

# The unexpected road to spirituality via volunteer tourism

Anne Zahra

## SUMMARY

*This paper explores the volunteer tourist experience that unexpectedly led to a long-lasting spiritual experience. The paper fills a gap in the tourism literature in linking international volunteering and the spiritual experience.*

*Empirical data is presented in the form of narratives from six volunteer tourists who participated in three-to four-week overseas volunteering project in their youth. Their stories and experiences are being passed on a number of years after participating in the project. The nature of the projects was welfare/development work, organised by secular NGOs in marginalised and poor communities in Asia and the Pacific.*

*The researcher has been associated with volunteer tourism participants and projects for the past 18 years. The researcher knew the narrators personally and they were invited to relate their experiences because they had little or no exposure to religion and would not have called themselves spiritual prior to their volunteering experience. The narratives focus on the spiritual experiences, epiphany, the search for meaning and transcendence, the impact of the experiences and their lasting effects.*

*The paper examines what is meant by the constructs spiritual and religious, how these terms have come to be used in tourism literature, and how the findings in this study have implications for future research in this area and the postmodern paradigm. It concludes that the spiritual experience can be complex, intimate and personal, and researchers may need to develop relationships with subjects based on mutual trust if they are seeking to identify particular experiences rather than general spiritual experiences.*

### **Key words:**

*volunteer tourism; spirituality, religion, narrative methodology, postmodernism*

## INTRODUCTION

This empirical paper provides an account of meaningful, long-lasting spiritual experiences of six young people during a three-week overseas volunteer tourism project. Their motivations were travel and volunteering. They did not go seeking the spiritual; however, a myriad of experiences led them to discover the spiritual dimension.

The main objective of the paper is to explore the research question posed by Devereux (2003: 138): "What [spiritual] transformations have occurred within individuals that have a lasting effect in everyday life and what triggered them?" The central question in this study being: What triggered the spiritual transformation?

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Was it the host community and their spiritual/religious values and culture; the volunteer tourists reflection and evaluation of their life juxtaposed against the lifestyles of the people they were meeting or was it that their western secular and materialistic society and the post-modern condition that left them empty and the volunteer tourism experience filled this vacuum? This paper also analysed the volunteer tourists views to spirituality prior to their trip and their new found spirituality in the context of their post volunteer tourism experience.

Secondary objectives are: examining the nexus between volunteer tourism and spirituality; a discourse on the distinction between the spiritual and the religious; and the importance of the relationship between the researcher and participant when exploring deep, intimate experiences through narratives and the implications this has on research methodologies used for experiential research. Two separate, yet united dimensions are presented in this paper. Empirical evidence gathered through narrative methodology and the theoretical dimension offering “empirically grounded analysis and social critique” (Chase 2005: 670).

The first section considers the literature on volunteer tourism and spirituality and identifies a gap in the literature linking these two areas. The next section describes the narrative research methodology used to gather, present and analyse the data. This is then followed by the narratives of the volunteer tourists voicing their recollections prior to the volunteer tourism experience and their attitudes towards spirituality, religion, values, image and pleasure. The narrators then go on to describe their spiritual experience under the themes of epiphany, search for meaning and transcendence and religion. The narrators finally describe their experience in the post volunteer tourism experience, exploring why they turned to organised religion and not other forms of spirituality, the reaction of family members and the lasting spiritual transformation. In the final section, the researcher interprets the findings and raises further research questions for both volunteer and spiritual tourism.

## **VOLUNTEER TOURISM AND SPIRITUALITY**

Volunteers have for the most part been ignored as subjects of research until very recently (Stebbins 2005). Volunteer tourism is a new and emerging field within tourism literature.

Volunteer tourists are those who volunteer, in an organized way, to undertake holidays to assist individuals or communities in the alleviation of material poverty (Wearing 2001). Volunteering is a non-coerced activity that can be a satisfying and/or enjoyable experience (Stebbins 2004).

Literature on volunteering is very broad. This study is situated within research related to international volunteering. Weinmann (1983) and Carlson (1991), looked at personal development in relation to experiencing a new culture, and how it acts as a catalyst for volunteers to gain insights into alternative values, beliefs and ways of life. However, these studies did not explore the actual changes in the volunteers' lives with regards to spirituality or religion or what triggered these changes.

