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Pilgrims' play on the Santiago Way

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The popularity of the walking pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela across Northern Spain is often understood as a new kind of spiritual tourism rather than a revival of religious practice. In order to examine this claim, I explore common symbolic and ritual practices on the trail such as rock placing, message making, role playing, and partaking in communal play activities. I elaborate the concept of play to explain these behaviors and consider how they relate to transcendental and sacred meanings. This analysis has important implications for explaining the current popularity of the Camino. In particular, it helps explain how the same ritual and symbolic acts may be shared by diverse people with diverse motivations, and how contemporary ritual practices may relate and reengage with imaginaries of the pilgrimage of the past.

Key Words: leisure; play; pilgrimage; Camino de Santiago; ritual; sacred

Introduction

Given the patterns of secularisation in most European countries, the Camino phenomenon requires explanation by scholars of religion. Academic studies often emphasise the variety of pilgrims' motivations and origins, and conclude that the Camino fulfils the need for a new kind of spiritual tourism (Frey, 1998; Fernandes *et al.*, 2012; Oviedo *et al.*, 2014; Farias *et al.*, 2019). One common theme suggested by researchers is that the popular appeal of the Camino can be understood as secular or post secular 'self-therapy'. Walking the Camino aids a search for meaning or identity, as opposed to constituting a traditional religious practice (Slavin, 2003; Norman, 2009, 2012; Jørgensen, 2010; Schnell & Palib, 2013). Researchers observe that as the journey is physically challenging, pilgrims experience an altered sense of time and space, and an enhanced appreciation of nature (Peelen & Jansen, 2007; Winfield, 2013). Accordingly, studies explain how pilgrims report disappointment on arrival at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela because the purpose of the journey is to walk, not to venerate a Christian Saint (Devereux & Carnegie, 2006; Kiyani, 2001). Some Camino scholars have therefore argued that the spiritual tourism of the Camino is symbolic of the decline of Christianity (Herrero, 2008; Margry, 2008, 2015). On this view, the supposed lack of the traditional purpose of the pilgrimage – with its contemporary focus on the journey now finally ending at the sea in Finisterre (Fisterra) rather than the destination of St James' shrine – is evidence of postmodern unbelief.

By focusing on the therapeutic effects and motivations of the physical act of walking, however, scholars have tended to overlook the communicative and symbolic practices that make the Camino more than just an ordinary hiking path. One corollary of this view is that the traditional purpose of religious pilgrimage as *communitas* – to shed the worries and social roles of ordinary life and develop a common bond between pilgrims – has largely been discounted (Slavin, 2003; Kiyani, 2011; Oviedo *et al.*, 2014). Instead, researchers, following the work of Eade and Sallnow (1991), have argued that the meaning of the pilgrimage to Santiago is contested by secular tourists on the one hand, and walkers who identify as religious or spiritual pilgrims on the other (Murray & Graham, 1997; Digance, 2003). Nevertheless, as most recent studies focus on pilgrims' beliefs and motivations rather than *what they do* on the pilgrimage, researchers have arguably not sufficiently explored how the three-metre-wide path and its associated social spaces becomes meaningful for a diverse body of pilgrims, including those of no religion and those who do not identify as Christian. Surveys about pilgrims' motivations provide scarce insight into the ritual and symbolic practices pilgrims may use to communicate, interpret or make sense of their experiences.

Considering the Camino as a set of distinctive social practices, rather than a route walked by a disparate group of people with diverse motivations, permits the interpretation of a range of individual and collective actions that produce the space and its significance for its users (Lefebvre, 1991). An empirically grounded

'bottom up' approach employed in the present article informed by this theoretical orientation allows for a sensitive and in depth exploration of the personal meanings of play on the Camino. Crucially, this enables consideration as to how the same symbolic and ritual actions can be shared by pilgrims regardless of their religious beliefs and identifications.

