

Space, Sanctity and Service; the English Cathedral as *heterotopia*

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ABSTRACT

The 43 Anglican Diocesan cathedrals in England attract in excess of 30 million tourist visitors per year, but also function as museums, centres for pilgrimage and foci for the performing arts. This paper examines the complex nature of the experience offered by cathedrals to their visitors, which often generates difficulties associated with sites that may be viewed as interfaces between the sacred and the profane. It also identifies the problems presented by the requirement to earn revenue from visitors (especially by charging admission) when still offering facilities for worship, prayer or meditation. The model adopted is Foucault's concept of sacred space as *heterotopia* (a ritual space that exists out of time). It is argued that difficulties over admissions charges are not simply straightforward reluctance to pay up, but intrinsically related to the nature of the spiritual experience expected and received by visitors to cathedrals, whether consciously or not. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

The nature of the experience offered by a cathedral to its visitors is highly complex; being both intangible and including elements such as nostalgia, a closeness to God, 'atmosphere' and the gaining of spiritual merit, on which it is impossible to put a monetary value (Eliade, 1981). Cathedrals are also in the business of providing visitor services (literally as well as metaphorically), although their core business remains the provision of a focus and facility for those who wish to worship, pray or meditate. However, revenue from visitors is vital to the maintenance of cathedral fabric and facilities (Binney and Hanna, 1979) although the generation of such revenue (whether by donation or admissions fee) is highly controversial. This paper discusses issues surrounding the need to maintain the 'spirit of place' within a cathedral although still generating adequate revenue, exploring the idea of sacred space as *heterotopia* (a ritual space that exists out of time) (Foucault, 1986) as its conceptual basis. This paper will argue that difficulties over admissions charges are not simply straightforward reluctance to pay up, but intrinsically related to the nature of the spiritual experience expected and received by visitors to cathedrals, whether consciously or not. In earlier times, visiting a cathedral meant an encounter with the holy, and a visitor experience that might include a call to move beyond the self. The vast majority of today's cultural tourists do not have such motivations, but part of the challenge of managing visitors to cathedrals lies in difficulties associated with an interface between the sacred and the profane (MacCannell, 1992).

When a cathedral becomes a tourist attrac-

Table 1. The ten most-visited cathedrals in 1998 (source: ETB, 1998)

Ranking	Cathedral	Visitors	Charges?
1	Westminster Abbey ^a	3m	Free ^a
2	York Minster	2	Free
3	Canterbury	1.5	charge
4	St Paul's	1.09	charge
5	Chester	1	Free
6	Salisbury	800 000	Free
7	Norwich	540 000	Free
8	Truro	500 000	Free
9	Durham	466 559	Free
10	Exeter	460 000	Free

^a Westminster Abbey is a 'Royal Peculiar' and instituted admissions charges in March 1998.

tion its visitors are not necessarily drawn from any Christian tradition, yet may greatly outnumber regular worshippers (Vuonic, 1996). The 43 Anglican Diocesan cathedrals in England attract in excess of 30 million tourist visitors per year, but also function as museums, centres for pilgrimage and foci for the performing arts, as well as bearing tangible witness to more than 1500 years of England's Christian heritage. Running a cathedral is expensive. Few English cathedrals have an operating budget of less than £500 000/year with which to fund the conservation and management of a complex building as well as provide a wide range of services for visitors, pilgrims and worshippers. It is not surprising that cathedrals look to their visitors as sources of extra income. Charging for admission to cathedrals is currently a most contentious issue, and some cathedrals have substituted systems of voluntary donations or charges for special exhibitions. Visiting a cathedral should be an emotive experience and its management has to preserve that elusive quality referred to as 'spirit of place' when catering for the frequently conflicting demands of worshippers and visitors (Brown and Loades, 1995).

People visit cathedrals for many reasons (Winter and Gasson, 1996). Some are seeking a life-changing experience, others merely somewhere to while away a wet afternoon. Some wish to worship, others to marvel or just to explore. Cathedrals form a major peg in the urban tourism industry and a most significant element in Britain's cultural heritage (Nolan and Nolan, 1992). They are one of the few

categories of visitor attraction to show sustained growth in visitor numbers over the last decade, although growth has not been systematic. The Chapter House at Westminster Abbey is a case in point. Westminster Abbey is technically not an English cathedral because it is a 'Royal Peculiar' under direct Crown control, but is included for reference in this discussion, and increased its visitation by more than 20% (from 95 546 in 1998 to 115 233 in 1999). Table 1 shows the most recent list of visitation to cathedrals and greater churches. It is immediately possible to see a correlation between cathedral visitation and the proximity of the building to major domestic holiday areas (Chester, Truro and Norwich).