Volunteer tourism research has focused on development (Simpson 2004), the function and impact on the volunteer tourist, host communities and the environment (Wearing 2001; Wearing and Dean 2003; Uriely, Reichel and Ron 2003; Halpenny and Caissie 2003; Ellis 2003; Broad 2003), personal development of the volunteer tourist (Wearing 2002; Lyons 2003) the historical context of the volunteer tourism product (Callanan and Thomas 2005), participation in social movements (McGehee 2002), self, identity and ‘other’ (Wearing and Neil 2000), cultural exchange and the management of volunteer tourism (Lyons 2003), and reconciliation and healing (Higgins-Desbiolles 2003). However, there is a gap in the literature on the volunteer tourist experience and spirituality. Zahra (2004) made reference to the spiritual experience in the context of cathartic volunteer tourist experiences, but did not elaborate on or develop the spiritual theme. Volunteer tourists have not been the object of study within religious or spiritual tourism literature.

The leisure literature recognises the spiritual dimensions of the person and locates this dimension in the realm of values and creativity (Heintzman 1999). Westgate (1996) identified four broad dimensions of spiritual wellness: *meaning and purpose in life* (Frankl, 1959, 1978); *intrinsic values* such as a personal belief system, principles or a framework used to understand life; *transcendent beliefs/experiences* such as an awareness of and belief in a force greater than oneself -infinite being; with the fourth dimension being *community* incorporating relationships with God and others leading to selflessness and the desire to help others.

This paper explores the construct 'spiritual experience'. It examines if young volunteer tourists make a distinction between a 'spiritual' experience and a 'religious' experience. Tourism literature has mainly focused on religion and pilgrimage (Cohen 1992; Vukonić, 1996; Rountree, 2002; Swatos and Tomasi 2002), religious motivations (Cohen 2003), the religious tourism system (Nolan and Nolan (1992) and tourism as a sacred journey (Sharpley and Sundaram 2005). Tourism literature, to date, does not draw a clear distinction between the religious and spiritual experience. Jackowski (1987) argues that religious tourism and spiritual tourism mean the same the thing and therefore are interchangeable terms. Santos (2003: 132) also groups religion and spirituality together in trying to draw a distinction between tourism associated with consumerism and religion, "which by definition affects the domains of spirituality and the supernatural" (p. 30). Devereux (2003) tries to explain "what spirituality means in an effort to gain some clarity about the origin of the word, its dimensions and its changing use over time". He acknowledges that the term *spirituality* is troublesome, but explains (and provides examples supporting) that its roots are Christian, yet he states that the contemporary nature of spirituality is interdisciplinary and interreligious.

McGettigan (2003) alludes to a division between a spiritually motivated tourist and the traditional religious tourist or pilgrim. She identifies the spiritually motivated tourist as a typology falling under the cultural tourism market segment. This is an emerging typology primarily motivated by spiritual or emotional rejuvenation. These tourists seek sites and attractions connected to a 'sense of place' (Agnew 1987) that are conducive to the mental and spiritual renewal of the visitor. Due to the:

*context of the materialism of the developed economies set against a pervasive secularization (some would even say dehumanization) of society, it is possible to perceive the origin of a particular type of tourism distinguished by its concentration on mental/spiritual renewal and focusing on sites/activities and events which evoke a sense of renewal, of rootedness of rediscovering ones authentic self amid the chaos of ordinary life (McGettigan 2003: 22).*

However there is a silence on the tourists discovering the spiritual dimension during their experience.

Santos (2003: 32) also recognizes the impact of secularization of western societies, adding to the complexity of the distinction between the religious and spiritual experience: "In recent years, there has been paradoxically, an increase in quests for spirituality and identity that would seem to reinforce aspects connected with the encounter with the sacred, if in unconventional forms". It could be the deprivation of meaning, intrinsic values and the transcendent in postmodern secular society and the volunteer tourist experience is just a catalyst for their discovery.

Some of the wider literature does try to differentiate between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. Fuller (2001) distinguishes non-religious spiritual traditions from mainstream organized religious groups. Dean (2002) argues that the spiritual is the *sense of the whole*, the vision and guide that individuals and communities need for their purpose and direction. Spirituality "need not be overtly religious, institutionalised or based on creeds or dogmas" (Dean 2002: 21). However, the claim that there is a distinction between the 'religious' and the 'spiritual' is contestable. Cady (2004) talks about the *slippery* relationship between these two terms and Kozney (2004: 71) states that "religion provides the lens through which spirituality is seen".

This paper, through the narratives of volunteer tourists, will examine if there is a distinction between religion and spirituality and what they mean in their lives. Spirituality and its dimensions - self, others and God (a higher power) - is not a theoretical construct, but grounded and found in lived experience (Devereux 2003). This paper presents the lived experience of six young people and where these experiences have taken them in their adult lives. The volunteer tourists spiritual experience led to the transcendental and they discovered that while "material goods and things are appreciated ultimate satisfaction comes from spiritual things" (Heintzman 1999: 26).

