

From Tourist to Pilgrim: Theological and Pastoral Challenges in the Context of the Camino de Santiago

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the current challenges to the identity of the Christian pilgrim in the face of the dynamic growth of religious tourism. The semantic inflation that results in every wanderer being described as a pilgrim implies a new configuration of pastoral care, especially in terms of responding to the perceived "consumerism of the sacred." In the context of Zygmunt Bauman's observations concerning the transformation of the pilgrim into the tourist, the article proposes a reverse type of reflection, that is, how the tourist can become a pilgrim in the reality of modern-day pilgrimage routes. The Camino de Santiago was chosen as the point of reference, and current pastoral activities – both institutional and individual – were analyzed.

Keywords Pastoral psychology \cdot Camino de Santiago \cdot Religious tourism \cdot Religious identity

Introduction

A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist. —Victor and Edith Turner

Sometimes we find it difficult to distinguish between certain products because they are similarly packaged, even though they remain completely different in their contents. One wants to get the genuine article but often receives a "counterfeit," similar in outward appearance to the "real thing" yet very different from it. This phenomenon, the "counterfeit culture," affects many areas of life—not just commerce, where it is perhaps most visible, but also pilgrimage. In the eyes of an outside observer, a pilgrim and a tourist walking along the same path behave in a similar way; they both have rucksacks and walking shoes, follow the path, interact with each other, talk, visit places of interest, and even enter historic shrines... but are they the same? What is the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist? What is the difference between walking to Częstochowa or Santiago de Compostela,

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or to other well-known shrines or holy places, and taking the tourist route to climb Ben Nevis?

It is worth noting that the tendency to confuse pilgrimage with what is "pilgrimagelike" often comes with the temptation of reductionism. Many studies cite data to the effect that practicing religious customs – for example, attending a liturgy or going on a pilgrimage (Sweeney, 2020) – helps a person feel better and achieve "wellbeing" (Brumec et al., 2023; Malis et al., 2023). Critics, however, often emphasize that the positive effects emanating from the above activities are not due to what is religious in such experiences (e.g., the spiritual practices observed during a pilgrimage) but to the anthropological mechanism itself because when people gather for any reason, positive effects on health emerge, whether the event is a liturgy, a pilgrimage, or a social visit to one's close relatives. Of course, one should be careful in fully accepting such a claim, as shown by many studies throughout history, because it is not automatically applicable, and the result is not the same in all cases. Such reductionism in perceiving the effects of grace, to put it in theological terms, often reduces pilgrimage to an outward form, which, although true, is not all that there is.

There is a saying on the Camino de Santiago that someone begins the journey as a tourist, drawn by the attractiveness of the place, the journey, and the cultural context, but often ends it as a pilgrim in Santiago de Compostela. What can we do when we meet such a tourist who is ready to become a pilgrim? To answer this question, it is first necessary to consider who "the pilgrim" is and what distinguishes them from "the tourist" and from behavior that is only outwardly associated with pilgrimage. This line of reflection – bringing out the differences between the two rather than merely focusing on the obvious commonalities – may prove crucial for the development of appropriate pastoral propositions.

Fighting the semantic inflation of "pilgrimage"

If one follows contemporary literature, one can observe a trend to label all journeys with a purpose as "pilgrimages." Visiting a football stadium ("pilgrimage to Camp Nou in Barcelona"), a musician's grave, or a place of cultural importance ("heritage pilgrimage") are all examples of activities which are increasingly being described using this word (Roszak, 2022). In this way, the term "pilgrimage" loses its theological meaning and begins to encompass many phenomena which are related only indirectly (by external similarity) to this reality, thus becoming a blurred, vague concept that escapes precise description (Bailey, 2022).

