

The Enduring Power of Pilgrimage in World Religions

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Introduction

To undertake a pilgrimage is to die: to die one's old nature and invite transformation into something new. A pilgrimage is a personal quest, a journey with the goal to experience a change in the individual's life or spirit, though it also connects one to a larger community. It requires that the pilgrim's literal journey through time and space has a "parallel journey of spiritual growth, change or enlightenment."¹ Pilgrimages can be large undertakings involving several weeks, or small, short journeys that take only an afternoon, but the ones most revered by the world's religions are the long, arduous journeys. Even when individual religious leaders have discouraged pilgrimages, stories abound of founders, gurus or leaders going pilgrimages in search of deeper spiritual meaning or experience. The journeys may be motivated by a number of factors, including: to seek healing for oneself or another, to experience a miracle, to affirm religious or ethnic identity, to atone for one's sins, to test one's spiritual or physical strength, to undergo a rite of passage. Thus, the practice endures. Travel to sacred sites may be an inherent part of all cultures; indeed, it may even be central to being human. As early as 30,000 BC aboriginal Australian peoples were making annual journeys on foot for ceremonies, rituals and festivals.² This essay explores the function of pilgrimages in world religions and what they add to the religious life by exploring examples from Islam, Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. By looking at pilgrimage through three approaches to religion, pilgrimage and the symbolism of travel, pilgrimage as spiritual transformation and pilgrimage as a form of community embedding, it is evident that pilgrimages endure in world religions because of their ability to anchor the sacred into the material world and into the seekers' lived experience. What makes pilgrimages

¹ Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 18.

² Razaq Raj and Nigel D. Morpeth, eds., *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management: An International Perspective* (Wallingford, UK ; Cambridge, MA: CABI Pub, 2007), 36.

an enduring feature of religion is their unique ability to bridge the mystical narratives and beliefs of a religion with the material world, one that the seeker can experience through the senses.

Pilgrimage in Approaches to Religion

A brief examination of three approaches to religion — the essentialist, functionalist and family resemblance approaches — reveals insight on why pilgrimages are a consistent part of world religions. In the essentialist approach, each of the world's major religions refers to an invisible, non-empirical world that is beyond human.³ If 'religion' names the outward behaviours that are inspired by an inner thing called 'faith,'⁴ pilgrimages are extremely effective at externalizing the invisible beliefs around matters such as origin, death, meaning and the existence of non-human beings.⁵ The functionalist approach sees religion for its function in satisfying human needs including social cohesion, dealing with death, promoting social ethics and reinforcing power structures.⁶ In this framework, pilgrimages function as a way for people to temporarily escape their daily roles to seek spiritual ecstasy, adventure or transformation. At the same time, pilgrimages help adherents of a religion to connect with the wider, global community of a religion, reinforcing one's identity and creating a sense of belonging. The family resemblance approach sees religions based on seven 'dimensions' of similarity: ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, experiential and material.⁷ From this framework of religion, it is most clear why pilgrimages have become a feature in all major world religions: they bring forth at least five of the seven dimensions, combining the ritual, mythological, social, experiential and material aspects of religion and into a cohesive sacred experience. S Brent

³ Christopher Partridge, *Introduction to World Religions: Third Edition*, 2018, 2.

⁴ Partridge, 2.

⁵ Partridge, 2.

⁶ Partridge, 2.

⁷ Partridge, 4.

Plate argues that religions be understood without the senses. Sensory activity — interacting with materiality at the level of sight, smell, touch, sound and taste — is a means for participating in and experiencing the divine.⁸ Pilgrimages have endured in multiple religions because they contain unique features that enhance the senses and thus making the mystical, mythological elements of a religion more real and alive to the seeker.

Pilgrimage and Symbolism of Travel

Pilgrims are distinct from tourists in that they are seeking a journey that not only mediates between the natural and the cultural, but at the same time, between the natural and the supernatural world.⁹ Thanks to the symbolism and logistics of physical travel, pilgrimages operate as a highly effective means for shedding an old identity, or the ordinary, and claiming the new identity, signifying the spiritual transformation to which the religion points. By examining the role of transportation and apparel in pilgrimage, it is clear pilgrimages operate at multiple levels for the seeker.