## STUDY METHOD

The volunteer tourist's spiritual experience is examined through exploratory qualitative research. The study narrates six young volunteer tourist's spiritual experiences. Their countries of origin are Australia and New Zealand. They were aged between 19 and 23 years when they participated in the volunteer tourism project.

They assisted in grass roots community projects organized by secular NGOs in developing countries - Philippines, India, Tonga and Fiji - between 1989 and 2000.

The co-ordinating NGO of the volunteer programmes was Reledev Australia Ltd, an Australian non-government organisation registered with the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) which provides community development projects in Asia and South America. Besides community development projects, Reledev organises development education projects in which young volunteers from Australia and New Zealand, aged between 16 and 26 years, participate in three- to four-week welfare/development projects in developing nations in the Pacific and Asia. These welfare projects provide 'on the ground' assistance to communities engaging the volunteers and the community in a mutual exchange. This organization is typical of

*a range of NGOs [that] undertake programmes that focus on personal development potentiality in tourism, which, in the past, has not been characteristic of tourism organizations. These organizations and their projects seek to be locally identified and sustainable, while providing the tourist with an opportunity to learn and become involved in development issues. These projects incorporate many of the key elements that are considered to be essential to the underlying concept of alternative tourism (Wearing 2004: 209).*

The volunteers participated in what Stebbins (2004) calls project-based volunteering. Callanan and Thomas (2005) label the participants as shallow volunteer tourists because of the short duration and nature of their work. Their primary motivations were to experience a culture, go overseas, go on a holiday in which everything was organized, and do something worthwhile. When they were confronted with suffering, poverty, cultures embedded with deep values devoid of materialism and consumerism, combined with the cheerfulness of the host communities amid the lack of basic needs, each volunteer underwent a cathartic (Ryan 1997; Zahra 2004) or life-changing (Wearing 2002) experience. The spiritual was just one aspect of their experience, but is the only dimension analysed in this paper.

The author has been involved in volunteer tourism as a participant and coordinator of volunteer tourism

projects since 1988 and knows all the participants personally. The personal relationship and trust facilitated the participants in sharing their intimate spiritual experiences.

In-depth, unstructured interviews were undertaken with six volunteer tourists aged between 25 and 38 years. The author travelled with four of the volunteer tourists interviewed. She knew they had life-changing experiences while participating in volunteer tourism projects in their youth, but was not fully aware of the depth of their spiritual experiences. The interviews were conducted between five and 14 years after the volunteer tourism experience. Denzin (1989a) calls events, the volunteer tourism project, that created a transformational experience an *epiphany*. Epiphanies "alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life" (Denzin 1989b: 70). In these narratives the volunteer tourist entered with no prior understanding of what was going to happen and the meaning of these experiences have been given retrospectively and are relived and re-experienced in the narrators account of what happened to them (Denzin 1989b).

The volunteer tourists come from affluent, urbanized, developed and secular societies. Two encountered institutional organized religion in a regular way in their childhood; the others had little or no exposure to religion. Prior to participating in the volunteer tourism projects, none of the participants interviewed attended regular church services or considered themselves religious/spiritual or perceived themselves to have a personal relationship with God. The author selected them to narrate their stories, and thus highlight the lasting impact of their spiritual experiences, because they identified themselves as having no spirituality in their lives prior to their volunteer experiences.

Spirituality is grounded in the lived or existential experience (Devereux 2003). The methodological approach in this paper seeks to explore the deep, personal and experiential. The study

*attempts to make the world of lived experience, directly accessible to the reader. It endeavours to capture the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied. The focus . . . is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences (Denzin 1989a: 10).*

It relies on testimonial narratives. The “voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an I that demands to be recognized” (Beverly 2000: 556). Narrative is distinct from discourse; it is retrospective, articulates meaning and expresses emotions, thoughts and interpretations (Chase 2005). The researcher gives *voice* to the narrator to articulate self, reality and experience rather than facts. Unstructured in-depth interviews were used to collect data. This study refers to those interviewed as narrators, not interviewees. “The interviewee as a narrator is not an interest in the other’s “authentic” self or unmediated voice but rather an interest in the other as narrator of his or her particular biographical experiences as he or she understands them” (Chase 2005: 661).