Exploring pilgrims' play

I undertook seven walking fieldwork missions on the Camino Francés between St Jean Pied de Port in France, and Finisterre, Western Spain from July 2015 to July 2017 (ranging from lengthy visits to day-trips, totalling 42 nights and 54 days). During these expeditions, as a participant observer, I made an extensive study of graffiti, improvised sculptures and material placed on the trail by pilgrims, triangulating my observations of material objects with the real time explanations of pilgrims. Drawing on these observations which were recorded by photographs and notes, I argue that various forms of play enable pilgrims of diverse backgrounds to undertake the mass ritual of the pilgrimage, and in so doing, engage with religious and sacred discourses and practices. Inspired by Huizinga's famous definition of play in the seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1949), I theorise the Camino as a kind of continually-lived play. It is separate from real life, free, for its own sake, but also ordered. This play has deep instinctual and psychological roots that go some way to provide an explanation for itself, but these explanations do not constitute the ultimate purpose and meaning of the various kinds of play, which are, by definition, intrinsic to the play itself.

Salamone (1975) made the point that religious practice should be understood at least in part as Huizinga understood play. Indeed, further connections can be made between play and what is commonly regarded as religion by appealing to the deep religious roots of leisure and play in Western culture and the Christian tradition. Joseph Pieper (1965), writing against the emphasis on work in communist atheism and also implicitly in what he saw as the modern Protestant ethic of capitalism, made the observation that historically, leisure and contemplation were only made possible by God, or the Gods. For Pieper, true leisure may only be possible with a certain attentive resignation which readily arises from a theistic worldview. This has the enabling potential to allow someone to 'acquiesce[s] in his [*sic*] own being' (Pieper, 1965:43). In the field of pilgrimage studies more specifically, Victor Turner's concept of liminoid play (1974) presents a further, hitherto

unconnected, theoretical orientation for interpreting pilgrims' behaviour that also links play to sacred meanings. Turner suggests that leisure activities provide the opportunity to enable the liminal-like but less formal qualities of liminoid play. In these ritualised spaces, social actors take on new identities, abide by different social rules, and enter into states of psychological 'flow' that enhance and shape their experiences. When interpreted with either of these frames, the altered consciousness brought about by days of walking and then sleeping in communal guesthouses (*albergues*), makes the Camino a good example of a space where Turnerian liminoid play-flow takes place, as well as the site for a Pieperian experience of leisure-as-contemplation.

In the play world of the Camino there are many opportunities for pilgrims to engage with longstanding and traditional features of Christian pilgrimage, including experiences of transcendence, atonement, remembrance, love and goodwill. But these themes take on a particular sensibility in pilgrims' experience because of their unique social and material context. I go onto explore how profound and / or sacred personal experiences are created on the Camino which are influenced and communicated by play. By 'play', I mean a range of sub-rituals and symbolic practices, sometimes individual, sometimes communal, involving interaction with, and reflection about the world of the Camino, including other pilgrims, its historic infrastructure and discourses. They include playing with human-made and natural materials on the trail; playing with one's own identity and; taking part in intrinsically playful activities by communicating with other pilgrims. These practices mediate pilgrims' sense of the sacred or transcendent, and by mixing and inverting secular and religious discourses, promote pilgrims' engagement with religious narratives and practices, even if individual pilgrims may be distanced from Christianity outside the world of the pilgrimage. Play enables pilgrims to construct personal meanings of the Camino that may overlap with diverse or contesting religious positions, including those of no religion. Furthermore, and crucial to the perpetuation of the Camino experience, different kinds of play are inviting to others and allow them to join in the game - regardless of individual pilgrims' religious identifications, and regardless of whether individuals set out on the pilgrimage to do so, or not.

Material play and the production of hierotopy

Perhaps one of the most elemental forms of religion, and of play, is to touch and move natural materials such as stone or wood as one pleases, and as is satisfying (Plate, 2014). Evidence of play with naturally occurring materials is visible all along the Camino. Temporary materials or installations remain in situ or are added to by other pilgrims creating a multi-layered, dynamic, symbolic environment with which walkers interact. Material play includes collecting stones and other items with idiosyncratic or ambiguous symbolic meanings; creating messages, signs and symbols for other pilgrims; dedicating exercise, time or objects to loved ones and; depositing objects brought from home. These practices simultaneously interpret and construct the Camino through *hierotopy* – the creation of holy space through social performances and collective imagination, drawing on the physical properties of actions, objects or the environment and social actors' relationships with them (Lidov, 2006). While placed, individual stones, pine cones, twigs, balanced stacks of rocks and piles of rocks can be found all along the trail, less spontaneous examples include stickers, coloured or inscribed material with slogans deliberately brought onto the trail. Where there is chain link fencing aside the path it can be covered in pilgrims' twig crosses – the natural tension of the wood keeping them between the links in the metal fence. These varied and ubiquitous symbolic exchanges demarcate and create hierotopy by recording performative actions, leaving a physical mark significant for those who have placed them, and for those who observe them. Yet, these markers are ambiguous and are open to different interpretations, from the serious to the light-hearted.

