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Race MoChridhe

American Theological Library Association, racemochridhe@gmail.com

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The Still Center as Invented Topos: Static Pilgrimage in Aristasia

Race MoChridhe

American Theological Library Association
racemochridhe@gmail.com

After decades of challenges to many other definitional elements of ‘pilgrimage’, the centrality of motion and physical movement, whether literally enacted or realized virtually or through metaphor, remains largely uncontested. This paper examines practices of creative writing and home decorating among participants in the 1990s British subculture of ‘Aristasia’ (an outgrowth of a New Religious Movement known in the 1970s and 80s as ‘Madrianism’ but now more commonly referred to as ‘Filianism’) to argue that these practices functioned together for participants as static pilgrimages, accomplishing the same psychological and social tasks as traditional modes while suppressing even metaphorical concepts of travel or motion. This unique form of pilgrimage, it is argued, was made possible by traits identified by Carole Cusack (2010) as defining a category of ‘invented religions’—an analysis that supports Sarah MacMillan’s (2011) emphasis on ‘place and body’ as the constitutive elements of pilgrimage by demonstrating practically how these elements might provide pilgrimage functions in the absence of motifs of motion. In further elaborating how the deliberate suppression of such motifs supports metaphysical views that symbolically align motion with the loss of the sacred and the breakdown of social order, this case study also extends the theories of Peter Geschiere and Birgit Meyer (1999), as well as William Swatos and Luigi Tomasi (2002), on pilgrimage and globalization by highlighting the unanticipated development that modernity’s dissolution of place might paradoxically open imagined spaces from which the fluidity of modernity might be challenged and critiqued. In all of these ways, the Aristasian example suggests that pilgrimage definitions dependent on motion may be of limited applicability to emerging forms of spirituality.

Key Words: static pilgrimage, Aristasia, Filianism, Madrianism, globalization

Introduction

The centrality of motion—whether literal or virtual—as a defining element of pilgrimage has remained largely unchallenged since Edith and Victor Turner’s foundational accounts. Alan Morinis’ (1992) investigation of the ‘inner journeying’ of some Hindu and Sufi mystics as a form of pilgrimage did not shake his opinion that

*the essence of the journey is movement ...
Pilgrimage is woven out of the structural
opposition of stasis/movement, in whatever
diversity this theme might be depicted* (Morinis,
1992:16)

and metaphors drawn from this perspective continue to dominate analyses of pilgrimage practice. Even Noga Collins-Kreiner (2018), who has challenged traditional definitions of the term in many other respects, still writes that ‘[p]ilgrimage necessitates spatial movement’ (p.8).

This paper examines practices of creative writing and home decorating among participants in the 1990s British subculture of ‘Aristasia’ (an outgrowth of a New Religious Movement known in the 1970s and 80s as ‘Madrianism’ but now more commonly referred to as ‘Filianism’) to argue that these practices functioned together for participants as static pilgrimages, accomplishing the same psychological and social tasks as traditional modes while suppressing even metaphorical concepts of travel or motion. This unique form of pilgrimage, it is argued, was made possible by traits identified by Carole Cusack (2010) as defining a category of ‘invented religions’—an analysis that supports Sarah MacMillan’s (2011) emphasis on ‘place and body’ as the constitutive elements of pilgrimage, by demonstrating practically how these elements might provide pilgrimage functions in the absence of motifs of motion. In further elaborating how the deliberate suppression of such motifs supports metaphysical views that symbolically align motion with the loss of the sacred and the breakdown of social order, this case study also extends the theories of Peter Geschiere and

Birgit Meyer (1999), as well as William Swatos and Luigi Tomasi (2002), on pilgrimage and globalization by highlighting the unanticipated development that modernity's dissolution of place might paradoxically open imagined spaces from which the fluidity of modernity might be challenged and critiqued. In all these ways, the Aristasian example suggests that pilgrimage definitions dependent on motion may be of limited applicability to emerging forms of religion.

