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## Pilgrimage and its Perception in a Local Religious Community

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# Pilgrimage and its Perception in a Local Religious Community

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In this paper, the authors aim at examining how pilgrimage might positively change the personal life of the participating individual, and the life of the releasing community. In the authors' perception, where the individual is a member of a local religious community, after returning home he or she reports about his or her experiences to other members of the community; thus one member is positively influencing the community as a whole.

This research study is focusing on Christian pilgrimage, however, due to the common nature of pilgrimage in different kind of religions the authors believe that the results of this study could lead to valid conclusions of a more general nature. The paper is structured as follows: first, the concept of pilgrimage is depicted, and how this concept evolved especially in Christian theology; then, following the literature review, the methods of examining pilgrimage is described. The authors employ a detailed questionnaire as an asset to interview devoted members of a local religious community who have experienced pilgrimage. The results partly summarise the effects of how pilgrimage has changed the values and faiths of the members' lives within the community.

**Key Words:** pilgrimage, local religious community, Christianity

## **Introduction**

In relation to pilgrimage, whether the spiritual life of the individual members of a local religious community is influenced most, or the community as a whole is transformed with a deeper comprehension of faith matters, cannot be recognised easily. Before carrying out this research, the authors had positive feedback from their local community members about pilgrimage, mainly from the individuals' perspectives (i.e. relating to their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes towards pilgrimage). However, the effects of pilgrimage on community life have not been examined. The main aim of this paper is to describe how the individuals' perceptions about pilgrimage have contributed to their community life. In addition to this, it aims to discover the meaning of pilgrimage to a religious community nowadays. The intentions of the authors are connected to the fact, that one of them is the leader of the local religious community under investigation.

## **Concept and origins of pilgrimage**

Pilgrimage is known in most religions as the believers' journey to a place blessed by a divine manifestation, a deed of a prophet or a sacred relic, where they are about to pray. Before reaching the sacred place, the believers are preparing with purifying rituals, and exercise fellowship to demonstrate that they belong to the community. In this sense, pilgrimage is about seeking and meeting the divine in a ritual space (Duplacy, 1992).

Referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, travel to the proper place is important, since pilgrimage reminds the believers that here on earth they are on the road to heaven. The purpose is renewal in prayer: therefore, religious places and shrines are living springs for believers to perceive their involvement through different ways of prayer<sup>[1]</sup>.

The ending place of pilgrimage can be a saint's tomb or living place, a special painting or sculpture, or a kind of natural feature (for example a stone or a mummified animal carcass, which bears out the transcendent in its unusual form). The goals of

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1. 'Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer. For pilgrims seeking living water, shrines are special places for living the forms of Christian prayer in Church.' Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993), Guides for Prayer:2683-2691.

pilgrimage are not unilateral: unlike in Islam or Judaism, visiting the central place of the religion is not a compulsion in Christianity, so therefore pilgrimage is 'only' an option for believers. The motives can be repentance, submission of a special request, intercession, offering a sacrifice, searching for healing, asking for childbirth, or expecting guidance (Galling, 1960:1538-9).

According to ancient human belief, a place where a miracle once happened is to be considered as a holy place, and is most likely inhabited by some sort of a transcendent. Those who want to experience the senses of such place, go and visit them. It is recorded in every age of human history that people used to visit places that were considered holy, where powers ruled over the natural order of human life, where people could get close to the heart of the earth, in touch with the heartbeat of our very existence (Van der Leeuw *et al*, 2014:209-12). These dedicated sanctuaries are like magnets to believers mainly, since they could be a direct resource to serve their conviction. Pilgrims' experiences, their vows and visions influence the sacredness of religious sites (Terzidou *et al*, 2018). The believers' self-image (reflection) can be renewed, and their relationship with their deity as well (Van der Leeuw *et al*, 2014:350-51). For example, in the Al-Azhar Mosque<sup>[2]</sup> in Islamic Cairo, pilgrims touch with their hands a window which hides a tomb of Amir Taybars (in Madrasa al-Taybarsiyya) – in a belief that by power of this honourable location, miraculous events could happen in the present as well.