MANAGING THE ENGLISH CATHEDRAL

Cathedrals and tourism

Part of the diversification of the late twentieth century quest for religious experience included a resurgence of interest in visiting sacred sites, which can be measured not only by increased visitation to cathedrals and churches but also by increased numbers of people involved in pilgrimage and religious retreats, both in the UK and Europe. It is estimated that 3.5 million pilgrims visit Santiago de Compostela each year (Bywater, 1994), but this is only a fraction of the 12 million ordinary tourists who visit the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris each year, making it the most popular tourism attraction in Europe (Shackley, 2001). No English cathedral

yet exceeds 3.5 million visitors per year, but managing the existing volumes of visitors presents immense challenges, not least in balancing the need to conserve the cathedral fabric with the provision of a high quality experience for the visitor. ICOMOS-UK have recently carried out a survey of visitor management at cathedrals (ICOMOS-UK, 2001) updating the work of Hanna (1992) and estimate that 31 million visits were made to cathedrals and greater churches in the UK in 1999.

A cathedral performs many functions, including being a place of witness to a value system, a location permitting an encounter with the numinous and an interesting artefact in its own right. It often contains great works of art and may be architecturally significant. Its size, grandeur and splendour also make it a major visitor attraction. A cathedral is seldom an isolated node of activity, being usually surrounded by supplementary buildings such as minor churches and shrines, as well as by various types of visitor facility. Not all cathedrals are ancient; Coventry Cathedral, for example, was rebuilt after the bombing of the city in World War II and is visited partly for its unique architecture and partly for familiar artefacts including the Graham Sutherland tapestry. Most, but not all, English cathedrals function as the heart of an urban tourism industry and in some locations, such as York, the existence of a cathedral and associated sites has acted as catalyst for the development of newer, purpose-built visitor attractions that capitalise on the visitors attracted to older historic sites.

Generating revenue

A major investigation into the running of English cathedrals was carried out in 1994 and published as the report 'Heritage and Renewal' (Central Board of Finance of the Church of England, 1994), widely known as the 'Howe Report'. Since that time, there have been major changes to the way in which cathedrals are managed as a result of the 1999 Cathedrals Measure, but this has not affected their role as major foci for the cultural tourism industry (Borg *et al.*, 1996). Cathedrals remain underfunded visitor attractions with

enormous annual maintenance bills and few opportunities for generating revenue from visitors. Continuous maintenance is expensive, as cathedrals are less than optimally organised and resourced for the functions they are expected to perform in the modern world. A small cathedral, such as Southwell Minster in Nottinghamshire, receives less than 25% of its operating budget from the Church Commissioners. Other sources of income may include revenue from investments or property, but the cathedral still needs to find a means of meeting a substantial shortfall. Revenue from visitors, whether direct (by admissions charges) or indirect (e.g. from shop franchising) provides a potential method. Most cathedrals without a fixed charge request a £2.50 donation and receive around 30–40 pence per visitor. It is scarcely surprising that many have resorted to compulsory admissions fees, although these are almost universally resented. During late 2000 English Heritage announced only £2.5 million of grants for cathedral repairs, with the largest sum (£407000) to fund work on the roof, masonry and cloister at Salisbury. However, had the government given these successful visitor attractions an extra £75 million (or just 2.5% of the estimated £3 billion annual tax revenue from tourism) the backlog of repairs could be cleared in 10 years instead of the estimated 60 years that it will take at the present rate of grants.

