



## **The Soul: The Intersection between Wellness, Travel, Religion, and Spirituality**

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### **Article Info**

### **Abstract**

#### **Received:**

2023-10-02

#### **Accepted:**

2023-11-14

#### **Keywords:**

Tourism

Wellness

Religion

Spirituality

Many people travel in search of life-altering experiences, which, in the form of epiphanies, can lead to a profound and positive transformation in their daily lives. This paper focuses on the intersections of religion, spirituality, and wellness, and how similar experiences in these areas can be interpreted through viewing people through the lens of the human “soul”. After briefly defining religion, spirituality, and wellness, attention is turned to the medicalization of religion and spirituality in the form of wellness. The relationships between the soul, spiritual health, and travel are then briefly discussed before concluding.

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#### **How to Cite:**

Olsen, D. H. (2023). The Soul: The Intersection between Wellness, Religion, and Spirituality with an approach to tourism. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture and Spirituality*, 6(1), 23-35.

## Introduction

Epiphanic experiences are sudden or abrupt momentary events—often preceded by periods of anxiety or inner turmoil—that are so profound in the life of an individual that it leads to a “profound, positive and enduring transformation through [the] reconfiguration of an individual’s most deeply held beliefs about [themselves] and [the] world” (Jarvis, 1997, p. v; quoted in McDonald, 2008, p. 89). These epiphanic experiences “affect a person so fully that previous worldviews, ideas, and values are no longer relevant,” and the traveler returns from their journey “with their self-identity fundamentally changed” (Olsen, 2017, p. 120) in a lasting, permanent way (McDonald, 2008).

While the idea of epiphanic experiences tends to be reserved for discussion within the realm of religion and spirituality, understanding what constitutes such experiences and how they are formed has recently been an area of focus within the scientific circles. As Wearing, McDonald, and Ankor (2016, p. 158) note, “Much of the work on epiphanic experiences is limited by positivistic research designs that reduce cognitions and emotions down to simplistic sets of variables that frequently spilt the individual from their context and the Other.” In other words, science suggests that any experience a person identifies as epiphanic—or something otherworldly or Other—can be explained away by sociobiology or evolutionary genetics. Another, cruder way of putting it is that human beings are just *salt sacks* who are driven by chemicals and neurotransmitters (Dobbs, 2013; Fennell, 2006; Saad, 2007), and that any attempts to explain epiphanic experiences beyond these biological factors are nothing but illusions of the human mind, or human brain simulations or “neural correlates” projecting onto people their unmet physical and/or sociobiological needs (Jeeves and Brown, 2009).

However, many of the world’s eight billion people believe that there is more to life than being acted upon by biological and neurological processes, particularly when world history has been liberally sprinkled with stories of men and women who report epiphanic experiences that they believe go beyond mere biopsychology; that touches their more-than-biologically human core where the meeting of the individual, God or gods, and biology takes place. This experience, then, is interpreted through a religious or spiritual

framework or lens that helps that individual to process and explain the experience and its attendant emotions, all of which leads to a life-long positive transformation in some way.

While these epiphanic experiences are the ideal when people travel for religious and/or spiritual purposes, personal transformation tends to be an incremental process, where small life events and experiences lead to a subtle shifting of personal identity and worldviews. This personal transformation can be incidental to travel, where experiences interpreted as being religious or spiritual can either occur unintentionally—when a person visits a religious heritage building not expecting to have such an experience. In other cases, the search for personal transformation can be intentional—when a person travels with the expectation of having a positive, faith- or identity-affirming experience (e.g., Jackson and Hudman, 1995; Voase, 2007). These incremental personal experiences can also occur within a broader group context, where access to these subtle identity-shifting experiences come through *communitas*, where individuals in the same location enter an unstructured *liminal* state “betwixt and between” home and travel and have access to similar *rite of passage* experiences (e.g., Turner, 1987; Devereux & Carnegie, 2006; Beckstead, 2010, 2021; Di Giovine, 2011; Maddrell & Della Dora, 2013).

Inherent to the present paper are two underlying concepts or ideas. The first is that there is something that makes up a person that goes beyond the biopsychological. That “something” is often referred to as the “spirit” or the “soul” of a person. Indeed, the idea and study of human experience and purpose, as well as individual health and wellness, must include the more-than-human part of individuals. The second is that human experiences are often framed through a religious or spiritual lens. While these two terms have historically been used synonymously, today they are viewed as overlapping yet different ideas (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In this paper, these ideas are examined within the context of *wellness* tourism, which, at least in its current iteration, is a newer tourism niche market that seeks to subsume religious and spiritual experiences in a holistic manner in the human search for wellness and wholeness via travel.

