Religion meets Commemoration
Pilgrimages & Tours to Battlefields of the Western Front

***Peter Clarke  Griffith University  p.clarke@griffith.edu.au
Anne Eastgate  University of South Australia  Anne.Eastgate@unisa.edu.au

Abstract
This paper argues that battlefield tours have strong religious overtones covering respect for ancestors, remembrance, sacrifice and responsibility that features non-spiritual philosophies. This study incorporates views of 23 respondents during a Western Front battlefields tour. The Life Course Perspectives (Hutchinson, 2003) provides a framework to build an understanding of commemoration and religious interactions. The discussion relating to icons, memorials and cemeteries suggests that tours of this nature accrue attributes of a pilgrimage. A selected précis of religion precedes the proposition that Western Front battlefield commemoration meets religion. Tour members believe the Somme region, memorials and cemeteries to be sacred, symbolic places that hold secular meaning, attracts reverence and are a part of their life.

Keywords:
Western Front Battlefield Tourism, Commemoration, Pilgrimage, Life Course, Memorials,

Introduction
A specific event in a person’s life is understood in the context of an ongoing life story characterized by the person, their environment and dimensions of time coming together to produce unique life journeys (Hutchinson, 2003). This approach of Life Course Perspectives (Hutchinson, 2003) provides a framework to build an understanding of commemoration and religious interactions that are a consequence of a tourist’s emotions and values, the environment of icons, memorials and cemeteries, together with the distance of time and travel.

Although the First World War is now beyond living memory, it continues to be a strong fascination of modern British, Australian, Canadian, American and South African imaginations (Lloyd, 1998, Williams, 1994). Three hundred thousand Australians went to The Great War; over 60,000 Australians lost their lives and 120,000 wounded (McQueen, 2004, Lloyd, 1998). They were buried, if at all, not far from where they fell. Pilgrimages to these sites, and the graves of their loved ones, began in the 1920s when mothers, fathers, wives, and children went to Europe on a long, difficult, and extremely expensive journey (Scates, 2007). To many who undertake travel to these sites, the visit becomes a pilgrimage or a rite of passage, as these tours are important for Australians because of a quest for self-fulfillment (Lloyd, 1998). The Western Front is fast becoming a rite of passage for Australians, both young and old (Scates, 2007). In essence, today’s tourist comes to a fearful place just as “they” did before them and the accompanying beliefs are consistent with a religious-style commitment of respect for ancestors and those involved in the conflict.

Religion
Hodge (2005) simply refers to Religion as an internal, subjective reality of rituals, beliefs, and practices that develop in conjunction with other individuals who share similar experiences.
On the other hand, secular religion is a term used to describe ideas, theories or philosophies which involve no spiritual component, yet possess qualities similar to those of a religion. Consequently, the sacredness of any secular religion incorporates meaning and purpose to many people and such characteristics become evident in the quasi-religious or civil religious style of Anzac culture (Cranitch, 2008, Lloyd, 1998). Life Course Perspectives (Hutchison, 2003) chart the influences of religion on individual life stories, events and person-environment transactions within life course concepts. Overall, key themes are personal direction, connectedness and goal fulfillment. While young adults tend towards attaining a sense of meaning, purpose and personal direction, middle adulthood seeks connectedness within a multigenerational family context. In later life, there is a search for personal meaning through reminiscences, self image and accomplishments, a retreat to a safe place and to achieve self-integrity as well as goal fulfillment (Hutchison, 2003).