Transportation

In their book *Reframing Pilgrimage*, Simon Coleman and John Eade describe how movement acts as part of a semantic field, “A given style of mobility may take on particularly charged meaning as a marker of difference.”¹⁰ The mode of travel is important to the pilgrimage journey: as traveling on foot or bicycle, transportation that requires personal effort is considered more valued than driving or flying. Traditionally, pilgrimages were considered an ascetic act for

⁸ S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses*, 2015, 7.

⁹ Raj and Morpeth, *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management*, 39.

¹⁰ Simon Coleman, John Eade, and European Association of Social Anthropologists, eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, European Association of Social Anthropologists (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

many religions. Therefore, walking was the preferred mode of transportation as it would increase the religious merit the pilgrim gained.¹¹ In many cases, the more arduous the journey, the greater the merit. The time spent in transportation also takes on spiritual significance. Coleman and Eade explain, “Not only is walking a form of self-sacrifice involving endurance and austerity, it also allows ‘pilgrims’ to discover a sense of contact with the past.”¹² Since all enduring world religions are rooted in one or many ancient narratives, the time and physical effort it takes to complete a pilgrimage, allows one to reflect and enter into the story.

In Islam, the difficulty of the Hajj is part of what makes it meaningful. Muslims believe the physically demanding journey wipes clean past sins and allows one to start anew before God. During Hajj, there are multiple locations that pilgrims must travel to over a series of days, and certain sections should be completed on foot. Able-bodied pilgrims today continue to complete the journey on foot, such as, running seven times between two small hills to recall the plight of Hagar and Ishmael.¹³ In Christianity and Catholicism, walking the Camino de Santiago is a popular pilgrimage route. Although today the paths are wide, fairly flat and not difficult, to receive the official stamp of completion, the pilgrim must walk at least 100km or bike at least 200km of it. Underlying this requirement is the assumption that if the journey is easy, one has not done meaningful reflection or undergone true spiritual transformation. The difficulty of the journey is an integral part of its significance. As Coleman puts it, “The bodily and temporal modes involved in slow, effortful travel appear to subvert the rushing, mechanized world of the present, allowing space a kind of victory over time.”¹⁴ In this way, it is clear that travel is more than just a physical relocation, “pilgrims to Compostela are entering a kind of sacred

¹¹ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, 644.

¹² Coleman, Eade, and European Association of Social Anthropologists, *Reframing Pilgrimage*, 11.

¹³ Partridge, *Introduction to World Religions*, 464.

¹⁴ Coleman, Eade, and European Association of Social Anthropologists, *Reframing Pilgrimage*, 68.

decompression chamber.”¹⁵ In Jerusalem, the Via Dolorosa is one of the most popular sites for Christian pilgrims where even those who would normally travel by car or wheelchair will walk this route as a sign of reverence and devotion. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, symbolism of travel is further heightened on their pilgrimage journeys. One of the most important aspects of Tibetan pilgrimage is circumambulation, which is believed to help one accumulate virtue or merit towards liberation. Circumambulation involves walking clockwise around sacred objects, such as writings, monasteries or an entire topographical circuit around Lhasa or Mount Kailash.¹⁶ For longer journeys, austerity is to be incorporated in all aspects of pilgrimage – choice of food, places to stay en route, social intercourse.¹⁷ Devout pilgrims complete their circumambulations with full-body prostrations on the ground every few steps, which can prolong their pilgrimage for weeks.

Apparel

Richard Barber explains the role of apparel for pilgrimages, “Pilgrim costume set its wearer apart from the rest of society and proclaimed his mission.”¹⁸ The apparel used during travel is another way that the spiritual goal of pilgrimage is activated. The apparel required during a pilgrimage is often different from one’s ordinary life, either by choice, custom or regulation. In Islam, Male pilgrims to Hajj ritually don a two piece seamless white garment. The garment is seamless to represent Muslim pilgrim’s special state of purity during their completion of Hajj, called ihram. In the state of ihram, pilgrims are forbidden to wear jewelry or perfume, to cut their nails or hair, to have sexual intercourse, to shed blood, to hunt, or to uproot plants.¹⁹ On

¹⁵ Coleman, Eade, and European Association of Social Anthropologists, 68.

