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RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

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Introduction

This chapter attempts a critical review and appraisal of the current state of research into religious and spiritual festivals and associated events. The literature emerges from a wide range of multidisciplinary sources, which have historically been situated in separate, traditional disciplinary silos. The chapter also investigates research into the religious origins of contemporary festivals, and questions whether and how meanings can be separately, or both, spiritual and religious. It notes the de-spiritualisation of religious festivals. Finally, the chapter assesses the future development of conceptual and theoretical approaches to religious and spiritual festivals, from empirical positioning to qualitative ethnographic perspectives (Sparkes & Smith 2013) and critical events research (Lamond & Platt 2016).

Research on religious and spiritual festivals

Whilst the study of festivals from an events management perspective is fairly new (for only the past 20 years at most: Bowdin, Allen, O’Toole, Harris, & McDonnell 2011; Getz 2012), historically, academic writers have previously addressed the theme of festivals through the lenses of religion and spirituality, celebration and ritual. For example, the French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim, whose 1912 publication ‘The Elementary Forms of Religious Life’ contemplated a theory of religion, identified the concept of ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim 2008 [1912]), inspired by and imbued within religious celebrations and festivals. During the Second World War, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin explored the carnivalesque (Hirschkop & Shepherd 2001), a concept emanating from religious festival origins. The British anthropologist Victor Turner authored compelling studies of religious rituals, rites of passage, celebration and festivity (Turner 1982), and the Italian anthropologist and folklorist Alessandro Falassi (1987) focussed his research on festivals and ritual, identifying an influential typology of ritual characteristics found within religious festivals. These four researchers in particular have contributed to the formation of academic thinking on the topic of religious and spiritual festivals, although it seems unlikely that any would have considered this area outside of their own disciplinary contexts.
An examination of more recent literature continues to demonstrate the multidisciplinary nature of the study of festivals in general—and even explicitly religious and spiritual festivals—but such research is generally undertaken within and from separate disciplinary silos. The range of disciplines is surprisingly broad, and an investigation of journal titles in which such articles are published, as well as article and monograph titles themselves, finds examples in a range of subject areas (see Table 32.1).

However, historical silos are beginning to blend across disciplines, with the emergence of interdisciplinary fields of study. These include the sociology of religion (Brown 2006; Davie, Heelas, & Woodhead 2003; Flanagan & Jupp 2010; Lundskow 2008; Woodhead & Catto 2012); the more recent appearance of religious tourism, events and pilgrimage as an area of research (Laing & Frost 2016; Leppakari & Griffin 2017; Norman 2011; Pinho & Garofalo 2016; Raj & Morpeth 2015; Timothy & Olsen 2006); and the new development of the critical event studies turn (Hall & Page 2015; Jepson & Clarke 2016; Lamond & Platt 2016; Lamond & Spracklen 2014; Merkel 2015; Robinson 2016; Rojek 2013; Spracklen & Lamond 2016; Stanton 2015). This indicates the coming of age of the study of events and festivals from their management and logistics subject origins (Bowdin, Allen, O’Toole, Harris, & McDonnell 2011; Getz 2012). Figure 32.1 suggests a framework that maps the

Table 32.1 Range of disciplines with research related to religious and spiritual festivals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Authors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural history</td>
<td>Rao and Dutta (2012)</td>
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<td>Cultural theory</td>
<td>Hirschkop and Shepherd (2001)</td>
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<td>Drama</td>
<td>Chen (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Akay, Karabulut, and Martinsson (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental psychology</td>
<td>Ruback, Pandey, and Kohli (2008)</td>
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<td>Environment and water</td>
<td>Viji and Shrinithivihalshini (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnology</td>
<td>Håland (2014) and de Maaker (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>Pena Nunez (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Pfadenhauer (2010) and Quezado, Alcântara, Costa, Arruda, and Mota (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Bottorff (2015) and Mellor, Hapidzal, Teh, Ganesan, Yeow, Latif, and Cummins (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Liu (2015), Ross (2013), Sadovina (2017) and Yazbak (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>Illiyas, Mani, Pradeepkumar, and Mohan (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Cheer, Belhassen, and Kujawa (2017)</td>
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development of the study of religious and spiritual festivals from the perspectives of separated silos, into the more recent emergence of critical event studies, linking with the study of pilgrimage, religious tourism and events.