The author recognizes that narratives are socially situated and interactive. The relationship between the researcher and the narrator influences and shapes the story told. Denzin (1989a: 26) asserts that “meaningful interpretations of human experience can only come from those persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves in the phenomenon they wish to interpret and understand”. Three of the narrators’ spiritual experiences evolved out of an interview conducted for separate research relating to the volunteer tourist experience. They had participated with the author in a volunteer tourism project and most importantly there was a long, personal relationship with the author. The spiritual is generally an intimate experience and this intimacy was revealed to the researcher as a result of the friendships that have grown through the years. The narrators’ voices dominate, controlling the flow of the interviews. The three other narrators were approached by the researcher to share their spiritual experiences through unstructured, intensive interviews. Two in this latter group had a pre-existing relationship with the researcher and had mentioned in passing their spiritual experience. They were comfortable and relaxed and were the protagonists throughout their narratives - the researcher, the listener. The confidence they had with the researcher facilitated their story telling. The third person in this latter group was referred to the researcher, via snowballing, by one of the other narrators, although the person was casually known to the author. The last narrator’s story was the most stilted, as a relationship and confidence with the researcher was lacking. The researcher could not just sit back and listen, but was required to intervene with questions. It was the last interview and it could be described as an impromptu

semi-structured interview. Chase (2005) talks about how assumptions embedded in our current interview society can discourage interviewees in becoming narrators, as they think the researcher is only interested in what is general in their experience and therefore particular details are omitted.

Testimonial narratives focus on the narrator’s story, with less importance given to the researcher’s interpretative processes; therefore, distance is created between the researcher’s and narrator’s voices (Atkinson 2002). The narrators’ stories are presented in the next section, with minimal interpretative commentary with the emphasis being placed on thick description trying to capture the interpretations the narrator brings to the events (Denzin 1989a). The researcher’s voice becomes prominent in the final section of the paper via thick interpretation the researcher endeavours to unravel the meaning and context that inform and structure the narrator’s experience. It is acknowledged that the researcher has decided what parts of the narrators’ stories to include, and imposed the structure and organisation in the narrators section around common themes. This reflects how the data was captured by the researcher through multiple narratives to allow convergence in experience to be identified (Denzin 1989a).

The data was analysed through a combination of grounded theory analysis and constant comparative analysis (Jennings 2001) that lead to the inductive construction of theories. This paper is more aligned to Glaser’s (1992) approach to grounded theory in that the narratives were gathered prior to the literature review and therefore the researcher had no preconceived views and less chance of forcing the data. The categories or themes that emerged from the narratives include: spirituality and religion, values, epiphany, search for meaning and transcendence, why organised religion and the lasting impact of the spiritual transformation.

These narratives are not presented with the aim of drawing generalized conclusions for all volunteer tourists. The range of narrative possibilities for both the volunteer tourist experience and the spiritual experience are potentially limitless (Gubrium and Holstein 2002) due to social, cultural and historical conditions influencing the persons concerned. The value of these narratives is that they provide us with insights into what is potential in volunteer tourism or other tourist experiences.

“Narrative theorists point out that narrative research is embedded in and shaped by broad social and historical currents, particularly the ubiquity of personal narratives in contemporary Western culture” (Chase 2005: 669). This theoretical dimension, linking the narratives to contemporary social contexts - in this case to Generation X - is the object of the final section by way of providing an empirically grounded social critique.

## THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES

This section imparts the volunteer spiritual experiences in three contexts. First, the values and experiences of the volunteers towards religion and spirituality before the volunteer project are presented. The second context looks at the catalysts surrounding the spiritual experiences during the projects and what the spiritual experiences meant for the volunteer. The third context describes what the volunteers experienced on returning home in relation to their family and friends, and focuses on how sustaining the experiences were.

### Views and attitudes prior to volunteer tourism experience

#### Spirituality and religion

“I was caught up in my career and sport. Religion was something old people did. My family did not go to church. Dad was very cynical towards organized religion.”

“What was my view of spirituality? I did not think much about it. I came from a family that went to church every Sunday; we said grace before meals and there were religious symbols in the house, but they did not mean anything to me. I can’t say I drifted away because I was never in anything to drift away from. When I was 15 or 16, I just stopped going to church with my family. There was no conflict or fights - I am not that type and my parents aren’t either.”

“My attitude before the trip was indifference to religion. I did not need think about a God; I was not challenged. Life was sweet.”

“I didn’t think about God at all, to be honest. God would have interfered with my lifestyle and I didn’t have time for anything spiritual or religious.”

“I had little or no exposure to religion in my life. I went to church maybe four or five times while I was living at home - not with my parents, with my granddad when he came to visit. I used to hate Church, simply because I never knew when to stand up, sit down or kneel. Everyone knew what to say - I didn’t have a clue - and nobody ever explained anything. I saw it as a sort of elite club.”

“I was so caught up in self - how could I think about anything spiritual when my life was filled with pleasure? If I did come across religion it was to laugh at it and knock it. This was my attitude going into the trip.”

“I went to the Philippines, which is mainly Catholic, and I had lots of prejudices. I don’t know where they came from - my family and most school friends were very critical of the Church. There were heaps of ideas: contraception, no sex before marriage, not eating meat on Fridays; there’s such an anti-Catholic tradition in New Zealand society. I had so many biases; I had a very stereotyped superficial knowledge and, of course, I thought I knew everything.”

