

2017

## The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World

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### Recommended Citation

Haller, Stephen F. (2017) "The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 5.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7NX4X>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol5/iss3/5>

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Peter Matthews, at the University of the Arts, London, for his friendly conversations that helped me organize my thoughts on this topic.

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# The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World

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The paper is a philosophical argument about whether a pilgrimage can be meaningful in a scientific age. 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 move makes it possible for almost any activity to be interpreted as a pilgrimage activity, including many activities usually associated with consumption, tourism, materialism, consumerism, and entertainment. Using ideas developed by the philosopher William James, and others, one can argue that many of these apparently secular activities can indeed be seen as religious experiences. By identifying what all religious experiences have in common, one can interpret many different kinds of experiences as lying on a continuum with traditional pilgrimage experiences.

**Key Words:** pilgrimage, science, religion, sublime, William James

## Introduction: Scientism

Can a pilgrimage be meaningful in a scientific age? It would appear not. 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. Pilgrimage is understood as a journey to a sacred place, or an attempt to connect with the miraculous. Thus, at first glance, the idea of pilgrimage seems inconsistent with a modern, scientific world-view.

## Science and Religion Might not Conflict After all: The N.O.M.A. Thesis

Attempts have been made to reconcile the apparent conflict between science and religion. S.J. Gould defends a compatibility thesis on this issue which he calls the N.O.M.A. thesis, an acronym for Non-Overlapping Magisteria (Gould, 1999). He argues that science and religion are non-overlapping languages that cannot conflict because they are about different things. Instead of conflict, urges Gould, we should seek separation and 'respectful noninterference' (Gould, 1999:5). 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. These two spheres of meaning do not conflict with each other anymore than a physio-chemical description of the paint in Monet's *Sunrise* conflicts with an aesthetic evaluation of its beauty; nor with an understanding of its historical role in the Impressionist movement. This philosophical move makes room for legitimate forms of knowledge alternative to scientific knowledge, including such things as the language of sacredness, poetry and the sublime, traditional folk knowledge, and morality.

## N.O.M.A. a failure?

The N.O.M.A. thesis that religion and science use very different languages can backfire as it might actually provide grounds for criticism of the religious sphere. Scientific belief is grounded in evidence, and is thus open to change with changing evidence. Religion, on the other hand, is grounded in faith, and prides itself in believing without evidence. Many believe that there is something fundamentally mistaken about believing without evidence. Richard Dawkins, for example, writes that 'a case can be made that faith is one of the

world's great evils' akin to a brain virus with dangerous consequences (Dawkins, 2000:318). In his international best-seller *The God Delusion*, Dawkins provocatively claims that a belief in God is not better than belief in other fairy tales like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy (Dawkins, 2006).

Even if one side-steps this issue, there is a more obvious failing in the attempt to have it both ways.

The problem is that science and religion don't actually stay out of each other's territories. Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins, for example, both point out that religion and science actually overlap quite a bit (Dawkins, 2000). 'Unfortunately,' writes Pinker, 'this entente unravels as soon as you begin to examine it' (Pinker, 2013:5). Various cultural and religious explanations for the origin of life, and the beginning of the universe, directly contradict known scientific facts. Religion does offer hypotheses about the nature of the universe, and it includes heaven, souls and the afterlife - things which no scientist could accept.

Similarly, science sometimes attempts to do the work often attributed to the religious sphere. Feelings of wonder and beauty, on Gould's N.O.M.A. hypothesis, are supposedly reserved for the religious sphere. Dawkins disagrees because 'it's exactly this feeling of spine-shivering, breath-catching awe - almost worship - this flooding of the chest with ecstatic wonder, that modern science can provide. And it does so beyond the wildest dreams of saints and mystics' (Dawkins, 2000:319).

The hope that one could be both a scientist and a religious believer seems doomed to failure. It is clear that science and religion can overlap, and that much of what religion says is inconsistent with science. It is not the case that science and religion do different jobs. Religions have famously invaded scientific territory with pronouncements about the origin of life, the age of the universe, and the structure of our solar system. All of these beliefs turned out to be false. Religions postulate the existence of heaven, souls, and reincarnation - which are all empirically vacuous claims. Religion *does* do science, notes Dawkins, it just does it very badly (Dawkins, 2000:319).

