(Re)Inscribing Meaning: Embodied Religious-spiritual Practices at Croagh Patrick and Our Lady’s Island, Ireland

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Cover Page Footnote
We are grateful to the research participant and pilgrimage authorities for facilitating our research, and to the journal editors and reviewers for helping improve the article.
Pilgrimages are not just religious/spiritual activities, but are also economic, political, and social processes that create destinations and routes enabling the circulation of people, goods, and ideas. This multifaceted nature is taking on a new significance in post-secular contexts as different priorities shape the motivations of pilgrims and understandings of these spaces (Blom, et al., 2016). Sanctity and secularity are interacting in new ways through pilgrimages, especially in the western world. Responding to this shifting landscape, we examine how annual pilgrimages are central to asserting the sacred character of two sites in Ireland. The paper considers the holy place-making capacities of embodied practices at Croagh Patrick County Mayo and Our Lady’s Island County Wexford (See Figure 1). These traditionally Roman Catholic pilgrimage centres are now framed by intersecting/overlapping religious, recreational, tourist, and heritage perspectives as a result of which the large-scale pilgrimages take on an additional significance to (re)inscribe religious meaning in these landscapes. The sites emerge and re-emerge in ongoing located processes of performance, history, vernacular religion, and contemporary social and political themes.

The inter-disciplinary focus on pilgrimage in recent years has broadened our understanding by illustrating the range of scales and forms involved. A dominant strand of research has established the wide appeal of pilgrimage and diversity of participants and motivations, including secularly motivated pilgrimages to cultural sites, war graves, and memorials (Badone, 2014; Lopez, Lois González & Fernández, 2017; Silva et al., 2019). Similarly, the crossover between tourism and pilgrimages has been extensively discussed, drawing out the nuances and sentiments of how modern pilgrimage is performed and perceived (Della Dora, 2012; Lois González, 2013). Pilgrimage retains much of its traditional role, with millions of religious devotees performing their faith annually and it serving as a source of consolation for those enduring illness, misfortune, and the loss of loved ones (Coleman & Eade, 2012; Maddrell, Terry & Gale, 2015). This paper is positioned at the intersection of these larger research agendas as it engages with how two pilgrimage locations are defined as religious spaces.

Our approach intentionally builds on geographical engagements which have problematised simplified and clear-cut categorisations of religious and spiritual matters as discrete entities; instead the pilgrimage

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Key Words: pilgrimage, sacred space, embodied practices, Ireland

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religious-spiritual realm is approached as a thoroughly grounded arena which is mobilised through contemporary embodied practices, socio-political concerns, and material and located features (Tse, 2014). Foregrounding the embodied practices at Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick enables the investigation of how sanctity is performed and emplaced in post-secularity. It illustrates the importance of theorising and negotiating what is meant by the sacred and its spatial presences (Blain & Wallis, 2004), as well as mapping different forms of religious-spiritual practice and beliefs in place (Brace et al., 2011).

Our discussion progresses by outlining the processual understandings of sacred space and the centrality of embodied performances in place-making, which are framed through Veronica della Dora’s (2016) ‘infrasecular geographies’ and Justin Tse’s (2014) ‘grounded theologies’. Next, an overview of contemporary pilgrimage in Ireland and the post-secular milieu is provide, alongside an outline of the field methods deployed in the research. Two case studies focus on the performances, events, and discourses surrounding the annual pilgrimages at Croagh Patrick and Our Lady’s Island in Ireland. These are followed by a discussion section highlighting the role of embodied practices in the (re)creation of both landscapes as sacred places including the layers, animations, and tensions involved. The conclusion reflects on the key points and suggests a direction for future study in this complex and evolving area of research.

**Inscribing sacred meanings in pilgrimage spaces**

Increasing interest in sacred space since the 1990s has moved from static and bounded conceptions to processual ontologies centring on performances, embodiments, and relationalities (Finlayson, 2017; Kong, 2010). Previously, a social construction lens highlighted ‘different (and often conflicting) narratives, meanings and social practices’, while more recently, everyday, experiential, and ethereal encounters are foreground in the ‘more-than-representational’ approaches (della Dora, 2011:167). Informed by these understandings, we interrogate the creation of pilgrimage landscapes as religious-spiritual spaces constituted through embodied performances.

