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Historical Perspectives of Shifting Motives for Faith-Based Travel

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Throughout pre-history and history, millions of people of many religions and faiths have undertaken pilgrimages. Although ‘the quintessential form of religiously motivated travel is pilgrimage’, the meaning of the practice of pilgrimage has changed over the centuries (Dietz, 2005:27). There are also some consistent Leitmotifs and principles in religious travel. Participants of the New Religious Movements (NRM) travel to Neolithic and other prehistoric sites (such as Malta) for a spiritual experience at such sites, seeking to fulfil needs which the historic churches cannot or no longer can fulfil. (Rountree, 2002:475-496). Many NRMs are based on historical values, past religions or on symbolical or perceived values of the Neolithic past (Hutton, 1990:351-8). Others come to Malta for a traditional pilgrimage or a trip with religious aspects which fit with the traditional aspects of religious Malta, related to the Pauline or Marian cults. The present writer prefers to use the term ‘faith-based tourism’ when it comes to Malta, because everyone arriving to Malta has to use part of the tourism infrastructure. Besides, faith-based tourism is an umbrella term, encompassing pilgrimage, religious travel, tourism with a religious theme and secular pilgrimage, because even in the latter form there are spiritual aspects and elements of faith present.

Key Words: Malta, pilgrimage, Neolithic temples, New Religious Movements, fulfilment, faith-based tourism.

Pilgrimage throughout the Ages: Palaeolithic Beginnings

After the Cognitive Revolution, Homo Sapiens were endowed with the ability to think in abstracts and to understand symbols; the human mind could now fully absorb matters like language, art and religion, writes Harari (2010:60-70), of which pilgrimage is an early externalisation and perhaps the most ancient form of travel not related to physical survival. In the Upper-Palaeolithic era, some 70,000 to 10,000 years ago, people travelled to distant sacred spaces to engage in rituals associated with basic and perennial human needs. According to Rountree (2002:475-96), these needs were, among others, to maintain a proper relationship with the supernatural for fertility, safe birth, healing, ancestor cult, predicting the future, requesting a good hunt and to possibly solve conflicts with their neighbours. Such travels did not disturb their

living pattern very much, thinks Harari (2010:56), as they could hunt and forage along the way, and also have their leisure, since their work occupied only a few hours daily.

Ritual

Also from Palaeolithic times onward, the general current conviction is that at those sacred destinations, they would engage in (shamanic) rituals. Rossano notes the (near)-universality of such ritual practices, found in many traditional societies and modern hunter-gatherer tribes. In the opinion of Rossano (2010:69-70), our Palaeolithic ancestors would also engage in artistic expressions, e.g. cave painting, creating figurines, song and dance.

Whitehouse (2014) remarks that sacred sites are often permanent ones, providing a proper space for regularly held rituals related to religious cults. Regular would then mean, e.g. according to a solar or lunar calendar, indicating change of seasons or transition in one’s life. Such rituals must be of a high arousal effect and unforgettable. Ritual sacrifice of a living being qualifies as high arousal, while manipulating the voice acoustics of a place, together with the flickering flames

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Figure 1 : Walking down the path at St Paul's Island, Malta, while singing



(Source : Author)

of strategically placed torches, can make it unforgettable. Generally, natural caves and ingeniously constructed temples have excellent acoustics, such as the famous Neolithic sites in Malta, the underground Hypogeum and the Hagar Qim and Mnajdra surface temple complexes. Such rituals justify a long travel to a special place, or building a special place just for that purpose, or as Olsen and Timothy put it, 'to travel to sacrosanct sites that have been ritually separated from the profane space of everyday life' (2006:2).

