

Tourist or Pilgrim:
Comparison of American tourism to religiosity at The Official Center of the World.

Emma Jane Hopper
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I. Introduction

In 1986, Jacques-André Istel founded a town called Felicity, named after his wife, Felicia, and in doing so created the newest experience available to travelers touring the United States.¹ The Official Center of the World in Felicity, California, exemplifies the idea of tourist attractions as sacred space in the context of American providentialism. Istel's children's book, COE the Good Dragon at the Center of the World, and recognition by California's Imperial County Board of Supervisors and the *Institut Géographique National* of the French government are the legitimators of the location's claim to fame.² While the Official Center of the World is not as official as the name suggests, nor is it meant to be, it still attracts visitors who "come by the thousands each year."³ The pilgrimages of tourists to The Official Center of the World and similar attractions can be viewed through the lenses of providentialism, Manifest Destiny, and American civil religion. While tourism may not be religious as the layperson might define religion, it can be explored most effectively through those concepts of religious theory.

II. Felicity, California

Felicity is home to eight "History of Humanity" monuments, granite triangular prisms engraved with key moments in human history, at the center of which is the Felicity Stone, a modern Rosetta Stone with the same purpose. The Maze of Honor is nearby, a granite maze in which visitors can have personal memories engraved and preserved for a fee. It is also home to a granite seal, the church on the Hill, the Felicity sundial, which is a sculpture of Michelangelo's "Arm of God" found in the Sistine Chapel, and "section number 12 of the original staircase of the

¹ Jon Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 19, 2014.

² "Setting the Official Center of the World," *Center of the World*, accessed Apr. 24, 2021.
<https://www.centeroftheworld.us/>.

³ Anne Burke, "A strange museum at the 'centre of the world,'" *BBC* (London), Jan. 2, 2019.

Eiffel Tower."⁴ These are just the attractions surrounding the main event: the pyramid that houses the plaque officiating the center of the world.⁵ Such a sprawling collection of monuments rightfully attracts plenty of tourists, despite its remote location in the "far south-east corner of California, a few miles west of Yuma, Arizona."⁶ Evaluating the interest of tourists in the Official Center of the World through the same framework as the interest of pilgrims in religious sites is a useful tool in understanding the tourist's experience in the United States.

III. Sacred Space

When considering the Official Center of the World as sacred space, the term must first be defined. While Eliade defined this construct as "particularly powerful places of religious significance," the Durkheimian interpretation of sacred space as "an expression of social relations" is more applicable in the case of this attraction.⁷ After all, aside from the Church on the Hill, the monuments at the Official Center of the World are not explicitly religious in nature. They still attract thousands of pilgrims each year, and not without good reason. According to Istel's lifelong friend Donn Gaebelein, "'you have to live with this place, you have to sleep on this, to get the feel of its power,'" so the site does evoke bodily responses.⁸ This does not take away from the applicability of Durkheim's definition of sacred space. Since "bodily responses to space are themselves inseparable from social processes," the sense of awe experienced by tourists does not detract from Durkheim's definition.⁹ As a whole, the attraction is largely unaffiliated with organized religion, and fulfils Durkheim's definition of sacred space more explicitly than that of Eliade.

⁴ "Center of the World," accessed Apr. 18, 2021, <https://www.centeroftheworld.us/>.

⁵ "The Official Center of the World," Felicity, California: A Town Dedicated to Remembrance, accessed Apr. 18, 2021, <http://www.felicity.us/center.html>.

⁶ Anne Burke, "A strange museum at the 'centre of the world.'"

⁷ Thomas Bremer, *Formed from This Soil* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 103-104.

⁸ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

⁹ Bremer, *Formed from This Soil*, 104.

Eliade's explicit religious requirement in considering sacred space is not entirely without place when it comes to the Official Center of the World, though. The Church on the Hill was an interesting choice by Istel, who does not consider himself religious and whose mother was Jewish. Even more oddly, Istel constructed not just the church, but he built the hill as well. According to Gaebelein, "Jacques will die not knowing why he built that chapel... but also knowing that he *had* to."¹⁰ That certainly sounds like an instance of an "autonomous and transcendent force or reality" manifesting itself in human reality, at least in appearance.¹¹ The Official Center of the World fits both definitions of sacred space, but Eliade's interpretation applies more specifically to the Christian church that oversees the town.

IV. American Civil Religion and Its Aspects

The Official Center of the World is an aspect of American civil religion, playing into the providentialism and Manifest Destiny ideologies that support the civil religion, as well as the adherence to capitalism it encourages. Civil religion is characterized by "the nationalistic practices and traditions related to legitimizing state authority with reference to transcendent powers," a common phenomenon in the United States.¹² Perhaps unwittingly, when considering Istel's French origin, The Official Center of the World supports the idea of the United States as transcendent by claiming the United States is literally the center of the world. This helps to explain the site's popularity with tourists, despite its remote location: "among the most visited destinations in North America are sites that celebrate nationhood."¹³ The Official Center of the World has a secured place in the canon of the American civil religion.

¹⁰ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

¹¹ Bremer, *Formed from This Soil*, 103.

