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# Religious Tourist Attractions and Ecological Concerns in the Italian Dolomites: The Case of the Trekking of the Thinking Christ

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**Abstract:** The article examines the mobilisation of a local community after the creation of a religious attraction and a popular mountain trail in a protected and fragile context. Despite much research on the topic, the boundaries between spiritual or religious tourism and pilgrimage are still quite complicated. The research questions focused on the social reasons behind the growing invention and reinvention of religious places outside of liturgical celebrations and religious practices. Through a case study, the question of whether/how a religious attraction can give new meaning to a mountain tourist spot on the border of a UNESCO World Natural Heritage List Site is addressed, while also raising ecological issues.

**Keywords:** religious tourism; spiritual tourism; pilgrimage; ecology; trekking; Dolomites; Italy



**Citation:** Rech, G. Religious Tourist Attractions and Ecological Concerns in the Italian Dolomites: The Case of the Trekking of the Thinking Christ. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 16331. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416331>

Academic Editor: Brian Garrod

Received: 6 October 2022

Accepted: 2 December 2022

Published: 7 December 2022

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the contested ecological negative effects of a tourism successful religious-themed itinerary on the borders of a UNESCO World Natural Heritage area in Italy, questioning the blurred boundaries between spiritual and religious tourism, pilgrimage, and their relationships with the creation of tourist attractions.

In June 2009, a statue of Christ in a meditative position with a big metal cross was placed on a mountaintop in the Dolomites, located in the Italian region of Trentino, within the Natural Park Paneveggio Pale di San Martino (Park PAN). An itinerary named ‘the Trekking of the Thinking Christ of the Dolomites’ (TTC), which connects the mountain pass to the top of a secondary mountain of the Eastern Alps, was created in July 2007 [1].

As the endpoint of the trek is the figure of Christ seated next to the cross and as the local community had raised concerns about the ambiguously religious characters of the trek, the research began with an investigation of the religious meanings of an iconography that stimulates questions both about tourism and contemporary Catholic religious forms and devotions. Over time, the case of the TTC has involved environmental and religious conflicts which have questioned the ecological impacts of those initiatives that promote religiously oriented trails and itineraries. The promotion of this mountain route has led to the creation of a tourist and religious attraction that has been potentially damaging to the natural environment, especially when considering the very nature of the mountain area where the TTC trail was laid.

The unclear borders between the different definitions of pilgrimage and religious or spiritual tourism, which animated the initial local debate, do not constitute an issue from an analytical point of view: this enriches the challenging components of the tourist/pilgrim divide. Albeit the present case study will add to the discussion on how spiritual and religious references created a tourist attraction that is basically a religious attraction [2], it is also important to consider the path from the perspective of its environmental [3] and socio-economic [4] sustainability.

The Park PAN agreed to adhere to the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas in 2015, aware that the uncontrolled visitor flow to the Thinking Christ

clearly was one of the threats for the sustainable administration of tourism in the Park [5]. If the three pillars of ecological, economic, and social sustainability are necessarily taken into account by the Park PAN that implements policies to maintain them, [6], the cultural and, lately, spiritual dimensions of sustainability are a stimulating matter, specifically relevant but relatively latent in this case study. Ecological implications are opposed by the local community whose apprehensions touch on the consequences of climate change, together with the verifiable access of mass tourism to the Dolomites during and after the COVID-19 pandemic [7], representing a global issue that is detectable beyond this specific case study.

The placing of a statue of Christ together with a cross on the top of an otherwise ordinary mountain has triggered debate and caused conflicts, while its success has aroused ecological concerns in the local community. The interpretation of the case study examined here is based on the divergence between religious representations and territorial touristic aspirations in a fragile natural environment. Since the beginning of the research, the focus has been on the symbolic and religious objects that have both mobilised the local community on the issue of nature conservation and created a surge in the number of tourists along the trail and on the mountaintop.

## 2. Literature Review

Literature about pilgrimages and religious tourism has greatly expanded over the last few decades, spanning so many different themes and approaches, that it is not possible to provide an exhaustive account here. Due to its characteristics, the creation of the TTC walk could be interpreted ambiguously, because it passes through the characteristics of a pilgrimage or a religious and spiritual tourism experience [8–18]. Analysing its location, this itinerary also merges with typical recreational activities like hiking and other mountain and nature-based activities. Although in many ways similar, the itinerary and its associated meanings could involve the pursuit of a deeper meaning than that of simple recreational pastimes in the mountains [19–24]. When the specific space traversed and the destination of the walk are considered, secular or religious imaginaries relating to the landscape contribute to the creation of its power of attraction [25–28].

Social science scholars continue to discuss the difference between religious or spiritual tourism and pilgrimages, often concluding that the boundaries are blurred and complex [29–33]. These distinctions typically deal with the two pillars of the sacred and the profane, not only in light of intimate or personal motivations (those not apparent to the ‘phenomenological’ observer during ethnographic fieldwork) common among walkers on the most popular routes like the Camino de Santiago for example [34–36]. The desire for a deeper meaningful and complex experience leads to new travel aspirations [37]: walkers may be in search of an authentic experience anchored to their own religious beliefs [38], but a certain degree of hedonism and escapism is always a part of their experiences [39]. Considering the variety of other actors’ and stakeholders’ motivations involved in the invention, reinvention, and heritagisation of routes and trails [40–44], a divergence is always found between religious, economic, identity, and expressive aims of creating and performing such itineraries. According to recent studies in Italy [45,46] and worldwide [47], these itineraries could become a driving force for local sustainable development, as assessed by Trono [4] when looking at possible initiatives to ensure balanced growth in the areas concerned.

