

What is Pilgrimage?

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The Religious Origins of Pilgrimage Studies

Answering any student's legitimate first question – what counts as a “pilgrimage”? – is no longer easy. Pilgrimage Studies have emerged in the past few years as a new field of inquiry arcing well beyond former definitions that boxed sacred travel into religious or historical paradigms. Even in its traditional home in medieval studies, Western pilgrimages have taken over as the locus of attention on the traveler of times past. After decades in the spotlight as the prime example of encounters between rival cultures and faiths, the Crusades have apparently yielded to pilgrimage as the framing narrative for travel richly imagined. Besides, the Crusades were merely the armed subset of the much more common unarmed journeys that travel in the name of God represented for venturesome Christians. And since all medieval trips of any distance were prudently armed and assembled in companies of companions, one could reasonably say that the Crusades were armed *offensively* and pilgrimages outfitted *defensively* against the inevitable beasts, brigands and belligerent infidels. As distinct from travel for commerce, military expeditions and governance, journeys of faith were “pre-loaded” with an imaginary that gave them an inner trajectory. Pilgrims knew in their hearts that they would traverse sacred lands and arrive at a lofty peak, sometime quite literally, like at Mont Saint-Michel on the French coast, Saint-Martin-du-Canigou in the high Pyrenees, St. Catherine's in the Sinai, or Mount Athos in Greece.

All religious traditions worldwide (in the classic formulations of Arnold van Gennep 1909) have incorporated quests and displacements as rites of initiation. Sacred travel may be viewed as a ritualized sequence of leavetaking from one's normal life and social network, then during the trip an immersion in an altered state of “liminality” or threshold living usually within a unique polity of strangers which forms its own society or *communitas*. Eventually there was a reincorporation as someone transformed and endowed with holy experiences and gifts that enrich the imagined community that was left behind, whether a specific village or the scattered believers of one's congregation (the influential conceptual model of Victor and Edith Turner 1978). More recent scholars assert that far from comprising an idealized community of travelers who forge some sort of utopian *communitas*, bands of pilgrims engage in a complex and even hotly contested negotiation of class, personal identity, and purity of intention (Coleman and Eade 2004).

Nor is religious pilgrimage a casual adornment for the pious, or a pastime among the overly fervent. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam travel is part of their foundational myths of God's stamp on history and His requirements for living in it. When Yahweh called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees to found a great nation whose people would be as countless as grains of sand or the stars in the sky (Genesis 15-22), this first of Jewish patriarchs was being summoned to pilgrimage. Abraham's signature test of faith when Yahweh ordered him to slaughter his first-born son Isaac as a ritual offering (an act of violence that was forestalled and transformed into a categorical rejection of human sacrifice), the entire biblical drama is staged as the centerpiece of a pilgrimage into the wilderness to enact a special act of worship. And when the extended family of Isaac endured exile and enslavement in Egypt, and its numerous descendants were led on a 40-year trek in the wastelands of the Sinai, a stumbling quest full of failures, revelations and wondrous encounters with the divine it culminated in taking possession of a new hereditary estate, a Promised Land. This long, complex journey was enshrined as its decisive Exodus Event which birth to the Jewish nation. Recalled as the foundational memory of the Jewish faith community, the flight from Egypt is memorialized in every observant home at the Passover Seder meal.

Christians inherit this foundational myth of travel as creating a nation of the faithful and a faithful nation. The infancy narratives of Jesus show his parents making a humdrum trip as an administrative obligation (registering for a Roman census) and being overtaken by the sacred which explodes into their lives in mid journey and forces them into a miniature replica of the Exodus Event as they flee into Egypt, live in exile, and return home to Palestine to fulfill their destiny by inaugurating a new people of God. The Three Kings who visit the newborn child and his parents in Bethlehem are later honored as the first pilgrims to a Christian holy place. Jesus's earthly career of preaching and miracles can easily be read as a prolonged circuit pilgrimage through the Holy Land, terrain made holy by His passage and witness, functions that all Christian pilgrims feel themselves repeating as they transform their own trails into highways of faith. Some theologians would even posit that the incarnation itself, the Godhead leaving heaven to assume human flesh as its pilgrim's uniform and in death returning home transformed and bestowing gifts on a community of remembrance, is the pilgrimage motif writ large, inscribed on time and on the Christian cosmos itself.