In past centuries, many Christian ceremonies were celebrated around the tombs of saints from the early church congregations. These locations became the central points of solemnities and pilgrimages. Overall, we can consider the worship of enshrines as a method of carnation of the holy Trinity, and an understanding can be developed through a parallel theory, even for secular people, as something to be comprehensive and approachable.<sup>[3]</sup>

2. 'Mosque of the most resplendent' (Rabbat, 1996)

3. Wonderful powers can be derived from the holy corps, namely parts of the bones – the enshrines were the ones who projected the powers of the miracles. In the enthusiasm of the believers, the worship of enshrines brought closer the heavens to the earth in their minds, and anomalies such as a martyr were at once present in the heavens as well as in the tomb, or even in the small part of his corpus; leading to a paradox way of thinking as a result. See also: Eliade, 1985: 3. 600-01.

4. 'Pillars of Islam'. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pillars-of-Islam>

5. 'Buddhism' Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism>

## Its typical forms in different religions

In the Islamic faith, many Muslims gather in Mecca every year, at the holy place, where they perform several procedures. This is called the Hajj (pilgrimage). There are several reasons to undertake the Hajj journey, which is one of the five pillars of Islam, of which the other four are the following<sup>[4]</sup>: Shahada (declaration of faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (charity) and Sawm (fasting). Shahada means the testimony that there is no other god but Allah; and that Muhammad is the messenger, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. Salah is a physical, mental and spiritual act of worship that is observed five times every day at prescribed times, and is an obligatory religious duty for every Muslim. Zakat is a form of alms-giving, treated in Islam as a religious obligation or tax. Lastly, Sawm refers to fasting the holy month of Ramadhan in each year, according to the Islamic calendar. Conditions of applicable obligation of Hajj include the fact of being in good financial and health state, as it is required to be done at least once in a lifetime. The Hajj is also considered to be a means of demonstrating universal Muslim solidarity, and submission to Allah (Zamani-Farahani and Eid, 2016). Therefore, the literal meaning of Hajj is 'to intend a journey', which connotes both the outward act of a journey and the inward act of intentions.

In Buddhism, pilgrimage is the central building element within believers.<sup>[5]</sup> Pilgrims place their hope for wealth, descendants, liberation from bondages of sins and weaknesses and many other wishes. Arising from their sound dedication, it is also a stepping stone to the transcendent – to be heard by the divine in their needs (Wiist *et al*, 2012).

In Biblical traditions, one can trace back even to the church fathers, the idea of pilgrimage: the patriarch Jacob, realising he has stepped into a holy place, anoints the place of his vision by Bethel. At one point, he returns (see Genesis 28:10-22). Later on, in the laws of Moses, it was made mandatory for the believers to undertake pilgrimage three times a year, in accordance with the set feasts (Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-23). In the beginning we know the existence of multiple core shines, i.e. Beersheba, Bethel, Gilgal and Silo, but after Josiah's strict focus on Jerusalem, for all believers, the saint city was assigned as the only true place of sacrifice. Still, up to this day, it is part of the Jewish faith to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Its blessings are reported in Psalms 120-134 (called the Pilgrimage Songs) (Börzsönyi, 1993).

The New Testament does not make any radical change to the Older one in understanding pilgrimage – even Jesus Christ was a pilgrim three times a year to Jerusalem, according to the prescriptions of the law (Turner, 1973). In numerous chapters of the Acts, apostle Paul is found as a pilgrim (see Acts 20:16; 24:11). However, the death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ opened a new direction in the life of believers: the former age had been ended by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the elimination of the sacrifices. According to the book of Second Corinthians, the life of believers is to follow the footsteps of Christ in an eschatological meaning of pilgrimage (see Second Corinthians 5:6-10). In this aspect, the end of the road is salvation in the heavenly Jerusalem (see Hebrews 12:22-24). In the book of John (4:24) Jesus Christ states that the Spirit of God desires those who would worship him in spirit and truth; and this makes the deeds of the fleshly pilgrim who perhaps might be far away from God undesirable (Duplacy *et al*, 1992: 1453-54).

Conversely to the religious concepts of pilgrimage, there are objections to its substance. These ideological theories arguing the significance of sacred places are: first, pantheism is the belief that every living creature – including human beings – are a manifestation saying the universe itself is the God; Secondly, so-called Rational Theology is based on the relationship of moral principles to religious belief and practice; and thirdly mysticism, which itself is a journey to a place where the human and the divine meet (Turner and Turner, 1978).

### Actuality of pilgrimage today

Since the turn of the millennium, Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostella are mentioned among the premier destinations of Christian pilgrimage (Eliade, 1998). Small 'souvenirs' were acquired in the places and were carried to their homes by the pilgrims to retain the memories about the pilgrimage. However, as Gregory of Nyssa, a bishop in the 4<sup>th</sup> century emphasised, the major goal of pilgrimage cannot ever be reached by somebody who is occupied with untrue beliefs and thoughts, a man in darkness in his mind (Seco and Maspero, 2009). Instead, pilgrimage is a special occasion to be tuned into spiritual rounds in sanctification. According to the Christian theology, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit takes an important part in assisting a pilgrim in comprehending the transcendent, seeing the miracles happen at graves and memorial places of deceased saints.