This case study partly refutes such claims: the symbolic dominance of the religious objects and related images—which are the destination of the trail—frame a pedestrian mobility that has, first of all, had severe repercussions on nature conservation and, secondly, questioned the role of religious representations in motivating walkers. On the first point, as noted by Shinde and Olsen [48], the environmental impact of religiously motivated tourism is a physical reality, especially in the largest gatherings or in the most delicate natural contexts. The location of the statue of the Thinking Christ and the cross in an environmentally fragile territory has caused local communities and nature protection bodies to mobilize against this attraction and push to raise local environmental awareness.

On the second point, such objects have gained a good reputation in a markedly secularized context, raising the researcher's attention to the fourth dimension of sustainability which has been recently developed by Aulet and Duda [49]. According to these authors, the notion of spiritual sustainability 'refers to the preservation of the spirit of a place, the original use, and the sacredness of the site' (p. 5). Above all, this religious attraction centres on the specific image of the Thinking Christ, whose power and authenticity are questioned by religious institutions that also discussed the theological status of a 'pensive Christ'. The Thinking Christ is both an image and an object, not only the destination of the trail but also the focus of the creator's entire endeavour. First of all, the Thinking Christ and the cross are material objects belonging to the Christian tradition which is enriched with symbolic redundancy of other sacred references, so, from a sociological point of view, the best theoretical frame where it could be interpreted is in material religion studies started by Goa et al. [50]. In this fertile line of thought, Morgan's works on focal objects and devotions [51,52] was particularly pertinent to the Thinking Christ. A 'focal object' is part of a network and is 'responsible for constructing subjects by acting as a counterpart to the individual or group', meeting 'the eye of the viewer as a corresponding other' [52] (p. 93). Its relevance for the case study concerns the centrality of the gaze and the ways of seeing and being seen, not only in the natural context when walkers approach it, but also in all the online exchange and multiple references in the press and media. When Morgan [51] clarifies the multiple components in which the focal object configures the role of images, he underlines how 'the visual features of lore are also a dense intermingling of saying and looking' in 'a constellation or assemblage of different agents' (p. 22), as it will be in the mechanisms of creation and success of the TTC.

### 3. Case Study: Materials and Methods

The data for this case study were gathered during a non-continuous ethnographic fieldwork spread over several years. It was a recursive research project in which interviews, participant observations, and pre-existing documents were all used to interpret an evolving religious and touristic phenomenon.

Initially I was interested in the research questions about the pilgrimage/tourism dichotomy as emic/etic definitions of place and itinerary that were centred on it. I conducted non-standard interviews with the primary actors involved in the project: the creator, the local Church and tourism delegates, the Park PAN Director, and the artist who sculpted the statue. During the summer months, I carried out participant observations while I completed the trek more than 20 times: the first year, I made solitary observations while staying on the mountaintop for many hours to observe walkers' behaviour in front of the Thinking Christ and the mountains. The following summers, I did the hike with other walkers and actors involved in the promotion of the trek. During all those participant observations, I did some informal interviews and had many conversations with participants about their motivations and experiences. After the first summer fieldwork, when I ascertained the multiple sources of conflict at the local level, I enlarged the research to encompass local community actions and their manifestations of dissent, especially on social media and through political initiatives. In 2014, a specific qualitative survey was conducted with people who walked along the TTC. Data were collected on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays of July 2014. The survey was conducted through a brief questionnaire with convenience sampling (N = 614) that aimed to understand whether TTC could be classified as a religious, spiritual, or leisure experience [53].

I returned to the trail after many years to observe place changes during an unexpectedly warm autumn characterised by a prolonged drought, although an actual restudy was not carried out. As the phenomenon has been observed diachronistically, research questions have changed over time and data collected have been interpreted through an equally evolving 'comprehensive' frame that balances place identity and performative characters of the trek.

## 4. Results: A Narrative Cartography Redolent with Meanings

### 4.1. The Creation of the TTC

The TTC is a thematic itinerary among the conspicuous network of hiking trails in the Trentino region where nature-based tourism is well developed, starting from the days of early tourism [54]. The tracing of the trek is Pino Dellasega's 'invention', as he narrated in his books and in interviews. A former orienteer and a master of cross-country skiing, Pino has worked as a Nordic walking instructor and has organized walking tours, founding an amateur outdoor sports company in 2014. Actually, a track had always existed before, but it was just one of the numerous trails which Park PAN staff regularly maintained. Interestingly, it actually covers an important protected area (The area [55] is both a Site of Community Importance according to Natura 2000 and the European Commission Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and Important Bird and Biodiversity Area according to BirdLife International: [56], where The Great War was fought. Trenches and old battlefield construction works are still visible which, because of their misuse (described later on this text) were then included in a larger project of revitalisation carried out by the local autonomous province for the centenary of the Great War [57].