While spirituality and religious aspects may only appear tangentially in some of the relevant research published in these silos, nevertheless such studies can still inform the body of knowledge. For example, recent research on contemporary music festivals by Robinson alludes to the spiritual or mystical elements of the festival experience, especially in those festivals that embrace collaborative forms of participation (Robinson 2015; McKay 2015). Robinson connects these participative or ‘No Spectators’ festivals with Bakhtinian carnivalesque, in opposition to the ‘perverted… spectator-inducing aspects of concert-model festivals’ (Robinson 2015, pp. 144–145), which have arguably been overwhelmingly corrupted by commercialisation and sponsorship. Related research into raves and freeparties by Dowson, Lomax and Theodore-Saltibus (2015) observed participants’ explicitly spiritual experiences within the sacred space of such illicit festive events. Indeed, some sound collectives have evolved through the rave and freeparty scene into producing independent rave-themed festivals of their own, followed by the introduction of specific rave-stages at larger (and more commercial) music festivals. Such occurrences might be a reflection of the commercialisation of festivals generally, but there is a gap in current research concerning the spiritual experiential aspects of mainstream music festivals that might be explored through the critical event studies route.

Equally, studies of religion and spirituality may either make tangential reference to, or ignore, the elements of festival. For example, Brown (2006) examines developments within the religious context of British society but makes no explicit mention of religious or spiritual festivals, despite a short discussion of Catholic pilgrimages. Instead, Brown focusses elsewhere on the charismatic renewal of the 1980s which has influenced the evolution of Christian festival-like events in the 21st century. Descriptions of charismatic church gatherings in which ‘ecstatic people sway in unison’ (Brown 2006, p. 299) more resemble the drug-fuelled bliss of the rave than a traditional church service, yet the comparison remains...
unmade. Ward’s 2005 monograph provides a deep theological analysis of the impact of cultural change and transformation on religious practice but makes no mention of religious or spiritual festivals, or their consequences for churches. Even the ‘holy trinity’ of leading sociology of religion academics, Davie, Heelas and Woodhead, also omit to consider explicitly the impact of religious festivals in their work on the future of religion. This is despite their recognition of the influence of the experiential in teaching religious studies in schools (2003, p. 2) and their recognition that both the Church of England and Roman Catholic churches in the UK provide a focus of celebration during major Christian festivals (Christmas, Easter), along with rites of passage (baptisms, weddings and funerals) (2003, p. 93). Perhaps this omission should not come as a surprise, as these authors’ perspectives (or their hermeneutical lens, to borrow a theological term) originate from within the scope of mainstream theology and sociology of religion, so why should they therefore be expected to consider festivals within their studies? And yet across the globe, beyond the windows of the ivory towers of traditional theological academia, lie lands where festivals flourish, whether religious, spiritual or secular in nature, attended by millions of people, affecting not only their beliefs but also their everyday lives and even providing employment. Or might such considerations resemble the ‘distortion and manipulation’ (Turner 1982, p. 297) of Boorstin’s ‘pseudo-events’ (1962), and therefore be deemed as unacceptable for study by academics from disciplines such as theology or sociology of religion? Sadly, the responses of events management academics (and perhaps more so for practitioner-academics, like myself), and especially for those with an inclination towards critical event studies, to what perhaps appears to be not only ignorance of the nuances of our subject but sometimes even a lack of awareness of its very existence, result in an achingly frustrating view of those who either ignore or write about ‘our’ subject yet come from a non-events background. Such resentment might be addressed by the collaborative efforts of truly interdisciplinary approaches to research.