This is, after all, a key issue in any field of reflection: the correct identification of the object of study. If everything means the same thing, then no characteristics or laws can be established. Not all pilgrimage routes are the same, so it matters which way one goes. However, as Pazos (2023) notes (see also Bremer, 2006), a certain regularity can be observed in this semantic inflation; after an intense period during which the names are extended to all referents, once the point of saturation and the peak of euphoria are reached, the original, narrower meaning then returns. One can observe a similar trend in what is happening around pilgrimage today – a steady movement towards emphasizing how it "differs" from other forms of wandering. The core difference is that pilgrimage is about the hierarchy of what the pilgrim finds interesting. Pilgrimage has always contained an element of curiosity about the world, of learning about culture or food and meeting people, but the key issue remains an orientation towards the main goal – one

which cannot be overshadowed by secondary goals. Pilgrimage used to integrate these elements, but it did so according to a certain hierarchy of importance; it was an inclusive experience in its nature, without expecting the pilgrim to abandon everything and focus solely on one aspect of the journey.

The propensity to label every journey as a pilgrimage proves the popularity and positive image of the pilgrimage in the public perception but at the same time threatens to blur its essence. It is therefore necessary to discover and deepen the theology of pilgrimage, which deals with the configuration of journeys to places of worship, in order to see the *differentia specifica* (as in the classical definition), which is the soteriological orientation of the effort. In other words, pilgrimage is about doing something for the sake of salvation in the sense of a union with God that brings freedom and does not imply exclusivism. In the same way, Christian salvation incorporates the temporal experience of life, showing its meaning from the perspective of the end (*telos*), which gives significance to the "means" to this end. Therefore, in classical Christian theology, of which St. Thomas Aquinas is a representative, the sacred dimension is relational; it signifies a certain reference rather than a "place." In other words, it is not so much that the sacred can be seen as it is that everything else can be seen through the sacred. Moreover, the Christian perspective is more about the *sanctum*, related to the good and love, more interpersonal and directed toward God than about the sacrum, that are glimpses or signs of God's holiness in the world, provoking admiration and wonder (Otto, 1993; Pospieszalski, 1983; Sieradzan, 2006).

By using the philosophical categories proposed by the theory of hylomorphism (the doctrine that physical objects result from the combination of matter and form), it is possible to distinguish a material element and a formal element in every pilgrimage. The former is common to many journeys as it involves fatigue, movement, and visits to places of cultural and religious significance. And yet, it is the formal aspect that gives pilgrimage its identity; in a human being, it is the soul – as the form of the body – that shapes the distinctive arrangement of matter which constitutes that being. Transposing this to the topic of interest, the tourist may resemble the pilgrim externally (in terms of "matter"), but the motivations and the fruits ("form") are the true distinguishing factors.

The tourist seeks experiences, whereas the pilgrim seeks relationships that will change them in the perspective of becoming one with God. Therefore, the pilgrim "repeats" the journey because the relationship does not bore them, while the tourist "has already been there" and is constantly looking for new things. The tourist ticks places off their list without establishing any deeper relationship with them, effectively "consuming" (and then "excreting") them. By making a tour, that is, turning around, and by changing their routine over and over again, the tourist explores places as "attractions," thus discounting the value they hold. For the tourist, roadside shrines are an attraction, not a place of worship, which makes the whole endeavor a "second-hand" experience. The pilgrim, on the other hand, can access reality directly as a participant in it (Barnes, 2013).

Since the tourist's goal is the "experience" itself rather than what it can build up in the person, it seems legitimate to question the genuineness of that experience or even challenge the authenticity of the places that the tourist visits in order to compare them with others. In the case of the pilgrim, it is the journey that matters, but it does so on account of the destination, not the "experience"; pilgrims are not looking for themselves in these experiences but for an encounter with God. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the subjective experience of people of late modernity also includes a religious experience with its transformative power (Martinez, 2023). The pilgrim is therefore looking for meaning, seeing a "sign" of God's blessing in seemingly contradictory events and asking about the sense of that sign. The tourist wants exactly what they have planned and how they have imagined

it; thus, they are unable to open themselves to the unexpected and surprising unless it is associated with control.

From pilgrim to tourist – or vice versa?

As is the case with all scholarly reflection, the discussion of pilgrimage is exposed to a certain kind of reductionism that blinds one to the true essence of the problem. Just as man is alleged to be nothing more than a pair of neurons, pilgrims are said to be "nothing more" than tourists or wanderers. While such a description makes it easier to grasp the most important manifestations, it builds a false perception based on a single point of convergence. While it is true that the tourist shares many activities with the pilgrim, the two at the same time differ a great deal from each other because the tourist experience is different from the pilgrim experience.