Pino has always colourfully narrated the episode that inspired his TTC initiative [1,58,59]. In the summer of 2007, while hiking in that area, he bumped into some religious people: first, six Franciscan friars crossed his path and, later, he noticed a person kneeling intent on praying. Pino identified that man as a Muslim turned towards Mecca and took a picture that was then reproduced in one of his books [1] (p. 34). Once home and looking at a wooden statuette of Christ he had bought many years previously in Warsaw: (this is popular Polish iconography representing a *Chrystus Frasobliwy*, Christ who is 'seated thinking with sadness' [60], he decided to realize the TTC. When I interviewed him, he explained that his project's originality is based upon religious encounters, but he converted these into the context of an idea for leisure: 'when I saw that Muslim in *Val Venegia* ( . . . ) from that moment Christ was Christ and he would have carried everything with him and it was like that and I never doubted, you know? But then let me tell you, in my opinion, the beautiful thing is the uniqueness of the project because everyone ( . . . ) copies because you see ( . . . ) the tour of the huts and the tour with the goats ( . . . ) then the following year everyone does the same'.

From the very beginning of its creation process, the TTC differed from other itineraries as it used the mechanism of storytelling to publicly convince people to support the project. It was partly funded by the local Destination Management Organisations (DMO) of Primiero Valley and Fiemme Valley that implemented a bottom-up approach to test potential interest or criticism from the local communities or the Church. It was only after receiving a warm local response that they proceeded to approach local organisations and institutions for all the necessary legal permits, including the registration of the logo at the Italian Patent and Trademark Office. Before the statue was laid, the TTC was presented both in the general interest press and in the Catholic media and press. Adjectives used to describe the track fluctuate between 'religious' and 'spiritual', calling it a simple walk or a religious tourism attraction. This press attention contributed to encourage dialogue between the different local opinions shared through multiple canals and involving all levels of society. Before the installation of the statue, some people asked local promotion offices and, in some cases, the inventor himself for more information regarding the TTC, but at that time it was not available, as witnessed during an interview. During the autumn of 2009, an Italian journalist published a book dedicated to his religious conversion following a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Medjugorje; one chapter in the book narrates the story of the TTC [61] (pp. 182–211). This witness account by a public personality in the national media, together with accounts from the devotees of the Medjugorje's Virgin Mary, initially acted as an important sounding-board for the Thinking Christ. In the early years of the TTC creation, comments from some of the walkers met at the summit were explicit proof of piety. Provided with the books or other material that tell the story of the Thinking Christ, they noted—especially when solicited by the ethnographer—that

it was not the same as Medjugorje, the place of pilgrimage in Bosnia where the Virgin Mary continues to appear to some of the seers.

In 2010, a book dedicated to the undertaking of the TTC of the Dolomites was published by the TTC creator [1] and later reworked in other books [58,59]. The narrative supporting the creation of the TTC is enriched with elements belonging both to popular religiosity and the special dedication required to realise a goal. The specific Christ iconography is typical of Central and Northern Europe [60] and evokes the well-known engraving by Albrecht Dürer on the cover of *Kleine Holzschnitt Passion*. The creator provided materials from several sacred places of catholic pilgrimages, such as Lourdes, Jerusalem, or Medjugorje for a case which were placed inside the base of the sculpture. All the narratives—told and retold on many media channels—established the foundation of the itinerary and gave a new meaning to these places. Narratives are an important factor in creating the sense of place and above all the sense of the endeavour of walking the trail as, for instance, studied in modern guidebooks such as those on the St. Olav Ways in Norway where a pilgrimage becomes a way of engaging with ‘an immersive heritage encounter’, “walking in other people’s footsteps,” even where the physical surroundings bear no trace of a historical community of pilgrims’ [62] (p. 510).

#### 4.2. A Religious Attraction in an Environmentally Fragile Context

Only ten days after the laying of the cross, the 33rd UNESCO Commission [63] communicated a favourable opinion regarding the inclusion of the Dolomites in the list of World Natural Heritage (WNH) Sites of outstanding value. The Dolomites are a serial property comprising nine mountain systems in the north-eastern Alps: one of them is the Pale di San Martino mountain chain that is just in front of the Castellazzo mountaintop. This inscription onto the UNESCO list was accepted at the second attempt after a revised second submission focused more strongly on criteria (vii) and (viii). The Dolomites ‘are widely regarded as being among the most attractive mountain landscapes in the world’ and ‘are of international significance for geomorphology, as the classic site for the development of mountains in dolomitic limestone’ (UNESCO [63] (p. 187)). Aesthetics relates to the historically and culturally based recognition of the immense beauty of the mountain ranges, while the geomorphological features, on a natural level, are unique.

Since summer 2009, the flow of visitors has grown considerably. During the first summer, nearly 10,000 people reached the top of the mountain. This number steadily increased to about 25,000 visitors in the summer of 2012 and averaged at around 20,000 visitors per summer in the subsequent years. The number of people who walk the trail was recorded by counting devices prepared by the technical sector of the PAN Park, which provided me with the data. In the subsequent years, they moved their devices to other parts of the Park. During the core days of summer fieldwork observations in the months of August 2011 and August 2012, the average number of visitors per day was 200. In such an environment, numbers count, and the effect of these visitors was rapidly visible (Figures 1 and 2).