Aristasia and the Imagining of Place

Around 1973, a small group of women in Oxford began teaching a religious philosophy and devotional practice they termed 'Madrianism', organized around approaching God as Mother. Combining diverse influences from pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Marian devotion, imported currents of *bhakti*-oriented Hindu Shaktism, feminist-aligned Wicca, and lesbian separatist discourse, their system was particularly indebted to the Traditionalist thought of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy. The Madrians followed these authors in preaching a 'decline of the ages', modifying their paradigm of history with reference to the theories of Marija Gimbutas and others who promoted models of a 'matrifocal' or 'matriarchal' antiquity. The Madrians thus presented patriarchy as the first in the civilization-eroding sequence of societal 'inversions' suggested by Guénon, which were held to have initiated a long, slow degeneration that reached its nadir in modernity—the lowest point of the *Kali Yuga*, or Iron Age (see Sedgwick 2004, 216-19).

Within this historiography, the early Madrians maintained a deliberate ambiguity about the lineage of their teaching. Statements about the origin of their traditions often blurred the distinction between historical and spiritual inheritance, as well as hereditary transmission through ordinary means and transmission via the recovery of sometimes very ancient past-life memories. Though the specifics were never clearly laid out, the central, consistently reinforced point was that the basic teachings of Madrianism were to be understood as broadly identical with those that had been taught by pre-patriarchal cultures in the distant past and that had been preserved or rediscovered wherever human beings became aware once again of the primordial femininity of God. As these teachings spread through Britain, Ireland, and America during the 1980s, many adherents lost the nuances found in the original writings and held Madrianism as they practiced it to be a direct inheritance from antiquity.

During this same period, however, the movement began to fragment into different branches and, in parallel with developments in Wicca and other communities of the time with dubious claims to ancient origins, the historiography of Madrianism became a matter of open discussion in some groups. One of these was an English branch that became known as the Aristasians, achieving minor notability in the British tabloid press for their combination of lesbian subculture with Traditionalist-inspired conservatism. While Aristasia was not a specifically religious movement, it grew out of a Madrian community and contained many Madrian practitioners within it whose further writing and teaching broadly influenced most other Madrian-descended groups. (These influences included the change of moniker from 'Madrianism' to 'Filianism', which is more commonly used to describe these groups today.)

One of the significant innovations of the Aristasians was to take the rich Madrian legendarium of supposed matriarchal queendoms of Old Europe and 'Amazon Crusades' that fought the encroachment of patriarchy and fuse it with their own social criticism of the postwar United Kingdom. Drawing on Traditionalist ideas about the decline of human civilization across history, they identified the early 1960s as what they called 'the Eclipse'—the point at which the untraditional and un-spiritual modernity critiqued by Guénon and Coomaraswamy had become positively *anti-traditional* and *anti-spiritual*, plunging Europe into what they termed 'the decades of darkness'. To escape the moral turpitude and spiritual aridity of contemporary society, the Aristasians mapped the past onto an imagined spatial realm, creating the 'feminine Empire' of Aristasia, comprising seven nations: 'Amazonia' represented the ancient matriarchies of Madrian teaching, 'Arcadia' reprised the Victorian Age, 'Vintesse' stood in for the 1920s, 'Trent' for the 1930s, 'Kadoria' for the 1940s, 'Quirinelle' for the 1950s, and 'Novarya' for a hypothetical 're-civilised future' in which the sound principles of the Traditionalist order lost during the Eclipse would be restored in the context of a (retro-)futuristic, technological society. Through declarations of spiritual 'secession' from the modern world, the Aristasians shed their allegiance to existing nations of the Earth and declared themselves 'daughters of the Empire'.

While the Madrians had been deliberately ambivalent about the boundaries between legend and history, the Aristasians were very candid in embracing the self-consciously playful and imaginative nature of their creation. Even the names of the nations, largely

derived from the French or Latin words for the number marking the decade they were based on, were tongue-in-cheek. As one anonymous Aristasian put it, ‘Aristasia is a game. But then schools, corporations, armies, nations are all games. They happen to be bigger and wealthier games than ours. But ours is better’ (quoted in Passantino, n.d.). Like the fairy tales of which the Aristasians were likewise fond, the ‘feminine Empire’ was no less earnest for being openly fanciful, and real perspective and spiritual growth were meant to be achieved through its role-play. The relationship of the Aristasians to their imagined ‘Motherland’ thus often resembled V.S. Naipaul’s (1987:318) talk of

[p]laces doubly and trebly sacred to me because far away in England I had lived them imaginatively over many books and had in my fantasy set in those places the very beginning of things, had constructed of them a fantasy of home

which Dale Eickelman (1990:xiii) quoted to illustrate the ways in which the traveler ‘enters a mythical realm where home, the ‘fixed point’ of departure and return, is re-imagined and further travel inspired’.