Despite the mythic resonance that pilgrimage holds for Judaism nor Christianity, travel never becomes in either tradition a cultic imperative. Jews may toast at the end of their Seder meal "Next year, in Jerusalem!", but no Jew is actually obliged to make that trip in order to be a good Jew. Christians became some of the most industrious sojourners of all, flocking to shrine sites major and minor, most a jumble of the glorious and tacky, sprinkled throughout the world. But again no Christian is required to undertake any sort of trip to live a Christ-centered life and

achieve salvation despite journey images saturating their daily prayers and thoughts about “getting to heaven”. Only in Islam does pilgrimage become an obligation, and all faithful Muslims possessing the health and means must visit Mecca once in their lifetime to reenact the physical circuit of flight and faith that Muhammad once did. Among the Five Pillars or requirements of Islam, this is the only one that followers of the Prophet must carry out as voluntary exiles from their homes, something they anticipate daily when they set their faces toward Mecca and touch their foreheads to the ground that will carry them there.

Religious studies is the most obvious home of research on pilgrimage but increasingly in a fresh, non-sectarian and comparative way. Christian pilgrimage, well known in its medieval forms, is experiencing almost convulsive growth across the world in new shrines consecrated to Jesus, the Virgin Mary and popular saints from times past and present, and in remote corners like Esquipulas in Guatemala, Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and throughout the province of Québec. Those treks of faith are helpfully contrasted to Jewish visits to the tombs of rabbis and the killing fields of Auschwitz, Muslim visits to Medina, Marrakesh and Meknès, and treks by Hindus and Buddhists and countless other travelers who long to plant their feet on mountain tops in the Andes or Himalayas, on island sanctuaries in Ireland, in caves to the underworld fast by Lake Avernus in Italy, or on the teeming river banks of the Ganges in India or the São Francisco in Brazil.

Pilgrimage has always been a powerful gesture of group spirituality and a poor instrument of indoctrination, and therefore it sometimes regarded with doubt or mistrust by religious authorities who play anxious games of catch-up to frame novel expressions within orthodox beliefs.¹ While on their way, pilgrimage communities tend to be self-defining through their prolonged contact and shared exertions, open to be moved and instructed, but inevitably falling into step most closely with their companions of the road, catechized both vertically by revered masters and horizontally by their peers. Every age explains religion to itself in its own idiom, and the language of pilgrimage has become a lingua franca among Christians and faith partners in many other traditions.

¹ Edith Turner notes that “Pilgrimage has been of concern to the orthodox hierarchies of many religions, for pilgrimage draws the faithful away from the center of organization. A devotion may arise spontaneously, not in a consecrated place, and may not keep the strictest rules of the structured religion. Once started, it is democratic, rich in symbolism of its own and in *communitas*. From the point of view of social structure such manifestations of *communitas* are potentially subversive.” (2005, 7146) For critiques from especially within the Christian tradition, see “Criticism of Pilgrimage” in Davidson and Gitlitz 2002, 1:127-129.

The contemporary study of pilgrimage has taken a great leap outward from these inherited and exclusively religious precedents. Scholars now embrace many forms of travel for transformation including patriotic pilgrimage to sites of national or ethnic identity (the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC; Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland), “dark pilgrimage” to sites of communal remembrance (concentration camps in Eastern Europe; Ground Zero in New York), historical circuits (Union and Confederate Civil War battlefields; American World War II cemeteries in Normandy), the transformation of ancient trails into mythic excursions (the Inca Trail in highland Peru; Izamal and Chalma in Mexico), and even new “invented routes” that merge tourism with respect for history’s well trod landscapes (the Route of the Cid in Spain; the now rather secular Route of St. Olaf in Norway; recovered segments of the Underground Railroad and Trail of Tears in the United States). We now have a new suite of research tools for analyzing travel that clearly means more than drifting, commuting, or transporting oneself or one’s merchandise. Scholars now appreciate how pilgrimage embraces many sorts of journeys freighted with special values for one’s people, nation or eternal soul.