Leitmotifs

Within faith-based tourism to Malta, such journeys are within the historical and traditional boundaries of healing, relief, penitence, viewing and visiting places, looking into the future, initiation and spiritual experience (Sumption, 2003; Ure, 2006). All these Leitmotifs are seemingly focussed on two general principles:

- Probably the most overarching and near-universal manner people interact with their divinities, especially on pilgrimages, is probably best expressed by the Greco-Roman legal notion of *do ut*

des, 'I give so that you may give', i.e. I, the supplicant, will give, (during a ritual), a sacrifice to you, the divinity, so that you may reciprocate and give me what I am asking for (to survive). *Do ut des* expresses a primary form of reciprocal altruism and represents the contractual form of sacrifice to the divinity and the result, the divinity's blessing or aid granted (Labuschagne, 2012:157-8). Of course, the same principle rules human relationships and businesses.

- Secondly, many studies on pilgrimage throughout all ages and religions have revealed the human yearning for fulfilment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Notermans, 2007; Timothy and Olsen, 2006).

In view of faith-based tourism, questions such as belief, hope, confirmation of belief, prayer for one's self or for others, reflection, purification, personal salvation, forgiveness, comfort of the soul and the tangibility of religious sentiment, are important matters. Then there are psychological matters, e.g. wishing for closure, harmony, happy marriage, ambitions, enchantment, (self)-acceptance, self-actualisation, restoration, a better fortune in life or empowerment. Then there are concerns about health, e.g. healing, fertility, safe birth. Other issues could be visitors' satisfaction, or simply enjoying the moment.

Short Overview of Pilgrimage throughout the Ages

In order to understand the New Religious Movements (NRM) better, Leitmotifs of pilgrimage throughout the ages must be reviewed. Hodder (2010:18-9) and Mann (2011:34-59) propose that in the Mesolithic and Neolithic period, following the Palaeolithic era, developments in Anatolia about 12,000 years ago at Göbekli Tepe, show a relationship between building a remote megalithic religious site and the development of agriculture. It seems plausible that temporarily gathering crowds for religious purposes at a site, still hunters and gatherers at that time, accidentally led to the domestication of plants and animals. This could have served several purposes - feeding many people when building megalithic sites, sacrificing to the supernatural for a good hunt or harvest, healing, ancestor veneration, celebration of the cycles of life and death, observation of the constellations, a timely change in the seasons or giving thanks for being allowed to master the world of plants and wild animals.

In contrast, the late Neolithic sees little traveling for religious purposes since the shrines were often within closed small-scale agricultural communities, mostly narrowly focussed on survival. These peoples

Figure 2 : Praying at St Paul's Grotto, Rabat, Malta,

Pilgrims hold the statue of St Paul while singing, praying and enjoying having their picture taken with St Paul. These were Protestants, discovering that statues and pilgrimage were not such bad things after all

(Source : Author - faces blurred to guarantee anonymity)

celebrated the permanence and continuity of their existence and engaged in ceremonies and rituals regarding healing and the celebration of the cycles of life and death (Sherrat, 2001:200-1).

Animism seems to have been common among hunter-gatherers and early agriculturists. Generally, a slow shift occurs from animism to theism as society moves towards the Bronze Age; from communicating with a myriad of spirits of nature and earth, towards a rather male dominated series of divinities living on lofty mountains. Even later, a sole male God in Heaven would appear. Survival seems to have been a major drive behind these shifts (Harari, 2014:60-1).

In the Early Bronze Age, a network of commercial and social exchange, religious interactions and military actions between the inhabitants of Europe gradually developed between 9000 BCE and 1000 CE, according

to the findings of Cinliffe (2008). Material commodities, such as copper and bronze weapons and prestige objects, new clothing fashion and furniture were seemingly 'universally valued' because they could achieve more wealth and prosperity much faster than agriculture could (Popham, 2001:276).

One of the oldest recorded religious travels is of the third millennium BCE, when Gudea of Lagash in the land of Sumer (in southern Mesopotamia) recorded his journey when travelling from his hometown at Sumer over a long distance to Isin to visit the sanctuary of the goddess Nanshe who was associated with social justice, prophecy, fertility, bounty and fishing, according to Elsner & Rutherford (2005:10). Herodotus (d.425BCE) records that pilgrimage, as it is known to the Western world at present, steadily comes about around 1500 BCE. Herodotus gives an account of the Egyptians, who, he said, were the first to make

Figure 3 : NRM adherents enjoying the energy and vestiges of the Neolithic temples at Malta



(Source : Author - faces blurred to guarantee anonymity)

annual solemn assemblies, processions and voyages to the temples of their gods (1996 [c.431BCE], 2:4), whereas, Kerényi holds that the cult of Demeter and Persephone was widespread and already very ancient before the Greeks incorporated it. Around 1500 BCE, the Sacred Road to the shrine of Eleusis was in use by worshippers to honour Demeter and her daughter Persephone, related to healing and the cycles of life and death (1967:21).