However, the recent corpus of research into new developments in Christian worship provide evidence of a more insightful approach, acknowledging the positive impact of the advance of new Christian festivals that resemble the secular music festival, often with a greater emphasis on the ecstatic experience of a freeparty (Evans 2006; Mart 2015; Plantinga & Rozeboom 2003; Ross 2013; Ross & Baker 2015; Spinks 2010; Ward 2005; White 2000; Wroe 1988).

**Festivals: religious and spiritual?**

Classic studies of festival have often selected autochthonous (indigenous, aboriginal) tribes and groupings for comparison with contemporaneous practices. Durkheim (2008 [1912]), for example, studied aboriginal tribes, and whilst his work was met by strong methodological challenges, the assumptions he made have influenced deeply the subsequent development of theory, such as the social nature of religion, and the foundations of community cohesion through the celebration of sacred times, places and occurrences. Jepson and Clarke’s (2016) study of contemporary festivals, situated within the emerging turn to critical event studies, recognises the depth of connectivity with the religious origins of ‘festival’, particularly in producing the experience of togetherness and transcendence, or what Turner labelled ‘com-munitas’ (Turner & Turner 1978).

So, how do the religious origins of festivals influence religious and spiritual festivals, or even the non-religious and non-spiritual festivals, of today?

The celebrations of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are structured around the concepts of times and seasons. For example, the way we use our time,
the amount of time we allocate to different activities, the way those activities are structured, and what activities take precedence, indicate the value we place on those activities. Observant Muslims will stop all other activities to pray five times during a 24-hour period, often traveling to the nearest mosque or masjid. The Muslim calendar is lunar and shorter than the solar year, so Ramadan, a month-long period of fasting, moves forward each year by approximately ten days, migrating slowly through the seasons.

Similarly, Christian practices and festivals reflect the priorities of the early church. Sunday is the day of rest, and so the flow of the week is important to Christian ritual and worship. Within each day itself, the church adopted the Jewish practice of the day beginning as night fell. As a result, there are celebrations of the Eve of a festival, such as All Hallows’ Eve (celebrated as Halloween by the secular world), and Christmas Eve; whilst morning, mid-day, evening and night prayer form a daily structure of worship and prayer, in addition to Sunday services (White 2000).

Christian rites, rituals and festival celebrations are ordered around the three seasons of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (White 2000, p. 57), with special time prior to Christmas (Advent) and Easter (Lent), whilst in between comes ‘Ordinary Time’ (White 2000, p. 66). Some dates are fixed (sanctoral cycle), whilst others move (temporal cycle) (White 2000, p. 63). Some additions were made after the 4th century, including All Saints’ Day, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Corpus Christi. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches also honour saints’ days and festivals commemorating holy people, acts and places, celebrated in different ways in different places, initiating pilgrimages, processions and feasting. Thus, religious practice has influenced the concepts of sacred and profane time, and liminal space. The sacred time of religious festivals provides a ‘time out of time’ (Falassi 1987), as well as a time before and after sacred time, which is not sacred. These precepts have influenced the development of the festivals we know today.

Having identified the origins of religious festivals, it may also be helpful, in today’s context, to attempt to define terms – what do we mean by ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ festivals? Unfortunately, the answer is complex and longer than the space available here. However, Flanagan and Jupp offer a comprehensive discussion of the meaning of spirituality from a sociological perspective, concluding that ‘spirituality partly overlaps with theology, but also belongs to religion’ (2010, p. 2). This understanding is evidenced by the traditions of the major faiths that contain elements of organised religious practice, as well as individual spirituality.