Contemporary disciplinary approaches

The disciplinary range of pilgrimage studies is equally broad and appealing. Students of the plastic arts catalogue and analyze artifacts created by and for pilgrim travelers, while historians study the social consequences of the millions who ventured far from home to seed new ideas and identities. Sociologists are naturally interested in this most mobile of all forms of lived religion and most fluid – and intentionally peaceful – form of negotiation among social classes, while anthropologists mine the same data to understand pilgrimage as an expression of culture that defines communities and redirects their resources. Those engaged in classical studies ask fresh questions of their own antique wanderers: how ancient figures like Alexander the Great understood his journey to the Siwa Oasis in the Libyan desert, or what commoners hoped to gain from their treks to the Colossi of Memnon near Luxor to hear the mysterious “singing statues”. And when nostalgic Romans visited archaic but still bustling Greek temples, were they too on pilgrimage?

Hardly any realm of the humanities and social sciences could claim to be disinterested in pilgrimage and all have their contribution to make, from the study of literature like first person narratives and travel writing, to philosophical approaches to body, mind and belief, to folklorists who ponder the tales and talismans of travelers. Social scientists in human geography and geospatial analysis are offering wonderful insights about how humankind has laid claim to its physical space, penetrated remote corners of the planet, and transformed the meaning of the geography it inhabits. Pilgrimage is studied as place and also as the movement of people who

determine a land's use and meaning (Stoddard and Morinis 1997). Even researchers from the exact sciences draw innovative conclusions from pilgrimage trails turned data mines about ecology and watercourses, the nutritional demands of distance walkers, the physiological conditioning and the emotional/spiritual swings induced by sustained exercise, and urban planning that is responsive to swirling pilgrim hordes.

Pilgrimage Studies as a highly collaborative venture will never establish itself as a respectable field of professional inquiry unless it defines its data sets and methodologies. These will span areas of expertise, each with its established or innovative approaches. This fresh fusion of insights makes our intersections and sometimes competing claims far more interesting. Art historians may interpret carved sirens and mermaids adorning pilgrimage churches as remnants of classical art, theologians as symbols of temptation, and folklorists as covertly recalled protagonists of nearly lost popular tales.

This short essay will not try to cover some essential topics already well surveyed elsewhere. It will not attempt a full historical review of well-known pilgrimages (Mecca, Jerusalem), or try to map contemporary scholarship from within a single research field like sociology or travel writing. It will try to suggest something of the interdisciplinary encounters and tensions in current work on pilgrimage studies, and merely point to the often imperfect fit between popular practices and professional analysis. Taken together with the individual essays in this volume, the following outline of features common among travels for transformation will touch on a robust variety of issues and perhaps provide a compass to guide the neophyte into a complex and still rather unsettled world of pilgrimage studies.²

Towards a definition of pilgrimage

Some of the essential elements of pilgrimage most often underscored by researchers include

² For general background, students will benefit from admirably comprehensive works like Dee Dyas *et al.*, 2007 and Linda Kay Davidson & David Gitlitz 2002.

It's important to recognize that walking itself is a powerfully evocative human endeavor far beyond its evolutionary usefulness, and while on pilgrimage "movement itself is regarded as a form of worship and sacrifice" (Stoddard and Marinis 1997, x). We're not just organically bipedal, we're hard pressed to think clearly without walking ourselves through our thinking process as Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau and even the paleoanthropologist Mary Leakey recognized. See Amato 2004, Manning 2012, Manning and Manning 2012, Nicholson 2008.