Malta as a Possible Sacred Island and a Palimpsest of Divinities

A long sequence of divinities and saints can be observed at Malta since 7,200 years ago, when the earliest signs of a permanent human presence on the Maltese Islands appeared, when people skilled in farming and husbandry arrived by vessel from or via Sicily (Renfrew, 1990, 2004; Trump, 2002). About 6,400 years ago these settlers started to build their Neolithic constructions, referred to as ‘the oldest freestanding megalithic monuments in the world’. Renfrew is of the opinion that the Temples of Malta are ‘primary, pristine developments . . . since . . . nothing

remotely comparable’ is found at other Neolithic sites (2004:10-1). There are many material proofs for overseas contacts during this time, but caution must be observed against over-interpretation (Evans, 1963).

Since then, the islands have acquired a palimpsest of civilisations and divinities, perhaps not easily found elsewhere. Many people have, throughout the ages, considered tiny Malta as a Sacred Island and the home of a succession of divinities. Zuntz (1971:4) calls it *isola sacra*, a sacred island and suggests that Malta should be regarded as a pilgrimage destination from Neolithic times onwards, a place where the earth and vegetation were venerated. He further remarks on the ‘vital importance of sowing, growing and harvesting’, which in Malta was externalised in a number of temples, stylised religious images, some representing a Mother Goddess and cyclical art. Neolithic data gathered by Rountree (2002:475-96) indicate a religion centred on an indigenous Neolithic divinity of vegetation, healing, fertility, prediction of the future and celebration of the cycles of life and death.

Figure 4 : The Venus of Malta

This statue was found in one of the Neolithic temples of Malta, possibly a non-liturgical expression of the Mater Magna

(Source : Author)

The Neolithic goddess of Malta is, according to Zuntz, not only related to the ancient mother goddess Mater Magna from previous times, but also connects to later goddesses in the Greek and Roman world, such as Isis and Persephone. This is even carried forward to modern times in the figure of the Virgin Mary, in view of her exemplary life (1971:17). This carrying forward of characteristics from one divine persona to another is not based on rationality or scientific findings, but is rather symbolically construed on the basis of perennial human needs and emotions. (Rountree, 2002). Moreover, succeeding civilisations absorb and appropriate divinities, such as the cults of Isis and Artemis, of which certain values and iconography transferred to the cult of the Virgin Mary. This happened, says McGuckin (2008:1-22) not because of the usual syncretism, but due to ‘dramatic missionary strategy’ of dislocation, replacement and appeasement to those newly converted to Christianity.

At Malta, the site of Tas-Silg has yielded proof of a continuum of worship of female divinities, from Neolithic times throughout the period of the Bronze Age, Carthaginians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and early Christendom, from the Mater Magna to the Virgin Mary. All these divinities share characteristics of fertility, childbirth and healing, and all had temples and shrines built for their veneration. Azevedo (1975) and Bonanno (2005) mention, among

others, Juno, Hera, Artemis, Astarte, Persephone and Isis. Throughout these evolutions, agriculture, healing and the connection with the sea have remained prominent in Malta (Calleja *et al.*, 2008:22). Early Christendom in Malta came with the Romans and was consolidated by the Byzantine cult of Christ and Mary as sources of life (Azevedo, 1975; Brown, 1975).