The qualitative survey undertaken in 2014 detected several kinds of walkers along the TTC: pilgrim-tourists who come with organized groups, Nordic walkers, people who return there independently after having been visitors with organized groups previously, and finally tourists who are already vacationing in one of the two valleys and go there for a daily excursion. Among the people interviewed along the TTC, those who were not familiar with religious places and had never visited pilgrimage sites before, admitted such aspirations were not important. As Digance concludes [37], ‘Perhaps quantitative research soliciting pilgrims’ motivations is irrelevant after all when all that really matters is that an individual took time to take a journey redolent with meaning in his or her desire to connect with the Other’ (p. 46). This seems to be affirmed on the mountaintop where the walker who joins the Thinking Christ can read a plaque displaying Mother Teresa’s words: ‘Find the time to think/Find the time to pray/Find the time to smile’.





**Figure 1.** Photograph depicting the meadows at the top of Mount Castellazzo in front of the Thinking Christ statue (10 September 2011). Credit: the Author.



**Figure 2.** Photograph depicting the same meadows turned into scree at the top of Mount Castellazzo in front of the Thinking Christ statue (31 October 2022). Credit: the Author.

#### 4.3. *Tourists or Pilgrims along the TTC*

Since the announcement of the creation of the TTC, one of the first issues for the public was understanding which kind of attraction it was: religious or touristic? If one looks at the area, with surrounding meadows and the Pale di San Martino above, the Rolle Pass is an alpine landscape of great beauty and a tourist space whose main focus since the 1930s has been on winter sports, mostly skiing [64].

Looking at its socio-historical situation, the Rolle Pass forms a controversial border between the Primiero and Fiemme valleys, from an economic and social point of view

for the everyday life of local workers: both valleys are Italian and now belong to the Trentino-Sud Tirol region yet still seem distant because of seasonal or exceptional isolation due to cases of extreme weather. According to many of those questioned, the TTC has contributed to the reappearance of old local rivalries. One is represented by the perception of the Pale di San Martino range, always felt by residents of the Primiero Valley to be a Primiero Valley property [58]. Even if the mountain area is officially public soil, the statue and the cross are placed on a ground actually belonging to two different Primiero municipalities. This situation means that firstly, they are not on the valley ground where the creator was living, and secondly, that during authorisation procedures, two different municipalities were consulted. When the participant observations started, owners of local shops, mountain huts, and restaurants remarked that alpine guides from Primiero Valley refused to accompany tourists along the TTC. In the following years, the trail became one of the weekly summer excursions proposed to tourists in both valleys, according to many tourists that were interviewed.

From a touristic point of view, this mountain pass has the features of a marginal place with a declining number of visitors. Today, it is frequently visited by passing drivers and motorcyclists, but it continues to be 'desolated', in the words of local business and restaurant owners. Along with contingent problems, such as its partial or total isolation due to landslides and avalanches, the need to offer double seasonality to mountain tourism must be considered as well. The project of the TTC seemed to offer an opportunity to relaunch the summer season, with a simple and affordable trail for 'everyone', as commented by many of those questioned.

The TTC path takes one to the Castellazzo mountain at a height of 2333 m above the sea level after a short, easy, and safe walk of about 1.5 h along first a forest road, then a mule track, and finally a mountain track. Even in old tourist guides, Castellazzo mountain was defined as a vantage point and a 'real look-out point for the northern chain of Pale di San Martino' [65] (p. 444) that was worthy of a detour for tourists and explorers [66] (p. 18) [67] (p. 123). The trail immediately gives non-mountaineers the opportunity to enjoy mountain views. The combination of the beauty of the place and the comfortable and easy access to it is the primary reason for the influx of visitors, but both the local community and local Church speculates about whether this convenience may distort the alpine experience, the enjoyment of the mountain, its authenticity, and also the authenticity of the pilgrimage experience. 'They want to bring everyone up the mountains' was the argument of many of the members of the local community asked, and the ambivalence of their judgment was left open to the ethnographer's interpretation. When interviewed, the parish priest of the nearest village explained 'many people feel the need to do something to refer to and believe in ( . . . ) I don't think it's so much that they have experiences that leave a mark. There they have a nice walk, they enjoy a beautiful view and that's it . . . '.

The Primiero Valley community has discussed the relationship between the costs and benefits of this tourist attraction through the local press as well as on internet forums. When asked, owners of local shops and services disagree about the real impact of the TTC on the Rolle Pass economy. The visitor flow would have probably increased anyway due to the fortunate timing of the inscription of the Dolomites onto the UNESCO WNH list, which occurred a few days after the installation of the statue and the cross.

Visitors' awareness of their location and their ability to situate themselves in a geographic, natural, and historical-cultural space was tested. Almost all tourists questioned for the 2014 survey were aware that they were inside a natural park, fewer people interviewed knew that the Great War was fought there, and almost everyone recognized that they were close to a UNESCO WNH site. In the latter case, people interviewed made the direct connection with being in the Dolomites. In fact, during summer 2011, some informative billboards showing the Dolomites to be a UNESCO heritage natural site were placed on the main routes to Rolle Pass [68].