¹⁶ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, 636.

¹⁷ Raj and Morpeth, *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management*, 38.

¹⁸ Richard Barber, *Pilgrimages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998), 147.

¹⁹ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, 222.

the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, pilgrims are often seen displaying the badge of the shell. The scallop shell is ubiquitous along the path, often serving as a signpost and guide for pilgrims. Moreover, the shell is even more worn on the pilgrims themselves, as a way to identify themselves as pilgrims and displayed throughout their journey. Whether by completing changing one's attire, or adding pieces for the journey, the experience of travel forces one to alter his or her apparel to match the inner and outer journey.

Reprioritization of Needs

Pilgrimages, as a form of extended travel, also require one to leave most of one's possessions behind. Since the journey is expected to be difficult, only what is essential is brought along. Thus, another way to understand the power of pilgrimage in world religions is through Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs. Maslow argued that once people's lower-order needs are met (food, shelter, security), they will be motivated to seek high-order needs, such as esteem and self-actualization. However, religions can change the order of one's needs by prioritizing esteem and self-actualization. This explains why people are moved to disregard their lower-order needs in favour of the search of growth, transformation provided by pilgrimages.²⁰ Moreover the symbolism in travel actually forces one to focus on his or her higher needs. Religions like Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, advocate against excessiveness, greed and gluttony and by minimizing what is necessary for survival, pilgrimage travel aligns with this fundamental belief. The pilgrimage reduces the importance of low-order needs and encourages seekers to focus on the high-order needs of self-actualization, esteem and social belonging. By analyzing the symbolism and logistics embedding the practice of pilgrimage, it is

²⁰ Raj and Morpeth, *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management*, 41.

clear that pilgrimages aid the seeker in undergoing the process of spiritual transformation. Travel forces the outward appearance to be changed, paving the way for inner spiritual transformation.

Pilgrimage as Spiritual Transformation

Marcus J. Borg explains how the process of personal spiritual transformation, is central to all world religions that have stood the test of time:²¹ Christians call it being born again, dying and rising with Christ; by definition a Muslim is one who submits to the will of God; and the Buddhist path advocates letting go, dying to the old and being born into the new.²² The world's enduring religions point to a path of personal spiritual transformation, where one is liberated from an old way and invited into a new way of living. Pilgrimages are especially powerful for their ability to act as a stepping stone into the journey of spiritual transformation, acting as a summation, a capstone or ritual that solidifies one's relationship with the divine. In *Image and Pilgrimage*, Turner describes pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon, a state of ambiguity or disorientation when one is in the middle of a rite of passage. He relates the pilgrimage experience to tribal rites of passage, positing that the pilgrimage journey is a transitional state—emotional, physical, social—between two places.²³ Pilgrimage is the way for the ordinary householder to experience the great “liminal experience of the religious life,” the sense of transcendence or unity with the divine that the religious founders spoke of or experienced.²⁴ In other words, the act of completing a pilgrimage allows the seeker to have a memorable, physical taste of their own religion. According to Richard Barber, this may be

²¹ Marcus J Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2004), 119.

²² Borg, 119.

²³ Victor W. Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Columbia Classics in Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 12.

²⁴ Turner and Turner, 7.

precisely why seekers throughout the ages have felt the need to go on pilgrimage: “surrounded by the petty cares of everyday life, it is impossible to hope for miracles or to find spiritual release.”²⁵ Pilgrimages take one out of his world and puts him in touch with another, the one that the religion deems divine. Moreover, pilgrimages serve a practical purpose in the journey of spiritual transformation: tracking one’s journey along a religious path is not always clear cut. Pilgrimages offer a way for the adherent to externalize his devotion or to mark the depth of his commitment.

