

Surfing the Shifting Boundary between Sacred and Profane: Confluence, Dwelling, and Crossing

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Abstract

While a distinct aspect of surfing can be considered sacred, in its contemporary manifestation it is also commercial, political, and territorial. Rather than setting up a dualism between the profane and sacred aspects of surfing, this paper aims to focus on them as interdependent aspects of the same phenomenon. While apparently contradictory, these aspects continually converge to give surfing its unique form and dynamic character. Taking the aquatic tropes established by Thomas Tweed to their logical conclusion, the intertwined spacio-temporal practices of surfing as dwelling and crossing will be applied to the religious phenomenon of surfing as a site of confluence. This discussion is delicately balanced between the solitary and the social aspects of religion, emphasising the permeable boundary that exists between them.

Introduction

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

In 2008 I travelled to Morocco on a surf trip with my close friends and fellow surfers Mookie and Jugu. We stayed for a month in Taghazout, a small fishing

village on the coast, which catered largely to surf tourism. We would often ride the local bus when trawling the coastline for surfing potentials. On one occasion, standing in the bus with our boards and wetsuits and a plastic packet containing some bananas, a loaf of bread, and a bar of chocolate, we peered intently out of the bus windows. We chatted amongst ourselves and engaged extra-linguistically with the local commuters while our attention followed the contours of the coastline.

All of a sudden we came around a corner and caught a glimpse, through a large dusty cactus field, of a surfer taking off on a wave that looked very promising. We erupted in unison with shouts of enthusiasm that coerced the bus driver to drop us off a little further down the road. From there we set off on foot in pursuit of that vision of perfection that had imprinted itself upon our minds. After navigating a dusty trail through the field of cacti, we arrived at the long arcing point. In the water was the solitary surfer we had fortuitously glimpsed from the window of the bus. At the shore the rocks formed large stalagmites that jutted out menacingly.

It was a remarkable looking place, and while we waited and marvelled at its spectacular appearance, a magnificent set of waves rolled down the point, instantly confirming our impressions from the bus. We stashed our packet of goods under a rock and cautiously navigated the sharp, fang-like rocks. While this spot had surely been ridden for years by surfers, we felt like pioneers, intrepid travellers figuring it all out for the first time.

Almost as soon as we paddled out, Mookie and Jugu were each sent rocketing down the point on two beautiful waves. I whistled and shouted for them as they took off, part of the way in which we express encouragement and enthusiasm for one another in the water. There were no more waves in the set and I sat out there with the solitary surfer. Looking moderately displeased about our intrusion on his session he turned to me and said, "You know, this is my sanctuary, it is where I come to be at peace". His relationship to surfing and the ocean was clearly a personal and spiritual one. What became clear was that our presence, in all its unhinged boisterousness, was in conflict with the sanctity of his space.

Our presence was in the end a bit too much for the solitary surfer who, after some sulking, caught a wave in and left the water. We continued to revel and play with the waves for hours, until fatigue turned everything orange and our arms felt like overcooked spaghetti. As we snacked on chocolate and banana sandwiches, basking in deep satisfaction, I reflected on our encounter with the solitary surfer and was struck by how divergent perspectives of what surfing means are perpetually conflicting and co-existing within the same space.

Framing Religion

The religious nature of surfing is wholly dependent on the way in which we choose to conceptualise religion. Generation after generation of scholars have wrestled with the term, yet despite sustained theorising on the matter there is a recognisable lack of unanimity when it comes to defining “religion”. Park (1994: 32), for example, illustrates this point when stating, “[t]o try to portray religion as a homogeneous or unidimensional entity is to presuppose a uniformity and cohesiveness between individual religions that simply does not exist”. In fact, if we were to map the range of definitions of religion they would likely resemble a web rather than a series of isolated boxes. In other words, religious phenomena, as complex patterns of human action, can often accommodate various definitions. With this in mind, it is essential for theorists of religion to navigate this vast ocean of diverse perspectives in order to grasp the dynamic nature of religious experience.