- Celebrating a physical location as a site of symbolic or real access to powers beyond the human realm
- Displacement from one's customary locale, daily routines and social position to undertake a voyage into liminality where social roles and constraints are elided or transcended³
- Undertaking ritualized, non-utilitarian behaviors in the course of one's travel or while savoring the goal of the trek; discomforts and ordeals are not just tolerated but may be welcome and embraced as essential components of the quest
- Being present at a site that others have designated as significant for non-material reasons: being there is transformative and enriching, and connects one to values beyond the normal reach of the individual
- Accepting that there is an imprecise but presumed "transactional value" to the journey, that a major effort may have a major payoff in terms of a cure, expiation of guilt or sin, inducement of a special divine favor like fertility or a bountiful harvest, protection from danger, salvation, or simply enlightenment
- The experience of pilgrimage is seen *in advance* as capable of creating an enduring memory one returns to in later life.

In the most universal sense of trying to construct a personal spirituality, performing a pilgrimage counts as a classic form of the "reliable clean high". While promising a true peak experience, it is not a fleeting altered state induced by drugs, hunger, exhaustion, or shallow breathing. It is presumably accessible to all adherents of a belief system without constraint of age, gender or spiritual depth. It leaves behind no sense of shame, guilt, indebtedness or damaged reputation. The benefits of the experience are profound yet shareable in some way, and both the subject of reflective conversation and necessarily inexpressible. And most such acts that yield enlightenment are repeatable without being degraded or made routine. Most people count include sex with one's legitimate partner, caressing a newborn baby, enjoying a fine meal,

³ Edith Turner (2005, 7146) emphasizes pilgrimage as a rite of passage whose ethos may show parallel structures in the heart of the sensitive tourist, the dutiful pilgrim, and even the mystic who undertakes a radical inner journey toward the sacred. The Turners extended Arnold van Gennep's "analysis of rites of passage into the phases of separation, threshold or *limen*, and re-aggregation to be not only a useful cross-cultural model but also the source of a fundamental insight: the regenerative and transformational possibilities of ritual liminality. Whereas van Gennep emphasizes only the outward change of social status accomplished by these rites, Turner emphasizes the inward, moral, and cognitive changes that occurred, and where van Gennep examines only the social aspects of the liminal state, Turner examines its deconstructive and reconstructive processes." (Benjamin C. Ray 2005, 9406)

listening to powerful music, stimulating exercise and other common (but not constant) experiences to fall in the same category of the reliable clean high. Travel as pilgrimage offers comparable benefits – plus a new one: fulfilling a quest for authenticity, a genuine experience of another age or belief system by replicating the life style of those who sought it before us.

Points of departure

It will be hard to improve on Linda Davidson and David Gitlitz’s thumbnail sketch of the roots of pilgrimage:

From long before the beginning of recorded time, **three** fundamental beliefs have launched human beings onto the roads of pilgrimage. The **first** is the conviction that there are forces infinitely larger than ourselves – gods, superheroes, the tectonic plates of history – forces with the ability to influence our lives. The **second** is that each of us has the potential to initiate a meaningful relationship with those forces. The **third** is that there are certain special places where the remote, transcendental power of those forces seems close enough for us to touch. (*Pilgrimage. From the Ganges to Graceland* 1:xvii)

If these are the *premises* of pilgrimage, we might add **seven** more complementary aspects to the *experience* of being a pilgrim.

First is a belief in the transcendent. That belief implies that there’s something greater than the individual *and* his or her community. The collective may be a vehicle for values like shared ethnic character, courage and honesty, or just some baseline common humanity. That’s why so many native groups call themselves The People, The Men, the Middle Kingdom or some variation on a core of human experience. But pilgrimage is not simply empathizing with common samples of one’s kinfolk but reaching out to the contact points where a race first derived its identity and vision of itself, whether it’s the presumed site of first arrival (Teotihuacán, Plymouth Rock), convulsive trial (Hastings, Dachau), or creation of the world itself (Uluru/Ayers Rock, the Klallam ceremonial site under Lake Aldwell in Washington State). A community founded by a charismatic leader may replicate a route blazed by that figure.⁴

⁴ Edith Turner recognizes a category of “prototypical” pilgrimages swelling the impulse for *communitas*. “The Jerusalem and Rome pilgrimages are prototypical for Christianity, Jerusalem for Judaism, Mecca for Islam, Banaras and Mount Kailash for Hinduism, Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth, India, for Buddhism, and Ise for Shintō. Pilgrims at these sites often reenact events of the founding times.” (7147)

Pilgrimage is prompted by a mythic sense of a latent ingathered essence waiting to be recovered from beyond the landscapes we normally inhabit, including the social ones.