It is this aspect of Aristasian teaching (and of some other varieties of Filianic practice influenced by it) that might be said to overlap the category of ‘invented religions’ as coined by Cusack (2010), referring to religions that eschew more traditional modes of legitimation (appeals to authority, antiquity, or revelation) and self-consciously acknowledge themselves as products of human imagination. Markus Altena Davidson (2013) works with a similar category he has termed ‘fiction-based religions’. To apply either designation to Filianism as a whole would be overly reductive of its understanding of the nature of revelation and of the significant debates that have occurred within its community, but these terms are useful when applied specifically to that portion of the teaching of some Filianic groups that engage Aristasia as a kind of imagined ‘Buddha Land’ (to borrow a Mahayana term)—a plane of being that serves as a platform from which the teachings and practices of the tradition are easier to realize or engage, and which thus furthers the spiritual growth of the practitioner who attains to it.

The question, of course, is how the practitioner accesses this place. In the Aristasian context, past epochs in which the sacred was felt to be more accessible became mapped onto imagined places where those epochs ceased to be past and became present, experienced in part through connection with their

recontextualised artifacts. An elaborate Aristasian philosophy of the spiritual significance of human (and especially female) eroticism, for example, became condensed in the symbols of early 20th-century women’s fashion, transforming unopened packages of 1940s stockings into a kind of reliquary. A private residence in London was outfitted with bakelite telephones and transformed into the Art Deco ‘Aristasian Embassy’, which held cocktail parties and ‘Embassy balls’ to which attendees were sometimes chauffeured in a refurbished 1930s automobile known as the ‘Embassy car’. Crucially, however, the Aristasian narrative around these items was not that they had been purchased at auctions, flea markets, and second-hand shops and painstakingly restored (though they had been) but that they had been ‘imported’ from the Aristasian nations that represented their respective times.

Static Pilgrimage

To understand the pilgrimage significance of this conceit, however, requires us to look at how this discourse was ported into virtual space as the Aristasian community migrated online in the mid-1990s, creating a digital enclave they termed ‘Elektraspace’. In the early days, ‘Elektra’ was composed of a small handful of short, simple websites, of which the most important was the *Aphrodite Cocktail Bar*—a forum where Aristasians would submit responses by email to ‘the Blonde Management’, which would dutifully post them (tragically undated) to the static site. For the present topic, the most illuminating exchange among the voluminous archives of the *Cocktail Bar* is a short series of posts from the lead-up to Christmas in one of the site’s early years. The original post read, in full:

Hello dears. Christmas is fast approaching, or as we call it in Aristasia, Nativity. As I write this, I am sitting in a high tower-room in a delightful inn in northern Trent. From the small, leaded window I can see much of the small town of Claireborough and the countryside beyond. Over everything lies a pure, deep carpet of snow, almost luminescent in the winter moonlight. Day is only just ending, and all over the town, windows are turning from black to glowing yellow-gold as electrical lights are lighted, and I love to think how, behind each one, is a scene of cosy Aristasian domesticity.

A group of young brunettes is abroad in the street, throwing snowballs and laughing, and it is pleasant to see that they stop as three blondes

pass between them, in case their high spirits should be a cause for alarm among the fair sex. Fur collars and high-buttoned coats are the order of the day, and shiny, slender black boots with heels not too high as the going can be treacherous.

The single shopping street of Claireborough has coloured electrical lights strung high across the way, and glittering silver stars suspended in the air, and in the centre of it all, high above the thoroughfare, a representation of the Star-Fairy in her silver chariot (the Aristasian equivalent of Santa Claus). I am despatching this report from the dear little brown bakelite keyboard with its tiny glass screen framed with geometric silver wings like an Art-Deco photograph frame, which is set into the oak writing desk for the benefit of customers (one has to put a threepenny piece into the brass slot to despatch a communication).

As my threepence is now running out, I shall proceed down, in a moment, to the warm, gaily-decorated bar to admire the tinsel-covered Nativity-Fir and the equally charmingly decorated bar-blonde. Hot rum punch is 3d here, so have one for me at the Cocktail Bar! (Di Quirinelle, n.d.)