#### Values

“I lived my life on one dimension, I just existed.”

“Typical of postmodern society, I was morally zealous in some things, such as the environment, honesty and corruption, but in other areas, such as sexual relations, anything went and no one was going to pontificate to me.”

The following quote links meaning to values. Although it could be argued that they were more akin to extrinsic values: self-serving and fluctuating, dependent on present needs and the option that provides the best perceived value (Heintzman, 1999).

“I was searching. I was looking for meaning in my life. I became a vegetarian and lived what I would call today an alternative lifestyle. I loved nature and the outdoors. I was a pseudo idealist - I was vegetarian because it was cruel to kill animals for meat, but I had no difficulties wearing leather shoes; I was out to save the animals as I couldn’t stand to see them suffer, but I was all for a woman’s right to have an abortion, as if the child in the womb does not suffer when it is being ripped apart.”

“At home I was a cow, a spoilt brat. I really did not care about my friends; they were a means to my end.”

### Image

“My life and views before the project were superficial. All I cared about was being cool, fitting in with the cool crowd.”

“What did my life centre on? Image, clothes, jewellery, shoes, make-up. I was trapped by consumerism. I always had a boyfriend and he had to be good-looking, otherwise my life was not worth living - I wanted a boyfriend for myself, not for a mutual relationship.”

### Pleasure

“My only purpose in life was pleasure. I was trapped in the world of drinking and drugs. The drinking started first, at about 15-16, then drugs, then sex. I would not even say I was materialistic; I was just out for a good time.”

“I was exposed to everything, like drugs, sex and drinking, that your average young person encounters.”

## The spiritual discovery

### Epiphany

“The whole experience made me stop and think about what was important in life, and it struck me that God is the most important thing. How it happened I do not know; it just hit me amidst the squalor and chaos. Things built up - I was working in the slums, there was so much poverty, seeing the living conditions where the kids lived. The caste system segregated people. The students I met from affluent backgrounds had no compassion for the poor. The caste system is connected to their religion and the religion colours the culture. All these things hit me.”

“What happened to me? I’m still trying to figure out what happened, why the sudden and complete change. It happened in the Philippines. My life was thrown out of orbit. Here I was seeking pleasure, and then I confront kids suffering. I had a heart and it went out to them, especially the kids in hospital. Then there were the poor people... smiling, welcoming, generous, despite their poverty. They wanted to give me a good

time; they gave everything, even though they had nothing.”

“I have a life before Tonga and a life after Tonga. It is as though I have lived the life of two different people. When I was in Tonga, I would think “What am I doing here?” it was like being on another planet. The hardship, poverty, hard work and sacrifices I made to survive each day; the cold showers and horrible food. All this was preparing me for a pivotal moment. It hit me when I realized there were no shops. The main street of the largest city in the whole country was one block. There were two clothes shops where all you could buy were T-shirts and sarongs. Nobody cared what they wore. It stripped me of my image; my identity became meaningless”.

### The search for meaning and transcendence

“One thing was what was going on around me and another thing was what was going on inside me. Not just inside my head, but my heart, my emotions, my whole being. I was transported out of my comfort zone; I had to put meaning and purpose back into my life. It was so clear to me that God was the most important thing. My life had to be centred on him. What more can I say?”

“I looked back on my life, my friends’ lives; they were empty. I realized that even though people and cultures are different, one thing unites us all: the need for love. I was searching for meaning in my life and I found it. I found peace. I discovered love and God is what gives purpose to life. It struck me that drinking, drugs and sex for selfish pleasure leaves you empty, miserable, less than a person. I was running away because I didn’t want to confront the hard issues, but I couldn’t run in the Philippines. My thoughts, my emotions, my feelings, my heart all came together and assaulted me, and then everything became clear and simple and there was peace.”

“I needed purpose, I needed meaning. I turned to the people around me and observed. What gave them meaning? Family, time for people, time for prayer, time for God, this is what I saw. They had order, structure and priorities. God first, and along with God came worship and a code of behaviour. Nobody did anything on Sundays, not even go to the beach. Family second, community third and self last. The young people were

secure, they knew how to behave, they knew when they did something wrong. They were happy. I was happy. I had to put up with all these horrible things - stripped of my identity, not caring how I looked or what I wore, and I was happy. Why? Two things hit me which cannot be separated: I wasn't thinking of self and I turned outwards and God was there, and he has been there ever since."