A **second** aspect to complement Davidson and Gitlitz's three premises is memory. Pilgrimage is a journey to recollect, travel that reactivates a mythic knowledge still buzzing softly as a background to consciousness, an implied structure on which the chaos of daily life can fumble about secure. Pilgrim paths lead deep into ancient times when the collective enjoyed clear consensus. Bands of travelers find much of their essential camaraderie in the assurance that they will agree on fundamental principles and beliefs, a moral convergence which produces an unaccustomed tranquility and trust among individuals who are otherwise strangers.⁵

The group moreover seeks to create memories through its travel. There is an active will to build a memory hoard of real endurance, and not just of places and meals and companions, but of having participated in rites that recover, enact and propel intuitions of the transcendent into future time. So a **third** aspect of pilgrimage we might name is its ability to resist time itself. Pilgrims absent themselves from historical time and opt to live, temporarily, beyond time and its near-horizon perspectives. The crucial equipment they need to carry on the journey – as well as the most cherished souvenir of the trip – is a depersonalized memory of collective truths. And after their return, pilgrims retain something of their status as repositories of a communal sacred memory, becoming tokens of the sacred verities they have visited.⁶ They acquire status as living souvenirs that a community holds as keepers of memories of what's been achieved, validated and given human form, much like Edgar Lee

“Father Malloy”

You are over there, Father Malloy,
Where holy ground is, and the cross marks every grave,
Not here with us on the hill—
Us of wavering faith, and clouded vision
And drifting hope, and unforgiven sins.
You were so human, Father Malloy,
Taking a friendly glass sometimes with us,
Siding with us who would rescue Spoon River
From the coldness and the dreariness of village morality.
You were like a traveler who brings a little box of sand
From the wastes about the pyramids
And makes them real and Egypt real.
You were a part of and related to a great past ...

⁵ Edith Turner would call these “root paradigms,” ... axiomatic frames, or deep myths.” Benjamin C. Ray 2005).

⁶ There are two sorts of pilgrims who effectively never return: the permanent pilgrim who chooses a life of constant travel as a personal discipline perhaps unrelated to a specific shrine site as a goal, and the professional pilgrim who acts as a surrogate or virtual pilgrim on others' behalf.

Masters has his chorus of buried villagers attribute to Father Malloy, a local priest who shares their cemetery in Master's *Spoon River Anthology*.

Father Malloy is one of the few characters profiled in Masters's community of the dead who never speaks himself. Like the "traveler who brings a little box of sand," he becomes the mute depository of beliefs and memories for others who have not made the trip. And since much pilgrimage is related to holy figures who have suffered death, many pilgrims hope for a sense of renewal and rebirth and give testimony to that possibility for others, as Father Malloy seems to have.

That depersonalization points to a **fourth** complement to any definition of pilgrimage, elision of self. Pilgrimage invites, facilitates and even requires a surrender of individualism, and the more idiosyncratic the traveler (the voluble, eccentric Margery Kempe comes to mind), the less likely he or she will participate in the journey as a true pilgrim. Those trekking outbound who insist on willful accommodations in dress, food and lodging, and who complain of others who do not follow their pre-imagined scripts of proper pilgrim behaviors, are prisoners of their whims and probably not open, or at least resistant, to the "otherness" of travel for enlightenment. The humility that common pilgrims value and for which they are often praised – self-effacement, modesty and forbearance are virtual clichés when it comes to "acting like a pilgrim" – is in part a strategy to help one access knowledge suppressed by ego-centered social behaviors. The loss of control, a letting go of off-trail identity and the leverage it confers, is a welcome change of pace from the stylized posturing that scripts our normal lives. Inconveniently for the researcher, this is precisely the attitude that disinclines the insider to record their personal journey. We have to wait until the early twentieth century to encounter the remarkable Georgiana Goddard King, perhaps the last person to do the Camino de Santiago by medieval conveyance and the first to provide us with an inner monologue of depth.