**Icons, Memorials and Cemeteries**

Generally, an icon is an artifact that holds attributes, incurs important experiences (Becken, 2005) and represents a set of mental associations of time, place and cultural links within an immediate environment (Laverick and Johnston, 1997). All forms of media report and reproduce images and these activities make icons instantly recognizable to become important and enduring symbols of sacredness (Becken, 2005). Traditionally, the word icon refers to art works depicting a religious image, representation, or picture of a sacred or sanctified Christian personage (Sternberg, 1999) and such art takes many forms that include friezes, bronzes, marble, metal, art and glass works (Robb, 2002, 215). Another view treats an icon as a human figure whose gesture, body position, costume, and surrounding objects refer to a concept, usually a human virtue or failing, like love, faith, truth, veracity, melancholy, good fortune or greed (Sternberg, 1999). Coleman (2002) indicates that revered images occur within a given space and evoke invisible auras, appeals and desires from a spiritual world. As Robb (2002) argues, the society of that time believed each and every serviceman accrued an heroic aura, if not an iconic status, because World War 1 was a divine plan that transferred a war of national interest to a holy war. Specific battles as Zonnebeke and Passchendaele came to acquire an almost sacred ring and thus, became ordained with holiness (Dyer, 2001). In a sense, battle sites, graves and memorials began as profane sites, however, they emerged as meaningful, sacred places (Lloyd, 1998). Such specific iconic images and sentiment suggest battlefield tours are more than tourist experiences; they become secular pilgrimages.

The narratives of Christian idealism and self-sacrifice feature on monuments (Robb, 2002) where the helping of mates theme is obvious in the Australia Cobbers memorial at Fromelles (Hutchinson, 2006). Many memorials feature patriotism, triumphalism and passages from the Bible to the extent that the civilian and military communities made saints of dead soldiers and shrines of their graves and monuments (Robb, 2002). As such, shrines convert assumptions and hopes into sacralized forms readily acknowledged and suitable for easy consumption (Coleman, 2002). Consequently, these physical monuments encourage those simple, yet iconic and symbolic practices of laying wreaths and incantation of the Ode of Remembrance (Pound, 1998b).

In earlier times, most British and dominion citizens saw the battlefields of France as holy sites where travelers negotiated the environs of the Western Front to visit ground made sacred by the blood of men (Robb, 2002). The momentous nature of the battles of the Western Front created unparalleled devastation; the sites exist but they are now memorials, military cemeteries and museums; or the fields reverted to crop cultivation, rural pursuits, urban development and daily existence (Iles, 2008). Urry (1990) describes tourist behaviour as an
activity that is primarily carried out through the medium of vision or the gaze. The modern Western Front panoramas belie the horror and turmoil of battle. While some sites such as Lochagner Crater are preserved, others such as the Canadian trench system at Vimy Ridge underwent restoration, modernization and sanitization for visitors’ protection and convenience. Ultimately, shrines or sites impart a certain kind of authoritative animation, a sense that they can both reflect and affect aspects of people’s lives (Coleman, 2002). Rather than merely seeing or gazing, many come for the experience because their imaginations and emotions allow visitors to construct both an emphatic and historical connection with the present landscape (Iles, 2008). The visit becomes an epiphany moment.

Pilgrimages
Lloyd (1998, p220) expects that pilgrims distinguish themselves from tourists in order to stress their special links with the fallen and the war experience. If a pilgrimage is a sacred journey, search or quest for the pursuit of the ideal, and a mission of great moral significance, then journeys to a sacred place or a significant shrine realigns or develops the importance of a person’s belief. Coleman (2002) argues, pilgrimages are both historically and culturally specific instances that encompass the person, place and story. These religious pursuits become adaptable to other situations such as the meanings of collective journeying by motorcycle by Vietnam veterans (Coleman, 2002). Soldier pilgrimages began to perpetuate the memory, but these acts of private pilgrimages transformed into the official fabric of commemoration (Scates, 2007). Today, the Somme and Ypres Salient continue to grow as tourist attractions and is a specialized niche of the tourist and leisure industry (Iles, 2008). Furthermore, a successful pilgrimage depends on realistic, resourceful, and totally committed leadership (Scates, 2007) where the leadership of these tour activities tends toward retired military officers and published historians, and, according to Iles (2008), having an interest in family history influences the decision to tour the Western Front. By retracing their ancestors’ movements across the battlefield terrain, tourists attempt to reinforce their sense of family pride. These tourists seek meaning, purpose and affirmation of their own self-identity as described in Hutchinson’s (2003) later life phase.