In Islam completing a pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five fundamental duties of Islamic worship and is a significant milestone. For Muslims, Hajj allows one to enter into or enact multiple layers of spiritual transformation. Apart from being an obligatory religious duty, completing the Hajj is believed to grant spiritual merit to the Muslim as well as an opportunity self-renewal. Hajj serves as a reminder of the Day of Judgment when Muslims believe people will stand before God. Additionally the Hajj is a pilgrimage within a pilgrimage and Muslims who perform the Hajj are taking part in a drama that connects them to the first prophets and to the testing of humanity’s faith in God. As Reza Aslan explains that the Hajj bonds people to the primordial religion, through a “secret dimension of the Hajj that penetrates its entire ritual process, connecting the present moment to the past so that even today’s very modern pilgrims, with their ritual choreography and ancient-looking robes, seem to have stepped out of the pages of Scripture.”²⁶ Through the rituals of the Hajj the people are experientially rooted deeper into the centuries of Islamic heritage as they reenact elements of Abraham’s story. This element of reliving an ancient drama is central to how pilgrimages enable spiritual transformation in world

²⁵ Barber, *Pilgrimages*, 155.

²⁶ Michael Wolfe, *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage*, 1st ed (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 20.

Christian pilgrimages also serve a function in spiritual transformation by embedding the seeker deeper into the “root paradigm” of the religions founder.²⁷ Turner argues that the difficulty of the long journey makes the pilgrim more vulnerable to imagery, sacred art, and experiences that are pervasive on the pilgrimage. “Religious images strike him, in these novel circumstances, as perhaps they have never done before, even though he may have seen very similar objects in his parish church almost every day of his life.”²⁸ In this way, pilgrimages bring the ancient life of the founder, Jesus, into the one’s material world, and allow one to enter deeper into his life and teachings. This is evident on the highly-trodden Via Dolorosa, the Sorrowful Way, which is the route where the last events of Jesus’s life played out. The Via Dolorosa compels Christians to reflect at the fourteen “Stations Of the Cross” on the significance of Jesus’s life, making the mystical material and tangible. In other words, the Christian pilgrim “puts on Christ Jesus temporarily entering the a paradigmatic mask, or persona, and thus for a while enters redemptive tradition,”²⁹

Buddhism focuses on letting go of the suffering of the world, primarily through meditation and the practice of pilgrimage also serves to help the buddhist progress towards spiritual transformation. Adherents of Buddhism strive to achieve enlightenment, or perfect wisdom that ends suffering by attaining nirvana, and thus be released samsara, from the cycle of death and rebirth.³⁰ Tibetan pilgrimage, called “walking the kora”, is the widespread practice of walking or continuously prostrating around holy mountains and Buddhist sites in Tibet. It is considered a highly symbolic move and is deemed to be the best way to express their devotion to Tibetan Buddha and holy mountains.³¹ Pilgrims seek to accumulate merit by performing koras,

²⁷ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 10.

²⁸ Turner and Turner, 11.

²⁹ Turner and Turner, 11.

³⁰ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, 102.

³¹ Davidson and Gitlitz, 634.

which are considered a major merit generator. For example, completing one cycle around holy Mt.Kailash is believed to purify all of one's sins; circling the mountain 10 times would exempt the pilgrim from being condemned to the hell in reincarnation; circling around 108 cycles, will grant the pilgrim enlightenment and he will become a Buddha in his lifetime. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is evident that the act of pilgrimage is one of the means of manifesting, even controlling one's spiritual fate. Thus pilgrimages also act as a form of spiritual transformation in Tibetan Buddhism by providing a physical marker of one's progress along the spiritual path or a condition for proximity and union with the divine.

Merely to embark on the pilgrimage is a sign of one's devotion, since is usually not the new adherent to Christianity or Buddhism or Islam that goes on a pilgrimage, but the long-time practitioner. Pilgrimages, in all religions, serve as an outer practice that gives materiality to religion, a physical path that represents the path of spiritual transportation, or in some cases *is* the path of transformation. and for many, is believed to be, itself, the path of transformation. Whether performing a symbolic function, or actually taking one closer to the divine or enlightenment, pilgrimages do signify progress within one's religion.