Critical interventions in conceptions of sacred place have primarily sought to move beyond the resilient dichotomy of sacred versus profane, and accounts that place secularity as an aggressor towards all religiosity and spirituality (Bartolini, Chris, MacKian & Pile, 2017; Brace, Bailey & Harvey, 2006; Chen, 2017). Broader appreciations of sacred space illustrate how it can be made through cultural and political forces as well as in spiritual meanings (Kong, 2001). This is furthered by post-secular geographies that appreciate how space is shaped by the

\[ \text{dynamics of secularization and secularism (as political and cultural ideology) but which also has to negotiate and make space for the re-emergence of public expressions of religion and spirituality (Beaumont and Baker, 2011:3).} \]

In this environment, the sacred and profane have become even more intermeshed, ‘increasing visibility of religion in public space and a growing plurality of religious communities’ (Havlíček & Klingorová, 2018:792).

Two recent frameworks shape our examination of these spatial intersections. Firstly, della Dora’s (2016:45) ‘infrasecular geographies’ articulates the complex overlapping layers and material manifestations of coexistences in these realms, by focusing on:

\[ \text{contemporaneous cohabitation and competition between multiple forms of belief and non-belief, as well as by the hidden layers of a collective ‘religious subconscious’ which underpins contemporary Western European societies, no matter how secularized.} \]

Through examinations of the re-purposing or transforming of sites of worship, she demonstrates how models of desacralisation and resacralisation are tangible expressions of continually present and shifting sacred landscapes. Foundational to this paradigm is the importance of ‘material specificities, performative encounters, affects, numinous and emotional geographies’ of these sites (della Dora, 2016:65). Secondly, Tse’s (2014:202) model outlines contemporary geographies of religion in a (post)secular age:

\[ \text{the task of geographers who deal with religion is to reveal spaces, places, and networks as constituted by grounded theologies, performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent [original emphasis].} \]

This emphasis balances considerations of the transcendent and immaterial, alongside more immanent social, cultural, political, and secular processes.
Significantly, these approaches enable new examinations into the practiced roles of secularisation and sacralisation of sacred spaces (Chen, 2017). For example, they present a means of discussing how in Western cities former mainstream Christian churches are becoming art galleries and restaurants, while evangelical congregations are establishing themselves in industrial spaces or despite the decline in religious practice, spiritual-motivated social justice organisations are increasingly active and new buildings, such as airports and shopping centres, have prayer rooms. Together della Dora and Tse prompt new considerations for the way the religious-spiritual and secular are interacting in relation to each other but also in relation to themselves with a focus on how the different features and ideologies interact in the making of place.

Pilgrimage spaces serve as a clear example of how the sacred and secular interlace as traditional and diverse spiritual believers participate in routes and centres that are supported by civil society and official bodies (Hall et al., 2017; Kim, Kim, & King, 2016). Post-sectarian influences are found in pilgrimages with participants undertaking the practices for a variety of motivations which are generating new forms of engagement and patterns of movement (Maddrell, Terry & Gale, 2015). For example, Blom, Nilsson and Santos (2016) discuss how increased individual religiosity and negative response to commercialised mass tourism at Santiago de Compostela have resulted in Fisterra, 100km west of the city, emerging as the destination for some groups, while Óian (2019) explores forms of contestation between different interpretations of pilgrimage routes in Norway. While shrines and pilgrimage destinations retain their spiritual functions, recent appreciations discuss how different secular forces are also present and necessary.

Within this context, the physical undertakings and ritualised actions of participants are central to shaping these locations as scared spaces. Pilgrimages are understood as meaningful journeys through which individuals and groups reach new spiritual and emotional states (Guichard-Anguis, 2011; Scriven, 2014). Maddrell (2013) explains that the practices of pilgrimage facilitate, but do not guarantee, meaningful journeys. In the embodied activities between people and places both ‘coconstitutively come into being in this process of physical interaction’ (Maddrell & della Dora, 2013:1115). Through these performances, pilgrims and pilgrimage spaces emerge together (Scriven, 2019b). In addition, this focus dovetails with research that has highlighted how embodied spatial practices are central to creation of sacred spaces (Bremer, 2006; Holloway & Vallins, 2002), and to development of the more-than-representational approaches in human geography which prioritise experiential understandings of the place (Anderson & Harrison, 2011; Macpherson, 2010). Pilgrims have agency in the conduct of their pilgrimage and through the examples provided here, we show how spiritual and religious meanings are inscribed in these sites.