The realisation and popularity of the TTC involved a lively debate inside the local Primiero community and triggered reactions from the Park PAN, which had to address their environmental concerns. During autumn 2014, the Park PAN carried out a process of raising awareness for trekkers: drawing from the funds for the centenary commemoration of the Great War, they installed several information panels along the trail. The signs pinpoint the locations of the trenches and the traces of old battlefield construction works: today, walkers traversing the TTC understand they are inside a protected area and in a place of memory where the Great War was fought.

In fact, if compared with other areas in the Park PAN, concentration just on one area is very problematic: people go to the Thinking Christ to stay there, precisely in the place where almost every walker takes photographs of the surrounding peaks. Here, the TTC has certainly created a *collective* tourist gaze on the statue: it is also a *mediatized* gaze [69] (pp. 27–28) which consumes that area. It is a single point of attraction that catalyses attention, and continuous foot traffic has resulted in the erosion of the frail turf and taken centimetres off the top of the mountaintop. The situation was so problematic that, during an interview with the researcher, the Park PAN director stated that the only viable strategy would be to simply accept the loss of a part of the mountaintop.

The TTC was discussed in several local forums dedicated to hiking and commented on in online local press articles: it was deemed unsatisfactory by those trekkers who were in search of an authentic mountain experience. Their complaints mainly concerned the crowding of the summit and the bad manners of walkers. Some users openly dissuaded visiting, while others nostalgically remembered the Castellazzo mount before the TTC. A shared opinion is that the mountain area has been desecrated from an ecological point of view: ‘what shocked me was the crowd’s booming voices with no respect for the place and the events that happened (by this I mean the battles in the war), the lack of respect for the mountains, litter everywhere, abandoned plastic bottles’ [70]).

Many ecological and moral concerns arose: a mass tourist and religious attraction needs facilities, and a mountain over 2000 m high in a Strict Nature Reserve could not be equipped for such basic needs. The hundreds of people who go up to the Thinking Christ every day have caused the degradation of the environment and the improper use of old battlefield construction works is still an environmental hygiene problem. In particular, this last aspect is a sensitive point for those who experienced the Great War through first-hand family tales. These are the majority of the indigenous inhabitants of the Eastern Alps who belong to the generation of people born before the 1980s, while the visitors interviewed in 2014 mostly come from the nearby regions and probably do not personally share those painful memories.

#### 4.4. Local Community of Primiero for a Spiritual Ecology

The large number of visitors that have climbed up the Castellazzo mountain since 2009 raises several concerns with regard to environmental sustainability and the consequences of human presence on the habitats of the Park PAN. In the TTC preparation process, these concerns were considered by all the actors involved in the decision: authorisations passed all legal steps of municipal planning permissions and the provincial Commission of Appraisal of Environmental Impact, despite the Park PAN aversion shown by Park PAN and the first hurdle refusal [58].

The local community of the Primiero Valley has questioned the effects of the TTC several times after its completion to the extent that it became a point of strong political controversy. The debate has taken a very polemic tone since the autumn of 2012, when the number of visitors on this route was first publicly announced: from June to September 2012, an average of 400 people went up to the Thinking Christ per day, according to the technical sector of the Park PAN. A local association (the Fishermen Association is involved in local nature protection and, as the Primiero Valley is a little community, they decided to take the floor first declaring: ‘urged the relocation of the monument and the cross and the environmental restoration of the area’, suggesting alternative locations for the statue and



demanding regulation and an access fee [71]. An angry public reaction followed, and the effects of the presence of this trail were interpreted by critics as an instance of desecration, since the mountain has now been exposed to consumerism. ‘Thanks to the religious trekking, here it is a privatized mountain, reduced to pure commodification’ [72] (p. 12).

Nevertheless, the institutions concerned with environmental protection took a step to address the situation. The executive regulations of the new Park PAN plan include the introduction of a new rule. It is now forbidden to ‘install symbolic and permanent celebratory artefacts which have an evident visual impact on the peaks and ridges of the Park’ [5] (p. 32). This revision of the prohibitions involves a remarkable addition: the previous plan did not mention artefacts of symbolic or commemorative type [73].

This prohibition against installing artefacts addressed the real problems that had emerged along the route of the TTC. More than ten years after the trail inauguration, mountaintop soil erosion is impressive as pictures, taken at two different moments, show (Figure 1; Figure 2). The Park PAN has succeeded in limiting the number of people wandering off the paths through increased maintenance and by adding many signs which repeatedly inform trekkers that stepping off the trail is prohibited and explain the protection status of the area. Unfortunately, the need for toilets for many people at a high altitude in a limited time period continues to be the most crucial aspect of the direct impact of tourism. This confirms what Shinde and Olsen [48] noted for ‘the resilience of religious sites [which] are severely tested, as there is not enough time for the natural and built environment, let alone the host community, to recover from the impacts of major [ . . . ] events’ (p. 163).

The formal prohibition led to a more complex discussion that is still relevant: not only did it claim that ‘mass’ tourism impacted environmental sustainability, but it also questioned the religious imaginary that supported the creation of the TTC. This issue underwent different levels of political discussion in the early years of the trail’s inauguration. In particular, the Primiero Valley Community Assembly were questioned by minority groups for clarification about the environmental effects of the TTC in view of a planning reform.