The Classic Concept of Pilgrimage

Common principles of pilgrimage in classical antiquity and in Early Christianity are that pilgrimage serves as a mechanism, bringing the pilgrim into intimate contact with a shared cultural or religious tradition. From religious travel in the past, many common elements can be discovered which are also valid in a wide variety of religious or secular travel at present (Elsner and Rutherford, 2005:10). The Greek word, *ἱκέτης* (*hiketēs*) literally is a person who comes to seek protection, after a journey and arriving at a shrine or sanctuary, mostly for healing purposes or other life saving motives (Naiden, 2005:73-96). The ritual of *theoria*, served the community and is maintained through activities such as attending a festival, tourism, leisure, philosophy, poetry, intellectual pursuits, athletics, cultural nostalgia, theatre, sacred sites or visiting former battle grounds. Some went to remote places, on foot and up to a mountain, going the hard way to please the gods. Others went for oracles, healing, initiation, purification or dedication. *θεωρός* (*theōiros*) are those who travel, view and interpret what is viewed (Kowalzig, 2005:43-5).

Christian Form of Pilgrimage

Early Christian pilgrimage is seemingly primarily motivated by a rejection of Roman urban values, argues Sumption (2003); commencing from the second century CE and while existing alongside older forms of pagan pilgrimage, it went through a number of developments, such as pilgrimage in view of the Scriptures, to see miraculous icons and images, to visit living and dead saints. A common element of Christian pilgrimage is healing.

Medieval Christian pilgrimage is described as an adventure of a lifetime. Motivations for pilgrimage were, among others, an escape from medieval daily life and a rare chance to see the world. A pilgrimage was

both an aspiration and an adventure, an external experience and an internal inspiration (Ure, 2006:1).

The Acts of the Apostles 27-28 of the New Testament describe the shipwreck of St Paul in Malta around CE 60, which brought about a cult of healing and celebration of life in a Christian context. Pilgrimage from overseas and locally related to the healing cult of the Apostle Paul dates back to the early Middle Ages and continues unbroken to the present (Azzopardi & Blondy, 2012).

The Case against Pilgrimage

Pilgrimages in the pursuit of the miraculous and of healing, with an element of leisure, are an apparent phenomenon of all times, and notwithstanding the fundamental changeover from a goddess of the earth to a single male god in heaven, the urge for pilgrimage remained more-or-less undiminished in the West, until the element of austerity came about. The austere and fundamentalist view of St Jerome (c.347-420) condemned leisure and tourism. He regarded the pilgrim as a monk and pilgrimage as an escape from

civilisation (Sumption, 2003). Pilgrimage was thus regarded as a process of self-exile, of social and physical isolation. Time at leisure was used to try to come closer to God. According to Saint Jerome, as recounted by Karlsaune (2002), a pilgrim was not 'a vulgar tourist, not fodder for the lying guides in Jerusalem or Rome', indicating that the social institution of pilgrimage was both fully developed and linked to leisure and tourism at that time.

Pilgrimage to the great shrines of Europe and Jerusalem always contained - inevitably - an element of tourism, because it partly depended on an existing 'hospitality' infrastructure for travel, food and shelter. Later commentators were also not in favour of pilgrimages, e.g. the German Franciscan Berthold of Regensburg (c. 1220-1272), is rather cynical about the whole essence of pilgrimage, writing that 'those who make lots of pilgrimages are seldom sanctified by it'. David Hume and Erasmus did not agree with the institutionalising of miracles by the Church and clergy

Figure 5 : Mass prayer at Lourdes



(Source : Author)

and did not consider the beneficial emotional effect of miracles on pilgrims. Sixteenth century Reformers went much further, they simply banned and abandoned pilgrimage. This was based on the Protestant ruling principle that Christians may only reach Salvation when justified by grace through faith. Good works and / or moral sincerity no longer qualified for Salvation, since the philosophy was that faith was divine but good works, such as pilgrimages, were human. Pilgrims, saints and relics are 'without the Word of God' and therefore useless. It is further remarked that for Lutheran Protestants, the element of healing related to a pilgrimage appears to be outside their mental framework (Karlsaune, 2002).