This seems not to have been grasped by Zygmunt Bauman when he conducted his sociological analysis of the social transformations of postmodernism, which, in his view, led to the extinction of the "pilgrim" as a species and the emergence of several varieties of the "postpilgrim" in its place. The author reduced the latter to four categories, each of them in some way absolutizing one of the pilgrim experiences and taking it to an extreme. Isolated from one another, once they are "depressurized" they cease to form a single organism, giving life to hybrid forms. An example is the "walker," who in Bauman's view is the successor to the pilgrim but is no longer goal oriented (Bauman, 1993, 1994; Tidball, 2021). The walker no longer sees the meaning of the stages that, one by one, lead to a distant goal and instead focuses on the current event, which constitutes a closed and isolated whole. This is why Bauman's main thesis, stemming from his analysis of the postmodern context, sounded like a verdict on the pilgrim; his era – the era of the person who is aware of where they are going, knows their motivations, and consistently pursues their goal – has come to an end, giving way to the time of the walker, marked by short excursions with no impact on the walker's identity or simple collections of impressions that never get to be arranged into a single whole. In order to build something out of such scattered experiences, a shared model is needed – a definitive point of reference – which, according to Bauman, is missing in postmodern culture.

The projected – rather than observed – replacement of the "pilgrim" by the walker, gamer, vagabond, or tourist raises the question of whether an opposite perspective is possible, that is, whether this movement is bidirectional. Today, there is a lot of talk about the so-called anatheism (Platovnjak & Svetelj, 2018), that is, returning to God after various experiences of breakdown of one's past faith. Is it possible to speak of an "ana-pilgrim," a tourist (in Bauman's sense of the word) who has become a pilgrim again? This, in turn, leads to another question: How much of a pilgrim is there in the contemporary tourist (Podemski, 2013)?

In order to answer the above question, however, it is first necessary to make note of the broad descriptions of the tourist experience and their systematizations that appear in contemporary research (Cohen, 1979). Following Cohen, it is worth pointing out several types of the contemporary tourist and relating them to the pilgrim. One type is the "recreational tourist," who is looking for variety. Another is the "experience seeker," who does not rebel against the dominant cultural narrative but seeks their own goals. This type differs from the pilgrim in that the latter seeks the centers of their own religion, while the tourist searches outside their own circle but only observes and does not get involved. Yet another type is the "experimental tourist"; this one engages with the foreign world by way of trial and error. An example of such tourism could be, for example, for a Christian to experience living in a Buddhist environment with all its practices and rituals. This is very rare as a rule, but if it means adopting the above way of functioning, that is, moving away from one's own reference point for

identity (with which everything else is compared), then we are dealing with an "existential tourist." This individual has already found a new center for their life and is, in a way, "living in exile" in relation to their previous environment.

The post-pilgrimage "consumer" and piety

The presence of the ubiquitous tourist experience -a diverse one, as described in the previous paragraph – introduces a new element into pilgrimage that competes for the pilgrim's favor: an attempt to format the same experiences but along different lines than in the case of pilgrimage. This process can be observed on contemporary pilgrimage routes, which are now subject to strong "touristification." What this term means is the reduction of the pilgrimage experience to tangible tourist benefits, considering it in terms of "product" and "sales," and presenting pilgrimage only through the lens of the tourist attractions to be "ticked off the list." Touristification means translating the pilgrimage experience by using a new language, avoiding religious references, and construing pilgrimage as "nothing more than" tourism. However, as Professor Jesus Tanco points out, this "nothing-but-ness" is a manifestation of commercialization and indicates that a new subject is being born under the old slogans: the post-pilgrim, who is characterized by a consumerist attitude towards the content of the pilgrimage (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). The post-pilgrim knows no language other than commercialism and therefore interprets everything along these lines. It must take a long time before they understands the inadequacy of this way of describing the experience, and helping them to see that inadequacy is certainly useful in restoring the meaning of pilgrimage.