Pilgrimage as Community Embedding

Pilgrimages also serve an important social function within religion: they act as a way of embedding someone in their religious community, as both locally and internationally recognized markers of status and religious accomplishment. Richard Barber explains, "When the pilgrims returned home, they could expect to enjoy an enhanced reputation for having made the pilgrimage; something of the special status they had enjoyed during the journey would remain."³²

³² Barber, *Pilgrimages*, 151.

Another way of understanding the social function of pilgrimage is through the lease of 'communitas.' Victor Turner explained that the 'communitas' quality pilgrimage systems, whereby a new community arises spontaneously and defies hierarchical systems.³³ Pilgrimages operate as a powerful form of communitas, a social space where participants simultaneously equal and can experience liminality together, as they also prove their spiritual and moral worth.

In Islam, the community ebbing aspect of pilgrimage happens in several ways. The name 'Hajji' is applied to a muslim who has completed the hajj to Mecca. Some people add this term to their own given name for the rest of their lives.³⁴ When Muslim pilgrims return home from Mecca, they are often greeted with festivities, music, dancing, and thanksgiving prayers. They may find their homes decorated with motifs of Mecca, exemplifying their new exalted status and entitling them to add the term hajji to their name.³⁵ The social recognition attributed to the completion of the Hajj is part of it's significance. Additionally, the Hajj emphasizes the unity of all human beings before their Creator.³⁶ Today, the gathering of Muslims of all races, culture and language at Mecca operates as a symbol of unity and quality, much like Israel can do for Christians, Jews and Catholics.

Jerusalem operates as the holy center to three of world's major religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Today pilgrimage to Jerusalem is a massive industry with all-inclusive tours and busloads of pilgrims. Yet, more than any other place on earth, it is also the place where the diversity of Christian sects, and sometimes the animosity between them, can be seen in one location.³⁷ Still, The plurality of Christian sects all simultaneously acknowledging the same sites

³³ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 48.

³⁴ Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage*, 224.

³⁵ Davidson and Gitlitz, 224.

³⁶ Wolfe, *One Thousand Roads to Mecca*, 14.

³⁷ Bruria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 38 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 187.

provides a sense of unity for believers who have journeyed to Jerusalem. In fact, members of different denominations can be seen getting baptized along the same shores of the Jordan River.

Conclusion:

Pilgrimages perform an intricate function in world religions: the symbolism of travel invites the adherent into spiritual transformation, the pilgrimage itself acts as a milestone of spiritual progress, and the *communitas* quality of pilgrimage creates a sense of local and social belonging and status. Through the physical rigors of travel, including transportation and apparel, pilgrimages bring spiritual transformation to the material world, magnifying the sacred into something experiential and tangible. Not only do pilgrimages invite humans to seek the higher order goals of self-actualization, they also provide a social structure and a path for its fulfillment. At the same time that they act as a form of merit, pilgrimages are also equalizers: giving all devout seekers an opportunity to achieve social esteem and commune with the divine. Through the practice of pilgrimage, followers of a religion can experience, externally and internally, the transformation they seek. Although the locations and specifics of pilgrimage look different in Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, it's clear that pilgrimages perform similar functions for the devout seeker, removing the mundane to see and know the divine more clearly. Pilgrimages draw people deeper into their spiritual tradition at the same time as widening their global horizon.

The power of a pilgrimage to combine spiritual meaning with adventure, progress and community may be the power behind why the practice endures even among today's religious nones, agnostics and atheists. As long as the desire for self-actualization is part of our interior landscape, pilgrimages will continue to be an enduring feature of our external spiritual and

religious landscape. We need to touch, smell, taste and see that there is meaning to our lives and pilgrimages allow us to enter a mythological narrative where others have found meaning. Even as religions shift and morph in our increasingly globalized world, it is safe to say that humans will continue to find pilgrimages, both new and old, to connect to us our past and find a better way forward. With or without an understanding of God, pilgrimages allow us to temporarily be part of another world, one where we can find new life.

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