This vignette of life in Aristasia received a very positive response and there were then calls for others to contribute their accounts of what Nativity looked like ‘in their parts of the country’ (Susan, n.d.). Of particular note are two features of Miss Di Quirinelle’s message, quoted above, that became common to the replies. The first is the use of multiple stays of action. The children throwing snowballs have, in the moment of the writer’s composition, stopped. The writer is about to go downstairs but hasn’t yet. Almost all of the vignettes have some kind of device for diffusing the idea of motion to create these static images, something like Currier & Ives prints of the imagined plane. The second is the fine detail given to the physical surroundings of the writer, not only in terms of the broad scene being described but of the immediate physical facts surrounding the writer herself. In Miss Di Quirinelle’s post, this comes out in her description of the bakelite keyboard and the geometric silver art deco framing of the screen.

The stays of motion receive attention first because, as has been noted, motion has generally been taken as central to the act of pilgrimage, even when it is displaced, metaphorical, or expressed in tension with stasis. The Aristasian examples, however, resonate less

with even these extended or alternative forms of ‘inner journeying’ or similar practices and more with scholarly meta-reflection on pilgrimage documentation. The vignettes are given to us as windows on holiday observances that reprise Simon Coleman and John Eade’s description of how

[t]he act of representation – involving either the literal or the ethnographic snapshot – encourages concentration on images and issues that lend themselves most easily to the gaze of the analyst (2004:2).

The process of attempting to capture the event, in their view, robbed it of motion and thus of its essential character, creating a distorted representation. By displacing the representation of the sacred to an imagined plane, however, the Aristasians cut off the possibility of physical movement and made this ‘gaze of the analyst’ the only means of accessing the pilgrimage destination.

Interestingly, though, while they could in theory have written stories about moving somewhere within this imagined domain—a kind of fictional pilgrimage journal—they did not. Instead, they systematically subverted the reader’s sense of motion at almost every opportunity. In the second vignette from the exchange started by Miss Di Quirinelle, we find a tremendous emphasis on distance and location, but expectations of movement are again stymied.

Marybridge is in Quirinelle, it is a long way South and a bit West of Claireborough, Trent (I know because I just looked at the big map in Brunette Mummie’s study). ... On Nativity Eve the Choir is going to make a procession through the town, singing all the lovely carols. We shall be dressed in white robes and white fur cloaks to keep us warm ... Oh, and I wish you could see the lovely Nativity displays in all the shops and the street lights. People say that Ladyton has the best and biggest shops and lights in the world, and pettes [people] come from miles and miles to see them, but I don’t believe that they could possibly be better than our ones in Marybridge (Ellhedrine, n.d.).

This is not an airy kind of imagining; no attempt is made to escape from spatiality or geographical detail. Yet, just as in the last example, movement is promised but not delivered. The description of the choir preparations has been abridged here; the original provides the scene in exquisite detail, but the actual procession is not depicted. We have, once again, a kind of Currier & Ives print. Even more strikingly, the writer twice disclaims the value of motion. This occurs

once as an implication when giving the location of Marybridge as established not by personal experience of the journey to or from any other location, but instead by reference to a map available in the imagined house. The second instance is much more direct, as the writer informs us of the reputation of Ladyton (the capital of Aristasia) for its fine decorations, only to immediately dismiss this as assumed hyperbole in favor of Marybridge's display. Thus, we are assured that, although we might hear otherwise, there is really no reason to go anywhere, since everything one might want is already present.

A respondent signing herself from Novarayapurh, the capital city of Novarya, wrote:

No snow here as yet, though the air is cold enough to crack and most girls turn on their invisible personal environment bubbles (or 'auries' as we usually call them) when they go outdoors. There are very few overcoats here in Novaria [sic] for that reason, but many girls wear fur wraps, perhaps from vanity, and of course hats and gloves, since we are not savages (Verentela, n.d.).

Here the motion-negating literary device is science fiction—a personal bubble that wraps its wearer in an environment that moves with her such that, even on a candlelit procession or a sleigh ride, the implied motion is undercut by the unchanging nature of the environmental surroundings.

In a variety of ways, then, the Aristasians did not simply lack physical motion in their mode of accessing the imagined sacred space but actively subverted the concept of motion in relation to it. Paradoxically, consideration of the changing role of pilgrimage amidst globalization suggests that this can best be understood as an organic outgrowth of trends within global pilgrimage practice—one to which the Aristasians' ties with Traditionalism likely predisposed them.