The letter accompanying the proposal for the agenda echoed the new executive regulation of the park, describing the ‘tourist-religious phenomenon’ as ‘literally out of control among the more or less improvised pilgrims attracted by the successful invention’ [74]. It reaffirmed the efforts of the Park PAN to channel ‘the hordes of trekkers armed with sticks and chanting the rosary onto “official” paths’ [74]. It draws attention to the responsibility of natural heritage conservation from the point of view of the passing on of the protected environment from generation to generation, that, since the Bruntland report of the United Nations [75]), is at the very base of the idea of sustainability. Even if a huge number of people took the hike ‘because of large commercial scale initiatives or ordinary ignorance of the limits that should be observed for the preservation of heritage entrusted to us (from fathers, sons or from holy spirits, it does not change the matter)’. So, they exhorted: ‘the quota restriction for a sustainable influx in such sensitive places must not be treated as taboo for any longer’ [74].

The high mountain, ‘if one wants to hear and recognize it, is already a shrine in itself, without any need for signs and other “accessories”’ [74]. The judgement of walkers, identified as pilgrims or trekkers, is openly disdainful, and locals do not consider them to be tourists in a tourist area. It can be noted here that there are contradictions in prolonged tourist land use that strives to be both compatible with environmental protection as well as attractive for the promotion of tourism at the same time. The neighbouring area is characterized by the presence of tourism infrastructure such as ski lifts for winter skiing.

Two statements published on the internet by an inhabitant and a political activist of the Primiero Valley are particularly sharp: ‘The Castellazzo is the Kingdom of God, it must conserve its natural universal value and whoever goes up should meditate on those values! Protecting the place and saving its culture and significance through silent respect cannot be delayed because it is consistent with its status of Integral Reserve’ [76] (p. 3). This indignation assumes the terms of a ‘spiritual ecology’ [77], which clearly emerges in

the title of the statements: ‘If God exists, the nature, the silence, and the miracle of the mountains are already a witness’ [76,78].

The TTC’s success has been attributed to the fact that ‘it came to touch something deep which nowadays people are prisoners of: Confusion, Fear, Solitude, Hope and Illusion’ [78] (p. 4). This assessment was considered ‘harsh’ by the same Taufer who underlined that sacredness of the mountain has failed in the exact spot where the Christ lies. He debates through metaphors that recall a traditional mountain imaginary, noticing that the ground around the statue is consumed: ‘Just as deer with their tongues erode [the soil] around the mountain houses looking for salt, so the altar foundations will collapse’ [78] (p. 3).

The complaint is not only directed towards the evocation of a controversial religiosity but also at the role of local authorities, both secular and religious. The example of the TTC illustrates the way in which the mountain ‘is now used as a stage for personal or group ambitions, and also to build business’ [72] (p. 12), and finally to transform the mountain in a way that could annoy its secular visitors who are not interested in any religious connotations.

In the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of people walking in the mountains, making Italian and local institutions reflect on the problems of overtourism. The issue was tackled both from a political point of view and from a scientific point of view but prompt solutions have not been enabled yet, to my knowledge the Italian Youth Association for UNESCO [79], the UNESCO Dolomites Foundation [80] and Bertocchi et al. [7] illustrated it. It has been especially serious in protected areas where setting limits is a difficult theme as it impacts profitability for tourism entrepreneurs and local communities [81].

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Linear Tourism Trails: Bringing New Meaning to Places

Trekking and thematic itineraries are created according to the initiative of organisations and associations: some are inspired by local legends, while others offer ethnographic, historical, or religious meanings that enhance the territory in the light of environmental, historical, and cultural heritage. In this specific case, the religious itinerary draws a narrative cartography [82] (p. 466) that socializes tourists, pilgrims, and walkers through a narrative that prepares and instructs them in view of the tourist experience. It could be, in this sense, described as a performative approach to tourist spaces, and their creation through tourism [83] is therefore detected during the ethnographic fieldwork. The ethnographic approach implies a researcher’s awareness that hiking the TTC is an embodied practice, shared with and often anticipated by other walkers, but always surrounded by that place that is literally ‘felt’, as Crouch argues [84] (p. 208).

More than ten years after its establishment, the trail has become a relatively brief linear tourism trail [85] with a strong point of attraction on the mountaintop, while different actors have contributed to adding or uncovering other layers of meaning over the area. This mechanism is quite typical, even if diversified, in the continental and non-continental European and Reformed areas. For instance, replication of the prototypical Camino de Santiago can also be found in the Anglican Cathedrals as seen in the results of the research conducted by Bowman and Sepp on those ‘open spaces of spiritual possibility’ [40] (p. 84). The authors of this research have named this phenomenon “caminoisation” confirming the trend of linking sacred spaces along real or metaphorical lines. From the perspective of the natural environment, the Northern European initiatives, connected to the St. Olav Ways studied by Øian [41] for the Norwegian main route, confirm the involvement of secular stakeholders as prominent when compared to the role of the Church of Norway. If we widen this perspective to include countries where the revival corresponds to a similar cultural process, we can see that the Baltic routes of pilgrimage [86] and other marginal areas of Europe [87] are managed for tourism purposes, having—for a number of walkers and pilgrims—an authentic religious significance. From tourism purposes to the enhancement and spiritualisation of built cultural heritage, to the rediscovery of previously contested traditions, trail-based mobility is an important theme where economic actors and local communities find an opportunity

for future economic and social development as demonstrated by Trono and Olsen [88] when looking at the future of pilgrimage trails and routes.

