

# Pilgrimage

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*Pilgrimage* is a performative social activity through which individuals in all world religions and a wide variety of indigenous traditions practice their faith, a type of a journey that generates a potential for self and collective transformation. Particularities of this practice make sense within a given cultural context and religious tradition and, therefore, vary widely throughout different historical settings, across cultures, as well as within religious systems. The decision on the part of the pilgrim to temporarily break with the mundane of daily living for the purposes of the journey opens up possibilities for new experiences, which can potentially be transformative. This process is meaningful in relation to a destination. In some traditions, this is an inner journey toward enlightenment and understanding. In others, it entails corporal movement away from home to a physical landscape, marked through the aesthetics and symbolism of its topography, architecture, art, myths, collective memories, ritual practices, objects of veneration, sacred persons, or cultural heroes. The kinds of transformations this practice may generate are shaped by multiple factors, including pilgrims' openness to new circumstances afforded by the journey, their cultural backgrounds, their ability to relate to the setting, and the forms of sociality of which they become a part.

Individuals themselves assess their own financial status, psychological and spiritual well-being, discretionary time, permissiveness for travel by their social environment, and physical stamina needed to complete the journey. Religious traditions, sacred texts, and cultural milieu help to shape their expectations and provide encouragement to make the decision. The Buddha, for example, instructed the faithful to visit four places associated with

significant events in their lives. Every believer should fulfill the five pillars of Islam, one of which requires a journey to Mecca. Christian imaginaries of physical places associated with the life of Christ have sustained the desire to visit the Holy Land. Most destinations today, whether they draw pilgrims locally or globally, are also featured through the mass media, including local newsletters, newspapers, the Internet, tourist promotional materials, travel guides, travel accounts, film, and documentaries. This is the case with destinations, overseen by official religious or political establishments, those that have become places of popular interest and general religious heritage, as well as sites marking new events of spiritual and emotional significance where pilgrimage activity may be more improvisational and impromptu.

Leaving behinds one's daily routine life with a pilgrimage destination in mind opens the pilgrims to unfamiliar social and cultural circumstances and novel modes of interaction, which offer a new basis for self-understanding and collective sentiments. Whether they journey individually or in groups, pilgrims' destination becomes an assembly of disparate individuals from around the world in a close social and emotional proximity and who share similar anticipations. Performative movement through symbolically marked landscape, including ritual, prayer, singing, and various modes of walking stimulates experiences that become embodied by each individual pilgrim through the human capacity for spiritual, cognitive, emotional, corporal, and sensual reflexivity and perception. Their movement through space, be it spontaneous, subjected to prescribed ritual practices, or framed by group leaders, may generate individual awareness of the co-presence of others with shared dispositions to performed activities. Such awareness of movement and

shared sentiments may become synchronized collectively in the sense that pilgrims become attuned to each other's experiences and performances. This shared state of the social body may deepen their individual experiences as it generates a communal dimension to feelings and interactions.

Potentials for individual and group transformation through pilgrimage have been difficult to grasp theoretically. Detailed ethnographic case studies, oral accounts, and historical documentation demonstrate an overwhelming diversity of pilgrimage practices and experiences, defying generalizations. The enormous variations in implications and meanings assigned to this process also necessarily put into question the fruitfulness of comparative analysis of pilgrimage traditions between different cultures and religious systems and may even cast doubt on comparisons between different historical periods within the same religious tradition. Likely, televised pilgrimage rituals, virtual journeys to holy sites through the Internet, tolerance for increasing plurality of religious expressions, and secularism today make Christian pilgrimages, for example, a different phenomenon than what they might have been, say, for people in the Middle Ages. This variability in pilgrimage practices encourages research focused on the intricacies of specific transformative processes, in particular cultural contexts. Empirical specificities allow us to continuously rethink our understanding of the nature of the self, conceptions of personhood, interstices between the sacred and the secular, and dynamics of group formation.

Persistence of pilgrimage historically and its popularity cross-culturally speak to the enduring transformative power of this social practice. Significance of such experience is diffused through narratives, relics, images, or replicas of various holy sites pilgrims bring back with them to their home environments as they seek to reconstruct memories of their journeys for the people at home. Notable pilgrims across traditions and historical periods produced written narratives of their

experiences that have been encouraging countless people to take the journey in their footsteps, motivating armies to be involved in the custodianship of holy sites, exciting business-minded merchants and tradespeople to facilitate these journeys. They are also influenced by how scholars think about pilgrimage. As a performative practice, pilgrimage has proven to be highly adaptable to new technological developments, from the printing press, to railways, the airline industry, and now the Internet. Then, as today, national identities are imagined, cities built and destroyed, sites of veneration dismantled, conflicts ignited, economies boosted, and groups persecuted in relation to pilgrimage practices. Such dynamics suggest that transformation may emerge simultaneously within each individual pilgrim and a group of pilgrims present at a particular place in time. Transformative experiences may also reverberate within larger social settings as well as global relations of which they may be a part. One way to approach these processes would be to look for ways of understanding transformative potentials through pilgrimage at different scales of complexity, that is, transformations that emerge at the scope of the self, the group, the community, and the global. This would mean paying close attention to how such dynamics emerge in space and through time within each scale as well as across multiple scales. In this endeavor, theories of emergence and complexity may offer new insights into possible points of intersections at which the level of the personal transformative experience can be said to connect with the global and under what conditions may such a circuit emerge so that the flow can be made possible between an individual pilgrimage experience and transformations at larger social scales.

SEE ALSO: Buddhism; Christianity; Collective memory; Flows; Hinduism; Judaism; Mediascapes; Megachurches; Mobilities; Mobility; Place; Religion; Tourism.

### FURTHER READING

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