The most common ritual stone-placing takes place at the Cruz de Ferro approximately two-thirds of the length of the trail from St Jean Pied de Port, between Foncebadón and Manjarín (Margry, 2015). Stones left here and elsewhere often represent specific intentions for pilgrims or for their loved ones, and the resolve for a better life, to leave things behind and renew. This is most obvious to the observer when written messages are left with a rock, such as one that I read and noted which stated

... On this Camino I leave behind that which no longer serves me. All I need is love.

These kinds of material bear ample evidence of a communicative ritual practice constituting a form of play whereby highly personal actions are given deeper

meaning by their contextual location – the symbol creating a special place where other pilgrims also reflect. A second kind of meta play can then be superimposed upon previous offerings that subverts or plays ironically with them. A huge boulder placed on a way marker, for example, both humorously undermines the sincere and ubiquitous stone placing, but at the same time endorses the stone record of intentional symbolic actions with a much weightier contribution.

A recurrent theme reported by pilgrims during my fieldwork expeditions was the imputing of personal psychological significance onto physical material, a key feature of hierotopy. Pilgrims' transformation of ordinary artefacts into deeply personal symbols indicates the salience of walking the Camino and how improvised material play is related to sacred meanings for pilgrims of all kinds of religious persuasions. For example, one pilgrim told me about an internal conflict she had about her own abilities and freedom in relation to the desires of her parents. She described how she had been thinking about this intensely while walking. Because she did not identify as Christian, she did not want to participate in stereotypical pilgrimage activities in general, but she reluctantly found a stone that spoke to her. This stone was special because it had two different kinds of surface that, to her, represented the struggle between her and her parents. She took this stone and carried it some days before leaving it on a family grave in a village, which gave her satisfaction and closure. This example demonstrates three important aspects of stone placing on the Camino. The symbolic gesture is personal, but in this case adopted because of the prevalence of such practices among other pilgrims. In this way it is private and public in nature, and learnt and spontaneous. Secondly, it relates to the psychological flow, and catharsis of the walk, which is considered by the pilgrim as a liminal and symbolic activity that fosters personal change. Thirdly, the deposit of the symbol on a more traditional religious site allows for a different reading of the meaning of the symbol by those unaware of its specific story while also representing the importance of the ritual for the pilgrim, who relies on the authenticity of the grave to add significance to her action. No one will know that the stone represents a specific internal conflict, but it adds to the growing weight of other intentions placed on the route which accumulates accrued, but unspecific meaning, ready to be reinterpreted in different ways by other pilgrims. At least for the placer of the stone, the family grave represents a sacred site with the power to receive her

offering. The hierotopy created through multiple similar acts, playful in the sense they are free and open, reconnects individual and non-religious acts with omnipresent religious material (in this case, the Christian grave) and also Christian discourses, such as atonement, forgiveness and prayer.

Contestation and ambiguity by playing with meanings

The theme of much of the graffiti to be found on the Camino is concerned with walking, and the desire to communicate various transcendental meanings of that experience of play-flow. One interesting aspect of this are pilgrims' transformations of secular infrastructure to create sacred symbols. Playing with the continual message of the official Camino infrastructure, an arrow, or phrase, are improvised by pilgrims with stones or other material on the path. In one case, for example, the existential question, echoing Matthew 16:14, 'Who do you follow?' was added to a huge pebble arrow. When so transformed, the practical symbols of way marking readily reflect the double activity of finding one's geographical route to Santiago and reflecting on one's direction in life. Playful graffiti superimposes more transcendental meanings in similar but diverse ways. For example, during my fieldwork, two 'STOP' road signs on one of the penultimate stages of the Camino before Santiago had been altered to play with their meaning:

1) '*Don't STOP me now*';
and,

2) '*Don't STOP dreaming*'.