In his classic work *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson notes that "religion in our time has been overtaken by a tourist mentality." According to Peterson,

it is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. . . . In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness. (Peterson, 2000, pp. 15–16)

In discussing the identity of the pilgrim, it remains crucial to take proper account of the presence of tourist motifs, which – after all – are still present in the pilgrimage experience. This is not a question of eliminating the cognitive experience altogether since there has always been an element of "curiosity" (or, as we would say today, "tourism") in pilgrimage. However, it has to be noted that it was not predominant and that it was subordinated to the fundamental religious motivation connected with visiting a holy place, regaining freedom from sin through penance, and thus achieving salvation in a process initiated by the experience of pilgrimage.

It is also worth noting that in addition to the restoration of balance, another element differentiates past and modern pilgrimage, which is its repetitiveness. In the past, a pilgrimage to far-away shrines was generally undertaken once in a lifetime and left a deep mark on the pilgrim. Today, the same experience may be lost among a multiplicity of memories, so the pastoral effort should focus on "retaining" the experience and relating it to the effects that it has had on the pilgrim. The self-actualization that pilgrims experience on the Camino de Santiago – as mentioned in empirical studies and confirmed by surveys among *hospitaleros* ("hosts"; Seryczyńska et al., 2022) and by analyses of the blessings and forms of pilgrim devotion created today on the Camino (Roszak & Seryczyńska, 2020) – relates to the change that takes place in the pilgrim through the realization of the religious dimension. The individualization of the pilgrimage route, which manifests itself, for example, in the way in which confraternities take care of the pilgrims (if only through applications and by providing company on the way), has become the basis for a new pastoral phase on the Camino. This type of approach seeks to bring about conversion – sometimes in a way that can be compared to gradually "raising the temperature" to the boiling point, for example by arranging specific situations or suggesting quotations from Scripture – through an open church or through other people. In other words, it is about putting up signs that will remind the pilgrim of their identity and demand a response in freedom, not intrusively but by exposing the pilgrim to meaningful content.

Frank Fahey (2002) points to eight distinctive features that distinguish the tourist from the pilgrim and relate to differences in experiencing the journey itself. The pilgrim is configured by faith (1), by the conviction that life has meaning and that the pilgrimage helps one discover the full perspective of life's mysteries. Another essential element is penance (2), which is defined as a willingness to change one's heart, to let go of what stands in the way, which means that the pilgrimage can be a painful experience. Pilgrims also differ from tourists in their approach to the community (3), since they do not choose a companion for the journey and instead welcome everyone they encounter on the way. The pilgrim is also heading for a sacred space (4), which is synonymous with an encounter with God and takes both the exterior form of a shrine and the form of hidden spiritual places in the landscape of the world, reminiscent of rivers that have underground beds in some sections. Ritual expression (5) of one's identity is another characteristic of the pilgrim, and so is the votive attitude (6), that is, the offering of sufferings and difficulties associated with the transformation of one's existence. Pilgrimage is also an experience of being able to stop and celebrate, to take joy in the experiences that one has had (7). The last feature is the absence of the "from-to" mentality typical of the tourist; the pilgrim knows that they are beginning a journey which is never over and demands perseverance (8).

It seems that the recipe for overcoming the consumerist approach to pilgrimage may be to restore the original meaning of the term *pietas* ("piety") that characterized pilgrimages in medieval times (Turner & Turner, 1978). Importantly, however, piety - which constitutes the main motivation of pilgrimage (with the phrase *pietatis causa* appearing as a motive on the document that confirms one's arrival at, for example, the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela) and distinguishes it from tourism – is not a matter of the actual presence of a certain group of gestures or words that qualify as "pious" (Mróz, 2019; Roszak & Gutowski, 2021). Rather, reference should be made to the virtue of piety, which according to Thomas Aquinas is part of the cardinal virtue of justice and which, as he explained, consists in having a proper relation to those who are the source of our life: the family, society, and God. This entails ordering one's actions in such a way that they lead to God as the ultimate goal, a goal to which all the means leading to it are subordinated. Thus, in a pilgrim, piety means a reorganization and selfactualization of the essential existential references. Supporting the pilgrim in finding the transcendent dimension in the experience of pilgrimage, that is, the glimpses of another world that reach a person in the reality of the journey, is a valuable pastoral aid in the discovery of one's own identity.

