

The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World

Names of all Authors

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Biographies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the conflict between science and religion in the context of pilgrimage. Since a scientific world-view rules out many ideas which are traditionally associated with pilgrimage, such as miracles and the effectiveness of prayer, it seems that pilgrimage might be a practice inconsistent with the modern scientific age. Attempts have been made to reconcile this conflict by arguing that science and religion do not conflict, but are non-overlapping spheres of inquiry. Thus, it is possible to make sense of pilgrimage in a scientific age, if one strips their pilgrimage of all aspects to which science might object. However, this results in an end product that is all but unrecognizable as religious in the first place. It makes it possible for almost any activity to be interpreted as a pilgrimage activity, including many activities usually associated with tourism, consumption, materialism, consumerism, and entertainment. Using ideas developed by the philosopher William James, one can argue that many of these apparently secular activities can indeed be seen as religious experiences.

Key Words : pilgrimage, science, religious, cultural, sublime, William James

Introduction

Advocates of “scientism” argue that science is the *only* source of reliable knowledge, and this rules out belief in miracles, the effectiveness of prayer, and the need for God in explanations about the world (Rosenberg, 2011). Traditionally, pilgrimages are motivated by, and explained in terms of, these very ideas. Thus, at first glance, the idea of pilgrimage seems inconsistent with a modern, scientific world-view.

Attempts have been made to reconcile this conflict. Gould defends a compatibility thesis on this issue and argues that science and religion are non-overlapping languages that cannot conflict because they are about different things (Gould, 1999). Instead of conflict, urges Gould, we should seek “respectful separation,” and “non-interference.” Science and religion are completely different spheres of inquiry that do different jobs and use different languages. The province of one sphere of inquiry includes science, objectivity, and empirical facts. All questions of meaning, value, religion, subjectivity, poetry and awe lie in another sphere. This philosophical move makes room for legitimate forms of knowledge alternative to scientific knowledge.

This leaves the project of making religion compatible with science by stripping it of all beliefs that scientific thinking would reject. Unfortunately, the end product is all but unrecognizable as religion in the first place, because such a religious belief system would not include a caring God, a God that created the universe, nor the existence of a soul that survives bodily death. When applying these ideas to the case of pilgrimage, it involves removing all concepts to which science might object. One might emphasize the psychological transformation made possible by the journey of pilgrimage itself, rather than the sacred nature of the journey’s end, or the supposedly miraculous facts associated with these destinations.

However, this understanding of pilgrimage opens the door which permits almost any activity to be interpreted as pilgrimage. Cousineau, for example, instructs his readers that “it is possible to transform even the most ordinary trip into a sacred journey, a pilgrimage” (Cousineau, 1998: xxv). His examples include visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame, paying one’s respects at an author’s gravesite, running with the bulls in Pamplona (Cousineau, 1998: xiii), as well as Hollywood inspired journeys to visit the home where they filmed *Mrs. Doubtfire*, or locations of *The Bridges of Madison County* (Cousineau, 1998: 122-123). It might be tempting to reject these examples as an equivocation on the word “pilgrimage.” After all, pilgrimage is supposed to be

unlike tourism, consumption, materialism, consumerism, entertainment, and baseball. However, all these examples of pilgrimage can be seen as lying on a continuum of religious experiences.

William James famously surveys many different “varieties of religious experience” and notes that they all have a few features in common. After describing various religious experiences, he concludes that they all share two features. First, all share a sense of “uneasiness” that “there is something wrong about us”; and second, the “solution” of this uneasiness whereby one is “saved from the wrongness” by connecting with non-materialist “higher powers” (James, 1958: 418).

Interestingly, Cousineau describes pilgrimage in just these terms. He writes that “The journeys all begin in a restive state, in deep disturbance. Something vital was missing in life.” (Couineau, 1998: 14-15) Pilgrims are dissatisfied with something in their lives, and aim to transform themselves, or recover something of themselves that they have lost.