This paper’s focus on the inscription of sacredness into the landscape foregrounds della Dora’s and Tse’s frameworks to critically consider the role of performance in the forging of sacred spaces within fluid arenas of sanctity and secularity. By understanding that the interrelationships of belief and landscapes ‘can be intensely complex, dynamic and unstable’ (Cooper, 1994:202), we centre our work on embodied spatial mobilities as forms of infrasecular geographies and grounded theologies. These unfold in the relationality of embodied practices and different spaces.

**Contexts and Methods**

Ireland has witnessed a recent revived interest in pilgrimage which has occurred in the context of increasing secularisation. Census data and other sources indicate a slow decline in religious affiliation (CSO, 2017; O’Mahony, 2011). More recently, Irish society has begun to enter a post-sectarian phase whereby formal religion still holds a significant role as a cultural force and a provider of social services, while other forms of spiritual identity are growing alongside atheism and humanism (Ganiel, 2016; O’Mahony, 2019). More private and individualised beliefs are gaining prominence drawing on ecological, ‘Celtic’, and hybrid spiritualities (Flanagan & O’Sullivan, 2016). Against this background, pilgrimage is a popular activity, with at least tens of thousands partaking in Reek Sunday at Croagh Patrick or the annual Novena at Knock, Co. Mayo. National and local sites have recently been developed to facilitate increased numbers, and Roman Catholic diocese and parishes are putting a strong emphasis on pilgrimage. Secular bodies have also promoted pilgrimage; most prominently, the Heritage Council supported the development of the ‘Pilgrim Paths’ network along medieval routes in conjunction with local communities. Accompanying books serve to promote the routes as spiritual, recreational, and cultural spaces (MacDonald, 2013; O’Dwyer, 2013). These
studies that appreciate the importance of located interventions. The detailed work of Dubisch (1995) on the pilgrimage to the Madonna of the Annunciation on the Greek island, Tinos, and Frey’s (1998) description of the Camino de Santiago established the insights provided into embedded examinations of the practices, discourses, and activities. More recently, engagements with pilgrimage have prioritised researchers participating in events, conducting surveys on site, and interacting with pilgrims at these spaces and

Our research at both Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick involved participant observation during the main pilgrimage activities, including taking detailed field notes and extensive photographs. This approach was informed by methodologies from pilgrimage pilgrimages are both shaped by, and a manifestation of, the increasing post-secular influences in Irish society with both religious and profane factors supporting them.
performances (Kim, Kim & King, 2016; Maddrell & della Dora, 2013; Power, 2015; Scriven, 2019a; Wu, Chang & Wu, 2019). The fieldwork aspects of the study incorporated these elements to enable a focus on the located practices undertaken at both sites, and the different meanings and patterns involved. In the next two sections, a synthesis of our observations and analysis highlights the range of actors and performances found at the pilgrimage spaces under examination.

**Croagh Patrick**

Approaching Croagh Patrick at dawn on Reek Sunday, the annual pilgrimage day, the scale of the event is conveyed through the traffic of cars and walkers, stalls and vendors, mountain rescue teams, and crowds already on the mountain. Reek Sunday is linked back to the Celtic pagan harvest festival Lughnasadh and the site’s Neolithic ritual status, and it is associated with St Patrick’s evangelising mission in the fifth century (Gibbons & Walsh 2005). A revival of the pilgrimage in the 1890s lead to its prominence as one of the main Roman Catholic destinations on the island; by 1950 an estimated 100,000 pilgrims were taking part in a night pilgrimage on Reek Sunday. More recently, crowds range from 10,000-20,000, which is still a substantial amount of people for a one day event.

The path to the Reek is animated by thousands of pilgrims performing the pilgrimage together. O’Dwyer (2013:44) describes the scene as that of:

> teeming multitudes – many of whom otherwise would never have recourse to a hillside – come in a human avalanche to search for redemption on a tough ascent to the crest of Ireland’s quintessential holy mountain.