The characteristics that define a religious phenomenon have always been subject to contention. It is not my intention here to illuminate the variety of perspectives on what constitutes religion, as they are far too numerous. The ways in which “religion” has been defined is irreducibly connected with the agendas and sensibilities of the theorists at work. In defining theoretical boundaries with a heavy hand, certain forms of reductive theorising run the risk of constricting the very phenomena to be explored, and, as pointed out by Tweed (2008: 7), “[t]heorists often have obscured their own position, and pretended that they enjoy a view from everywhere-at-once or nowhere-in-particular”. Theorising of this nature reinforces perspectives that are characteristically dislocated and static, by failing to recognise that theorists are inescapably positioned in relation to the phenomena they observe. These patterns in the theoretical domain have led scholars like William James (1985: 26) to suggest that “the theorising mind tends always to the oversimplification of its materials”. This paper seeks to move away from such reductive theorising that has taken as given an omni-perspective of religious phenomena. However, some degree of reductionism is necessitated by the cultural, biological, and temporal constraints of situated human beings.

Our embodiment and emplacement compel us to select, condense, name, break down and categorise phenomena in order to be able to act effectively in the world. In that sense, no position is innocent, totally anti-reductive, and the best we can do is be self-reflexive, aware of the questions we ask and the localised yet rigorous rules and procedures that we strategically deploy to answer them in fruitful ways. (Vasquez 2011: 4)

What is being sought here is not a theoretical approach that is anti-reductionist, but one that locates the theorist in the reductive process. In articulating this approach, I have found the theoretical contributions of Thomas Tweed to be particularly useful. In order to preserve the discipline of theorising in the face of these realisations, the grand narratives need to be abandoned in favour of a humbler approach. Tweed (2008: 55) argues that “[theory] is never more (or less) than a sighting from one shifting site that might offer an illuminating angle of vision at another site”. As such, with reference to the introductory auto-ethnographic vignette, it is not my assertion that, as a participant, my perceptions of surfing are authoritative by virtue of subjective experience alone; nor that certain perspectives I highlight are universal in nature.

In his attempts to re-cast theorising as located and dynamic, Tweed (2008: 11) utilises the metaphor of “embodied travelling”. This metaphor emphasises the paradoxical yet necessary notion that theory is simultaneously located and on the move. Theory that is embodied is positioned within the perception of the theorist and relational to the observed phenomenon. Furthermore, the metaphor of travel illuminates the dynamic and fluid nature of the process of theorising, as accumulated by and articulated through the theorist.

Alternately, Tweed (*ibid.*) also employs the trope of theory as “purposeful wandering”, emphasising the necessary paradox that theory is both focused and flexible. Theorising itself must be flexible, not only to accommodate the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon being observed, but also to account for the shifting perspectives of the theorist. Accordingly, this paper is not an exhibition of religion as a phenomenon that is statically opposed to other types of human experience, but rather seeks to explore the points of intersection.

If the ocean represents the ungraspable vastness of religious experience, and the land represents religion as defined and categorised, theory as “purposeful wandering” surfs the waves that break on the shoreline. Just as good surfing conditions are a product of ocean-based factors like swell and wind, they are also produced by land-based formations like reefs and sandbanks. It is at this conjunction, where the structural converges with the mystical, that the religious is to be unravelled in this paper. For this purpose, I find Tweed’s (2008: 54) definition of religion very useful: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”

Tweed’s emphasis on religions as confluence characteristically involves the hydrodynamics of religion, which he explains in the following way:

“If we are trying to formulate a theory that accounts for the dynamics as well as the statics of religion, I suggest, it can be especially helpful to turn to fluid mechanics and aquatic metaphors” (2008: 59). Taken together, Tweed’s conceptualisations of religion offer innovative perspectives for studying religious embeddedness and mobility and are also well suited to the discussion of religious formations that are characteristically transnational, diasporic, and global.