**Festivalisation and eventisation of faith**

Religious festivals, feasts, fasts and mystery plays of past millennia have developed into the festivals and events that monopolise the postmodern cultural landscape of the 21st century in what might be recognised as the ‘eventization of life’ today (Dowson 2015). Whilst the Internet age impacts on social aspects of daily life, bringing with it private individualisation, the 21st century has witnessed an explosion in experiential marketing as organisations review their strategic direction in an effort to better to attract, involve and animate their customers and clients within relationships. Religious organisations of all faiths are no different, engaging with communities and building new relationships through celebratory festivals and other events (Dowson 2015). The ‘eventization of faith’ was introduced by Pfadenhauer, who applied the concept of experiential marketing to a study of an international Roman Catholic youth festival held in Germany in 2005 (Pfadenhauer 2010).
A question arises regarding the meanings of religious and spiritual festivals: can they be both spiritual and religious? A thorough literature search identifies tens of thousands of possible sources, more for 'religious festivals' than for 'spiritual festivals', with some overlaps. From an analysis of this literature, there appear to be identifiable thematic groupings of research, outlined later.

The first theme discusses and analyses specific religious and spiritual festivals. Some publications discuss specific Hindu festivals, including Kumbh Mela, Holi (Rao & Dutta 2012), Thaipusam (Mellor et al. 2012) and Mela (Carnegie & Smith 2006) as well as specific Hindu saints (Pechilis 2009). Others consider Muslim festivals, including Hajj (Al-Muhrzi & Alsawafi 2017; Raj & Morpeth 2015), Muharram (Rao & Dutta 2012) and Nabi Rubin (Yazbak 2011). Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian festivals are widely investigated, whether directly associated with a holy person (e.g. a saint), or a holy place, or time (Alvarado-Sizzo et al. 2017; Pena Nunez 2016; Pinho & Garofalo 2016; Viji & Shrinithivahahshini 2017). Some studies focus on specific age groups (Pfadenhauer 2010; Quezado et al. 2016), whilst others examine New Age, spiritual and syncretic festivals (Sadovina 2017; Chen 2011), along with pagan aspects (Håland 2014), animism and folk religion (Liu 2015).

A second theme assesses the ‘spiritual’ aspects of festivals, from motivations and attitudes (Raj & Morpeth 2015), to multicultural festivals which may have religious origins (Lee & Huang 2015), and festivals with or without explicit connections to religion and spirituality (Bottrorff 2015; Ross 2013). A third theme finds explicit or implicit inclusion of festival within studies of aspects of spirituality or religion: those publications that make explicit mention of religious and spiritual aspects of festivals tend to be found in specific journals, such as the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, which provides many examples and encourages such academic discussion. Additional minor themes include the study of festivals within a wider context and the de-spiritualisation of religious festivals, which would traditionally be addressed through the lens of sociology or anthropology, but which is found more recently within critical tourism (Yazbak 2011).

However, there appears to be a gap in academic discussion of religious festivals’ meanings being overtaken by cultural appropriation, such as the Hindu Holi festival, whereby a religious festival morphs into a non-spiritual, secular ‘colour run’, appropriating parts of the religious festival’s culture, actions and structure, but not its meaning.

The Hajj is the most-discussed mass participation event in academic literature, along with many Roman Catholic pilgrimages, yet events and festivals attended by the Pope attract large crowds but little research, including the largest event in papal history, which took place in Manila, Philippines in 2015, with an estimated attendance of up to seven million people (ABS-CBN News 2015).

**Future development of theory and research**

There are several areas which could usefully be researched in future. The concept of ‘eventization of faith’ proposed by Pfadenhauer (2010) could be advanced, following the process of the conceptual maturity of festivalisation. Future research might explore the spiritual experiential aspects of mainstream music festivals, through the critical event studies route. Additionally, emerging themes identified through this research that could be addressed in future research include identity, community, growth/learning/development/self-awareness, protest/hegemony and spectacle.
Whilst there has been a preponderance of quantitative analysis in recent research, the development of qualitative ethnographic approaches (Sparkes & Smith 2013) is increasing and would complement critical events research. Finally, encouraging dialogue across disciplinary boundaries through international research, with researchers from different perspectives would aid a move away from silos towards critical integrated perspectives. Engagement between new and existing academic associations could support such measures.

References


Religious and spiritual festivals & events