Instituting a charging system in a cathedral also means calculating what discounts or free access must be given to local people, how access for worshippers is maintained and how to provide visitors, who have now become customers, with value for money. In cathedrals where an admissions charge has been implemented there is always a pay perimeter, located beyond an area where worship or prayer can take place. Lincoln Cathedral has recently adjusted its pay perimeter so that visitors entering the building are able to get an excellent overview and panorama of the nave for free. They are also able to enter a small chapel reserved for prayer, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, and gain access to the cathedral bookshop without charge, but cathedral catering is within the charging zone. Some areas in the cathedral are no-go areas, reserved either for staff, administrative or storage use,

or for sacramental purposes. In order to implement a single admissions central charge Lincoln cathedral has removed the previous system of charging for admission to ancillary attractions such as Treasury or Library. Selective charges also can be used to manipulate the flow of visitors round a cathedral. At York Minster access to the main Minster building is free, but visitors are charged for access to fragile parts of the site such as the crypt, foundations and central tower. York Minster attracts 3 million visitors per year, but by this policy of selective charging the numbers visiting the more sensitive locations has been reduced to 170 000, significantly reducing the levels of wear and tear in the stone staircases linking the Minster with its crypt tower and foundations.

Within the world of secular visitor attractions the greatest challenge to site managers is usually trying to optimise visitor numbers in order to minimise adverse impact, and maximise the possibility of generating income. As they usually wish to recover a substantial percentage of operating costs from visitor-related revenue, there usually is a direct correlation between visitor numbers and visitor revenue – at least in the private sector. The situation within a cathedral is very similar, although its management is complicated by the need to cater for diverse customer bases including tourists and worshippers whose requirements may be very different. Life is usually made additionally difficult by not-for-profit motivations that compete with the need to generate revenue for the management and conservation of such an expensive historic site. Some cathedrals have taken a creative approach to revenue generation, such as Gloucester Cathedral, which is about to feature as a location in the film version of the popular children's book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Gloucester apparently won the contract with Warner Brothers after beating off stiff competition from Canterbury and Salisbury, and it seems likely that the fee will be substantial. A certain level of moral flexibility has certainly been required from the Dean and Chapter because the Harry Potter books have been criticised for stirring up an unhealthy interest in witchcraft. Gloucester has previously been the location for the BBC's

adaptation of Joanna Trollope's novel *The Choir* in 1995, which used congregation members as extras.

VISITORS TO CATHEDRALS

Visitor experience and behaviour

Visitors to cathedrals may be divided into two basic groups; those whose primary motivation is religious, and the far larger group of those whose motive is heritage tourism. The primary motivation for a visit, both from worshippers and tourists, centres on the issue of visitor experience, how the site conveys its spiritual message, its 'spirit of place'. Cultural change and cultural distance condition many aspects of visitor experience at cathedrals (Berger and Norman, 1995). Fifty years ago, for example, most visitors would themselves have been regular worshippers, and the nuances of dress and office visible within the premises would have been familiar in a way that they are not to contemporary visitors. Dress, vestments, lights, incense, smells, colour and ceremonial add greatly to the quality of visitor experience at a cathedral, and visitors are themselves components of the experience that it offers (Carmichael *et al.*, 1994). Many contemporary church cathedral visitors are unaware of previously accepted behaviour norms such as keeping their voices down and behaving reverently inside a cathedral (Jackson and Henrie, 1983). Wright (1966) invented the word 'geopiety' to refer to the recognition of certain areas as sacred, meaning devotion and loyalty towards a perceived sacred space, such as a cathedral. This perception of sanctity is central to the idea as sacred space exists only for those who know its characteristics and the reason for its delineation. This is at the root of many problems associated with the management of cathedrals. Although the premises are recognised as sacred by the worshipping community, who behave accordingly, tourists may not perceive them as sacred and behave in an inappropriate manner, creating tensions that provide interesting dilemmas for site managers. Christian cathedrals, for example, traditionally impose a basic dress code that bans the wearing of revealing tops, beachwear and shorts (at least for women). Many con-

temporary visitors are unaware of such unwritten rules and feel that, if they are not believers, they should not be subject to the same rules.

Complex models of travel behaviour have been constructed which attempt to assess the factors influencing consumer decision-making behaviour, as well as those affecting the quality of the experience. Much of the literature of consumer behaviour (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999) either measures satisfaction against expectation, or against actual experience. Satisfaction is defined as a holistic emotional response to a situation or event that matches or exceeds expectations (Ryan, 1997). Classifying the motivation of cathedral visitors and assessing the quality of their experience is complicated, because both include qualitative elements such as 'a sense of the numinous' or a 'spirit of place'. In practice the distinction between those who visit a cathedral as tourists and those who come to worship is far from clear-cut. The writer's own observations suggest that around a quarter of all visitors to a cathedral light a candle, which could be construed as an act of worship. Many also pause to listen to the brief prayers that are said in many cathedrals for a couple of minutes on the hour.