However, Tweed’s approach has also been aptly criticised by Manuel Vasquez (2009: 2011) who, though sharing a similar perspective on the necessity of moving beyond essentialist readings of religion, contends that

[Tweed’s] almost exclusive reliance on aquatic metaphors, while offering a powerful critique of dominant categories in religious studies, leads to a troubling ‘blind spot’ in Tweed’s own words: a failure to give widespread dynamics of exclusion and closure their proper epistemological weight. (Vasquez 2009: 435)

Despite this poignant critique, I propose that the broad definition of religion given by Tweed is such that it presents a general framework or way of perceiving religion that can easily incorporate alternative definitions. Drawing on Tweed’s definition, I am choosing to conceive of religion in two particular ways: namely, as a personal experience that is lived, and as a social experience that is shared.

The former category relates to a solitary relationship and connection with the sacred in a manner that is mystical. It corresponds with defining religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1985: 31). This understanding reflects a deeply felt and direct connection with a source of divine power that is personal and unmediated.

Religion as an experience that is shared, relates to the social and cultural mechanisms that construct collective identity and belonging. Bron Taylor (2010: 2) illustrates this aspect of religion in the following way: “Religion has to do with that which connects and binds people to that which they most value, depend on, and consider sacred.” Here, the emphasis is on the social processes that function to mediate and produce the sacred. In order to navigate this middle ground between the personal and social aspects of religion, I will utilise the overlapping processes of confluence, dwelling, and crossing as outlined by Tweed, while examining the spacio-temporal dynamics of surfing as a religious phenomenon.

Surfing as Confluence

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Robert Frost

Pioneering attempts have been made to re-cast various water-based phenomena – such as surfing (Taylor 2007), fly fishing (Snyder 2007), and whitewater kayaking (Sanford 2007) – as religious in their own right. Bron Taylor (2007: 923) employs the term “aquatic nature religion” to describe these particular religious phenomena. As outdoor activities they have previously been, and continue to be, articulated by practitioners of organised religions as a means of divine appreciation and worship (*ibid.*).

Surfing and religion can intersect on a multitude of levels. There are significant sub-sects of surfers who are spiritually orientated towards one religion or another, and who consequently articulate their experiences in the ocean as spiritual or religious. At the same time, others who formally practice religions might feel that their experiences in the water are public and secular. While these intersections inevitably inform various perspectives on surfing, Taylor (2010: 104) formulates a dynamic and lively representation of surfing as religious in and of itself by emphasising that “[a] significant and increasing part of the evolving, global surfing world can be understood as a form of dark green religion, in which sensual experiences constitute its sacred centre”. It is this perspective of surfing as a religious phenomenon that this paper intends to build upon.

For Taylor, surfing as an “aquatic nature religion” finds its feet within a particular expression of surfing subculture, referred to as “soul surfing”, whereby surfers have articulated a deep connection to the ocean and its healing and transformative effects upon them.¹ Taylor suggests that the mystical nature of surfing as experienced among “soul surfers”, and its effect upon their perceptions, can “lead to ethical action in which Mother Nature, and especially its manifestation as Mother Ocean, is considered sacred and worthy of reverent care” (*ibid.*). Although “soul surfing” is a particular subsect of contemporary surfing culture, it is also a part of a longer and more complex history.

The spiritual nature of surfing is not bound by its contemporary manifestations, and Taylor (2007) takes great care to highlight its present form in relation to its historical development. Accordingly, he traces the diverging and converging flows of the phenomenon as it weaves through time and space. This resonates well with Tweed’s (2008: 62) aquatic imagery

of religion as a site of confluence where “[r]eligious flows — and the traces they leave — move through time and space”.

For Taylor (2010) the source of this distinctive stream of religiosity converges with the origins of surfing in pre-colonial Polynesia, flows through the “soul surfer” phenomenon of the 1970s, and gains momentum and form in light of increasing concerns about ecological instability. I will not retrace Taylor’s steps in unwinding the historical thread of modern surfing. However, it is important to emphasise that as surfing has moved through time and space there have been both continuity and change. “Soul surfing” is bound up in the personal revelation of individual surfers in relation to an awareness of the sacredness of the ocean. As such, it is a wholly relative phenomenon and thus slippery to define. Fundamentally though, it corresponds to a subset of the global surfing community that conceives of surfing as a mystical act. As a spiritual position it is generally accepted “that there is a mysterious magic in surfing that can only be apprehended directly through the experience, that surfing fosters self-realization, that commercialization is a defiling act, that even such threats cannot obviate its spiritual power” (Taylor 2007: 925).