The summit is alive with people attending Mass, eating, chatting, taking photographs, and reciting prayers. There is a strong festive atmosphere as hundreds of people gather for different reasons. National and international media cover the event, with photos of participants featuring in newspapers. Cumulatively, these practices and supports assert Croagh Patrick’s role as a pilgrimage space. Its character and volume is an annual fulfilment of a distinct role. No matter what else the mountain can be, the eventfulness proclaims this spiritual function.

For the rest of the year, Croagh Patrick is a significant recreational location. While it is climbed for religious-spiritual reasons all year, it is now more popularly used as a hillwalking and sporting venue, a tourist amenity, and a place for charity events. Mountaineering Ireland (2013) describes it as:

> ... arguably Ireland’s best known and busiest mountain. Its religious and cultural significance, and its dominant position in the landscape, have given Croagh Patrick iconic status that in turn has made the mountain a valuable resource for tourism.

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Figure 2: Pilgrims praying by circling ‘St Patrick’s Bed’ on the summit of Croagh Patrick, in the background a group is starting to gather for mass by the chapel.
These different strands of practice are often overlaid harmoniously, with occasionally tensions arising. In this context, the significance of the annual pilgrimage day is amplified as an occasion to reaffirm the mountain’s role as a Roman Catholic space. The pilgrimage simultaneously draws from and reinforces the mountain’s historic sacred purpose. The enacted religious narratives are embedded in landscapes through the activity, demonstrating a legitimacy (Brace, Bailey & Harvey, 2006; Blain & Wallis, 2004).

These elements are more observably and viscerally present in the performance of the ‘Stations of the Reek’ a set of practices traditionally linked to the pilgrimage. They consist of circling a cairn on the path, St Patrick’s Bed (a grave-like structure on the summit), and the chapel, reciting Roman Catholic prayers for the Pope’s intentions. Signs on the route and prayer cards distributed on the summit on pilgrimage daysunderline this aspect as a means of adding or ensuring a clear faith-based dimension to individual and collective journeys. The reciting of prayers in a structured manner, focused on physical features, forges connections between the materiality of the mountain and the ethereality of belief and the spiritual. Croagh Patrick is created as a medium for the meeting of these plains, a vertical space and an elevating landscape that can connect the earthly and the heavenly (Cosgrove & della Dora, 2009). Furthering this dimension, significant numbers go to the masses which are said throughout the morning on the summit and there is a constant queue for confessions. A sense of community and belonging is generated in the shared experience of the Mass, often with the congregation huddling together in wind and rain (Williams, 2010). John, one of the research participants, articulates his feelings of sharing Eucharist on the mountain-top:

You are well out of it for then when you’re up there it is a great sense of achievement, if one is fortunate enough … to get mass when you’re there, that adds to it because we break bread together at the top...

Through his Roman Catholic faith he experiences this Mass as a special way of connecting both with God and his fellow pilgrims. The coalescing of landscape, performance, events, and purposes enable people to have meaningful encounters that enrich their experiences.

Enabling the distinct religious aspects of the activity are more secular features, including civil, voluntary, and commercial bodies. Mountain rescue and first aid services, stalls selling refreshments and landowners...
converting their fields to temporary car parks are necessary to facilitate the pilgrimage. Reek Sunday’s religious, cultural, and economic role are fully acknowledged and supported by the community, civil society organisations, and local authorities. The corporeal and spatial manifestations of belief are enabled by non-belief in a respectful and coalescing matrix. These profane elements are also found in the motivations of participants, many of whom do not climb for spiritual reasons. The nuances involved are captured by Ciarán as he outlines how he views his role:

_I wouldn't think of myself as a pilgrim. I'm undecided about religion, I am part of the Catholic Church but I don’t hold that much belief in its teachings or ways ... I go hill-walking quite a bit so I'd say I come under that term!_

His appreciation of the Reek is multifaceted as he recognises the spiritual and social heritage of the site as well as the beliefs of pilgrims; however, he also locates his experience within the arena of recreation. These secular aspects illustrate the different features at work in the pilgrimage, showing how a range of motivations and actors coalesce to continue the tradition.

The significant increase in foot traffic has, however, led to the deterioration of the path which has been severely eroded in recent years (Jones, 2013; McNulty, 2019). Tensions have arisen between the different uses of the site, with an emphasis on the need to preserve its sacred function. Fr Frank Fahey, who was instrumental to the revival of an ancient pilgrim path to Croagh Patrick, points out that:

_A sacred place has the power to impose its presence and sense of awe on the world. If, on the other hand, we conquer these mountains, they lose their sense of awe and of transcendent power_ (Ryan, 2011).