From Counter-Structure to Structure

Central to the Turnerian understanding of the function of pilgrimage was the tension between structure and anti-structure. Structure represented the familiar rhythms of ordinary, mundane life governed by a well-established set of social rules. Anti-structure forms as pilgrims extract themselves from that familiar setting and enter liminal spaces beyond the reach of those norms, where new conceptions of the self and of relationship with others, God, and the world become possible. Pilgrimage, as an exercise in going and

returning, is seen in this way as reflecting into the lives of pilgrims the arc familiar in so many mythic tales, whereby the hero or heroine embarks on a quest, is dissolved in their old self-understanding, is re-constituted in a new one, and returns finally to a mode of being that resumes his or her place in the world but on a level or in a manner that was not possible before. It is a process of creative destruction and reconstruction—dissolution and re-integration. When done collectively, either by travelling with others or by undertaking a defined pilgrimage within a shared cultural horizon of meaning, this process engenders what the Turners called *communitas*:

an experience of oneness or unity felt by those sharing a rite-of-passage experience... a model of sociality and a way of experiencing unanimity with other human beings (Turner, 1978:xxx).

In a period of rapid and constant change and upheaval, however, the valency of structure and anti-structure changes. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has characterized our present society as 'liquid modernity', in which all forms of identity and understanding become ceaselessly and consciously mutable. Interestingly, Bauman employed the pilgrim / tourist opposition as a metaphor for this, relating the former to the pre- and early modern person who, he argued, sought integration and meaning, and the latter to the individual characterized by liquid modernity, who seeks out novelty and diversification of experience. A treatment of Bauman's work that engages it with the problematization of this opposition in recent pilgrimage studies research is beyond the scope of this paper, but the difficulty of cleanly distinguishing the pilgrim from the tourist is a useful analogy for the ways in which the 'liquidity' of modern society can be simultaneously read as deepening or shallowing, constructive or destructive, enabling a more authentic search for meaning or eliminating its very possibility. In its more positive aspects, liquid modernity might be thought to resemble John Eric Killinger's (2014) description of Turnerian anti-structure as:

*an inversion of the normal. In this respect, we are open to the play and fascination of mirrors as apophatic third eyes. Communitas thus extends our gaze, including our backward gaze or regard. We are negatively defined—not contradicted—as *neti ... neti*: neither this nor that. We are thus opened up to new experience and meaning-making such that we can work and play well with Others as we see ourselves as Others, too (quoted in Turner, 1978:xli).*

The term ‘inversion of the normal’, however, is a perfect pivot into a more negative reading of the same phenomena. As has been noted, much early Madrian thought was influenced by the work of René Guénon, who understood modernity itself as a series of ‘inversions’ that overturned what he saw as the (capital -T) ‘Traditional’ order of human civilization. Developments as diverse as Renaissance painting’s emphasis on realism over the stylized symbolism of medieval art, Enlightenment democracy’s elevation of the masses over the elites, or late capitalism’s primacy of finance over the exchange of tangible goods and services were all interpreted under this rubric. Miss Alice Lucy Trent (2010)—a leading Aristasian writer whose own contribution to the Christmas vignettes is examined below—refined Guénon’s paradigm in light of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s by making a threefold distinction:

1. ‘Traditional’ societies (including much of the West up through the end of the Middle Ages and much of the rest of the world for longer, including indigenous peoples up to the present) were oriented toward transcendent principles that provided a basis for a shared vision of the True and the Good, which promoted human flourishing.
2. ‘Normal’ societies (including most of the West from the Renaissance up until around 1963) were those that had lost their sense of transcendence and became focused primarily on material welfare, but which nonetheless retained, by cultural inertia, codes of morality, etiquette, and propriety that enabled a more limited kind of human flourishing.
3. ‘Inverted’ societies (including the West since the 1960s and the rapidly-expanding list of cultures imitating it) had not simply lost sight of transcendent values but had begun to actively pervert them. These were societies in which ugliness was praised as beauty, ignorance passed off as wisdom, and license mistaken for freedom (pp. 41–3).