Although excessive numbers of visitors may adversely affect the fabric of a cathedral (by theft, vandalism, graffiti, erosion, etc.), as well as diminishing the quality of the experience of visitors by excessive noise, and crowding, visitors undeniably make a positive economic input into cathedral finances. The crowding issue is especially difficult to manage. Westminster Abbey, for example, receives 3 million visitors per year—an astonishing total of 16000 visitors each busy day. Its strategic location resulted in its having become, for international visitors, more of a meeting place than a church, where visitors talking and milling about upset worshippers. This had destroyed the spiritual atmosphere of the cathedral. In 1998 the cathedral developed a programme called 'Recovering the Calm' (<http://www.westminster-abbey.org>), which employed the techniques of visitor flow management and zoning to reduce crowding by moving visitors along a predetermined route eastwards from the North Transept,

including the historic cloisters, and leading to the Nave before exiting via the Great West Door. A new 'welcome' leaflet was produced, together with revised sound guides in several languages and the option of taking a tour with the Abbey's vergers. Guided tours were strictly limited to 26 visitors per guide, and an attempt made to space out the parties. A £5 admission charge has been levied in a bid to discourage the unmotivated, justified by the fact that charges had already been instituted at St Paul's and Canterbury Cathedral, and that visitors to Westminster Abbey had always paid for access to particular areas such as the royal chapels. The new strategy has resulted in the abbey becoming much quieter, with noise levels reduced by 50%. Tourists seem to value the calm and space of the Abbey, which provides an opportunity for reflection and prayer. The programme seems to be working as both visitor and worshipper numbers are rising.

The English cathedral as heterotopia

The rise in the numbers of visitors to English cathedrals comes at a time when Anglican worshipping communities are declining in numbers. This raises the issue of whether visiting a cathedral is just another piece of cultural tourism, or whether the visit is in some way becoming a substitute for attendance at church services. Identity is a problem in a society where the individual is often no longer part of a stable social network. The resulting search for meaning can take place in a number of ways, including both the pursuit of consumption (Belk *et al.*, 1989; O'Guinn and Belk, 1989) and also the search for religious experience (Berger, 1992). This can involve an unfocused 'New Age' spirituality but also can be a reversion to organised religion and the safety of traditional religious practices, which bind individuals to group identity and reinforce community bonds. For some people, joining a church community and becoming a regular worshipper is a manifestation of this phenomenon. Yet both cathedral and church worshipping communities in the UK are declining, at exactly the same time as tourist numbers are rapidly increasing. More than 50 million visits are made annually to English

parish churches, and 30 million to cathedrals. It is tempting to suggest that in today's pressured world some people are seeking a quick-fix spiritual experience by being a temporary tourist entering a place of worship for a transient, but none the less significant, encounter with the numinous. This phenomenon does not account exclusively for the tourist interest in cathedrals, but must be taken together with the growth of the day-trip and short-break market and the popularity of heritage and cultural tourism attractions that have consistently increased market share at the expense of purpose-built visitor attractions. Special interest holidays account for only 8% of breaks taken in the UK during 2000, but new trends include breaks themed around cultural attractions, antiques, food and gardens, sometimes developed in partnership with hotel chains and marketed over the internet. At least one English cathedral is already investigating this possibility. Spending on day-trips has increased by 48% between 1994 and 1998 to a total of more than £65 billion (ETC, 2001), with the short-break market especially to cities increasing to 34.7 million trips in 1999.