The “solution” James mentions, is to be found in the union of visible and spiritual worlds and can be achieved by “prayer or inner communion” (James, 1958: 401). However, many experiences, other than the familiar religious ones of meditation and prayer, can also be described as a connection with a reality that lies behind the appearances. ‘Sublime’ experiences, for example, are vehicles for transcendence. Sublime experiences are those where one feels awe and terror at the same time, and this lifts one’s consciousness out of an individual ego and connects to something beyond the self. Henry David Thoreau found transcendence in walking. The 17th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer argued that music was a way to eliminate the distinction between the subjective observer and the objective thing being observed, and thus connect with a more fundamental aspect of existence (Magee, 1983:167-169). Aldous Huxley poetically describes how drug experiences can be interpreted as religious experiences of altered states of consciousness (Huxley, 2009). Frederick Franck explains how the experience of drawing and sketching is an act of meditation that connects us to the “awesome mystery and miracle we share” (Franck, 1993: xvii). As one can imagine, these examples could be multiplied and easily applied to the non-traditional pilgrimage experiences of the sort Cousineau describes.

In finding a common core for all religious experiences, James is voicing an early version of the N.O.M.A. thesis. There are two aspects of experience, he reminds us, the subjective and the objective. Religious experiences, James observes, always act at the “private” and “personal”

level, whereas science operates at the “cosmic” and “universal” level (James, 1958: 411). For example, religious experiences of “the rainbow,” “summer rain” and “the stars” are not “about the physical laws which these things follow,” but about inner, subjective experience (James, 1958: 411).

Pilgrimage is not just about a physical place, but is experienced at a subjective level. One’s visit to Lourdes need not be insincere if one does not believe in the literal truth of the miracles which are supposed to have occurred there. The pilgrimage can have significance at personal, metaphorical, and symbolic levels.

Mary Midgely has recently argued along similar lines (Midgely, 2014). She writes that science and religion talk about the same topic from different angles and ask different questions (Midgely, 2014: 27-28). She emphasizes the primacy of her experience of such things that scientism denies, such as free will, consciousness, intentional purpose, Self, soul, and meaning. Her main target is the rejection, by science, of the experience of an inner Self as a mere illusion. Since scientism cannot make sense of these obvious experiences, she argues, then scientism must be rejected. That is, the scope of science is limited, and excludes subjectivity. To understand the world, and solve problems in it, we need more than just science. We will also need politics, economics, history, poetry, philosophy and many other methods of inquiry.

Scruton also rejects scientism because science cannot explain essential aspects of existence such as love, beauty, art, the sacred, interpersonal relationships and the transcendent dimension of human experience (Scruton, 2014). The thesis of scientism is that because science cannot explain these things, or else explains them away, then they must be dismissed as illusions. The response being made here is to reverse the burden of proof. Some concepts and experiences are fundamental and necessary to our understanding the world. Because science cannot explain these things, then the claims of scientism are false.

An experience, argues Scruton, can be “meaningful even though its meaning eludes all attempts to put it into words.” (Scruton, 2014) As examples, he refers to viewing great works of art, or watching the sunset. This kind of experience is real and meaningful—despite the fact that it cannot be explained in terms of empirical evidence, nor proved by the scientific method.

These “moments of revelation” reveal the paucity of scientism since it cannot include them in its explanations.

The phenomenologist, Husserl, also wrote insightfully about the non-overlapping languages of objective science and personal experience. Phenomenologists insist that one can talk meaningfully of experiences, such as freedom, and Self, without answering questions of truth or epistemology. In summarizing the history of the movement, Sarah Bakewell writes that “Phenomenology is useful for talking about religious or mystical experiences: we can describe them as they feel from the inside without having to prove that they represent the world accurately” (Bakewell, 2016:42). Bakewell provides further examples to illustrate this key point. The meaning and importance of music, for example, is best described in terms of the personal experience of feelings and emotions, rather than as compressed sound waves and frequencies. Similarly, the experience of an illness cannot be equated with purely physical descriptions of bodily processes (Bakewell, 2016:42).

Literature Review

This paper discusses a current debate in the philosophy of science; namely, the question of whether there is room for religious ideas in a scientific age. These ideas are then applied to the concept of pilgrimage.

Methodology

This paper is a philosophical argument discussing the problem of the consistency between the scientific worldview and the religious worldview, as they are applied to pilgrimage.

Conclusion and Discussion

While science seems to conflict with religious language, and seems to render the concept of pilgrimage meaningless, the N.O.M.A. thesis that science and religion are non-overlapping spheres of inquiry has been defended from many different angles over the last century. The price of this accommodation is to broaden the concept of pilgrimage to include experiences in popular culture that have not traditionally been associated with religious experience. However, one can interpret all these experiences as lying on a continuum with traditional pilgrimage experiences.

They all and all seek to connect with a larger reality yet describe the experiences at a personal level of meaning.

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