## Religion

"The spiritual change happened gradually, but it all came together during the last days of the project and on the way home. It could have come sooner, but I fought and rebelled all the way. I was obnoxious to the others in the group, I was sick of putting up with everything. I was impatient and intolerant of the Filipinos, especially the men. I thought they were useless and lazy. But the positive was there: I found the poverty very hard; it hit you in the face, but at the same time it struck me that the people were happy and, despite the mess and filth around them, clean. Religion was all around. Pictures and statues in homes and in the jeepneys [public transport]. Joy and peace amidst suffering; it was a mystery to me. All this came together at the end. It changed my attitude to religion. From having no religion and then discovering my Catholic roots, which has the answers to everything. This was a solo journey. No one told me anything, it just happened; it was the example of the people around me, the situation, my experiences. How do I explain it? It all came together and has shaped my life since."

"They had no money, but were very well presented and brought us morning tea every day. I felt bad because it wasn't necessary, but it was impressive. One day we were talking about income and expenditure, and they named their expenditures - really accurately - and then when talked about their income, they didn't know what it was. I said, "What do you mean you don't know? You have to know, otherwise you can't manage your own finances". They said, "Our husbands are contract workers, so one day they work, the next not". I was shocked; I asked them how they managed their families. They said, "God provides". That was all they said, they didn't explain further, and it just blew me away. I was overwhelmed because they were happy. They didn't whinge and whine about their situation, they were happy, generous people who thought about others. I thought that was amazing. I hadn't anticipated how religious people could be.

They would meet you, ask your name and then ask what religion you were. In New Zealand, nobody would ask that. That's not the second question you ask somebody; and here it happened over and over again, I thought, golly - not how rude, but how odd. It was obviously very important to them."

The following longer narrative brings together the complex interplay of epiphany, the search for meaning and transcendence and what religion implied for the narrator. This narrative was difficult to delineate and separate and any attempt to simplify it would have meant sacrificing the thick description of the text. This narrative leads on the next theme of why organised religion?

"Every year in Cebu [Philippines] a festival is held, dedicated to an image of the Child Jesus which caused the miraculous cure of a local princess centuries ago, and we were there for it. The atmosphere of the city was incredible. I went out of curiosity. I went into a church for the cultural experience. The day before the festival there were huge pilgrimages, people were praying the Rosary and the whole city stopped. I tagged along with one of the Filipino girls I'd met. I asked her what everyone was doing. She explained they were praying the Rosary and said she would teach me if I wanted. I said alright and so I prayed it with her, and it was very calming, despite the crowds and heat. I thought it was really beautiful because people were obviously praying; they weren't just there to pick up a nice boy or check out the social scene. I was amazed at how focused they were and then I thought - that's nice, but who cares. A week later, "our group went to a beach resort. The whole day I felt guilty being there when people were living in slums. The materialism shocked me, and it wouldn't have shocked me before I left New Zealand; it wasn't even an expensive resort, just a nice place to go and swim. I had the most stink day because the contrast shocked me. We'd been organising feeding programmes for undernourished kids, even the school we were working in couldn't supply the proper equipment for us to strip down the walls. People were so poor, and here I was in this resort... I was pretty annoyed when I got back on the bus; I wanted to get out of the place. The drive home took about an hour. It was beautiful because the sun was setting, and then - out of the blue - I thought, I have to be Catholic. I don't even remember the words; it wasn't a feeling, it was positive certainty, real certainty. I was suddenly sure and I can't describe what led up to it because I was



totally unprepared for it. But I was convinced, like absolutely, positively, definitively convinced. The next few days I thought about it quite a bit and about the rules and the regulations, and the 'thou shalt do this', and I decided that at least these people had criteria. I thought of my friends at Uni and how some of them were really lost, and that they suffered because they had no guidelines and didn't even know if they were doing the right thing or not. I thought that at least people here had clear guidelines, they actually knew what they were doing and it gave them peace of mind. I didn't know enough about Catholicism, but it was clear that it was good for the human person and that the guidelines were there to help you. And I was seeing people who were happy and coherent. I don't think I'd ever met a Catholic that I'd actually admired before, really."

### **Spirituality in the context of the post volunteer tourism experience**

#### **Why organised religion**

"My faith, my religion, is the foundation; it is the source where I 'get', so I can give. The Philippines was a catalyst for all this. It is a very poor country, yet the people were happy and there was a reason for that. That reason was their faith. Religion and faith had little bearing on my life at the time. I now appreciate this when I visit other countries, especially Europe. Religion has impacted on Europeans' whole way of life. When you look at the history of the Church, Christianity has impacted on their social structures e.g. care for the needy, their laws, art - all have a foundation in Christianity. I had been exposed to art and architecture through studying art, but I never realized the influence of religion. I have learnt to appreciate all these things, and to appreciate people and the forces that shape them."

"I had my faith. I had God, who never left me. This shapes my life. I need an organized structure. Individual spirituality was not an option. I have always been social, and organized religion fulfils that social dimension."