¹² Bremer, *Formed from This Soil*, 353.

¹³ Thomas Bremer, "Tourism and Pilgrimage," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, edited by Charles Lippy and Peter Williams, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010, 18.

Hand in hand with the American civil religion is providentialism, which in turn is the basis for Manifest Destiny. Providentialism holds that the land that the United States encompasses was "providentially sanctioned" by the Protestant god, considering America to be sacred and in the rightful possession of white, Protestant settlers. This idea then led to Manifest Destiny, the supposed right to "overspread and to possess the whole continent" despite it already being inhabited by the Native Americans.¹⁴ Manifest Destiny involved spreading white settlers all the way to California, the area where Istel placed his Official Center of the World. Felicity can then be considered as an extension of providentialism and Manifest Destiny.

Even if the motivation to build a site like the Official Center of the World was entirely for the purpose of profit, that is just another aspect of American civil religion: capitalism. The Official Center of the World would not exist in its current form if it were not for capitalism. Tourists flock to the spot, paying the \$3 fee to stand in the pyramid that marks the Official Center of the World and \$2 for a certificate saying they did it.¹⁵ In a way, the Official Center of the World is a monument to the accumulation of wealth, an essential pillar in the American civil religion. Istel was only able to build the site due to his passive income from his "lifelong habit of buying land," a rather expensive habit to have.¹⁶ Both tourism and religious pilgrimage in the modern world involves engaging in capitalism, regardless of whether there is an entrance fee. In the case of Temple Square, a Mormon site in Salt Lake City, Utah, for instance, "local hotels, restaurants, stores, tour companies, as well as airlines and bus companies, also benefit in more directly financial ways from visitation... These businesses profit from the religious and aesthetic appeal of the site as a destination for both pilgrims and tourists."¹⁷ Visitors necessitate the

¹⁴ Bremer, *Formed from This Soil*, 234.

¹⁵ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

¹⁶ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

¹⁷ Bremer, "Tourism and Pilgrimage," 10.

spending of money and provision of goods and services. This is the same of any location, explicitly religious or not, including the Official Center of the World.

At the Official Center of the World visitors can engage in capitalism in a few ways. The town is small, only fifteen people, so there are not countless hotels and restaurants from which to choose. Still, the town offers a motel, a "combination gift shop and post office," and a "'brasserie,' where a woman named Debbie makes pretty good sandwiches."¹⁸ For \$100 visitors can have a panel engraved in the Maze of Honor.¹⁹ Felicity is also being written about in travel sections of well-respected newspapers, like the BBC²⁰ and the New York Times.²¹ Advertisers are paying to be in these newspapers, while the writers are being paid, and in part this is facilitated by the Official Center of the World. Istel's book upon which Felicity is based, COE the Good Dragon at the Center of the World, is only 29 pages long but being sold used for \$99 on Amazon.com.²² The Official Center of the World engages in capitalism at every turn. No one claims the site is truly the center of the world, but it still has "perceived existential value" without fulfilling "the desire for authenticity" at first glance.²³ Instead, its authenticity lies in its representation of the mythic American dream.

V. Tourist or Pilgrim?

The distinction between a tourist and a pilgrim is a hazy one. While "tourists often are motivated by purely aesthetic attractions" and pilgrims are motivated by "devotional ones," they often interact with the same structures in visiting their destinations.²⁴ Both tourists and pilgrims

¹⁸ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

¹⁹ "My Engraved Granite Panel," *Maze of Honor*, accessed Apr. 26, 2021. <https://www.mazeofhonor.com/product/custom-engraved-granite-tile/>.

²⁰ Anne Burke, "A strange museum at the 'centre of the world.'"

²¹ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

²² "Coe: The Good Dragon at the Center of the World," accessed Apr. 25, 2021. <https://www.amazon.com/Coe-Good-Dragon-Center-World/dp/0934003009>.

²³ Bremer, "Consider the Tourist," 188.

²⁴ Bremer, "Tourism and Pilgrimage," 8.

must use the same "transportation, facilities for lodging and food, banking and money exchange services, translators, and all the other support services," and they often visit the same places, if for different reasons.²⁵ Based on Mr. Gaebelein's description, perhaps they are even having the same spiritual experience. At what point, then, does a tourist become a pilgrim? While "most pilgrims are not merely religious travelers; many of them to some degree are tourists too," that does not necessarily mean that all tourists are to some degree pilgrims.²⁶ Pilgrims become tourists by interacting with the tourism industry in performing their pilgrimages. Tourists become pilgrims through their experiences in sacred spaces and, in the United States, their adherence to the American civil religion.

The commodification of religious iconography further closes the gap between pilgrimage and tourism. In fact, "commodifying religions goes far beyond the trinkets, artwork and utensils of the faithful... all sorts of goods and services have become the basis of a modern consumerist religion," further blurring the lines between tourist and pilgrim with the help of capitalism.²⁷ While tourism is not necessarily religious, the similarities are so great that "the juxtaposition of religion and tourism serves as a methodological two-sided mirror for seeing differently both religion and tourism."²⁸ Capitalist ideals strengthen these similarities between tourism and pilgrimage in two ways, both by being intrinsic to the American civil religion that makes tourism more religious, and by commodifying mainstream religions to make them more touristic.