In his powerful and thorough elaboration of “soul surfing”, Taylor (2007) has taken pioneering strides towards conceptualising surfing as a religious phenomenon, and simultaneously leaves significant room for further exploration of the ocean as a place of confluence. I would like to suggest that an incorporation of the profane back into a discussion of the sacred nature of surfing could function to enhance, rather than undermine, its religious character.

The ocean is a dynamic example of a space of confluence where divergent streams flow back to the same source. In reality the religious nature of surfing is multifaceted, characterised by the co-existence of multiple personas. These multiple personas, located within both the individual and the social body, continuously intertwine to give the face of contemporary surfing its particular character. This point of confluence is the crossroads where the divergent streams of the phenomenon of surfing converge. The exploration of this misty boundary is the course charted for this article. My purpose is to contextualise a discussion of the contemporary sacred dimensions of surfing within a mainstream surf culture that is characteristically competitive, commercial, and territorial. As such, this is an exercise in putting “soul surfing” in perspective.

I emphasise two particular processes that illuminate both the sacred and profane qualities of surfing: namely, dwelling and crossing. Travelling in the wake of Tweed, this paper also aims to construct a preliminary conceptual map of surfing as a religious phenomenon in relation to sacred space. Relatedly, I portray surfing as relative to both social and personal dimensions. In the

dwelling section, the ocean as a sacred space will be articulated as both an experience of the divine (substantial) and as socially constituted (situational).² In engaging surfing as crossing, theorised by Tweed as the movement over boundaries and the process of confronting embodied limits, I explore surfing as the experience of permeable boundaries and transcendence.

Surfing as Dwelling

Don't you realize that the sea is the home of water? All water is off on a journey unless it's in the sea, and it's homesick, and bound to make its way home someday.

Zora Neale Hurston

Religious theorising on the nature of sacred space, or on how sacred space is constituted, can be categorised in two principal streams of thought: the sacred as substantial, and the sacred as situational (Chidester and Linenthal 1995). Sacred space, from a substantial point of view, emphasises the idea that sites of worship have an intrinsic sacred nature. Hence, “the sacred has been identified as an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 5). The ocean is popularly perceived by those who interact with it as a raw, primal, and tremendous force of nature. Commonly, surfers express that surfing is a humbling experience. As such, the ocean can easily be seen as substantially sacred, possessing a kind of power that demands a level of respect and reverence from all who engage it. Conceiving of the ocean as sacred also highlights the potentially transformative experiences of surfing, linking it to physical, psychological, mystical, and sacred dimensions (Taylor 2010: 118-126).

Religions can also function as a means of orientating the practitioner in space and time (Tweed 2008). Accordingly the body, as the primary vehicle for physical and perceptive engagement with the ocean, is the means through which this spacio-temporal orientation occurs. In this way, the sacred centre of surfing is its sensuous experience, involving an intimate relationship with the ocean as a sacred source of power (Taylor 2007). The act of surfing also enables a mapping of the surfer's body as sacred space. The body becomes a microcosm that reflects through sensuous embodiment the sacred significance of the ocean. Furthermore, through repeated reaffirmation of this relationship, surfers are not only connected to, but potentially also physically and perceptively transformed by, the ocean. Thus the body is not only orientated and mapped by the sacred, but in various ways actively maps and defines sacred space. The more surfers interact with a particular spot, the more sacred it becomes as they begin to know and understand the tendencies

of the waves there. Frequented breaks become sacred to individual surfers as they develop this insider knowledge and begin to feel at home in that space.

While the body can be seen as a sacred space that is bounded, defined, and modified through repeated ritual action in the ocean as substantial sacred space, the sacred nature of this space is also situational. Chidester and Linenthal (1995: 6) explain that “[a]s a situational term ... the sacred is nothing more nor less than a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralising space, time, persons and social relations”. In this respect, sacred space is not conceived of as holding intrinsic sacred significance, but is a product of social processes that construct, maintain, and modify it.

