori (1999: 126) notes that teenagers participating in a Buddhist religious retreat scored higher in measures of emotional maturity, achievement, and sympathy than those who participated in a Roman Catholic retreat, leading the author to surmise that "nontheistic Buddhist techniques may be particularly applicable in secular settings and for those who find faith in unknown entities unsatisfying." Yoon et al. (2019) found that meditation by participants at an intense four-day Buddhist meditation retreat had facilitated white matter myelination in brain regions that are important for cognitive functioning.[2] Jo et al. (2020) also found that over the course of a five-day temple stay the paraben levels in South Korean participants did not decrease, in part because of the temple stay dietary program which allows for the use of traditional condiments and seasonings that might have contained parabens.[3] Krygier et al. (2013) found that several measures of well-being improved among participants after a ten-day vipassana meditation retreat.

There has long been an interest in Buddhist retreats by North Americans and Europeans. Several memoirs about travel to Buddhist retreats in India and Nepal, as well as anthropological accounts of retreat experiences, add a depth of understanding to why people are drawn to this practice. In the 1970s, several Westerners traveled to South and Southeast Asia with an interest in Eastern spirituality. Their writings reveal a common theme, wherein they met a teacher or encountered a Buddhist retreat center, and after this, continued to practice and spread Buddhist meditation the rest of their lives. One of these travelers was Alison Murdoch, who at the age of 27 bought a ticket to New Delhi in order to find herself. In 1987, she happened across a Tibetan Buddhist temple and participated in a ten-day meditation course there taught by a Canadian monk. Later on in the same trip she did a month-long Tibetan Buddhist course in Nepal, and since then has remained committed to Buddhism (Mackenzie 2001: 29–31).

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Another common theme in these ethnographic writings is some people who participated in these meditative retreat in South and Southeast Asia returning to North America or Europe and establishing a retreat center there, leading to an internationalization of Buddhist meditation. This happened in the case of Sharon Salzberg, who at the age of 18 turned to meditation to deal with confusion and unhappiness she was working through at the time. In 1970, she traveled to Dharamsala, India, to practice meditation with the Dalai Lama (b. 1935), and in 1971, Bodh Gaya, India, to participate in an intensive ten-day meditation retreat (Mackenzie 2001: 73).[4] After returning home in 1974, Salzberg became one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society and created a now well-known meditation vipassana meditation center in Barre, Massachusetts.

Indeed, vipassana meditation retreats in particular have also become very popular in Thailand and Myanmar (Jordt 2007; Cook 2010), to the point where in 2004, the World Fellowship of Buddhists published *A Guide to Buddhist Monasteries and Meditation Centres in Thailand* (Sirikanchana 2004) in English. Vipassana meditation retreats and vipassana meditation in different social contexts have also become a popular topic among academics (Marlatt et al. 2004; Perelman et al. 2012; Pagis 2015; Vaccarino & Comrie 2015). For example, Schedneck (2015) has written a monograph on the phenomenon of international meditation retreats in Thailand, examining issues related of translation, commodification, and embodiment in order to compare the international retreat participants with Thai participants. Schedneck (2019) has also analyzed ten retreat memoirs that discuss the experiences and reflections in the vipassana retreat setting for non-Buddhists. These academic analyses and guides demonstrate the significance of meditation and retreat within Buddhism and the interest from non-Buddhist international audiences.

In Korea, Myanmar, and Thailand, Buddhist meditation retreats have become an integral part of national and religious heritage. However, while as noted above Buddhist retreat centers have been established in some non-Buddhist countries, they do not carry the same importance. Indeed, as Gilli and Ferrari (2017) note, people who participate in Buddhist retreat centers in Italy find that their expectations compared with the reality of the experience were very different. Participants were hoping for a more hotel-like atmosphere, not realizing that the centers were nonprofit organizations with limited beds and a monastic lifestyle. This may be because people in non-Buddhist countries are not familiar with the purpose of and regimented routines that are a part of retreat living. People in non-Asian countries often do not understand the differences between Asian religious retreats. Instead of seeing these retreats as embedded within contexts of lineage, cosmology, and faith, outsiders might choose to make their own meaning out of the experience (Palmer 2014; Schedneck 2015).