"I was surrounded by older people who were into alternative forms of spirituality. There are a lot of good things about eastern thought, particularly in health and wellbeing. There is a lot of wisdom, but in terms

of the spiritual stuff, it seems to be very self-centred. In the end, yourself is very limited. You have to be able to reach out to others. A lot of organised religion does that because human beings are social beings. New Age is inconsistent, so my search for the truth ruled that out automatically. When I was in high school, a lot of the girls in my economics class were into Ouija boards and palm reading and tarot cards. I never tried it, but I knew an incredible amount about it. It's superstition and rubbish because it's inconsistent and incoherent and it doesn't match up and, really, what is it for? Trying to know self. It's self, self, self; it's so obsessed with self. My spirituality is focused on a relationship with God and to have any kind of relationship you have to get out of yourself. It's not denying the value of self, but your value as a person comes because you look outside yourself and you become more of a person. I saw people that were 'more'- more admirable, more generous, and I wondered why they were like that; they had a bigger heart? They weren't just wrapped up in themselves. I think people become very small when they're like that. Where do these people get the strength from? From God."

#### **The secular world and the reaction of others to the newfound religion**

"My parents [baby boomers] were the hardest to face: My father didn't say anything, I think he was surprised. He said, "Oh, it will pass". Mum was different. I didn't tell her. I went straight from dad's back to University. In the next holidays, I didn't tell Mum then, either. I was worried about what she would say - that she would throw a spasm or have a fit... I was really close to her. I didn't want her to scream and throw tantrums because I wanted to have a nice time when I was at home and be looked after, rather than cause World War III. I was afraid she would reject me for getting involved in organised religion. Eventually I told her and she said, "Well if that's what makes you happy..." I think she thought I was off my tree and at first she gave me a hard time, but she got over it and is now quite respectful and she likes it when I pray for her. At first, if I mentioned the word 'God', she'd change the conversation. My fear of telling Mum was quite justified - mention the 'G' word and, man, was it a conversation stopper! If we were on the phone, the conversation would end quickly; if I was at home, it was like dropping a bomb into the conversation. I couldn't talk to her about it because she didn't want to talk about it."

## The lasting impact of the spiritual transformation

“Fifteen years have passed since that first service project and I have done other volunteer work since then. I had a lot to learn, as I knew nothing. One thing is discovering your roots, but there is the tree and the branches and the fruit and everything else. It took time. I am not a drama queen or the emotional type. I came back home, went back to work, pursued my career, and now I am married with one child and expecting another. I have lived a normal life. I do not think you can split the spiritual from the rest of your life. I started taking my religion seriously, and a disinterested self-giving permeated my life. It is not that I did not have selfish moments. You know the saying: ‘In giving you receive’. I really felt that, and I try and live it.”

“The spiritual experience left a deep impression - it is part of me now. But after a time, I went back to my old habits of drink, drugs and being out for a good time. I was thinking solely of myself and I did not gain much, except unhappiness. This is why drugs are so bad for people; they kill the will. I went off track, but from that experience I knew I had to get back on. The road back was hard. I went on another volunteer service project to get away and put things back in perspective, and I made it I am now happily married with a family.”

A number of the previous narratives also acknowledged the lasting impact of their spiritual discovery.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Denzin (1989a:139) states that:

*Interpretive interactionism in the postmodern period is committed to understanding how this historical moment universalizes itself in the lives of interacting individuals. Each person studied is assumed to be a universal singular, or a singular instance of the universal themes that structure the postmodern period... Interpretative interactionism fits itself to the relation between the individual and society... In the discovery of this nexus, it attempts to bring alive the existentially problematic, often hidden, an private experiences that give meaning to everyday life as it is lived in this moment in history.*

Postmodernism and the consumer society deny any purpose or meaning to life and see meaning as a human creation and nothing to do with what is really real (O'Donnell, 2003). Yet here we have volunteer tourists grounded in and confronting the real: poverty, suffering, 'stripped of image' seeking meaning for their lives. Their search for meaning required them to evaluate or even establish intrinsic values which then led them to the transcendent in the context of community or organised religion.

The change of locale for these young volunteer tourists, along with deep and complex experiences, enabled them to reflect on their lives and discover their spiritual dimension. Their spiritual experience was not only a consequence of meeting a unique cultural product, but also the economics (or lack of it): no shops, poverty, going to a resort after the slums, along with encountering suffering and hardship. Their experiences were identifiable, there was a build up, but they could recall the moment and context, there was a clear epiphany. Many years later, the images are clear and emotive. “Spirituality is based on the lived experience, and learning is only something that can be done by each individual” (Devereux, 2003: 138). These individual narratives provide rich examples of lasting spiritual transformations and what triggered them.