This, of course, is not the same sense in which Killinger employed the term ‘inverted’—a use that draws its meaning from customs such as the Roman Saturnalia or the medieval carnival’s crowning of the ‘Prince of Fools’ (both traditions that Guénonian Traditionalists accept as a necessary part of the functioning of a healthy society). Reflection on the difference between Killinger’s use of the term and Trent’s, however, can raise our awareness of how Turnerian anti-structure within pilgrimage practices might look to groups that see themselves, under the

conditions of liquid modernity, as immersed in anti-structure all of the time. The Saturnalia and the medieval carnival derived their meaning from the inversion of a stable social order presumed to operate more or less effectively the rest of the year, just as anti-structure enables new forms of awareness and understanding (as described by Killinger) precisely through its opposition to the structure existing outside the pilgrimage. If one understands the ‘structure’ of everyday life as a negative space of dissolution that affords no guidance, no certainties, and no touchstones on which a healthy sense of identity and continuity can be built, however, it becomes necessary to invert the Turners’ process.

The impact of this on pilgrimage was noted by Meyer and Geschiere (1999), who observed that:

[t]here is much empirical evidence that people’s awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as [ways to] affirm old and construct new boundaries (1999:2).

Swatos and Tomasi (2002) similarly described the role of pilgrimage in reinforcing particularism within a global context. All these researchers anticipated that pilgrims might turn closer to home and seek to invest more deeply in local and regional sites rather than long-distance journeys, while also employing the pilgrimage process itself to solidify and re-affirm existing viewpoints and ways-of-being rather than using it as a space of deconstructive / reconstructive self-making. Coleman and Eade suggested that:

many pilgrim sites, rather than being contexts for the cultivation of anti-structure, can provide arenas for the rhetorical, ideologically charged assertion of apparent continuity, even fixity, in religious and wider social identities [and further speculated that] rhetorical construction of ideologies of localism in pilgrimage discourses may act in opposition to the seeming globalization promoted by the ‘non-places’ of super-modernity (2004:15).

What they did not anticipate, but which becomes clear in the example of the Aristasians, is that such ‘non-places’ (in their virtual and / or imagined iterations) might themselves prove useful in constructing that opposition, insofar as the logic of a pilgrimage from anti-structure to structure implies the replacement of the pilgrimage of motion with a static pilgrimage, the ‘non-place’ destination which can be reached only by a ‘non-journey’.

The staticism this involves is thus much more than an absence of physical movement. For example, Eickelman referred to cases in which

Muslims may envision travel across time as a substitute for physical travel, as when ... travel to the Hijaz was unnecessary to trace one's line of intellectual descent (isnad) back to illustrious Muslims of the early Islamic period (1990:xiii).

First, it must be observed that the tracing of *isnad* has, as in the examples Eickelman cited, been occasionally used as a substitute for the *hajj* but always as an imperfect one; it has never been realized as an independent form of pilgrimage that might truly assume the function of the *hajj* or displace its centrality as a pillar of Islamic practice. More to the point, the 'chaining' nature of *isnad* preserves the metaphor of motion—one moves backward from link to link, reprising a metaphorical 'journey' into the past. The conceit of the Aristasian narrative, however, is not that one moves into the past but that the past is present and that the metaphorical 'places' that render it present deliver it to the pilgrim (via imports) or else surround the pilgrim entirely, who already writes from within the desired locale.

The 'travel across time' alternative described by Eickelman was impossible within an Aristasian context not simply because the movement was young and had little history to draw on, but because Filianist metaphysics, like the Traditionalist metaphysics that has influenced it, sees the trajectory of history as a decline from a primordial golden age and systematically associates stillness and centredness with divinity, while motion and the periphery consistently represent the contingent being of creation, the mortality of human beings, and the imperfection of the world. The religion's scriptures (*The Clear Recital*), for example, teach that

Earth moves, but Heaven is still. The rim revolves, but the Centre remains without motion. Yet from the still point all movement comes; and Earth is the shadow of Heaven (Teachings 3:1–2).

This emphasis on stilling the troubled waters of the senses, the mind, manifestation, and history in order to come to the unchanging, unmoved Centre—unmediated by any record of prophetic history such as can be found in the Abrahamic religions—forms a ready link between the philosophical worldview of Filianic teaching and the reactions to modernity and globalization envisioned by Geschiere, Meyer, Swatos, and Tomasi. Hence, the Aristasians, rather than

employing pilgrimage as a way of temporarily stepping outside structure to embrace the freedom of spiritual reconfiguration, employed the motifs of pilgrimage as seen through 'the gaze of the analyst' to escape anti-structure and create structure, engendering their *communitas* through the sharing of pilgrimage still-lives in the *Cocktail Bar*.

