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Evangelical Christians' Reflections Along the Way of St. James

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Abstract

Historically, Protestants and Evangelicals in particular have rejected the notion of pilgrimage to visit a saint or holy site. Recently, however, there has been an increased interest and acceptance of pilgrimage to non-traditionally Protestant locations. The Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in Spain is growing in popularity among Protestants who seek a prolonged period of meditation, retreat, and prayer.

Since a religious pilgrim by definition is someone who travels to pay penance for their sins, how does the Protestant idea of grace and not works affect the evangelical pilgrim? Of particular interest to me is how evangelical students from Wheaton College will interpret the Camino after walking it in the summer of 2017. How do other religious pilgrims differ from evangelical pilgrims? What language does the pilgrim use to describe their journey along the Camino? What biases are the students bringing with them as evangelicals or are they open and willing to embrace other views of the transformative experience? How does pain and suffering

affect the evangelical pilgrim? Since suffering is not emphasised in protestant traditions like it is in other religions, will students see that as an opportunity for spiritual growth?

Introduction

There are several legends throughout history that begin the story of St. James and the Camino pilgrimage. Jesus, ascending into heaven gives the Great Commission in the book of Matthew to share the Gospel to every nation in the following scriptures:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (The bible, n.d.)

The apostle James was believed to be the first missionary to the Iberian Peninsula and was sentenced to die in 44 AD by Herod Agrippa. Considered to be the first apostolic martyr, in the ninth century his body was miraculously transported from Galilee to Galicia in a marble boat.

Historically, this time was important to Spain because it was in the midst of the *Reconquista*, a bitter war between the Moors and the Christians. Under Alphonso II, king of Asturias and Galicia (792-842) and Bishop Theodemir or Iria Flavia, the long-forgotten tomb of St. James was miraculously re-discovered (Melczer, 1993). St. James, or Santiago as he is referred to in Spain, appeared in several battles to help the Christians defeat the Moors. His assistance in the Holy

Wars gave him the name *Matamoros* (or one who kills the Moors). As his fame grew, legends and stories increased, thereby causing pilgrims to visit his relics and pay penance.

The pilgrimage grew in popularity until the Roman Catholic Church recognized the authenticity of the remains in the twelfth century and it became the third Holy City of the modern world behind Rome and Jerusalem. The *Codex Calixtinus*, written to coincide with this Papal decree, is a guide of sorts to the Way of St. James. Also, the Way of St. James appears in *Chanson de Roland* as Charlemagne, considered the first St. James pilgrim, fights for the Christian faith. St. James “appears in a dream before the astonished emperor and promises him the possession of Galicia; Charlemagne then sees a starry way on the sky and it told to follow it in order to get to the saint’s tomb” (Melczer, 1993). In fact, Roncesvalles, the famed site of the Battle of Roncesvalles, is still an important stop on the Way of St. James.

Before we can unpack, so to speak, the evangelical pilgrim, we need to first define what “pilgrim” means for the purpose of this study. We also need to clarify who an Evangelical is versus using the broader term of Christian, or Judeo-Christian. “Pilgrim” is not only a Christian term since Muslim’s have been taking a *haij* to Mecca for years and in the Old Testament, there are many references of the Hebrews moving from one place to another and being “strangers in a strange land.” (The bible, n.d. 1 Peter 2:11-12, Ex. 2:22) The New Testament often refers to Christians as pilgrims and a people whose home is not on Earth.

A Christian, as pilgrim, is perhaps best allegorized in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress* and in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. In medieval literature in Spain, works like *El Cid* and the

Codex Calixtinus refer to the pilgrim traveling the Saint James Way, or the Camino de Santiago. They are all traveling to a holy place, and they usually encounter some type of opposition, be it physical, spiritual, or both. Philip Cousineau in *Art of Pilgrimage*, writes that a to be a pilgrim is to make a sacrifice along the way. “In sum, while tourists might escape reality or the world where they live, pilgrims go deeper into what is real, what is of God” (Cousineau, 1998).

Methodology

According to anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, there are five characteristics of medieval pilgrims. 1) The destination for the pilgrim is a place where miracles have happened, are happening, and could happen again. 2) The importance of leaving the familiar home and place and traveling to the unknown. 3) Pilgrims are walking for penitence “and with a contemplation of the inner life, all pointing toward the time of pilgrimage as a period of penance which can include physical suffering. 4) The pilgrim is never truly alone even though he may set out on a solo journey like Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The pilgrim will always encounter others like him along the way. 5) There is always a certain destination and although he does not know what to expect, he is “in search of God, and in the process comes to know the self better. In seeking this relationship with God, the pilgrim will be irrevocably changed” (Webb-Mitchell, 2007). Devoted medieval Christian pilgrims, with the increasing danger during the Crusades, shifted their journey from Jerusalem to Santiago de Compostela. William Schmidt in *Walking with Stones* writes that “with the accessibility of Santiago for persons from all over Europe, it became a destination for tens of thousands of pilgrims annually for literally centuries...and hence a profound cultural and spiritual unifier for all of Europe” (Schmidt, 2012)

Modern pilgrims, while not necessarily walking the Camino for penitence, still embody many of these medieval definitions of “pilgrim.” Camino pilgrims’ final destination is the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela where they hug the statue of St. James and they are able to view what are believed to be his remains. Modern pilgrims leave their home, some travelling short distances, while others depart from their doorstep to begin their walk. The reasons for walking vary now since the majority of modern pilgrims do not use penitence as a primary reason to walk the Camino even though a spiritual awakening may figure into their journey. *Communitas* as well as solitude are still major components in the pilgrim’s journey. The final destination, though unknown, is certainly more accessible via blogs, pictures, guidebooks, and general globalization through technology.

Results

In the Summer of 2017, students from Wheaton College walk portions of the Camino and study the history, culture, art and spirituality surrounding the medieval pilgrimage. Preliminary studies from groups of both evangelicals and non-evangelicals surveyed during the three-week walk reveal fascinating results when comparing them to the terms we have defined for a “pilgrim” and an “evangelical”.

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