## **Religion, Spirituality, and Wellness**

The terms religion and spirituality have long been subsumed under the construct of *religiousness*, which refers to the “Beliefs, emotions, practices, and experiences are investigated as functional mechanisms...used to deal with fundamental existential issues, such as meaning, death, suffering, isolation, and injustice” (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 23). Religiousness can be communal in nature, particularly in cases where religion is defined substantively as what aspects of a particular culture and which socio-cultural institutions should be considered a part of religion (Beyer, 2007). In many cases, religion is tied intimately with religious institutions, which are involved in the creation of:

- a discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status;
- a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected;
- a community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices; and
- an institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value (Lincoln 2003, pp., 6-8).

At the same time, religiousness can be individualistic, referring to “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual [people] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1902/1961, p. 42).

In the last few decades, spirituality has become increasingly divorced from notions of religiosity and religiousness in many areas of the world where secularizing forces have

- reduced the importance of religious institutions in the public sphere;
- led to individualized forms of faith expression;
- emphasized a shift from belief to direct experience with the sacred; and

- shifted societies to be more consumer-based, wherein personal identities are based on individualistic consumptive patterns rather than communal structures and practices (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Gauthier et al., 2013).

From a western perspective, spirituality refers to “forms of religiosity and individual experience outside of organized or institutional religion” (Olsen, 2019, p. 273)—where the individual and not a religious gatekeeper is the ultimate arbiter of how one’s experiences are sought and interpreted. Spirituality is as much about the search to connect with the inner self as it is with the numinous; privileges inner, subjective experiences over mediated religious frameworks; and involves experimentation with different aspects of religion and spirituality, including at times the occult, holistic healing practices, shamanism, paganism, UFO worship, and other elements of the New Age movement (Kale, 2004; Vincett & Woodhead, 2016)—all of which purport to offer access to clarity and resolution regarding transcendental human concerns (Beyer, 2007).

A byproduct of the rise of spirituality—in which religion is often viewed to be negative, static, and institutionalized versus spirituality as positive, dynamic, and subjective in nature (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005)—has come the rise of *wellness*. Wellness—defined as “the path to achieving well-being...a path that includes physical, mental, and spiritual health, self-responsibility, social harmony, environmental sensitivity, intellectual development, emotional well-being, and occupational satisfaction” (Smith, 2022, p. 68)—is often tied to human health and spirituality. Many people travel to improve their quality of life and well-being. These experiences are often either hedonic—where people seek as much pleasure as possible—or eudaimonic—which focuses on personal growth and experience—in nature (Smith and Diekmann, 2017). In traveling for wellness purposes, many people seek spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing; connection with their higher self; meaning and personal discovery; experimentation with different faiths, cultures, and communities; and places, such as retreats, where they can have time and space to reflect and focus on growth and development. In essence, wellness tourism is designed to help people who seek holistic health through the reconciliation of the body, mind, and spirit (Smith and Kelly, 2006) outside of religious and even spiritual frameworks. This includes the search for

experiences that lead to psychological, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

### **The Medicalization of Religion and Spirituality**

Underlying this modern search for holistic wellness and harmony between mental, physical, spiritual, and biological aspects of human well-being and health, is the historical tension between religion and medicine. As Ferngren (2014, pp. 4-6; c.f. Amundsen, 1996, pp. 1-29) notes, there are four ways in which the interplay between religion and medicine has historically played out. The first is medicine being *subsumed* by religion. In this case, religious worldviews are fundamental in how societies attempt to understand and cure disease and other health-related concerns. The second is where religion and medicine are *partially separated*—where societies “understand disease [and other health issues] naturalistically and employ rational or empirical medicine for healing” (Ferngren, 2014, p. 5), with medical ethics viewed and practiced in conjunction with religious worldviews and values. The third is where religion and medicine have become *completely separated and compartmentalized*. This marks in many cases where modern societies presently are regarding how they view important moral medical issues, such as euthanasia, abortion, and assisted suicide, which moral issues are often discussed within broader concerns regarding what role religion should play within society more generally. The fourth is where religion is *subsumed* by medicine. In this case, aspects of societal relations, such as marriage, sex, mental health, and family relationships, are no longer the purview of religion, but are instead deal with through a therapeutic perspective of health and healing. Ferngren argues that “even spirituality has come to be viewed within a therapeutic framework, one in which counselors replace pastors, while the language becomes one of developing a healthy physical and spiritual lifestyle and restoring one’s harmony with nature” (Ferngren, 2014, p. 5; See Olsen, 2020).