What seems to have defined Aristasian pilgrimage is thus not motion, even of the abstracted, mediated kind Eickelman discussed, but what the Turners called *sacra*—the physical objects that give tangible substance to the pilgrim's spiritual undertaking.

Secondhand Sacra

At the end of the exchange of vignettes, Miss Trent chimed in with the only account written from within 'Aristasia-in-Telluria' (i.e., the physically extant Aristasian community in Britain). She talked briefly about her household and the party that they were going to host and then remarked that:

[T]his week we have seen newsreels from Quirinelle (the 1950s) about all the new Christmas decorations in real-world London ... and we have heard Christmas wireless broadcasts from real-world England and America with Bing Crosby and Vera Lynne and lots of other charming people ... ('Christmas in Aristasia-in-Telluria')

Just as the 'Embassy car' the Aristasians drove around London was said to be 'imported' from Trent, the newsreels come as an import from Quirinelle, and the 'Iron Curtain' (which, in Aristasian parlance, referred to 'the barrier separating ourselves from the rest of the Real World ... the Pit [post-1963 society] itself seen in its aspect as a barrier, cutting us off from normal civilisation' ['Glossary']) thins just a little bit as these 'Quirrie' newsreels provide images not of a place in Quirinelle, but of a place in 'Telluria'—i.e. in 'real-world' London. In Aristasian parlance, only things from before about 1963 are ever referred to as 'real'. All the products of 'the Pit' are decidedly *unreal* in Aristasian terms, following a *privatio boni* line of theodical reasoning. (This point is left implicit in Miss Trent's statement from *the Cocktail Bar* but is elaborated elsewhere in her work (Trent, 2010:71–2)).

The approach to the Good, and thus to spiritual and psychological health, thus comes from finding means of 're-racinating' oneself in the 'real world', which the Aristasians did precisely through such artifacts as the Embassy car, the Quirrie newsreels, and the kind of fur

coats and bakelite appliances that make appearances in the vignettes. While they held consumerism and modern capitalism in the deepest contempt as founts of degenerate materialism, the Aristasians effectively reappropriated the consumer goods of a bygone age as means of reconnection with a world that they saw as contrasting the one around them in having had more-than-material values and aspirations.

It is this particular form of perceived connection between ostensibly secular consumer goods and spiritual values that makes Aristasian pilgrimage unique among other forms that have been treated in the literature. A great deal of consumer studies research has looked at the ways in which consumer goods can become totemized and thus productive of spiritual experiences (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005), while more recent work in pilgrimage studies has viewed pilgrimages as 'extraordinary consumption experiences' (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann, Eckhardt, Grohs & Saccanu, 2016), but no treatment has, to this point, considered that consumer goods as *sacra* might contain the pilgrimage experience in themselves.

Taking such an approach, however, parallels much of the Turners' analysis of the relation of pilgrimage to materiality. They wrote about the desire to go to a place in order to connect with what they called 'palpable experience, the 'where-she-actually-appeared' sense' (1978:xx). This made pilgrimage 'kinetic ritual, replete with actual objects'—the *sacra*—which held the material results of the spiritual journey or self-transformation (Turner and Turner, 1978:xiii). The Aristasians had no physical location of pilgrimage, but they did have goods that served as *sacra* for the Turners' purposes and enabled the pilgrim's self-transformation as she became 'racinated'. The Turners wrote that

[t]he search for *illud tempus* is not a search for a fusty, dead past, or nostalgia: in pilgrimage it is the journey to the actual place containing the actual objects of the past, whose very stones seem to emit the never-obliterated power of the first event—a certain shadowy aura (1978:xv).

For the Aristasians, that power of the *illud tempus* clung to every flea market find that reaffirmed a world that, in their perception, shared their values—a world they meticulously reconstructed and reimagined around themselves. Across a series of artfully Art Deco-ed London flats we find embodied Morinis' (1992:4) definition of pilgrimage as 'a journey undertaken by a

person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal', just without the journey.