Without the concepts of American civil religion, providentialism, and Manifest Destiny, the religiosity of the tourist would be less clear. Tourism and religion "both create special (i.e.,

²⁵ Bremer, "Tourism and Pilgrimage," 8.

²⁶ Thomas Bremer, "A Touristic Angle of Vision: Tourist Studies as a Methodological Approach for the Study of Religions," *Religion Compass* 8, no. 12 (December 2014): 373.

²⁷ Thomas Bremer, "Consider the Tourist," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, edited by Vasudha Narayanan (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 191.

²⁸ Bremer, "Consider the Tourist," 202.

sacred) places and involve experiential contributions to identity through interactions with these special places," but one must first understand the concept of sacred space to draw that conclusion.²⁹ The aura of sacred space at the Official Center of the World is aided by American exceptionalism, even if tourists know that there is no real center of the world—the world is, as Istel points out, a sphere.³⁰ Without the concept of civil religion, such a comparison between the pilgrim and the tourist might be harder to imagine. The comparison is an important one, however. Recognizing the ways in which things that appear profane can be considered sacred is a useful tool in understanding the motivations of human behavior.

VI. The Religion of Tourist Attractions

The Official Center of the World is only one example of a tourist attraction in a country that hosts countless others, all of which can be considered through methodological approaches typically reserved for more mainstream religions. While the Official Center of the World includes both Christian iconography and features ideology consistent with American civil religion, not all roadside attractions have both. The only crucial aspect in considering a tourist attraction through a religious lens is the presence of sacred space, in that the location must inspire visitors and provide "an occasion for existential reflection."³¹ In this framework, all but the most lackluster tourist attractions can be evaluated through the methodology of religious theory. The explicitly religious attraction of Holy Land USA and the secular attraction of the House on the Rock are brief examples of the other ways tourism and religion intersect.

Holy Land USA in Waterbury, Connecticut is an explicitly religious tourist attraction and theme park. The site, defunct since the 1980s, is still being preserved by "Holy Land USA -

²⁹ Bremer, "A Touristic Angle of Vision," 376.

³⁰ Mooallem, "A Journey to the Center of the World."

³¹ Bremer, "Consider the Tourist," 202.

Waterbury," a nonprofit that aims "to protect in perpetuity for Christian purposes the 18-acre site atop Waterbury's Pine Hill known as Holy Land USA."³² Despite its explicit Christian affiliation, it is still considered a tourist attraction, perhaps because of its relative youth when compared to Mecca or Jerusalem and its official title as a theme park. Holy Land USA's association of the United States with the Christian god can be viewed through the lens of providentialism and American civil religion. The continued work to preserve and restore the site speaks to its status as sacred space. Holy Land USA is an example of how researchers can interpret even the most explicitly religious sites through less obvious, secular concepts as well as religious concepts.

The House on the Rock in Iowa County, Wisconsin, in contrast, is not explicitly or implicitly aligned with any mainstream religion. It still manages to attract plenty of attention. In Neil Gaiman's bestseller American Gods, the characters visit the House on the Rock because it is "a roadside attraction... One of the finest. Which means it is a place of power."³³ The House on the Rock can be viewed through the lens of sacred space, and its reputation as such is made clear by its place in popular culture. The House, which was built by Alex Jordan in 1945 and features a large assemblage of random objects,³⁴ can also be interpreted through American civil religion, due to its interactions with capitalism and American exceptionalism.

The Official Center of the World exemplifies the religious ways in which scholars can understand tourism in the United States, and its use of both mainstream religious and secular iconography makes the connections between tourism and religion particularly clear. Holy Land

³² "About Holy Land," *Holy Land Waterbury*, accessed Apr. 26, 2021. <https://www.holylandwaterbury.org/about>.

³³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: The Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 135.

Note: This page number is an estimate. My copy is on Kindle and only has locations, not page numbers. The more precise location is 1843 of 9021, whatever that means.

³⁴ "About," *The House on the Rock*, accessed Apr. 26, 2021. <https://www.thehouseontherock.com/about/>.

USA and the House on the Rock are examples of tourist attractions that are more religious and secular, respectively, and yet their visitors still can be evaluated as both pilgrims and tourists.

VII. Conclusion

Whether or not tourism counts as religion depends on who is asked. This is typical of most religions, however: religion is difficult to define, and "it is not useful for us to exclude any manner of being religious."³⁵ Some aspects of religious pilgrimage and tourism, however, are so similar that exploring tourism through religious theory is a useful endeavor. In the case of the Official Center of the World in Felicity, California, the concepts of sacred space and the American civil religion, including ideas like providentialism and Manifest Destiny, are easily applicable and provide a new and interesting framework through which to consider the attraction. The United States' nationalist tendencies encourage Americans to consider the country as a divine nation. This perceived divinity in American culture makes it easy to make even the most mundane and profane locations into sacred space.

³⁵ Bremer, *Formed From this Soil*, 6.

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