Religion meets Commemoration
Hodge (2001) provides a qualitative research framework for spirituality and connectedness to the Ultimate (p 208). The framework consists of consumer behaviour elements that encompass communication, cognition, affect and such elements relate to Life Course Perspectives of Hutchinson (2003). Many tourists come well-prepared with specific battlefield maps and summaries, the service records of their relatives and a working knowledge of the area’s history. Understandably, emotions move from disbelief and sorrow to pride, fulfillment and concomitant behaviors range from silence and introspection to positive, expressive actions such as speeches and story-telling. In most instances, a tourist’s communication reflects their knowledge utility and emotions about the battle site.

There is a body of research concerning the anti consumption stance of religious organizations (Ger, 2005). Therefore, if the commercialized celebration of Christmas is a commodification of religion, and religious groups have devotional objects, souvenirs, decorations, clothing, and music for sale (Ger, 2005), then commodification of religion through battlefield tours, cemeteries and memorials incorporates religious themes of prayers, reverence and sacrifice. In addition, the rebuilding and restoration of centuries old churches destroyed in the war represented a supremacy of higher order beliefs with churches as a central, if not mandatory feature of battlefield tours and such buildings became destinations in their own right (Thurnell-Read, 2009).
Battlefield tourism terminology, actions and activities have religious intent. As examples, memorial sites and cemeteries are consecrated ground (Lloyd, 1998 p 189) and visitors “gather” in a similar manner to a congregation that gathers for a service. There are prayer offerings, singing of hymns and a solemnity of praise, thanks and reverence for the soldiers, while placing of wreaths and flowers constitute gifts or tokens of appeasement (Mauss, 1969). Other terms relate to western beliefs as soldiers endured a baptism of fire; the battles became a test of personal strength, of manhood and incorporated a rite of passage (Lloyd, 1998). As in mortal toil, the combatants endured hardship and privation while the honoured dead rest in peace and serenity. Ultimately, those who remain unidentified are “Known only to God” and in this manner, most of the religious writing during World War 1 equated soldiers’ deaths with Christ’s sacrifice (Robb, 2002, 116). This view still resonates today as soldiers gave their lives to save others and is a common phrase in citations or medal awards and in church services on anniversary days.

**Method and Results**

The sample drew from members of a tour to the Somme Battlefields in November 2008 and a small, non-random sample of 23 responses ensued. One author participated in the tour, approached respondents and received the completed questionnaires as the tour progressed. In this manner, a mixed method approach incorporated an ethnographic component as life goals, past memories, family stories and anecdotes were shared with others. In addition, a formal survey instrument sought opinions and attitudes toward specific topics via a series of 5 point likert style questions adapted from the tourism and marketing literature, as well as a series of nominal responses and areas for open-ended responses and comments. A transformation and collapse of the data structure meant a tertial split that eliminates the middle third or “zone of indifference in responses” (Bennett and Rundle-Thiele, 2004).

There were roughly twice as many males as there were females on the Western Front tour; Six people were born between 1929 and 1939, eight born between 1941 and 1951 and another eight born between 1951 and 1956. These ages are representative of the overall tour cohort and within a well developed spiritual age, that holds close links with chronological age (Hutchinson, 2003 p 33). Twelve respondents reported having relatives who served in WW1. Whilst one guest was new to WW1 interests, the longest term of interest was 70 years and the average was just under 30 years.