Faith-Based Tourism to Malta

At present, faith-based tourists travel to Malta for the Marian or Pauline cult, and they follow standard procedures: see, visit, pray, be a tourist. NRM travellers also travel to Malta for spiritual experiences at the Neolithic sites. The NRM are a very diverse and somewhat secretive segment of the religious landscape and although at present they are still at its fringe, Malta has become a pilgrimage destination for modern Pagans over the last twenty years. Followers of NRMs claim to have a spiritual affinity with the real or perceived 'earth-and-women' set of beliefs of the Neolithic past. They also wish to have a religious experience at a site significant to their religion. Specialised Goddess tours have been organized since the 1990s for like-minded women (and some men too) mostly from the Western world. These travellers are of all ages, but the majority are middle-aged women, who have the necessary income, are mostly university educated and to some degree favour feminism. They also are discerning travellers, wishing to absorb the cultural heritage of the countries they are visiting.

Increasingly, modern people, stressed as they may be from their work or environment, are exploring alternative solutions to seek some human essentials. Akin to pilgrimage, the NRM participants are there for the expectation or an experience of the mystical, seeking fulfilment in the widest sense, such as healing or initiatory experience, harmony with Nature, spiritual engagement or (re)discovering whatever their faith was (Simos, 2001; Scott, 2010). What they do not possess in their beliefs are religious guilt, austerity and suffering - which elements often belong to the traditional Christian pilgrimage package. Some of the participants experience a visit to Malta in the sense of diaspora tourism, as a homecoming to their spiritual roots

Figure 6 : Individual prayer at Lourdes



(Source : Author)

(Rountree, 2002, 2003). At the Neolithic sites, the participants usually engage in rituals, either alone or in a group. These rituals, as personally observed, consist of praying, meditating, dancing, chanting, presenting an offering or lighting candles. Many of the participants engage in the visual arts, while writing poetry or prose is quite common too.

Hutton also regards some NRM activity as a new approach, not based on past or existing religions (Hutton, 1990:351-8), in line with what Rountree (2003) labels as designer religions, based on modern needs. Among many others, there are Neo-pagans, Pagan Witchcraft, Neo-druids and Goddess Spirituality. Wicca, and also includes Traditional, Hereditary or Hedge Witchcraft, which suggests that many of their beliefs and rituals are fundamentally alike (Hutton, 1990).

Differences in Value and Perception

As personally observed, any NRM participant behaves like any other tourist, although they can stand out of the crowd when they perform a dance at a temple, leaving regular visitors perplexed. Only a few Maltese

heritage managers have an awareness of NRM needs. On the occasion of a solstice or equinox, the temple management organises special tours for tourists and discerning locals to witness this phenomenon, and the custodians provide an archaeological interpretation. However, there is no space or possibility for the local pagans to celebrate such an important feast day for their religion, as they would have liked, since on such occasions tourism and religious ritual do not mix very well. Nonetheless, visiting pagans from abroad are less likely to be discouraged by local restrictions. With all respect for the heritage conservation aspects, they pray, dance, sing and offer gifts to the Goddess within the temple structures. They claim they have valid reasons and motivation to do other things than the strict site policies allow. In this, they differ in opinion about the site interpretation and the opinions of the local archaeologists and architects (Hutton, 1990). From observations and interviews, traditional archaeologists and museum curators find it difficult to accept alternative interpretations regarding the Maltese Neolithic period, in particular because the arguments of the NRM participants are not scientific but emotional and spiritual.

For most locals and for many foreign visitors, the Maltese temples do not belong to a living religious culture, and their value lies in cultural heritage, important for tourism and academia. Thus, the sense of spiritual ownership among the Maltese is not similar to the affinity and identification they have for the Maltese Catholic churches (Hutton, 1990). This is probably why there are no significant public discussions about the interpretation of the Neolithic structures as in the UK, where for instance the Neo-Druids make a lot of demands regarding Stonehenge (Bender, 1998). The importance of Malta's Neolithic structures as alternative pilgrimage sites remains largely unnoticed by the local population, and the local pagans, about 200 in number, maintain a very low profile in predominantly conservative Roman Catholic Malta.

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