A pastoral approach – how to make a pilgrim out of the tourist?

In discovering the differences between the pilgrim and the tourist, one should not look for different types of behavior but rather for a new frame of reference in which the same qualities play different roles. This entails changing the entire intellectual and existential "framework," which makes it an experience close to the biblical metanoia. This Greek term, translated as "conversion," does not mean a minor improvement in a small area but a transformation of one's way of thinking, a revision of intellectual categories, and an orientation towards "discovering" instead of "ticking checkboxes" (Kotecki, 2010). In the process of discovering, in turn, there is no guarantee that one will always find everything; instead, there is a risk which implies the existence of an inner path of freedom in the pilgrim. One may choose not to discover, that is, to close oneself off and not take up the heritage. Indeed, the pilgrim is characterized by a certain potential which the pilgrimage discharges in a certain way (Roszak, 2011). Examples of pastoral activities that enhance such discovery can be found in abundance on today's Camino de Santiago routes. Therefore, it is worth identifying some pastoral themes that are helpful in supporting the pilgrim on this path, using the efforts undertaken by various institutions (confraternities, parishes, associations, regional governments) or by individual pilgrims as a reference.

Institutional action

Recent years have seen a certain resurgence of involvement by institutions associated with the Catholic church which are now attempting to work together to create a theological framework for pilgrim-centered initiatives. The theological basis for these initiatives is the "welcoming" of strangers and visitors as a way of imitating God Godself, who welcomes every person and invites them into Trinitarian communion. This is why the name of the association that traces its roots to meetings of pilgrims who have completed the French Way (the main route to Santiago starting from Roncesvalles and still the most popular among pilgrims) contains the phrase *acogida cristiana*, "Christian welcome," which describes the manner of receiving pilgrims at an *albergue* ("hostel") that is proper to those who live the Gospel. The organization in question – Acogida Cristiana en el Camino (ACC) – works to integrate under a common framework individual parish *albergues* or confraternities that have so far operated in a dispersed manner. The organization's annual meetings and congresses aim to develop specific practices for those on the pilgrimage route to help them become pilgrims, which is not a one-off event but a process that comprises many stages.

ACC's assistance in building the pilgrim identity involves paying special attention to how each pilgrim is received when they finally reach the hostel after completing another stage of the journey. This is not only about adopting a psychological approach but also about ensuring that the relationship with the other person stems from having an experience of God and from following God. The "welcome" given to, and the first interaction with, the visitor at the threshold of the *albergue* is an evangelization opportunity that can make the tourist a pilgrim. This welcome subliminally conveys whether one is wanted or not; it "formats" the visit and provides the interpretative keys that help the pilgrim understand their relationships with others, the structure of the hostel, its customs, etc. As ACC notes, when a person comes to stay and is given shelter in the broad sense of the word (spiritual, sacramental, and liturgical), it is both a unique moment in the pilgrimage and a key step in the tourist-to-pilgrim transformation. A supporting experience is the provision of complete information about liturgical celebrations in the parish community. An information package created and given to the pilgrim (whether on paper or online) becomes a "pastoral map" that helps involve the pilgrim in specific activities that they consider appropriate for their piety.

Confraternities of St. James are also part of the equation when it comes to transforming the tourist into a pilgrim as they offer to further the veneration of Apostle James rather than promote the Camino de Santiago itself. This seems crucial in sports and tourism endeavors, which gain a proper framework for the interpretation of the effort through reference to the apostle. Another consideration is the fact that organizing events on the Camino is not equivalent to promoting pilgrimage, as has been noted in the case of certain promotional campaigns for the Camino that highlight the route itself, separate from its religious references, and disregard the apostle. Reorienting the Camino towards the apostle, his tomb, and his intercession; helping pilgrims determine their pilgrimage intentions; or offering the effort of walking some stages of the route for specific spiritual purposes (thus bringing back the classical idea of *votae (vows)* or *suffragia (votes)* offered to God that was present, for example, in medieval theology as a motivation to make a pilgrimage) – all these initiatives help to infuse the tourist experience with traits of pilgrimage.