Territorial or local behaviour among surfers has been widely researched, particularly in areas of dense surfer populations like Southern California (Comley 2011), the Australian Gold Coast (Evers 2009; Waitt 2008), and the Durban beachfront in South Africa (Preston-Whyte 2002). Conceptualising surf spots as situational sacred space correlates with these studies, emphasising as they do the spatial behaviour of surfers and the social construction of space.

In attempting to understand this kind of behaviour as a religious phenomenon, it is useful to conceptualise territoriality and localism as dwelling practices. Dwelling, as an act of homemaking, “draws boundaries around us and them; it constructs collective identity and, concomitantly, imagines degrees of social distance” (Tweed 2008: 111). The ocean is not a domestic space, yet surfers will often refer to a well-frequented and localised surf spot as their “home break”. Sacred space, as “home break”, draws on social, political, and spatial practices to be demarcated and maintained as a home space.

Preston-Whyte (2002: 312), who observed the spaces where surfers clustered along the Durban beachfront, interviewed a random sample group of sixty surfers in order to analyse their construction of surfing space. In a similar fashion, Comley (2011: 20-21) interviewed sixty-two surfers from Huntington and Newport Beaches in California. Interestingly, both Preston-Whyte and Comley report that while beaches are commonly understood to be public spaces, in the water, surf breaks are frequently regulated by those considered to be locals. Identification as a local often corresponds to the relative categories of possessing a sensuous knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of a particular break, possessing a significant amount of general skill in the art of wave riding, and/or seniority. Furthermore, Preston-Whyte (2002: 321) found that “attachment to surfing space was found to be widespread with 97 per cent of respondents claiming a strong identification with their favourite surfing space”. This statistical observation suggests that a significant majority of the surfers in this study considered themselves to be locals, and participated in constructing and maintaining their home break.

Dwelling practices, most evident here through the process of homemaking, can be applied to most, if not all, surfers as they invariably orientate themselves geographically and socially. However, the extent to which these geographical and social boundaries are policed and enforced varies. The manner in which homemaking processes are enacted at surfing spots, both inside and outside the water, is relative to the specific social dynamics in question, the particular psychology of individuals, and the geographic/oceanographic conditions present.

The politics of sacred space in relation to surf territoriality can be illustrated through the metaphor of supply and demand. Comley (2011: 19) argues that “surfers’ perceptions of waves as limited resources may contribute to the psychology of surf-related aggression”. As resources, waves are characteristically inconsistent, varying from day to day, even moment to moment, as oceanic conditions continuously change. Thus, in situations of low supply of quality waves and high demand, the social dynamics at a particular spot might result in surf-related aggression and other displays of localism in order to police particular boundaries and affirm belonging. In situations of high supply and low demand, where there are more waves breaking than riders to surf them, it is unlikely that aggression in the water would proliferate. This politics of sacred space is reflected in the Durban study, where “sixty-eight percent of respondents expressed frustration at having to share crowded waves with others, particularly when unknown visitors diminish the surfing space” (Preston-Whyte 2002: 320).

In addition to issues that stem from the density of surfer population in relation to the quantity and quality of waves, Preston-Whyte also highlights the imaginary social boundary that separates those on the “inside” from those on the “outside”. He notes that “92 percent of respondents agreed that surfing spaces were contested, with the use of prime surfing spaces dependent upon group acceptance” (Preston-Whyte 2002: 321). Hence, boundaries are clearly demarcated and enforced through the privileging of local identity and respective “home breaks”. Furthermore, local identity is also, at times, expressed outside of the water through territorial practices like graffiti. Comley (2011: 17) reports that “[t]he parking lot at Trestles in Southern California is marred with graffiti, stating things like ‘locals only’ and ‘beat it kook’ (kook is a euphemism for someone who poses as a surfer)”.