He recognises the cultural function of the site and its use as a place for charitable fundraising but remains critical of more commercial driven and sporting events. Drawing parallels with Uluru in Australia, he highlights the importance of respectful use of an historical sanctified location, built on Pagan and Christian traditions. This interpretation also draws support from secular groups, such as the Fáilte Ireland – the national tourism body - and the local Croagh Patrick Archaeological Committee, who both recognised its distinct cultural heritage and the importance of nurturing it (Discover Ireland, 2018; Hughes, 2005).

Multiple purposes and uses cohabit Croagh Patrick as an intertwined religious/spiritual, socio-cultural, recreational, and tourist space. Embodied mobilities of Reek Sunday demonstrate the interactions of the sacred and the secular as presence and practices that can be mutually reinforcing. This opens up avenues to appreciate how secularising process can influence and change religious uses of spaces, while also enhancing or adding tourist or cultural dimensions (Chen, 2017).

**Our Lady’s Island**

Our Lady’s Island is a Christian pilgrimage site located in the south east of Ireland in county Wexford and in the Catholic diocese of Ferns, about 20km from the town of Wexford. The pilgrimage site is surrounded on three sides by _Loch Tóchair_ (the lake of the causeway) and is joined to the mainland by a causeway. It has been known by different names, such as ‘the meadow of the women’ or ‘Mary’s Island’, and its place on the circuit of medieval pilgrimages conducted following the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century is well established (Murphy, 1940). The pilgrimage here has endured both the Counter-reformation and the Penal Laws which prohibited Catholic practice in Ireland (de Vál, 2007). The site is part of a serene landscape: the ruins of the Norman castle and a graveyard occupy a significant part of the space and there is a holy well devoted to Mary on the western side of the island.

Our Lady’s Island is crossed by multiple meanings. The land is a state-owned Special Protection Area, managed by the Irish National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is of ‘ornithological importance for both breeding and wintering birds, and is also an important stop-over point for passage migrants’ (National Parks & Wildlife Service, 2019:1). It is also a popular natural leisure and tourism amenity centring on the rich varieties of flora and fauna and on a EuroVelo cycling route, and the lake’s place as only one of two seepage lagoons in Ireland. In addition, the site is adjacent to the main road to Rosslare Europort (Ireland’s second busiest car ferry terminal). It is a hybrid place, continuously coming into being through religious performance and maintenance. The pilgrimage rituals and liturgical celebration are held in a space which is open to all for most of the year but for one month is made a site of religious devotion.

The annual pilgrimage events are central to how sacredness is brought into being and preserved on Our Lady’s Island. The pilgrimage season opens on August 15<sup>th</sup>, marking the feast day of the Assumption of Mary...
and ends on September 8th. On the opening and closing days, pilgrims are gathered near the enclosed altar in rows of temporary seats. The pilgrimage consists of a ‘rounding’ with liturgical celebration based on the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament at either end. The route is intimately denominated in the official Our Lady’s Island brochure (n.d.). The Rosary is inscribed directly on to the landscape:

The ROSARY is the prayer of Our Lady’s Island. Pilgrims say 15 (20) Decades of the Rosary while making the round of the island. The ROSARY is the shape of Our Lady’s Island. The Church is the crucifix, the causeway is the Creed and introductory prayers, the decades are the round of the island.

On August 15th, as the crowd gathers for Mass, the causeway fills up with cars. More pilgrims, from across the south-east of Ireland, are left by their coach drivers on the main road. They walk the short distance to the pilgrimage site. Like Croagh Patrick, the site here has a temporary infrastructure for the opening day. The pilgrimage at Our Lady’s Island is a relatively informal gathering: some meet at the church beforehand (particularly wheelchair-using pilgrims), others browse the extensive collection of miraculous medals and ephemera at the gift shop. People seem to know the routine of the day: doing as much as they can before the rounding of the island.

The official religious events, consisting of a mass and procession, act as the performative nodal point of the day. They involved the organised mobilisations of pilgrims in choreographed practice that both asserts the spiritual character of the space and official Church teachings. A woman calling over the public address system calls pilgrims into place:

We ask now that everyone becomes still and quiet in preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist. Jesus said: ‘come spend a quiet hour with me’. In deference to His invitation, we switch off our mobile phones (transcribed from recording).