This view of religion (and now spirituality) being subsumed by medicine can also be seen in the wellness movement. Instead of religion and spirituality being the basis for developing human wholeness, there is now a trillion USD industry (McGroaty, 2018) commercializing well-being that often uses religion and spirituality—as well as religious and spiritual sites, pathways, and practices—as *tools* and the *background* rather than the *means* through which human wholeness is achieved. At the same time,

the holistic approach of the wellness and well-being movement reminds us of the importance of nourishing the spirit and the body and the mind—the whole human being.

### **The Soul**

While this is not a ground-breaking idea for many of us, and many religions and spiritual movements focus on the duality of the body and spirit what constitutes the human soul varies between and within faith traditions. In some traditions, the terms “spirit” and “soul” are interchangeable, while in other traditions they refer to separate things. While the term “soul” is used in a variety of ways, generally it refers to the unification of the spirit with the physical body, making the whole person (Dolan, 2007). But in general terms, the human soul is “the immaterial aspect or essence of a human being, conferring individuality and humanity, often considered to be synonymous with the mind or the self” (Ciocan, 2020, p. 233). Further, “the Soul ...[is] part of the individual, which partakes of divinity and transcends the body... [and is] the source of...everlasting essence [O]ften considered to survive the death of the body—it is always appraised as a higher existence for which all should fight for” (*ibid*, p. 233).

### **The Soul, Spiritual Health, and Travel**

How does all of this relate to spiritual health—sometimes referred to as the fourth dimension of health (Dhar, Chaturvedi, & Nandan, 2013)? While there are several ways in which one can define spiritual health, these definitions tend to have certain themes in common, including “connecting (with self, others, nature, and God or a higher power), self-transcendence, harmony, [a] meaningful life, morality, hope, and peace,” with the outcomes of spiritual health including well-being and moral development (Jaberi *et al.*, 2019, p. 1540). Much of the academic literature on spiritual health is couched within the broader medical science literature, in some cases looking at religion and spirituality as an important, yet very small component of, the holistic health of an individual (Ghaderi *et al.*, 2018). Yet religion and spirituality become fundamental core components of spiritual health and health more generally when we view people as possessing a soul, and realize that positive activities that engage the bodily, mental, and spiritual senses together in a hybrid-identity construction effort helps them heal, transform, find

meaning, and potentially shift individual identities and world views, leading to long-term spiritual health.

While, from a spiritual perspective, this hybrid-identity construction effort should be accomplished through “unmediated, authentic, embodied, real[,] and ‘ordinary’ encounters with the cultures and places within which they visit” (Olsen 2022, p. 392), considering the rise of the “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore, 2011) and the top-down or sometimes co-created nature of travel experiences, one can rightfully ask if there is such a thing as an unmediated experience during travel because of the mediatized, strategic, and staged nature of tourism promotion and consumption. This, then, leads to questions regarding authenticity and authentication in the context of mediated travel and whether a person can have what they consider to be an unmediated and authentic religious or spiritual experience that, to them, truly enhances their spiritual health and wellness (Olsen, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

While spiritual health tends to be incremental through being present in the day-to-day activities of the world (Dhar, Chaturvedi, & Nandan, 2013), travel can facilitate this connection with the self, others, nature, and God or a higher power by taking people out of their daily living spaces and entering a *third space*—a physical and mental location or space wherein people’s identities are either intentionally or unintentionally “reflexively remade through the encounter and interaction with both the physical and the meta-physical aspects of [a] site” (Olsen, 2012, p. 234). This can also be accomplished through people traveling to have a set of experiences that leaves people positively changed and in good spiritual health. Travel, then, creates the space and time wherein the capacity and potentiality for transcendence and healing can take place.

The real question is how we approach the interplay and dynamics between religion, spirituality, and medicine within the context of tourism. Do we ignore the medical and only focus on the religious and/or spiritual? Do we only utilize a medical approach to spiritual health neglecting the religious and/or spiritual? Or do we integrate the medical with the religious and/or spiritual in developing spiritual health experiences? Different societies and faith traditions will have different answers to these questions, as will the

tourism industry in their quest to further segment the tourist market. However, considering the increasingly fragmented view of individual and group identity, the search for meaning and the Self will necessarily constitute an acceptance of “playfulness” when it comes to how and where people search for experiences that are spiritual and transcendent in nature that contribute to wholeness and wellness—a search that includes journeys that cannot be classified as “conventional tourism” (Jirásek, 2014: 50).

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