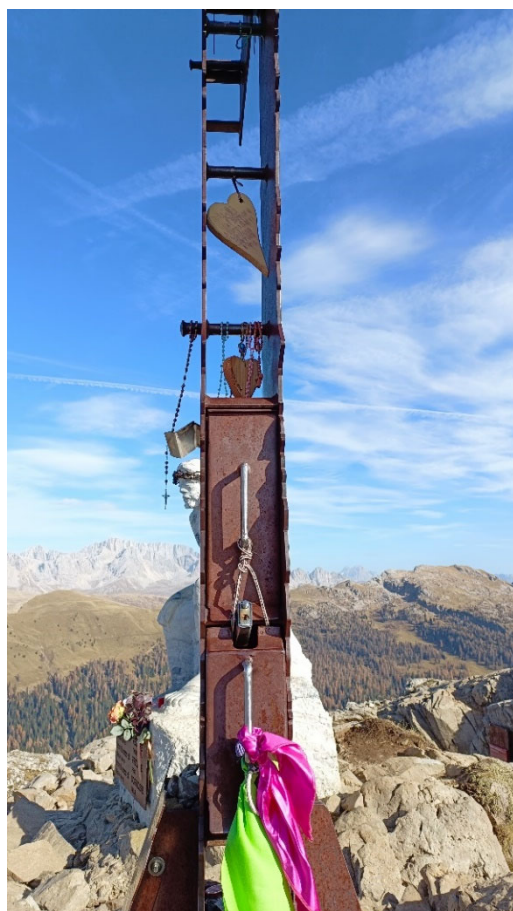
This opportunity is clearly recognised by the creator and the tourism bodies engaged in the realisation of the TTC, as in the abovementioned examples. Trono [4] affirms that the ‘compatibility and sustainability of the routes [ . . . ] depends on the horizontal integration of the regional system (environment, landscape and socioproductive systems) and the collaboration of all the actors involved (institutional and otherwise)’ (p. 453). The trail examined here did not succeed in integrating different systems because of the latent and manifest conflict. This involved not only institutional actors working in tourism promotion and nature conservation, but also the divide in public opinion and the vivid interventions made by the local community and passionate walkers.

The TTC has been a challenge for religious institutions because the symbolic redundancy of references to the sacred is specifically concentrated on the Thinking Christ image and makes this itinerary contradictory, especially for local Church interpretation. This redundancy revolves around the contrast, which is neither clear nor drastically binary, between an authentic religious experience and a leisure hike. These particular religious references place the undertaking of the creator of the TTC between religiosity and spirituality in a context that is local and, at the same time, has global and plural references, strongly linked to subjectivity. The relevance of the religious factor is focused on the representations (here images and narratives) that contribute to the creation of a disputed religious attraction which does not distinctively belong to a catholic denominational affiliation. For religious walkers, the iconography of Christ, which remains at the foot of the cross, explicitly evokes suffering: the issue of theodicy and Christ’s pain clearly emerges during several conversations and from the words expressed in front of the statue. Walkers have symbolically appropriated that place, leaving rosaries, tickets, or other items that recall happy or sad events, around or on the cross (Figures 3 and 4). In this way, they witness not only their own passage, but also multiply the spiritual, emotional, and affective connections with departed people or with other places of worship.



**Figure 3.** The statue of the Thinking Christ and the cross with rosaries from numerous pilgrimage sites (21 August 2011). Credit: the Author.





**Figure 4.** A closer caption of the statue of the Thinking Christ and the cross with objects and rosaries (31 October 2022). Credit: the Author.

### 5.2. *The Role of Religious Representations in Ecological Concerns*

There is a complex relationship between visitors, the natural environment, local communities, and religious objects connected to spirituality and religiosity and their teachings [19]. In the case of the TTC, this seems to the ethnographer to be expressed through the performativity of the place [83] (p. 10) and not only in the performative action of tourists and their journey. This makes it possible to understand that the sources of place re-signification differ and have been gradually stratified over time. The Park PAN's interventions are specifically relevant: on the one hand, they have brought the local history of the Great War back to light by making the battlefield works and buildings visible again. On the other hand, they have explicitly addressed messages of ecological respect to believers and spiritual people: 'If you love the creator, respect creation' is a message spread along the path. This strategy is aimed at taking advantage of the spiritual sensitivity in managing natural resources as demonstrated by Hitchner et al. [21] for a popular Californian trail.

Those representations take shape in the paths, images, and narrations, which become traces that make that part of the Trentino Dolomites not only a beautiful landscape but also a tourist place of future encounters. During several fieldworks climbs, I met people walking along the TTC who were retracing 'social constructions [that] help to shape not only the meaning of toured objects for pilgrims, but also the meaning of their own activities and experiences in the visited space' [38] (p. 684). Those activities are interpreted differently according to different kinds of users, but the TTC area lacks a univocal theoplicity in Belhassen's et al. terms [38] (p. 683). Theoplicity implies a hybridity of socio-religious and socio-spatial foundations of relationship between place, belief, and visitors, but the TTC shows that it could not be understood by any sort of walker. As introduced by Graburn and Gravari-Barbas' [28], landscape is mainly imagined and that particular mountain

landscape at the foot of the Pale di San Martino had different agents and instruments of construction of an imaginary. A first source dates back to the period between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The area is described in several guides which were written for scientific explorers and first tourists of the entire Eastern Alps [65–67,89]. On the contrary, the imaginary explored in this case study is very recent and is shrinking the walker's experience in a smaller and shorter space whose agents of construction revolve around the creation of the TTC.