Individual action

Regarding the activities or forms of conduct that every traveler can undertake on a personal level in order for the journey to gain or regain the character of a pilgrimage, it is worth pointing out those that bring one into the unique experience inherent in pilgrimage. Such activities may also be carried out by others who would like to assist a person met on the pilgrimage route in their transformation.

According to pilgrims' accounts, the experience of hardship has often been helpful in realizing the pilgrimage character of the journey. Embracing this character – rather than suppressing it – offers a chance to be reminded of the purpose of the journey, namely growth, which is achieved by making choices and overcoming difficulties. In this way, awareness of the purpose triggers a creative approach to the events that fill each day and raises questions concerning the "transcendent meaning" that goes beyond immediate benefit or convenience. As a rule, the tourist eliminates difficulties (Rountree, 2002), and if they accept them, it is because the experience of struggle must translate into a direct benefit. Conversely, in pilgrimage, hardship is an opportunity to purify one's motivation and adopt a proper spiritual configuration.

Questions about intentions, expectations, or relationships can be helpful in strengthening a pilgrim's motivation. By asking those encountered on the way questions such as why they are making the journey, what made them undertake the pilgrimage, how it started, etc., one can trigger an avalanche of reflections and behavioral adjustments and make the other person switch to "pilgrim mode." Not surprisingly, many pastoral aids – such as the spiritual guide (*Guía Espiritual*) prepared by the Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela for the Holy Year 2021/2022 – focus on asking deep questions rather than simply providing content. Unleashing the contemplative potential seems to be the goal of such activities, and the resulting capacity to contemplate, that is, to go beyond information in order to discover its deep meaning and touch the fullness of truth, is a characteristic feature of the pilgrim, standing in stark opposition to the superficiality and expeditiousness inherent in tourism. Indeed, pilgrimage puts the soul in direct contact with God, and the assistance provided is meant to foster this contact,

which is sometimes mediated by art or nature but nevertheless requires an awareness of God's presence.

For Peter Brown, this has been one of the main aims of spiritual journeys to holy places that have sought to enable Christians to experience *praesentia* ("presence") since antiquity (Brown, 1981). This has involved making sacrifices and devoting a considerable amount of time to develop a spiritual sensibility that allows the most important experiences not to be overlooked. The sacramental presence of the sacred – a presence that refers one back to God – was the goal of the practice. At the opposite pole from such an attitude is the pretentiousness of the pilgrim, who demands and expects and thus becomes a consumer of the sacred rather than someone who opens themself to it. The difference is subtle, like that between eating and binge eating, which are similar activities that differ fundamentally in their "measure" and "purpose." By evaluating everything by the person's own measure, that is, by the measure of themself and their own worth, the tourist puts themself at the center – in contrast to the pilgrim, for whom God is the central figure.

Conclusions

We live in an age in which it is difficult to distinguish clearly between phenomena and attitudes. Our time is marked by an emotional turn that manifests itself in the increased significance of emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences in various aspects of life, including spirituality and society (Mróz & Mróz, 2013). In the spirit of the prevailing reductionism, we reduce everything to one thing in search of a specific explanation (usually materialistic) which still does not provide a full understanding. This was already known to the early Christians, who differed from their contemporaries not in something external but in their internal approach or attitude, in their way of using worldly goods.

Thus, in view of the progressing touristification of pilgrimage, it is worth pointing out the measures that help sustain the pilgrim identity. These involve first discovering what differentiates the pilgrim from the tourist (Bailey, 2023), then defining the theology of pilgrimage (i.e., assessing its soteriological value), and finally revealing the different stages that make up the pilgrimage experience (Nelson-Becket et al., 2023). The main pastoral effort is to show the purpose of the journey, which can be achieved by developing the veneration of the saints, celebrating the sacraments and the rituals of pilgrimage, and building up the spirituality of the pilgrim, a subject which is yet to be explored in depth. The challenge remains to discover the "measure" that makes one seek not what is merely useful but what is valuable in itself. In view of the above, pilgrimage is a certain order (*ordo*) that is not founded on material originality – as the experiences of the pilgrim and the tourist may be similar – but on the relationship between the parts. Ordering means giving shape to and fulfilling deep desires, which is perhaps the visible effect of any pilgrimage.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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