The prevalence of territorial behaviour and localism as reflected in the abovementioned studies suggests that sacred space does not manifest spontaneously, but is produced through spatial practices and maintained through continued social re-enforcement. Sacred spaces are social spaces. However, while the sacred is produced, it also produces and transforms individuals. The power of the ocean as a substantial sacred space facilitates

surfing experiences that are mystical and ineffable. At the same time, this sacred space is also in constant confluence with the social control and spatial ordering that seem to characterise spaces of sacred dwelling. In this context, when a substantial and situational framework is applied, it is evident that these definitions of the sacred are interdependent; for the experience of the sacred, through sensuous awareness in the ritual of surfing, affects the social organisation and control of the space through mechanisms considered profane.

Surfing as Crossing

Everything is waves. The universe of space and matter is charged with energy ... waves of energy. Like echoes of the heartbeat of the absolute being, waves give expression to the divine will. They give form to the universe ... Waves pass through everything — steel, stone, flesh and blood and water and air and space alike. Waves are the imprint, the signature, not only of life, but of existence itself. (Drew Kampion, as quoted in Taylor 2010: 121)

In the previous section, the process of orientation was emphasised in order to illustrate that spatial processes function to maintain the sacred and to regulate surfers' locations and territories. In this section I highlight the spacio-temporal character of the religious experience of surfing so as to render visible the dimension of surfing as crossing. Tweed (2008: 136) amplifies this aspect by noting the limits that continuously challenge human efforts. He argues that “[o]ne limit is the boundary between the embodied self and the natural world, and encountering that limit can evoke joy or sadness, or a range of other emotions”.

The process of “corporeal crossing” is always modified and negotiated according to the perceived capabilities of the surfing body and of the embodied self (*ibid.*). Accordingly, the powerful emotional and sensuous experience of surfing can be seen as a means of propelling the embodied self towards the edge of its perceived limits. In this regard, the emotional state of fear, for example, can function to heighten awareness and perceptively locate the individual in time and space.

The temporality of experience is relayed in the following way by Gerry Lopez, popular for his Zen-like composure and mastery of tube riding at the infamous Pipeline on the north shore of Hawaii: “The faster I go out there the slower things seem to happen” (as quoted in Taylor 2007: 943). As the embodied self approaches the perceived limit, in that elusive moment

transcendence can occur as fear is transformed into awareness and the self dissolves. This process of transformation is widely articulated by surfers as an experience that is unbounded, not conforming to imaginary constructions of space or an imposed sense of time. Evers (2006: 232) explains this embodied metamorphosis: “The waves are part of our bodies, and our bodies are part of them; it is an exchange in which waves wash over me until I do not know where I begin and where the wave ends.”

Certain individuals, pioneers in various fields of embodied performance, challenge certain limits as they cross culturally defined borders. As they move, “such individuals tend to be unconstrained by the limits of existing beliefs and behaviour” (Preston-Whyte 2002: 323). While the experience of encountering limits is always relative to the particular surfer, limits are also culturally constructed. The surfer can directly experience a sense of belonging and transcendence within the ocean, yet the solitary experience will also be affected by social and cultural constraints. Tweed (2008: 138) notes that “[t]here are no culturally unmediated experiences, and religions mediate encounters with corporeal and natural limits”. Hence, there are various means through which the direct experience of surfers with the ocean as sacred space is mediated.

The contemporary period on which this paper focuses is marked by exponential developments in technology. Communication technology mediates surfers’ relationship with sacred space in a variety of ways. For example, proponents of the surfing industry, through advertising campaigns, frequently utilise the sacred experience of surfing as a means to push brands and sell merchandise. A crude but nevertheless well-known example is the Billabong slogan: “Only a surfer knows the feeling.” The sensuous core of surfing as a religious phenomenon is capitalised upon here as the brand of Billabong is cleverly associated with that feeling. Furthermore, the idea that only a surfer can know that feeling reinforces collective identity and fosters a sense of exclusivity and belonging. The solitary pursuit of transcendence and the social desire to belong, as primary driving forces for surfers, are both reflected and commodified in this simple turn of phrase.