People interviewed along the TTC are not walking in a sacred landscape [25,27] as they are not necessarily journeying to the sacred, in a strict sense. No religious apparitions, miracles, or hierophanies have consecrated that place. Nevertheless, for some of the walkers, the TTC area is accessed for a spiritual purpose and local critics pinpoint this as the true cause of the environmental desecration. Spirituality and religiosity are what give these experiences of places a media resonance and an intangible depth of easy, even though disputed, profitability. Looking at Aulet and Duda's relationship between accessibility and the use of religious places [49] (p. 6), the TTC seems to be perfectly suspended between the sacred and profane use while the physical, emotional/intellectual accessibility is still contested. The desecration did not affect a previously sacred place but the spiritual ecology that is expressed through the categories of sustainability is claimed for the natural environment, previously hardly touched by religious signs.

Such implications could be interpreted both in the agency of the religious image of the Thinking Christ and in the consequences of its media and promotion use. As Morgan argued, some religious images could be considered as 'focal object' because of its 'networks producing visibility, an ideologically charged hub that addresses itself to viewers and regards them in a particular way' [52] (p. 95). Here the image ecology is not only consisting 'of those artifacts and forces with which it comes into connection' [52] (p. 86). It is a concern for ecology of the image which has a main practical component for the multiple environmental matters caused by a single point of attraction and stops of walkers. The agency of the image is interpreted through this focal object in the way it activates the Primiero Valley and some of the stakeholders explicitly or implicitly involved in the TTC's creation. As a response against the phenomenon of mass tourism, local communities defend the nature as the 'ultimate trope' that has to be protected from 'urban, ordered, unnatural, clock-watching society' [28] (p. 163).

Criticism and issues concerning crowds on the mountaintop and along the trail show that any kind of tourist is also a performer of that place. The image of the Thinking Christ always characterises discourses about the TTC, some saying that the stature and the cross are just mere objects; however, when they are first seen by visitors on the mountaintop, they become focal objects that attract and accompany visitors as part of the place's meaning-making which is almost invariably performed taking numerous pictures with the subject embracing the sculpture.

## 6. Conclusions

Through this case study, the conflicts involved in the realisation and success of a mountain trail combining religious representations, tourism practices, and concerns for nature degradation, on the border (and in front) of a UNESCO WNH site, have been examined. If interpreted in the light of the pilgrimage/tourism divide, the TTC shows that there exist different ways of re-signifying the places: religious attraction re-shapes this landscape and makes it functional for tourism promotion.

This process has taken place in the wake of the last few decades of heritagisation of religious legacies and the spiritualisation of cultural heritage which contributes to both the diversification of the tourism offered and the rediscovery or reappropriation of local traditions. In the present case study, the relevance of the 'invention' was first supported by the image of the Thinking Christ. This always triggers debate about this trail, firstly, as they start as simple objects (the statue and the cross), but then, on arrival, they become focal objects that attract and accompany visitors as part of the meaning-making of the

place. Moreover, the TTC case study shows what could be finally named as a ‘subjective focality’ on Christ ‘descended from the cross’ as in the creator’s words [58]. Starting from Morgan’s notion of focal object, a strong subjectivity could be detected in the focality that is collectively fostered on the mountaintop through those objects that are used for the leisure purposes of taking a picture or for religious purposes of praying and meditating [53].

The TTC denotes the kind of travel that cannot be simply characterized as religious or spiritual tourism, nor as pilgrimage. When a destination, oscillating between a secular and religious tourist attraction, is developed in a fragile space, the consequences can be damaging for nature conservation but rich for increasing the number of walkers. The TTC project is in conflict with the past of those places, demonstrating that in the field of tourism, narrative cartography accompanies the creation of a place but could clash with its history, making spiritual sustainability—in a broad sense—an issue to be considered in tracing and promoting new paths. The project was superimposed onto an area where the Park PAN has operated in terms of preservation and protection, appealing to specific historical and symbolic resources in the name of nature and in the name of its original features. In fact, it can be seen how the authorities addressed the management and protection of the area through a heritagisation process where the spiritual sustainability claimed by the local community resulted in the preservation of the spirit of the place which itself tells an original story. However, it does not succeed in reaffirming any sacredness other than in the protection of the site which is a strong commitment for future generations.

**Funding:** The fieldwork of this research was funded by the Autonomous Province of Trento through the project HERI-REL TRENTO (funded by Bando PAT Post-doc 2011). The APC was not provided by any funding body.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and a formal statement about ethical issues was sent by the Author to Servizio Università e ricerca scientifica, Provincia Autonoma di Trento (27 September 2011).

**Data Availability Statement:** This study did not produce datasets because it is an ethnographic research.

**Acknowledgments:** The Author would thank the kind advice of John Eade and Kiran A. Shinde who read previous versions of this article. The anonymous reviewers’ and Editor’s comments were decisive to improve the quality of the final version.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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