The first shares humour with other pilgrims at having come so far; the second is an invocation for the search for a better life, the determination to envisage things in a new way. In both cases the *double entendre* serves as an inclusive way of sharing more than a pun, but a meaningful shared circumstance.

The transformation of ordinary materials and symbols points to the sacred meanings of the pilgrimage. On another road sign in the same part of the Camino, adjacent to the highway between Ponferrada and Villafranca del Bierzo, a large sign designating the European Union 'Itinerario Cultural Europeo' (European cultural itinerary) had 'Cultural' crossed out and replaced with 'spiritual' reflecting the contestation between the official discourse of the Camino and New Age, or religious narratives, another pilgrim adding to the sign, 'tout est grâce' (all is grace), to similarly direct other pilgrims to the transcendental and sacred. These verbal and symbolic exchanges reflect not just opposing views about what

the true nature of the pilgrimage may be, or who may be the most authentic pilgrim, but also affirm the mutual understanding that the Camino is a space where such spiritual debates and questions are valid and legitimate. These questions and statements bear resemblance to many conversations to be heard on the trail, suggesting there are multidirectional relationships and pathways between the symbolic practices of pilgrims, their psychological states and their behaviour. These are simultaneously co-constructed by, and contribute to the co-constructing of, a liminoid space in which transcendent and / or religious narratives are engaged through spontaneous and playful acts.

In plurality, play engenders *communitas*

The Camino is a symbolic space where ongoing contestation supports and engenders *communitas* through play. Vying explanations and beliefs about the pilgrimage present a fertile material and social space for walkers who join other walkers in a common purpose, even though that common purpose can be continually questioned. In addition to secular tourists and religious traditionalists, competition for authenticity also exists between Christian understandings of the pilgrimage and more esoteric positions drawing on New Age, Buddhism or the kind of popular mysticism advocated by Paulo Coelho. However, these divergent beliefs can coincide and overlap in pilgrims' meaning making and in their play. Displaying symbols on oneself is another form of play-contestation manifested on the Camino. Similarly in these practices, ideological positions can be blended, and irony can support double meanings. The play-actor therefore can ambiguously and freely shift between positions. For example, one pilgrim draped her backpack in Tibetan prayer flags as well as hanging the usual conch with a red Santiago cross. This was to show her resistance to orthodox Christianity while also showing her determination to rewrite the Christian pilgrimage narrative because of her own, sometimes painful, journey from Mormonism to Buddhism. All of this was further symbolised by a yellow arrow stitched onto her backpack – a signifier of common direction but ambiguous destination. As with play with natural materials, such innovations in the role and identity of the pilgrim invite others to play with their own identities, furthering opportunities for identity-play.

Play of various kinds allows for *communitas* to exist among pilgrims with differing motivations and religious positions. It gives assumed roles through which difference can be reduced, and identity markers that can be playfully challenged, or revoked. Thus

identity boundaries between pilgrims with different motivations diminish in the use of shared symbolic and ritual practices, even when they contest each other. In a state of flow, pilgrims are willing to play with the new experiences made available to them. Play is also a principal means by which pilgrims' cultural differences can support friendship, community and common purpose. For example, during my fieldwork, on the feast of St James, the parish of Grañon fed a large group of pilgrims with roast chicken cooked in the village bakery's oven. In the albergue, pilgrims of different nationalities sat and played cards. After eating the feast, we were entertained by a "Pilgrim's got talent" show where pilgrims of all nationalities gave a performance. This was won by Korean pilgrims' rendition of PSY's *Gangnam Style*. We then all slept – about 30 people to a room – on the floor of the church building. The next morning, one of the pilgrims who had taken part explained how these group activities, such as the talent show, eating together and sleeping together, gave him a sense of community among strangers. He explained the pleasure he had found in the bonds between people from all over the world who, though different, are united with the same goal of walking to Santiago.