Christianity

Religious retreats, which also have a long history within Christianity, have also been the focus of scholarly treatment, albeit from a very different angle. Rather than focusing on the motivations, benefits, effects of Christian retreats, and the effects of transnationalism and secularism, scholars have focused more closely on how retreats are connected to Christian tradition itself. This may be because there is less non-Christian participation and decontextualizing Christian retreats for a broader audience. Rather, Christians tend to be the participants in Christian retreats, which primarily take place within the Christian monastic tradition. While some Christian retreats offer a scheduled program of prayer, most retreats

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are focused on Christianity's soteriological goal of attaining heaven through offering ways to enhance one's relationship and connection with the God.

Because of this, much of the research on Christian retreats has focused on how clergy benefit from retreats and the ways monasteries bring spiritual restoration to its Christian followers. For example, Gill, Packer, and Ballantyne (2018) investigated the role of Christian retreats in Australia in helping Christian clergy deal with mental fatigue. According to the authors, participants in the retreats experienced "a significant positive impact on participants' mental state" (p. 246), including social, spiritual, and cognitive benefits related to reflection, renewal, restoration, personal development, transformation, and healing. Another study by Ouellette et al. (2005) looked at the potential of a Canadian Benedictine Monastery to provide a restorative environment, analyzing the nature of this restorative environment as well as retreat participants' motivations. The authors found that beauty, spirituality, and spending time away from home were some of the main motivating factors for people staying at the monastery.

The Ignatian monastic tradition offers the most unique type of Christian retreat with its focus on what is referred to as the Ignatian Exercises, which involves solitude and silence. Tyers (2010), in his survey of retreat practices in the Church of England from 1858 onward, suggests that by the mid-1960s between twenty and thirty thousand people in the Anglican Church were making an Ignatian retreat each year. This popularity led to an expansion of Ignatian retreats in 1979, and by the 1980s training courses for retreat directors from all denominations were made available. This expansion of Ignatian retreats spurred Benedictine monastics as well as Celtic and Franciscan traditions to "increase their focus on silence and devotional practices for all, encouraging a less cerebral and a more contemplative approach in many retreats, some of which are totally given over to exploring ways of stillness" (Tyers 2010: 272). Other Christian traditions have begun to host retreats experimenting with different retreat programming such as walking retreats, workshops, and journaling practices (Tyers 2010).

The idea of stillness and silence continues to be an important theme on research related to Christian retreats. In his work on retreats at Benedictine monasteries in England, Conradsen (2007: 34) argues that "stillness has been subject to growing valorization in Western countries in recent years. With pressures on many configurations of work—life balance, the scarcity of stillness has contributed to heightened public interest in places of retreat." As noted above, places of retreat, whether they are Christian monasteries or Buddhist meditation centers, are meant for people looking for a place apart; a place of stillness, rest, and renewal, as many people have "difficulty achieving internal stillness in many domestic settings" (p. 38). Rather than being viewed as sign of laziness and lack of productivity, stillness is now viewed as a kind of productive non-activity. Benedictine monasteries are well suited and designed to facilitate this stillness and encounters with the divine because of their "long-standing rhythms of prayer and worship" (p. 43). The programming at the Benedictine retreats helps participants learn how to take the practices of stillness and reflection and apply them when they return home.[5] As such, guests at the Benedictine monasteries Conradsen studied were encouraged to not focus on "doing", but rather on "being" and engaging with the natural environment so as to create a connection with the God (p. 42).

Besides monasteries, retreat houses are another popular Christina retreat. Retreat houses are places that provide "accommodation and spiritual input for guests in search of peace and quiet, whether or not this is associated with a religious or monastic experience" (Shackley 2004: 228). The retreat houses usually have spartan accommodations, little to

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no choice of food, and have little of the modern conveniences of hotels (Shackley 2004; O'Gorman & Lynch 2008). While retreat houses usually have a worship component to the guest experience, this component is optional, and there is no set programming regarding what someone must do during their time. Besides taking time away from one's normal activities, one could join in the many activities offered, including individual or group spiritual practice, taking spiritually based courses, or just walking in nature.

