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A Tale of Two Tours
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Important religious buildings, such as synagogues, mosques, temples or cathedrals, derive their significance from their members' activities in the building. Believers may gather there for worship; they may make personal pilgrimages to it; they may believe that their god dwells there. In other words, the building's fame and attraction comes from its role as a place of religious activity for its religion's adherents.

So what about tourists, people who travel away from their homes to visit important places? Tourists who visit religious sites, as opposed to pilgrims, do not come to worship and rarely belong to the religion associated with the site. They come to a cathedral or a temple because it is famous. They wish to see it and learn more about it; they rarely want to participate in the religious activities held there.

So how does a place of religious importance treat tourists?

Some religious places allow in no one who doesn't belong to the religion. That was true with the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and it remains true for the Muslim holy city of Mecca.

Other places give tours. The character of that tour reveals what the religion, or at least the religious officials who run the site, think is important for visitors to learn.

Take, for instance, Westminster Abbey in London, the church linked to the British Houses of Parliament. Thousands of people visit every day. Its tour is a well-oiled business that describes the building's history and its place in British history.

Highly trained guides take groups around the entire, large building. The guides are experts in the church's history and in its relationship to the government and the monarchs. They know the significance of every tomb, memorial and monument, and can provide key information about everyone buried in the church, from king or queen to poet, playwright or scientist. They can explain the purposes of every side chapel and cloister.

Buildings as old as Westminster require ongoing upkeep, and the wear and tear of the many daily visitors just adds to the building's deterioration. To pay for the building's maintenance, the church has numerous money-raising ventures, from entrance fees to the book shop and

the gift shop, to say nothing of the cafe. In this, the Abbey is just like the many palaces, castles, manor houses and other historical buildings throughout Britain.

Between the historical presentation and the fund-raising, Westminster's ongoing role as a place of worship is nearly invisible. Tourists often fail to realize that three to seven worship services take place daily, including at least one celebration of the Eucharist.

The Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City provides a completely different presentation. Tourists can keep their wallets in their pockets because there is nothing to buy: no food, no souvenirs, no books, no entrance fees.

The tour guides are quite different. Instead of trained, older professionals, the guides for Temple Square are college-age missionaries. They know the Square, from the Temple itself to the Tabernacle and other buildings, but are not extensively versed in its history. Indeed, being able to give detailed historical information is not their job, and they sometimes simply tell questioners they cannot answer a question. The tourists' curiosity about the past may be better satisfied by the short videos viewed on the tour.

The Temple Square tour guides make up in faith and friendliness what they lack in historical knowledge. Their task is to provide an understanding of the Mormon religion, the place of the Temple in that religion, and perhaps most importantly to give a sense of the vital immediacy of their beliefs in their own daily lives. There is no "hard sell," but the tour guides mention their faith when relevant, and the tour itself ends comfortably in a contemplative room before a large statue of Jesus Christ, with the two guides each giving a minute or so of "witness" about their religion.

The treatment of tourists at these two religious sites could not be more different. At Westminster Abbey, the guide delivers a historical message of English/British continuity and importance, religious and otherwise, to which the visitors will always remain outsiders. At the Mormon Temple, by contrast, the guides deliver a personal message, one which links the founding of Salt Lake and its Temple to the guides themselves, and through them the offer is made to the visiting outsiders that they can become insiders too.