All the members of the tour believe that the Western Front is about commemoration and is, above all, a spiritual place that brings a sense of peace. Nineteen respondents agreed that the Western Front is a celebration of survival and life, but all agree the battlefields are a celebration of death and sacrifice. The tour joined in the formal Armistice Day service at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial where one member read a dedication to the fallen. In continuing the theme, 20 guests viewed the battlefields as a sacred place and they regarded the motive for their tour as being on a pilgrimage. One respondent’s partner discovered six months before the tour that her Great uncle died on the Somme; she joined the tour and both visited his grave. In their own way, these visitors set out on a pilgrimage and conducted a service of remembrance for those individuals who served at the Western Front. As the tour progressed, many of the tour members visited cemeteries where relatives were buried. In most cases, there were prepared speeches read, prayers offered, the ode recited and flowers placed at personally relevant sites.

Since life changes (Hutchison, 2003) move from seeking connectedness in middle adulthood to personal meaning and goal fulfillment of later life, it means that battlefield tours are distinctive. In essence, each guest enjoys themselves but their enjoyment appears related to self-definition and goal attainment. A popular goal was to honour the AIF (21) and, in going
to the front, allowed achievement of a long-held personal goal (16). Twenty tourists held
goals to visit heritage sites, to immerse in AIF Actions (17) and to build Memories (19).
Fifteen members considered that the Anzac story is relevant to them and 19 believed that the
Anzac story and the Western Front is symbolic of themselves, their attitudes and is an
important part of their life. Such importance relates to information seeking, relevance and
meaning of the Anzac story and the Western Front in particular. Generally, the guests
believed a Western Front visitation is for the older visitor and Gallipoli is a rite of passage for
the younger visitor. However, there was a strong belief that all Australians should visit The
Western Front because it is an essential aspect of Australian heritage, culture and secular
beliefs.

Discussion

The emergent literature and analysis of the Western Front theatres cover tactical summaries,
unit histories, logistics analysis, machinery and armour, war generals, combatants’ heroics
and dedication as well as selections from a myriad of related military, service and personal
topics. Whilst there are some narrow insights into contemporary culture, there are few
insights into cultural and religious inputs and outcomes that maintain the memory through
upcoming generations. Locating this study within the Life Course Perspectives (Hutchinson,
2003) helped describe guests’ personal views and goals within a religious context.

This paper argues that battlefield tours have strong commemoration and religious overtones
and this combination is a powerful tool for continuing remembrance of the sacrifice of many.
The length of interest meant the visitors were well informed, held set life expectations and
sought a deeper respect, understanding and meaning toward the soldiers, the battles and the
enormity of the conflict. Ultimately, the tour members believe that the Western Front is a
sacred place that is symbolic of themselves and their attitudes. Importantly, the area holds
secular meaning and attracts reverence. Such a view reflects the narratives of Christian
idealism and self-sacrifice that appear on monuments and through the sanctity associated with
Australian war graves. In due course, service personnel of the era assumed an iconic status
and such images and secular sentiment suggest battlefield tours are more than ordinary tourist
experiences. If a pilgrimage is about a person, place and story, then tours to Western Front
battlefields are pilgrimages because it involves the person, their values and the story is
personal, intimate and seeks deeper meaning in line with Life Course Perspectives. Just like
those returning from active service, there was a post-tour comradeship where photographs and
DVD’s were readily exchanged. A common thread of correspondence reiterated the emotional
satisfaction on achieving a life goal. Many returned servicemen chose not to talk about their
service or battle experiences and the tour guests acknowledged a similar difficulty in
explaining their feelings and emotions, in effect, the tour became an epiphany pilgrimage that
questioned or confirmed their own values.

Limitations and Future Research

The research reported here is limited to a small Australian special interest group featuring an
older cohort. These people have the time and money available to overcome the financial
impost and tyranny of distance that is still a problem for many Australians. Additional
limitations arise because tour operators generally limit the number of tourists to the Western
Front, or any battlefield, therefore, potential research is limited to qualitative interpretations
rather than quantitative relationships. Future research could address a quantitative approach to
the attitudes, beliefs and motivations of Australians to participate in a Battlefield tour to the
Western Front or the other significant Anzac battleground sites across the world.
References