Anticipating this objection a century ago, William James offers a hopeful response. He writes that

*It does not follow, because our ancestors made so many errors of fact and mixed them with their religion, that we should therefore leave off being religious at all* (James, 1958:413).

Thus, one can admit that this conflict has arisen in the past, but if one is careful to leave scientific and religious questions to their own domains, one could still embrace the N.O.M.A. thesis.

This leaves the project of making religion compatible with science by stripping it of all beliefs that scientific thinking would reject. So, for example, it would have to allow for evolution by natural selection, and a materialist view of the minds. 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. This is the depersonalized, non-anthropomorphic God which Einstein likened to the philosophy of Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Buddhism. God is 'the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence' itself (Einstein, 1954:49).

## Pilgrimage

When applying these ideas to the case of pilgrimage, it involves removing all conflicts with scientific thinking. One might, for example, 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. Phil Cousineau, for example, is representative of this understanding of secular pilgrimage. In his inspiring book *The Art of Pilgrimage*, he instructs his readers that 'it is possible to transform even the most ordinary trip into a sacred journey, a pilgrimage' (Cousineau, 1998:xxv). Many examples are provided, including a visit to 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).

While these secular journeys certainly would not raise any scientific eyebrows, one wonders whether Cousineau is equivocating on the word 'pilgrimage.' He defines it as 'following in the footsteps of somebody or something we honor to pay homage' (Cousineau, 1998:xv). This definition can easily include all his secular examples such as visiting the Hewlett Packard garage where the computer

business started. His main thesis, however, still retains the traditional religious understanding of pilgrimage. His understanding of pilgrimage echoes its traditional meaning as a 'transformative' journey (Cousineau, 1998:xiii), with an 'aim to improve yourself by enduring and overcoming difficulties' (Cousineau, 1998:xxix). The transformation sought is described as a more attentive way of seeing (Cousineau, 1998:xxiii), and is achieved by using 'many of the same techniques that traditional pilgrims use, such as contemplating intention and practicing deep attention' (Cousineau, 1998:xiii). This language further slides towards the religious in his liberal use of words such as 'sacred places' (Cousineau, 1998:xiii, xxiv, xxv), 'reverential' (xv), 'spiritual exercise' (xxv), 'soul' (xxv), 'divine energy' (xxvi), and 'transcendence' (34). One can see how difficult it actually is to avoid the overlap between science and religion.

### **William James rescues the N.O.M.A. thesis**

It might be tempting to reject Cousineau's examples of pilgrimage as non-religious. After all, pilgrimage is supposed to be unlike tourism, consumption, materialism, consumerism, entertainment, and baseball. However, it will be argued that all these examples of pilgrimage are on a continuum rather than examples of different kinds of religious experiences.

In 1901, the philosopher William James argued that there is 'a common body of doctrine' to be found in all religions 'to which physical science need not object' (James, 1958:420). James famously surveys many different 'varieties of religious experience' and notes in his book of the same name, that they all have a few features in common. After describing various religious experiences such as Buddhism, mysticism, the 'healthy-minded' religious experience - characterised by optimism and happiness, and the 'sick-minded' religious experience - characterised by solemnness and an emphasis on sacrifice, sin, and suffering, 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).

Henry Rosemont Jr. argues much the same idea over a hundred years later in his own survey of world religions (Rosemont, 2001). He writes that all religions operate by a process of 'ego-reduction' (Rosemont, 2001:21, 25, 28). Following the philosopher Ludwig

Wittgenstein, he defines a religious experience as a feeling of absolute safety and a sense belonging (Rosemont, 2001:31). This experience could be grounded in the transcendental, but need not be. One could feel a sense of belonging with nature, or humanity, or a pilgrim's sense of belonging to all those who came this way before, and in whose footsteps one is walking.

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' (Cousineau, 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' to this unease, 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.