Seating is provided at the pilgrimage site, but some stay in their cars on the causeway and they were later asked to turn on their car’s hazard lights if they wished to receive communion. Following Mass, the pilgrims are asked to hold up any objects for blessing. A monstrance and gospels are carried first, then assembled priests, followed by ministers of the Eucharist, of the Word and then the bishop, under a processional canopy. Blessed flower petals, strewn by that year’s First Communion class from the nearby school, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession. As, the group passes the Marian statue, guide the path of the procession.

Recent adjustments to the formal elements illustrate how different religious-spiritual strands interact in post-secular contexts. The pilgrimage tradition at Our Lady’s Island combines the ceremonial religious aspects and folk elements common at Irish pilgrimage sites, including circling different parts of the site and focusing devotions on saintly forces. A new emphasis
is being placed on the official procession, with the Eucharist and Gospel at the centre, over the vernacular elements. Our Lady’s folk and ambiguous female symbolism has been replaced by the centrality of the word of God, in the person of Christ and personified in the priest himself. In an interview, the parish priest reinforced this message highlighting the power of the Gospel with little reference to the traditional rites. The re-establishment of orthodoxy is often found at pilgrimage sites (Turner & Turner, 1978; Taylor, 1995). However, in the actual performance, subtle tensions arose with some pilgrims choosing to follow more colloquial practices by walking ahead of the procession and leaving offerings at the holy well. Irish Traveller women, who have a strong devotion to the figure of Mary, emphasised the holy well in their pilgrimage. This gendered sub-practice within the context of the pilgrimage as a whole is noteworthy as it remains outside the current ordering of the Church’s understanding of the pilgrimage. In these negotiations, both the casual and Church sanctioned activities (re)created the space as sacred in different ways. Examinations of religious-spiritual place-making need to appreciate the nuances involved as the doctrinal and creative, the dialectal and orderly operate in relation to each other.

**Discussion**

Post-secularity provides the backdrop to an understanding of how different threads of meaning and purpose interweave contemporary pilgrimage spaces. Both della Dora’s and Tse’s scaffolds illustrate how a variety of religious, spiritual, social, cultural, and political dimensions intersect in the performances, materialities, and atmosphere of sacred sites. These meetings are manifest in diverse forms from coordinated alignments to palpable tensions. Significantly, there are always a range of factors involved. The practices at both pilgrimage sites suggest three key points in understanding how the spiritual character of these spaces are (re)inscribed.

Firstly, participation is central to the ongoing creation and maintenance of Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick as sacred locations. Aligning with processual understandings of place, our field studies demonstrate the importance of the customs and ceremonies as the means by which sanctity is engrained in both locations. Tse’s (2014) grounded theologies are found in the prayers and masses, traditional rituals and socialising, volunteers and religious paraphernalia stalls. Transcendent concerns are animated and shaped by the
enactments at these sites as the spiritual and material intermix through performance. The distinct character of the Reek is witnessed and felt in the exertions of pilgrims - the strain of the path embodies belief and tradition - while on Lady’s Island the outdoor mass and procession carries Roman Catholic observances beyond the church building threading them across the peninsula. In contrast to formal sacred spaces, such as churches or built-up shrines like Knock or Lourdes, these sites are open spaces with multiple purposes for a range of groups and interests. The annual pilgrimages present people with the opportunity to ensure that these spaces continue to serve as spiritual venues. As much as pilgrimage can be recognised as process to develop or reaffirm individuals’ faith, it is simultaneously a rallying point to reinforce the public role of these locations and their associated rituals. Performances and services are animating, buttressing personal faith and sacred spaces.