Christian retreats are also found beyond Europe, including North and South America (Wright 2008; Ron & Timothy 2019), Africa (e.g., Ojo 1988; Harrison 2004; Okonkwo & Nzeh 2009), and Asia (Jesudass 2000). And it is not just Roman Catholicism and the Anglican Church that host Christian retreats—Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Quaker, and Ecumenical Christian churches also offer retreat experiences. While the Christian retreat tourism niche market is understudied as a whole, several websites have been established and news articles published to help interested participants find appropriate Christian retreats.[6]

Hinduism

Religious retreats also take place in a Hindu context, many of which are tied to the practice of yoga. The Indian Ministry of Tourism has proclaimed that "yoga is India's gift to the world," and that "India has the potential to brand itself as the land of yoga" (Bowers & Cheer 2017: 211). As a part of this push to promote yoga in India as a panacea for the ailments of modern Western societies, Rishikesh, India, has begun to market itself as the "Yoga Capital of the World," and India has created a special yoga visa for travelers to India (Bowers & Cheer 2017). At the same time, many travelers tend to conflate yoga, religious retreats, and wellness tourism in this context (Norman 2011; Schedneck 2015) and may engage in several different types of retreats when traveling in Asia. Norman (2011), for example, found that people who engaged in yoga retreats in Rishikesh also participated in Buddhist vipassana meditation retreats in other parts of India. Schedneck (2015, 82) found that spiritual tourists at a meditation retreat in Thailand saw this as a part of their broader wellness trip, with one informant having just arrived from a yoga retreat in Bali. Norman (2011) also found that many spiritual tourists in Rishikesh create their own religious retreats, combining yoga and *satsang* (spiritual or philosophical lectures offered by gurus) activities with many tourists spending on average four to six hours per day in these classes. As such, bricolage and hybridity are an important part of religious retreats in Hindu tradition, which often claims its openness to people of all religions and those who claim no religion.

Yoga retreats in India are seen by spiritual tourists to reset the mind and gain a fresh perspective after a difficult period in one's life. While vacations and other types of activities can lead to renewal, retreats are viewed by many spiritual tourists as the best way to receive the catharsis they need. As such, yoga retreats have been a focus of study, particularly by psychologists. Pandya (2018) found that participation in Indian guru-led yoga retreats led to increased well-being among participants. Sharpley and Sundaram (2005) described a retreat at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, home of the controversial Sai Baba, and note that all visitors are welcome. There are also no compulsory activities, as everyone is free to follow their own practices and stay for as long as they like, as demonstrated by one respondent who has stayed at the ashram for 27 years with no plans to return home! Some of the participants in the study had traveled to India solely to visit several ashrams, seeking spiritual strength they could not find in their daily lives, while others visited this specific ashram to participate in a few meditation or yoga classes. Because these types of Hindu retreats have several different activities

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in which a person can participate and are not time-limited, there are a wide range of people who attend, ranging from beginning Hindu practitioners to long-time affiliated members.

Hindu and yoga retreats are also found in the United States, where many people spend their vacations. In their study of yoga retreats in Indiana, Lehto et al. (2006) note that yoga retreats in the Unites States are viewed in the same way as retreats in India—a place to focus on the self and receive spiritual nourishment instead of the demands of work. Other important reasons for attending a yoga retreat included renewing oneself, relaxing, being more flexible in mind and body, letting go of stress, and gaining a sense of balance in one's spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional dimensions. Many of the participants at this retreat felt that an hour or two of yoga at a local yoga studio was not enough to recharge or provide that sense of balance within the self, and as such wanted to spend a longer, more intense period of time at the retreat to fully restore their life balance.

New Age retreats

New Age retreats are a more recent phenomenon but fit well within the secularized and individualized nature of contemporary spirituality. Indeed, a major part of modern New Age practice is going on retreat. Attix (2002) has found that for New Age practitioners, retreat centers are not only places for practice and restoration, but often become hubs for independent travelers seeking information and directions to local sacred sites and special places. Attix, however, seems to take a critical stance against New Age practitioners, stating that "they also show little indication of awareness about how they may be externally impacting host populations and religious sensibilities" (p. 56). This criticism follows more general disapproval of the New Age movement by those who argue that while this movement provides an eclectic "spiritual marketplace" (Gauthier et al. 2013) for those who seek individualized or customized spiritual experiences and services, it is both heavily reliant on cultural appropriation and too closely tied to capitalism, thereby seen as a shallow form of spirituality (York 2001; Carrette & King 2004; Taira 2009; Wood 2016).