McGettigan (2003) identifies spiritual tourism evolving out of modern developed secularized societies seeking to discover self amid the chaos of life. Here we have Generation X, in a particular tourism context, not seeking but discovering the spiritual. They discovered self yet the spiritual experience did not lead to self, but to the *other* - people and God and organized religion. The narratives support Kozney's (2004) view, as these young people used religion as the lens to view and reach spirituality. They do not support Dean's (2002) claim that spirituality need not be overly religious, for them the discovery of the spiritual dimension led to religion.

The narratives were unique and individual, yet all the narrators turned to an organized religion of one form or another, rather than new forms of spirituality. Alternative forms of spirituality have evolved out of secularized postmodern Western societies which have moved away from organized religion, especially over the last 40 years. This has come about because of the enlightenment, political and social forces and the scandals related to organized religion/churches, at least in North America and Europe.

However the narratives highlight that these young people are a product of these movements. Most grew up with no religion or spirituality in their lives and most had a bias against organized religion. They were surrounded by organized religion in their host communities: Catholicism in the Philippines, Strong Protestant and to a lesser extent Catholic communities in Tonga and Fiji, and Islam and Hinduism in India. Contemporary views see organized religion as on the way out and dying in western developed societies, at least for the baby boomer generation. Postmodern relativism is highly critical and “hostile to any philosophical or political doctrine, and strongly opposed to those ‘dominant ideologies’ that help to maintain the status quo” (Butler 2002: 29). Life, and western society have become decentred and there is a market place of values, reasons and lifestyles on offer. All the “postmodern can offer is randomness and chaos, play and pistache, consumerism and unconcern” (Lyon 2000: 100) yet the narrative presented in this paper show a search for depth, meaning, the transcendental and the spiritual. These narratives perhaps are an indication to us researchers to be open to Generation X and Generation Y looking for secure boundaries and a spirituality that is organized and structured, with creeds and dogmas, as they provide secure these boundaries. Jameson (1991) sees postmodernism as a socially conditioned passing fad that is convenient for the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries but it will give way to new patterns. Are these narratives supporting Jameson (1991) and is indicative of what is ahead of us as tourism researchers? Is spirituality just a post-modern construct? Under the influence of post-modernism the focus is on constructed meaning, image and cultural identity. These narratives demonstrate that these constructs are vulnerable and have shallow foundations. In examining the tourist experience in the context of spirituality and meaning perhaps researchers should refocus the emphasis to examine the search for meaning (Frankl 1978), intrinsic values and transcendence. However to do this there needs to be a break from the shackles of postmodernism and its rejection of any foundationalism and challenge that attempts to ground truth in anything external to discourse and subjective experience.

These narratives support Secall (2003: 122) in that the spiritual/religious experiences are connected to time and place and the facilitation of sacred time to reflect on the profane:

*In this sense the first travels had a religious motive and because of this the first pilgrimage was seen as the first tourist trip. Since then religious journeys have undergone many vicissitudes and adjustments to the circumstances of time and place, though in essence they are still the same. Their variability depends on the existence of a sacred time different from profane time, of a time consecrated to gods, that is to say, to man’s spiritual dimension, in opposition to the time dedicated to matter, i.e. to the profane of subsisting.*

These spiritual/religious experiences show the connection of time and place and the facilitation of sacred time to reflect on the profane. Postmodern society with its constantly shifting information overload, the pace of life faster than ever and more decentred with shifting values and uncertain hopes (O’Donnell 2003) will evolve to a point where people seek the sacred and the spiritual through volunteering, tourism and leisure. An avenue for further research is examining the search for the sacred, constant or intrinsic values and the transcendent and away from multiple meanings, truths and realities.

These spiritual experiences have been made available to the academic community because they are based on trust and a prior relationship with the researcher. Religion and spirituality in western societies is very much in the realm of the private, as is highlighted in one of the narratives: “*In New Zealand you are never asked your religion*”. Researchers need to be aware that subjects in a study of spiritual experiences may be defensive if they believe that in revealing their personal stories they will be ridiculed, as seems to be the case if the spiritual experience leads to an organized religion such as the Catholic Church, which is mocked by their parents, contemporaries and the media. They may also relate the general rather than the particular experience, if a trusting relationship is lacking. This study evolved out of two of the narrators saying to the researcher, “*This is not for your research*”, in initial semi-structured interviews on the volunteer tourist experience, when relating the spiritual dimensions of their experience. Further research is required to explore the relationship of trust between the researcher and the narrator and its impact on the research analysing deeper meaningful and spiritual tourism experiences.

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Submitted: 12/20/2005

Accepted: 03/16/2006