Secondly, there are plural religious-spiritual and secular dimensions involved that are central to how the spaces are created and experienced. The focus on the actions of pilgrims illustrates that instead of a numinous discrete space being etched out of a profane arena, various factors merge to generate the pilgrimage sites. At Croagh Patrick, non-religious civil society organisations, local authorities, and vendors are all necessary to enable the event; while some are driven by profit many volunteer their time in service of tradition. Likewise, at both sites there are different spiritual priorities among pilgrims with participation centring on personalised motivations. In the religious performances, these numerous dimensions align, forging emotional and spiritual experiences that are ingrained into the substance of these spaces. Della Dora’s (2016:64) infrasecular geographies help explain these processes as ‘dynamic palimpsests whose layers move simultaneously at different speeds and scales’ that coexist, intermix and grate. Both the profane and devotional are required in the creation of both Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick, underlining the post-secular character of these pilgrimages, as valued spiritual customs hovering between cultural heritage and personal devotion.

Finally, the frictions identified, illustrate the evolving nature of these sites and a reassertion of their religious-spiritual functions. Strains and disputes are part of the located aspect of grounded theologies as an acknowledgment of the social and political forces that continue to frame sacred spaces (Tse, 2014). In controversy surrounding the damage to the Croagh Patrick path by the larger numbers of people using it, the religious-spiritual dimensions has been emphasised as the purpose of the mountain; however, rather than being a religious secular dichotomy, there are different voices highlighting a range of practical and spiritual points. The main aim of those involved remains the sustainable use of the path which will enable both pilgrimage and recreational uses. The nuances involved are manifest differently on Our Lady’s Island where the tension resides within the spiritual practices. Discord emerges from judgments on the devotional focus and nature of the rituals, with some pilgrims, most visibly Travellers, choosing to follow more traditional patterns while the clergy are emphasising the liturgical and sacramental aspects in their re-establishment of a formal rite. Here the plurality of uses relates to religious expression, with each one nonetheless contributing the forging of the Island as a sacred space. Tse’s applied focus helps unravel these situations and illustrates how tension can be found in inter-religious interactions, as much as in spiritual-secular dynamics.

The different enactments found at Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick are individual and collective journeys that manifest faith and tradition which becomes inscribed into the landscape. It is a form of pentimento on the landscape as the underlining numinous character is caused to reappear annually. These sacred spaces are shaped and sustained through continuous processes of (re)making that interact in three-dimensional scales revealing the complexities involved (della Dora, 2016). Spatial patterns and material presences manifest the continuing role of annual pilgrimages as events that are being preserved, despite a context of decreasing religious practice. The landscapes which host these performances do not disappear as mere background but instead become enacted as porous arenas at the meeting of history, belief, activity and practicality.

**Conclusion**

This paper builds on research into contemporary pilgrimage in Ireland to discuss the dynamics and features we observed at two prominent sites. Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick exist at the porous boundaries between vernacular custom, religious ceremonies, and modern event management which present layered case studies. Fresh understandings of these places are reached by concentrating on the practices at the sites and how they create, reinforce, and disrupt different meanings. This interpretation
focuses appreciation on the interplays between people, places, and movement in the generation of pilgrimages as distinct located performances with a variety of spiritual and secular qualities.

Movement, whether in the form of rituals, long-distance walking, or traditional enactments, remains central to most forms of pilgrimage. Croagh Patrick is intrinsically associated with the steep climb, while the main procession and outdoor mass define Our Lady’s Island. These processes generate the meanings and understandings which support, enhance, and unsettle the (re)creation of these spaces as sacred. While this paper has discussed the mobilisation of bodies at two sites, further study is required to interpret these performances on different scales from the intimate experiences of individuals to the macro-movements at large events, such as the Hajj or Kumbh Mela. Building on pilgrimage studies that have foregrounded the journeys and actions involved, new insights can be provided through a focus on the embodied, mobilised, and performed aspects of pilgrimage and religious tourism.

The case studies demonstrate how a variety of groups, from a range of religious-spiritual and secular positions, participate in the assertion of the sacred nature of these places. Della Dora’s (2016) ‘infrasecular geographies’ and Tse’s (2014) grounded theologies align to enable our examination of the spatialities, trends, and patterns found at the annual Our Lady’s Island and Croagh Patrick pilgrimages. These interpretive approaches present a means of considering the complicated ways in which the spiritual and profane interact through bodies, places, and discourses. Within a post-secular context and the increasingly diverse research interventions into pilgrimages, we encourage examinations that build on such frameworks to move understanding beyond lingering simplistic secular versus sacred dichotomies to reveal the manifold interplays and overlaps at work. In addition, research needs to attend to the range of actors and perspectives that participate in and facilitate these activities and their different manifestations in places.

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