Regardless, New Age retreats are an important part of spiritual tourism and its emphasis on balance, wellness, and health. Bone (2013) found in her research on two New Age retreats in New Zealand that community, connection, and the possibility of escape, along with natural and spiritual landscapes, are the key features of spiritual retreat tourism. These retreat centers focused on a mixture of yoga, meditation, natural therapies, healing, and exercises meant to awaken a person's consciousness. Participants also found that companionship with others who have similar goals and desires to escape from their everyday life was an important component of the overall retreat experiences. As such, Bone suggests that because of these positive benefits, New Age "[r]etreat centres can be seen as antidotes to the alienation and disruption that is felt by the population on a global scale" (p. 299), and therefore "are becoming increasingly popular as niche tourism sites" (p. 307). For those seeking these experiences outside of a religious institution, New Age retreats have become a significant option (Ivakhiv 2003; Redden 2005; Pernecky & Johnston 2006), especially when tied to power places such as Glastonbury Tor, UK and Sedona, Arizona (Bowman 1993; Ivakhiv 1997; Digance & Cusack 2002; Coats 2009; MacLaran & Scott 2009).

New Age retreats are also a type of spiritual retreat, which Bone (2015: 123) defines as "a unique form of tourism, differentiated from wellness or spa tourism, due to its focus on spiritual ideals and the touristic experience whereby spiritual activities and ideologies are practiced and symbolically evident at retreat sites." Spiritual retreats generally package health, wellness, spiritual practices, and services together with healthy, often organic and

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vegetarian, food options and a calm and peaceful environment similar to religious retreats in order to give participants the feeling they are doing something good for their bodies and minds. Within the New Age movement, the label of "spiritual" retreats is appropriate because it implies a space outside of a single religious institution.

Conclusion

In the modern world, people seek healing and meaning through religion and spirituality. As such, many people choose to travel to and participate in retreats and temple stays, staying

> …a few days of quiet and contemplation in secluded places of prayer and meditation. Some people retreat to a more primitive mode of living close to nature and away from the conveniences of modern civilization. People thereby wish to be free from the stresses of daily life and to restore themselves through quiet and contemplation to an original state of purity for renewed energy and readiness for life escaping for a few days in quiet solitude.
>
> *(Kim 2014: 21)*

And yet as important as religious and spiritual retreats are, they remain an understudied tourism niche market. Scholars in religious studies, anthropology, tourist studies, and psychological studies have conducted research on religious and spiritual retreats. While the focus of much of this research has been on creating typologies of religious and spiritual retreat participants and the outcomes of participation in these retreats, more ethnographic work would help better understand the perspectives of religious retreat participants and in particular the role of teachers at these retreats. Research at religious places, such as Buddha's birthplace of Bodh Gaya, India (Geary 2017) or with pilgrims traveling on the Santiago de Compostela in Spain (Norman 2011) is less challenging than studying a retreat. The structure and physical demands of a retreat offer unique struggles to researchers, as scholars must attend retreats themselves, become familiar with the participants and the retreat leaders, record notes and interviews, all while remaining in a silent or semi-silent environment.

What religious and spiritual retreats have in common is that time away from one's daily routine is the biggest reason why people travel to and participate in these retreats. People indicate their beliefs and values not only verbally but through the movement of their bodies in culturally conceived spaces. These removed and socially distant retreat spaces communicate to participants in retreats and to broader society, a performance of the self, which values contemplation and seeking a kind of truth (Adler 2002, 46). The chance to focus on one's self while undertaking religious or spiritual practices is the major benefit and motivation for undertaking a retreat. While retreats range from the austere to the luxurious accommodations, the point is to be away from one's home and community and to learn about and take care of oneself, physically and mentally. The popularity of retreats highlights the problems of modernity in many participants' minds—too fast paced with no time to relax and reflect. Religious and spiritual retreat therefore becomes spaces of anti-modernity, intended for those people who need a break from living modern lives.

Notes

1. Some of these benefits are the same as those found in other tourism niche markets.
2. Myelination serves to keep nerve impulses flowing to different parts of the brain.

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3 Parabens are non-persistent preservatives that are used in cosmetics, personal care products and food items that break down quickly.
4 Bodh Gaya, in Bihar, eastern India, is known as the "seat of the Buddha's enlightenment." It is here that Buddhist pilgrims come to pay respect to the spot where the Buddha attained *nirvana*.
5 This relates to research by Gill, Packer, and Ballantyne (2019), who note that the restorative aspects of Christian retreats diminish among participants who have significant levels of stress or deal with an excessive workload immediately after returning home.
6 Website examples include https://bookretreats.com/s/other-retreats/religious-retreats; https://www.retreatfinder.com/Directory/Faith/Christian.aspx.

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