Play contributes to *communitas* by providing shared activities that can be entered into by following demonstrable rules and play-acted roles. For example, during a talent show, language barriers can be transcended by finding something entertaining to show to others. Furthermore, while the talent show and other play activities such as playing cards, singing, throwing a ball or swimming in rivers are not intrinsically concerned with religious themes, they overall, may produce a special feeling of regenerative goodwill between people that promotes religious or quasi-religious notions of community and love. For this reason, as often recognised and reported by pilgrims, the Camino has the potential to change pilgrims' ways of thinking and relating to others, and therefore offers an impetus to enrich life after undertaking the pilgrimage.

The role play of hospitaleros

The social and material spaces of the Camino are co-constructed by pilgrims, but also by a range of service providers who are often volunteers, known as hospitaleros. Service providers on the Camino make symbolic performances to identify their roles and produce liminal spaces for pilgrims. The ritual practices organised by albergues, restaurants and other

service providers often play with secular and religious meanings as pilgrims and service providers create or invert rituals in order to position themselves in relation to vying discourses (Coleman and Elsner, 1998). I observed these working in both directions: they could seek to make play sacred, or to make the sacred things playful. For example, at a parish-run albergue in Bercianos Real del Camino, playful demeanour and popular culture were used to create an inclusive Christian supper blessing which was rapped by the incumbent priest to the tune of Queen's 'We will rock you'. Pilgrims were first invited by hospitaleros to hit their fists rhythmically on the table for two beats, then clap and repeat. When all were in time – achieved by group eye contact – the benediction was given in time to the beat. This rite invited involvement from a culturally and linguistically diverse group of pilgrims by being playful in nature. While remaining an orthodox blessing it engaged pilgrims by invoking the mass participation required by stadium rock.

Services and goods available on the Camino often mix innovation, gravity, parody and the invocation of transcendental themes and experiences in similar ways. One interesting example is a set of 48 Camino playing cards each offering a spiritual quotation and picture of the Camino. The game, sold on the route, is to consider the meaning of one's pilgrimage by randomly taking a card with one's co-pilgrims. This subverts the normal use of regular playing cards, as an activity that passes the time, to one that seeks ultimate meaning. These cards, and other comparable goods and services, including numerous guidebooks, are the commercial response to the popularity of the Camino where such sentiments are widely communicated and sought out. Such products allow for a distanced or vicarious engagement with religious practices and discourses through the guise of play.

Whereas some activities take play and make it meaningful, other forms of play take more serious and religious themes and make them playful. At private albergues and other places *en route*, innovated rituals not associated with ecclesial authority play with orthodox religious practices, such as the benediction of the self-styled last Knight Templar who lives in a mountain refuge in Manjarin. Dressed in a white cape with the red Templar cross, a local resident blesses passing pilgrims with a sword using traditional prayers and Marian devotions. Although outside formal organised religion, other private service providers create liminal spaces that support pilgrims' spiritual journeys by a playing out of sacred actions, such as reiki healing or Buddhist meditation.

Two further examples of how service providers' play engages with religious themes and practices are the rituals at a donations-only albergue run by the Italian Confraternity of San Nicolás de Puentelitero, Boadilla del Camino, Palencia, and *Bar A Galeria*, in Fisterra (Finisterre), Galicia. The Hospital de Peregrinos San Nicolás de Puentelitero is a recreated pilgrim hospital that provides a welcome to its guests by the washing of feet and the provision of a communal meal. In this ritual the sacred is invoked by means of the re-enactment of the Last Supper whereby pilgrims of all religious backgrounds are invited to play the part of Jesus' apostles, with the hospitaleros, of Christ (lay volunteers in ceremonial garb). This is an example of one popular point of contact between an imagined history and the present pilgrimage, enabled through the playing out of a specially-devised liturgy that draws its gravity by borrowing aspects of orthodox rituals. (It is not the official liturgy of the Maundy Thursday Mass, although a daily Mass may be conducted there if a peregrinating priest is present).