Which flows into a **fifth** component of the experience, perhaps the motor which powers the rest: how pilgrimage invites a high-value performance on the part of the traveler and all those around. Being a doctor, husband, class clown, nun, flirt or cop are all social roles with a heavy roster of behaviors and boundaries, specific ways to speak and act and dress and consume and interact with one's environment. All those "secular," off-trail forms of ego definition tend to melt away while on pilgrimage. A uniform dress code or specific costume, and therefore identity, may be adopted, jewelry and adornments set aside. Personal pleasures are deferred whether they are considered obstacles to enlightenment (alcohol, tobacco) or the near occasion of sin (sex, vain forms of personal grooming). Pilgrims treat each other in ways expected of a higher fellowship, with unprompted courtesies or even heroic mutual defense.

Some sacrifice their wellbeing or the quest itself so that others might safely complete it. And it's not just the individual and his or her companions who are drawn into the dance. The wardens of the designated refuges and sometimes even passers-by step into their complementary roles too, fulfilling religious duties toward these through-travelers and participating in this improvisational performance art among strangers. It can be all the more striking among modern pilgrims who long to step onto this stage and trigger the hospitable responses and acts of charity that confirm and fulfill one's intuitions of community. It's a perfectly sincere assignment of fictional roles that each side longs to deliver for the other, and which as an ensemble performance may provide the payoff of the whole journey.

It may seem too obvious to mention this **sixth** aspect, but pilgrimage is inherently a body-centered enterprise, the physical gesture writ large and choreographed on a finite terrain that emulates the cosmos. This is a chance to stride under the stars, to echo solar or lunar patterns, to trace the invisible geometries of grace on highways of faith. However a given tradition labels them, the routes and trails and processional circuits on arrival are a dance floor, and the sojourner willingly steps in sequence with his or her pilgrim partners. The micro-gestures of crossing oneself, touching one's forehead to the earth, raising arms all comprise a dense vocabulary of reverential movements which is overshadowed by the decorum of the long walk. This communal choreography of the pilgrim band imposes rhythms that engage the whole organic structure of the traveler, that demand nutrition and rest, and which help achieve the desired goal of enacting the sacred while reaching toward it.

And finally, a **seventh** component is incompleteness. No pilgrim seems to wrap up his or her journey satisfied that they exhausted the experience. The memory of a transcendence just out-of-reach or imperfectly glimpsed is nearly universal among sacred travelers. One can affirm that the power or truth sought on this quest was indeed there, but certainly not drained of its meaning. One lingers at the shrine site, mountain top, river bank or temple precinct only so long before returning home nostalgic for joys of a cup only sipped.

These seven aspects of the experience of being a pilgrim – **1** the value of transcending both self and community; **2** the engines of memory; **3** timelessness imagined; **4** the effacement of self; **5** performance without pretense; **6** body centeredness; and **7** "open-endedness" – help define pilgrimage in the face of runaway metaphorical extensions that usually only manifest a few of the constituent aspects of travel for transformation.

The travel is essential

One of the most basic distinctions we should incorporate in our examination of pilgrimage is the distinction between site visits and physical journeys. Pilgrimages are always named for the places one wants to arrive at, while the primordial journey is merely implied. The vast majority of place names associated with destinations honored for their history and transformative power are essentially locations. How you get there is at most a small part of the experience. St. Peter's in Rome, Lourdes and Fátima all belong to this category, as do Ground Zero in New York and the childhood homes of former US presidents. Destination sites are multiplying: the National Archives in Washington, DC. is one of the most temple-like structures in that capital, and visitors are lined up to process past an altar whose relics are reverently encased behind protective shields. Among religious sites St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and the National Shrine in Washington, DC are well known, while the province of Québec boasts an extensive circuit of sacred sites in addition to the Oratory of St. Joseph. The wealth of literature – and movies like *The Way* and *The Camino Documentary* – pouring out in recent years provide welcome contemporary interpretations of modern pilgrimage experiences.