While not ubiquitously so, many contemporary surfers are themselves frequently branded through the clothes they wear. It is my personal observation that while not unique to surfing, this phenomenon is extremely prevalent in surf culture. On one level, the importance of wearing/using the “correct” brands reflects the strong desire among surfers to identify themselves as insiders and reinforce their sense of social belonging. This phenomenon is particularly significant if the body is considered a sacred space. Hence, not only the sacred experience of surfing but the sacred space of the body is mediated by and expressed through advertising and surf brands.

However, other forms of popular surf media like surfing films and magazines also mediate and construct sacred space. Taylor (2007: 932) argues that “[s]urf movies help construct the experience of surfers at the same time that they remind surfers of the pleasures and ecstatic (even sometimes mystical) experiences they have while surfing”. This type of mediation is oriented around the production of images and the subsequent idealisation of sacred spaces. These images consistently represent the sacred through various renditions of perfection, untainted by the profane and frustrating elements that characterise the phenomenon on an everyday level. “For surfers the ‘perfect wave’ represents this ideal and perhaps unattainable vision. It is assumed to exist, is difficult to describe, and is the source of a quest that leads surfers in search of spaces where this wave can be found” (Preston-Whyte 2002: 311).

It is precisely this slippery notion of the “perfect wave” that is consistently reproduced through various surf-related media, mediating between and propelling surfers towards a socially informed notion of perfection.

Almost every issue of the hundreds of surfing magazines has photographs or other graphics that reprise the Edenic theme, and show pristine beaches, waves, and ocean-loving communities. The accompanying articles normally feature pilgrimages to such places and often the pursuit of harmonious relationships with the people and habitats there. (Taylor 2007: 933)

The collective recognition of certain surfing destinations as sacred is additionally reinforced through the role of the media in reproducing romanticised images and ideas about these places. These factors have a strong influence in compelling contemporary surf pilgrims to travel to culturally produced sacred sites in a search for the elusive “perfect wave.” The development of travel technology has had a powerful impact on this process, enhancing the capabilities of the contemporary surfer to travel in search of remote and socially mythicised places. These temporary “Meccas”, culturally considered and reproduced as sacred, are also points of confluence that are mediated by commercial and media practices that can be considered profane.

Conclusion

Surfing and theorising are alike in that both require a sense of balance. In his book *Crossing and Dwelling*, Tweed strives towards a theoretical balance between the spatial and temporal dynamics of religion. I have found his

emphasis on subjectivity and orientation in theorising particularly useful as my dual roles as student and surfer invariably overlap. In this article, as an example of theoretical wave riding, I have attempted to illuminate both the religious dynamics of surfing and its structurally constrained limits.

Within surfing the profane and the sacred, the solitary and the social, and the orientated and the mobile are all entirely co-dependent. In some sense, globalisation has brought the profane and the sacred closer together. The commercial surf industry can hardly be seen in isolation from the sacredness of “soul surfing”, but is thoroughly intertwined with it. They feed endlessly off one another in a continuing cycle of sacred reproduction.

In conceiving surfing as dwelling, religious, political, and spatial practices overlap in various ways to create boundaries that selectively include and exclude. This occurs on the level of the individual in the way that surfing, as a repeated ritual, functions to physically alter the surfed body. Surfers also, at times, collectively produce and police sacred space through territorial practices of localism. At the same time, conceiving surfing in terms of crossing highlights the ways in which established boundaries are traversed. These embodied and socially constrained limits are perpetually reconfigured and redefined, both individually and collectively.

In this paper I have merely skimmed the surface of surfing as an example of aquatic nature religion. I believe that the aquatic trope of surfing as confluence can open up fruitful avenues for further inquiry.

Notes

- 1 The “soul surfer”, as an archetype, is a mythical construction, a harmonious ideal, rather than an actual lived identity. In my experience surfers — even those who are somewhat spiritually inclined — do not refer to themselves as “soul surfers”. As an archetype, then, the “soul surfer” is a representation of the spiritual or even mystical elements of the practice of surfing.
- 2 For a more thorough discussion on the substantial and situational dimensions of the sacred, see Chidester and Linenthal, 1995.

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