The second example I draw upon from participant observation, is conducted in a bar located by the sea at the end of the trail beyond Santiago Compostella – widely considered to be a non-Christian appendage to the traditional goal of reaching the tomb of St James in Santiago (Margry, 2015b). This ritual play subverts and plays with the New Age meanings attributed to the ritual of watching the sunset by the lighthouse at Fisterra. Every night after sundown, the barman at *Bar A Galeria* wears a comic ceremonial hat and cape and recites a humorous incantation around a burning bowl of liquor. The poem / spell lasts some minutes, combines several languages, and lists a lengthy and repugnant array of ingredients. This light-hearted ritual provides a gesture of goodwill and welcome, perhaps parodying the spiritual, or mock-spiritual, nature of the pilgrimage to the world's end by offering a faux Eucharist. Yet, at the same time it invokes the transcendental themes of the pilgrimage by providing a poignant, playful symbol of communal bonding – shared drink.

Discussion

The religious dimensions of play on the Camino can be understood through a theoretical dichotomy between extrinsic and intrinsic sacred play. Extrinsic sacred play is play without a 'religious' theme that nevertheless contributes to transcendental purposes. For example, playing a regular card game in an albergue is not an activity focused on the transcendent. However, playing cards with strangers may allow for

bonding peripheral to religious activities, or for the exercise of principles informed by transcendental goals, thus sustaining *communitas* even among religiously diverse pilgrims. Intrinsic sacred play, on the other hand, is centred on what is considered religious, spiritual or transcendent. This can be sincere, ironic or both. As it is often improvised and personalised, it differs from formal religious activities available on the Camino, such as the Mass, and may play ambiguously with religious meanings.

When seeking to understand the meaning of pilgrims' play, it is important to consider what Turner explained as the 'content' of symbols and how this may relate to actors' interpretations of flow (Turner 1974). In this regard it is of utmost import that the semiotic means of pilgrims' intrinsic sacred play are overwhelmingly Christian and religious in character: the Cruz de Ferro is an iron cross, St James a Christian saint, St. James' tomb in a Cathedral, and many stopping places on the way which are churches. Pilgrims' emotional states to which these official symbols (as well as their personalised ones) relate are also those that are traditionally engaged with in Christian belief and practice: remorse, thanksgiving, remembrance, commitment and conversion. Extrinsic sacred play on the other hand is also most often inextricably linked to Christian organisations and / or religious experiences framed by Christian narratives. Both intrinsic and extrinsic play produces symbolic messages that create a liminal space enabling further religiously themed play and flow. The 'spirituality' and 'tourism' of this play rests upon the trail's Christian history. Even when contested, for example, by New Age beliefs, these beliefs often overlap or rely upon Christian themes. The placing of stones under the Cruz de Ferro is a good illustration of this overlap. The cross provides the resonance of a serious and genuine religious place, yet the stone can be personalised with whatever significance the placer gives it.

The openness of the contemporary ritual practices on the Camino has led some scholars to assume that it is no longer a traditional religious pilgrimage. However, the concept of play explored and advanced in this article challenges some of the assumptions about the nature of authentic religious belief and practice that has underpinned much Camino research, particularly studies based on questionnaire surveys about religious affiliations and motivations – data that mainly relate to pilgrims' reported lives outside of the pilgrimage. When investigated as a set of social practices, some insightful, cohesive and salient aspects of the Camino come to the fore which are perhaps more important

than stated 'religious' or 'non-religious' motivations of pilgrims. Most importantly, many people do it because it is fun. The Camino is considered a pleasurable and satisfying activity, and despite blisters and other hardships, it is most often undertaken with relish. It is also free, and in a sense unpredictable. It is trod as a worthwhile activity, separate from the world, with its own sets of rules, and its own sets of meanings. These meanings can be improvised, they can emerge and they can change. However, they are always set aside from the ordinary and in that sense they are often understood to have religious, transcendent or sacred significance.

Symbolic practices in the form of material play, role play and message-making are used in the communication, performance and construction of transcendent pilgrim experiences. The meaning of individuals' physical experiences is in part conditioned by these symbolic systems that surround those practices as well as those physical and psychological experiences contributing to the experience of play, contemplation and flow. This often changes the identity and behaviour of the player, if only momentarily. Fixed notions of religious identification therefore, may not transfer to the make-believe world of the pilgrimage. This fluidity does not necessarily reflect the postmodern unbelief of pilgrims because it is also an aspect of the traditional identity changes necessary for liminal or liminoid play. This has a significant bearing on the central premise of much research on the Camino: the supposed mutation of the pilgrimage from religious devotion to spiritual tourism.