In earlier times the traveling component was dangerous, strenuous, and unavoidable. No one who recorded their expeditions to sacred or historic sites in ancient or medieval times romanced the journey, and most modern voyagers simply endure the throbbing train terminals, bad airplane food and jet lag without embracing it as part of their pilgrimage.

A weird modern extension of the tedium of travel which neutralizes the spirit of being on pilgrimage is packing into the family car, a domestic space that one never leaves behind and which makes the transition from personal to public space more jarringly instantaneous on arrival. Lingering in an accustomed domestic space erases the sense of living through a liminal state while in transit. Trains and planes pitch their ability to buffer the depersonalization of their services by offering compartmentalized reclining seats, miniature movie screens and headsets, and other touches that emulate a home environment. At least the time it takes to make the transit and the persistent view from the car or plane window signals the evolution of space and setting and may induce a mild sense of wonder or strangeness. The hard part may be feeling truly present at the destination and not just looking on as through a mental window, the same old me, safe within.

The effort and expense that getting there demands enhance the sense of commitment of the traveler and his or her expectations of the personal “yield” of the experience, and such treks usually claim that the bigger personal investment, the bigger payoff. The journey may eclipse the site altogether, as in the case of the Camino de Santiago. Many modern pilgrims who undertake the trek not only feel a letdown on arrival, they may blow through the city with hardly

a stop until they reach the coast of the Atlantic and are stopped by the vision of the infinite barrier. But the journey remains such an integral part of pilgrimage that travelers need to encapsulate their travel by a virtual performance on-site, such as the carefully sequenced tour of a shrine (most cathedrals with grounds) or a whole city (the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem).

Pushed into Pilgrimage

In the end we have to bow before the power of the language we use to talk about travel for transcendence because the metaphors in play script lives before anyone hits the trail. Being on pilgrimage is one of our most tenacious images, and once we agree that “life is a pilgrimage” we cling to the chance to work our untidy temporal arc of human existence into a narrative. Even those relatively disinterested in religion are urged to see their long term personal development as a grand journey and to achieve short term goals through transformational treks. Now that millions are walking again – modern transportation helps, aided by a global tourist industry which also promises authentic experiences – we expect that personal arc to become visible within the purview of a summer. The push into pilgrimage is in some ways surrender to a runaway metaphor. Definitions of what constitutes “pilgrimage” as a human phenomenon may be deeply subjective and hotly contested – but no one wants to be left out.

“Pilgrim” is no longer a sectarian identity, certainly not in any required way. The Oratory of St. Joseph in Montréal welcomes over two million visitors every year, and their arrival is greeted by either the Director of Religious Pilgrimage or the Director of Tourist Pilgrimage. Only a few enraptured souls will climb the long outdoor steps on their knees, many more of the faithful will attend Mass in French, English, Haitian Creole or Spanish, but all will browse the gift shop and gawk at the extravagant decorations and strenuous attempts at religious art. Historically, the arts of pilgrimage are a bountiful index of piety with a purpose, aesthetics that may be lavish or homespun, not always in the best taste but hard to criticize because of their reverential character. All these eager allusions to the sacred may inadvertently recall Oscar Wilde’s quip that the one thing that all bad poetry has in common is that it’s sincere.

But art high and low is a crucial part of the material history of sacred travel which in itself leaves scant physical traces in its wake and often prefers not to. Fortunately pilgrims eagerly accessorize their sites and trails. The chapels, crosses, flags, way markers, and even stacked stone cairns are an effort to impose the metaphor they are living on the landscape and create sacred space on top of routes that were often created to serve as cattle trails or commercial highways. Their moments as travelers are often spun into the orbits of eternity: along with chapels and churches, cemeteries are among the most frequent features of those hazardous

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medieval Christian pilgrimage routes, and one's tokens of sacred travel among the most common grave goods in medieval Christian burials everywhere.

The longing to go on pilgrimage, the memory of that journey, and the identity it confers for this life and the next are all powerful motivators that urge us onto the trail.

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