Within the narrative of Aristasian play, the bakelite and stockings and vaseline glass are not purchased antiques one had to go and seek out (even if one did spend copious time *going* and *seeking*) but imports from 'places' in which the past is still a living culture. In Aristasian parlance, pre-60s books, films, and music were always 'up-to-date'. Thus, the Aristasian who stocked her home with enough of these touchstone objects could see herself as having 'racinated' her environment and thus become able to contribute to an exchange like the one at the *Cocktail Bar* as a correspondent from, say, Trent, because she was sitting in a Trentish room filled with imported Trentish objects. The power of the *sacra* to connect the pilgrim with *illud tempus* in this way is no different from in the Turners' account, except that instead of the pilgrim moving to the holy place where it is possible to connect with the living stream of the spiritual tradition, the place where the living stream of the spiritual tradition resides is systematically constructed around the would-be pilgrim in her own home. In this respect, despite their staticism, Aristasian practices come down decisively on the 'pilgrimage' side of the distinction the Turners drew with mysticism and the 'inner journeys' of Sufis and others, where they wrote that '[a]t the heart of the pilgrimage is the folk, the ordinary people who choose a 'materialist' expression of their religion' (p. xiii). The Aristasian home, transformed into a religious expression through its collection of antiques, became, in the context of that community,

a site that others have designated as significant for non-material reasons: being there is transformative and enriching, and connects one to values beyond the normal reach of the individual (Greenia, 2004:5).

In short, the home became the locus of its own inhabitant's pilgrimage.

Conclusion

With the rapid growth of online manifestations of religion, much attention has been turned to ‘virtual pilgrimage’ and attempts to replicate aspects of sacred journeying or of sacred places in an online environment. The fundamental dissimilarity between any such wholly virtual manifestation and the constitutive elements of pilgrimage has been ably asserted by Sarah MacMillen, who offered that

Marx and Benjamin would suggest that virtual pilgrimage and virtual prayer are not essentially about the claims of pilgrimage, but rather are explorations of space seen for its utility on the Internet (2011:16).

and, in examining the opposition of ‘place’ and ‘space’ as loci for the sacred, proposed that ‘the categories introduced by the Turners and Eade and Sallnow – such as place and body – define the reality of pilgrimage’ (p. 15). Concepts of motion and movement were not a focus of MacMillen’s treatment, which was concerned with embodiment and sociality, but the Aristasian example seems to support her intuition that pilgrimage may not be, in the end, fundamentally about motion but instead about *topos* and *communitas* in their mutually constitutive interaction.

Traditionally, it is the sacredness of a place that has constituted objects associated with it as *sacra* and it has been the limitations inherent to spatiality that have necessitated movement toward places rendered sacred by a religious community’s reception of its history. Some aspects of Filianism might be seen as ‘history-based religion’ (in Davidson’s parlance), however, the belief in ‘Aristasia Pura’ as an imagined higher realm was / is, for those Filianists who have held it, self-consciously ‘fiction-based’ or, in Cusack’s more generous term, ‘invented’. This crucial distinction enabled real physical objects to constitute an imagined sacred place, the basic functions of pilgrimage in tangibly negotiating structure and anti-structure being executed through the *sacra* alone without a physical journey, while the virtual space of the *Cocktail Bar* enabled the sharing of that experience with fellow pilgrims creating the sacred place in their own homes, thereby forging *communitas*.

The hybrid nature of Aristasian pilgrimage thus deserves to be distinguished both from so-called ‘virtual pilgrimages’ and ‘inner journeying’ (of the kind Morinis examined among Sufis and Hindus, or for which John Welch (1982) has argued in the works of St

Teresa d’Avila) as well as from traditional pilgrimages of motion. Yet insofar as the static pilgrimage aimed at (and arguably achieved) the same psychological, spiritual, and social affordances as other modes, recognition of it as pilgrimage seems an appropriate answer to Urry’s call for us to ‘investigate not only physical and immediate presence, but also the socialities involved in occasional co-presence, imagined co-presence and virtual co-presence’ (2002:256).

In this vein, it may be of interest for future work to explore the stability of static pilgrimage. Following the release of *Second Life* in 2003, the Aristasian Embassy and similar locations were reconstructed in what became known as ‘Virtualia’, taking advantage of more immersive online experiences than were possible in the 1990s. Similarly, as Filianism has aged and Filianic communities have begun to elaborate their historiography, there are signs of more traditional pilgrimages arising, with flowers beginning to appear at the grave of the last Madrian priestess, Olga Lotar, at Witham Cemetery in Essex. It is therefore possible that the hybrid physical / imagined nature of Aristasian static pilgrimage was a unique feature of its moment both in the history of Filianism and the history of the Internet, but consideration of its features may nonetheless offer insights into pilgrimage’s as-yet-unrealized possibilities.

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