A serious, more general problem in attempting to answer questions about changes in religious practices over time relevant here, are the common assumptions about the past held among those inside and outside the academy (Stark, 1999). Most studies of the Camino assume a religious golden age, to apply Stark's metaphor, with which contemporary belief and practice among pilgrims should be contrasted. Furthermore, Camino scholars' working concepts of religion emphasise Christianity's more grave semantics, fixed positions and formalised practices. This reflects a longstanding tendency in the study of religion where religious authorities have largely been influential in demarcating what can be legitimately called religion, ignoring temporary or occasional practice and their changing meanings (Bailey, 2001).

Though seldom consulted in studies of the supposed secularisation of the Camino, the sources of data we have about its past and of other popular pilgrimages of the middle ages, certainly challenge some of the

assumptions of contemporary scientific researchers. For example, the changing representations and cultural meanings of the Camino and its Patron Saint have often, in some sense, rested on the journey, and not just the veneration of his relic in Santiago (Graham and Murray, 1997). Material play is also evident in the famous thirteenth century Codex Calixtus (Melcer, 1993). This text suggests that medieval pilgrims placed wooden crosses on the ground at the highest point of the way over the Pyrenees in a manner similar to those placed elsewhere today. (The classic text also suggests a tourist itinerary based on the quality of the food and the welcome of the various places and peoples *en route*). Although these temporary medieval crosses are gone, material that has survived shows the common folk religion and veneration of nature that accompanied historic Christianity, such as the green man to be found at the Western end of Burgos Cathedral to give one example. For contestation, irony and levity, we only have to look to Chaucer, whose explorations of medieval pilgrims' individual stories (albeit to a different destination) can also be read as a series of playful games within 'the game on the way to Canterbury' (Lanham, 1967:18). There are of course, some obvious differences between now and then. There were no Buddhist albergues or reiki massages in medieval Christendom, but the Camino of the past did involve comparable activities associated with search, healing, wellbeing and service – and not least play of one form or another.

Conclusions

This is an ethnographic study which can only offer theoretical generalisations to be examined and tested in further empirical studies. Nevertheless, the harmony between pilgrims' actions and explanations give credibility and authenticity to its conclusions. Intrinsic and extrinsic sacred play are an important aspect of the Camino for diverse pilgrims, including those of no religious affiliation. Taking on a new role, playing with symbolic meanings – and allowing circumstances to symbolically play with you – are the common glue of its social processes and at the heart of the meaning-making of its pilgrims. But this play can be a serious business. It is often directed at influencing the thinking and behaviour of those exposed to it, as well as expurgating matters of extreme personal significance. Without this ongoing communication and contestation through play, the Camino would lose its sacred meanings which are continually constructed by the playing of imagined roles. These performances are often fictions that pilgrims willingly seek out to

embrace or deliberately set out to dispute. For, of course, there are no longer medieval knights on the trail. A priest is not a rapper. Korean pilgrims are not PSY. Many pilgrims do not go to venerate what they think are the real bones of St James. But taking on these roles – be it light-heartedly, ironically, seriously or earnestly – creates a social and symbolic space distinct from real life, where religious themes come to the fore. These themes cut across one another, providing overlapping meanings located in diverse, even contested, motivations, beliefs and identifications. But they all arise from contemporary practices that rest on their medieval, Christian antecedents. The Christian world, however we may define it, has changed since the Camino's former eras of popularity. Interpreting the implications of these religious changes for pilgrimage practices is not straightforward, but should begin with a deep and empirical study of pilgrim behaviour. Belief-centred methodologies that invoke the religion / spiritual or tourist / pilgrim dichotomies, begin by looking for predefined identifications. The liminoid play explored in this study, on the other hand, allows for, and explains how play may sustain dynamic religious meanings, rather than just being a frivolous corollary of tourism.

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