The cathedral as heritage tourism attraction is also sacred space, identified as such by the majority of its visitors even if they do not know the correct means of behaviour and are unable to articulate the significance of its seeming immutability as a component of their experience. It becomes important that the cathedral appears to be untouched by the modern world, even if in practical terms this is romantic but impossible as the building will have been continually modified since its construction. The tourist, however, sees it as a space to be preserved rather than used, to be gazed upon but not changed (Urry, 1990). Thus, when attempts are made to radicalise the use of that space, whether by the physical modification of the site or by the introduction of charging, a dissonance arises. Exactly the same phenomenon is seen at any sacred site when attempts are made to modify it by the addition, subtraction or alteration of a feature, perhaps to allow for some more contemporary use or the changing nature of a worshipping community. Because the space has become something to be gazed at, a space to be preserved intact much like a painting, the idea of altering

the frame or adding a few more strokes of paint is generally fiercely opposed. This partly accounts for the controversy surrounding admissions charges. The experience of visiting a sacred site, even when one is not actively involved in its 'ownership' undeniably inculcates a sense of history and tradition, a grounding in a particular belief system, which the casual visitor can reject or convert into worship.

The cathedral allows its visitors to rediscover the joys of ancient space. The echoing, dark, cavernous and mysterious interior of a cathedral divorces the visitors from the external (real) world by allowing them temporary entry into another world where the sense of time is lost and the visitor removed from the constraints of their day to day life. Contemporary humanity has a fear of chaos, produced as a result of modernisation when both society and human relationships may be temporary. Ritual space, *sensu strictu*, should divorce the participant from his/her surroundings so that the space becomes complete on its own, achieving a sense of timelessness (or perhaps timefullness) in which all sense of time is collapsed into a particular time-frame. It is this sense of timefullness that visitors to sacred space remark on but are unable to describe, which creates a powerful 'spirit of place' that affects visitors, and is affected by them. Foucault (1986) developed the term *heterotopia* for such ritual spaces, commenting that 'There also exist, and this is probably true for all cultures and all civilizations, real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other arrangements that can be found within society are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.' (Foucault, 1986, p. 15). To penetrate a *heterotopia* needs special permission and takes place after performing a certain number of gestures. Gatekeepers control access to such sites, but the rules for access are generally well known. However, when these rules are changed (perhaps by the introduction of a pay perimeter) or when the nature of access to the site is altered, both observer and

site user become concerned and uncomfortable. The sacred *heterotopia* exists out of time; attempts to lock it within a temporal framework and manage it as a business are doomed to failure. Sacred space is complete and self-referencing; a system composed solely through signification of itself (Baudrillard, 1988), which creates nostalgia through 'a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality 'creating' a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 170). This is analogous to Foucault's final characteristic of *heterotopia*, 'creating a space of illusion that reveals how all real space is more illusory' (Foucault, 1986, p. 17). The space offers compensation to those whose identity and history cannot be found or experienced in the realm of everyday life (Delaney, 1992).

It may be that part of the public's reluctance to accept the imposition of admissions charges to cathedrals stems not from inherent meanness but from some deeper reason, intrinsically related to visitor motivation. Part of the mystery of a cathedral as *heterotopia* is its otherness, its removal from the world of time constraints and commerce. Charging for admission brings the visitor down to earth because he or she is unable to place a spiritual and temporal perimeter around the site. This becomes confusing because the site no longer represents a space apart from the everyday world, but merely an extension of it. The cathedral loses its otherness and both visitor and visited become uncomfortable. It has been interesting to note, in recent years, the increasing popularity of houses of religion as place of retreat and even as training grounds for battle-weary businessmen. This phenomenon is matched by an emergent literature of business texts drawing on the sacred as a means of interpreting the values of the modern world, and changing them. There is a long tradition in anthropology of the structural examination of events and institutions as markers of the passage of natural and social stages in life. This stems partly from Durkheim's (1911) notion of the contrast between the sacred (the non-ordinary) experience, and the profane. The alternation of these states, and the importance of the transition between them, was first used in the last century in various

analyses of the almost universal rituals that emphasised the process of leaving the ordinary, whether for a long time (as a pilgrimage) or a short visit to a cathedral.

Many cathedral visitors are seeking an experience to change them, but not all are seeking that experience for the same reasons. The managers of cathedrals have to cater for this need while avoiding bringing the attendee down to earth. The experience essentially should be spiritual, uncontaminated by technical and commercial realities. This is easier said than done, bearing in mind the difficult financial position of most cathedrals, yet it seems clear that the function of the cathedral as a visitor attraction is to offer its visitor a glimpse of the numinous. The challenge is managing (and profiting from) the large numbers of visitors who seek exactly that experience without altering its essential nature. Let us hope that cathedrals can continue to remain islands of spirituality in an increasingly secular world.

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