

Pilgrimage Commentary

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Pilgrimage is a phenomenon found in almost all of the major (and some minor) religious traditions of the world. It is also encountered in a large and diverse variety of non-religious or secular contexts. As such, there is nothing specifically 'religious' about pilgrimage, even though many will claim 'spiritual' benefits resulting from it. Throughout history, pilgrimage has also generated important economic and tourism benefits, and there is an important leisure dimension attached to pilgrimage travel. Important pilgrimage centres in cultures and religions worldwide, whether they are very ancient or relatively new, benefit in many significant ways materially from such a phenomenon. In other words, pilgrimage is a multi-faceted reality, constantly shifting in both its meanings and its manifestations. It has not been an unchanging force in human history. And the distinctions between religious and non-religious pilgrimage are actually rather artificial; they tend to conflate rather easily.

Pilgrims go on pilgrimage for a vast array of different reasons. If they are on a religious pilgrimage, it may be because they are asking for a favour from a sacred being, or else they want to express gratitude for one obtained, or perhaps they are simply visiting or want to be inspired by an important site attached to their historical faith. In some cases, such as the *hajj* to Mecca in Islam, it is a requirement of the religious tradition. In the Middle Ages in Western Europe, or for those travelling to the Christian Holy Land as pilgrims, there was always a sense of sacrifice and arduousness attached to pilgrimage. The difficulties experienced were thought to contribute to an intensely transformative personal experience; this remains the case today for many modern pilgrims. For those on a non-religious pilgrimage, the reasons can be the same, though perhaps even more diverse: they vary from simple sight-seeing, to 'soaking up' a sense of history, to communing with nature, or going to a place that is especially significant for oneself or for one's broader family or community. But always, pilgrimage is tied up with a sense of place, and with the rich and multiple meanings we attach to our physical environment and the places we inhabit. We sometimes also speak metaphorically of pilgrimage as a uniquely daunting journey of self-discovery inside ourselves, thereby emphasizing its explicitly therapeutic dimension.

Though there is a multiplicity of ways of looking at pilgrimage from an academic or scholarly perspective, two in particular stand out. The first views it as a kind of rite of passage, whereby individuals suspend their everyday activities and go through a particularly intense and life-changing experience, emerging from it with an altered sense of self or a new religious or social identity. In this view, there is a sort of counter-cultural, community-building dimension to the pilgrimage experience. The second takes a somewhat more nuanced and critical look, stressing the variety of ways in which power, authority and institutional priorities and privilege are staged and performed in the pilgrimage experience, and how the pilgrims themselves either collude with these or else resist them. This perspective emphasizes the interactions between the pilgrim and the pilgrimage site and its organizers, teasing out the rich interplay between them.

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Perhaps it can be said that pilgrimage is a specifically human need. Perhaps we all have the compunction to strike out and to travel to places near and far to discover the deeper meanings attached to them. Perhaps, as is sometimes said, we need to go away in order to discover the true meaning of home. For millennia, humans have set out on all sorts of pilgrimages, encountering their deities and honouring them, eager for words of comfort, hope and some ultimate direction.