The attempt to experience the reality that lies behind the world of appearances has a long philosophical history dating back to ancient Greece. Plato, for example, explained that experiences derived from the senses are but mere illusions (Plato, 1974). The real world, he explains, lies in the non-sensory realm of ideas and numbers. Anything we perceive is only a representation of the real world, not the actual thing. 17<sup>th</sup> century English empiricist John Locke explained how one's experiences of colour, or shape are 'secondary qualities' that do not represent the world as it truly is (Locke, 1996). For example, one's experience of the colour red exists in one's mind, not in the perceived object. The object only *looks* red, under certain lighting conditions, to human eyes. Change the lighting conditions and the colour will change. Bring in other species, like dogs and pigeons, and they will perceive something else altogether, since the rods and cones of their eyes are structured differently. The 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Immanuel Kant developed a theory of 'transcendental idealism' where he too divided the world into appearance and reality (Kant, 1987). The 'phenomenal world' is an appearance constructed from sensations, and conceptual filters such as time, space, cause and effect. The real world, the 'noumenal' world, cannot be experienced or understood or characterized in any way, except to say that it exists.

While Kant and Locke believed that the real world behind the appearance could not be experienced, others have argued that it can be, at least momentarily, under special circumstances. ‘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 to connect with something beyond the self. Contemplation of the stars and the infinite distances involved is a sublime experience. Albert Schweitzer describes his sublime experience of paddling a dugout canoe, at sunset, down an African river through a herd of hippos (Schweitzer, 1998). He suddenly felt connected with all life, as his individual ego dissolved, and he developed this into an ethical theory known as ‘reverence for life.’ The New England Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau found spiritual transcendence through extreme walking every day for four hours, in all kinds of weather (Smith, 199:9). The 17<sup>th</sup> 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 psychedelic 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). All these experiences share the two features that William James claims are common to all religious experiences; namely, an uneasiness, and its solution.

As one can imagine, these examples could be multiplied and easily applied to the non-traditional pilgrimage experiences of the sort Cousineau describes, and were listed above. In the presence of great architecture, one can often be swept up in contemplation of the elemental forces involved in supporting enormous domes, and engineering that allows for natural lighting (Mann, 1993). This type of architecture reveals fundamental truths of the universe, and reminds one of William Blake’s poem where he suggests that the understanding of the universe is available in each grain of sand:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour* (Blake, 1950).

The experience of historical time is also a way of connecting to something beyond the individual ego. A pilgrim gets the sense of all of those that walked that way over centuries. A visit to Pompeii, the Grand Canyon, or an archeological dig can provide the same *frisson*. A scuba-diver enters an unfamiliar realm, and the disorientation expands the mind in ways beyond the limited nature of ordinary experience. In short, Cousineau is correct in describing his pilgrimage experiences as ways of ‘confirmation that mystery exists in the modern world’ (Cousineau, 1998:18).

In finding a common core for all religious experiences, James is voicing an early version of Gould’s N.O.M.A. thesis, described above. There are two aspects of experience, James 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 also experienced at a subjective level. One’s visit to Lourdes need not be insincere if one does not believe in the literal, objective truth of the miracles which are supposed to have occurred there. The pilgrimage can have significance at personal, subjective, metaphorical, and symbolic levels. So too, can a visit to the place where Judy Garland died have personal meaning for someone, whereas for most others it is just a place and not a meaningful experience.

Philosopher Mary Midgely has recently argued, along similar lines, for the compatibility of science and religion (Midgely, 2014). She writes that neither science nor religion is illusory. Rather, they talk about the same topic from different angles and ask different questions (Midgely, 2014:27-28). In ‘*Are you an Illusion?*’ she emphasizes the primacy of her experience of such things that scientism denies, such as free will, consciousness, intentional purpose, Self, soul, and meaning. For example, the existence of ‘gratitude’ seems to be a brute fact of experience for her, and it does not make sense, she thinks, unless there is someone to be grateful to. 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 it is scientism that must be rejected. The scope of science is limited, as it excludes subjectivity, and thus, it

cannot answer all questions. 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. Science is only one of many disciplines.

Roger 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, by both Scruton and Midgely, 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 to have eliminated them are false.

An experience, argues Scruton, can be meaningful even if we cannot explain it with words and logic (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).

## Conclusion

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 sphere 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. They all bring a sense of belonging. Thus, there is no clear distinction to be made between religious and secular pilgrimages.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Matthews, at the University of the Arts, London, for his friendly conversations that helped me organize my thoughts on this topic.

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