Early Protestants opposed the way Catholic pilgrimage was practised in the Middle Ages across Europe. For example, Luther did not reject pilgrimage *per se*, but considered it as obsolete; in contrast, Calvin deemed pilgrimage as an occasion of impiety. However, in these days, especially around the 500 year anniversary of Protestantism, believers are used to visiting places of remembrance quite often. For example, Wittenberg and Geneva are common places of pilgrimage among Protestants (Preston, 1992).

Given the exponential growth of travel and tourism, it has become a challenge to identify the subjective line that divides religious tourism from pilgrimage. While both are contrasting concepts, their meeting point starts to become blurry as we analyse their similarities. Religious tourism – irrespective to its religion, length, and the way it is organised – is exclusively or strongly motivated by religious motives (see for example Rinschede, 1992.) A schema developed by Smith (1992) suggests the categorisation of travellers from a point (A) of being pilgrims to a point (E) of being religious tourists. A pilgrim is identified by careful steps of meditation, contemplation and humility towards the sacred place; whereas the religious tourist is discovering, even conquering the spot, photographing, then travelling with arrogance and in a hurry (Ambrosio and Pereira, 2007).

### Comparative literature study

According to Smith (1992), until the 1990's, pilgrimage was equated with a religious, psychological event. Following the practice established by Adler in 1989, pilgrimage – exclusively a religious one – can be distinguished from religious tourism where faith has an incidental role or does not have any. Visiting burial places may not be going out of fashion, but the motivation to see the remains of known people can be secular, as well as sacral.

On the contrary, Nastase and Taleb (2017) put forward that religious tourism as an organic part of pilgrimage. In their interpretation, every pilgrim has his / her own reason, which is distinctly religious. Their examination refers back to Romanian pilgrimages, looking for answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are the subjective reasons for pilgrimage?
- 2) What kind of values are associated with the journey and does it have any behavioural or mental effects?
- 3) How can the relationship between tourist and route be determined?



In their research, the first aim was to explore the social facts and experiences that strengthen or hinder conflict management in daily life, causing dissonance and the ways to resolve it (Nastase and Taleb, 2017). In pilgrimage, their conclusion was that spirituality is not linked to the surroundings. The second emphasised theme was intentional comfort, which is not a central question in pilgrimage. The lack of conventional, comfortable conditions can be replaced by hospitality. Finally, the third field is social relations. Similar to the previously discussed questions it does not have a prominent role either. Pilgrimage can involve solitariness, particularly if the pilgrims have chosen to complete the route without friends or relatives. Pilgrims tend to think beyond the social and spiritual experiences: for most, it is to take the journey.

In interviewing participants about spirituality and pilgrimage Belhassen & Bowler (2017), placed a special emphasis on the possibility of having authentic spiritual experiences in commercialised tourism contexts. Even in these circumstances, the participants confirmed that travel was only a tool for understanding and experiencing spirituality.

However, socialising with peer pilgrims plays an important role in undertaking a route. In their research Bona *et al* (2016) delved into distinguishing the profane and sacred dimensions of the pilgrimage experience. Their findings were connected to the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain, and in this regard strong linkages were discerned between values and social bonds between participating pilgrims.

Recent trends in research reconfirm the substance of the environmental (physical) place, which, in the case of pilgrimage experiences, is essential to legitimise the experience of the trip, to enhance one's identity with the place, and to validate one's religious ideology (Belhassen *et al*, 2008). Pilgrimage is a journey for one's inner understanding, however, without witnessing such features, or in general without grounding one's tour in the physical world, the search for authenticity is lost. Studies (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Soica, 2016) confirm this impact of sacred sites in today's pilgrimage, which raise spiritual, cultural, environmental, secular and educational elements of the authentic experience of visiting these sites (mostly monasteries). Belhassen *et al* (2008) refer to the inter-relationships between the meaning of places and the religious beliefs and actions in their true, authentic form as theoplicity.

## Research methodology

Mindful of the various theories and concepts outlined thus far, the research presented in this paper delves into the deeper meanings of pilgrimage and thus, is centred on the substance of pilgrimage through the (intra- and inter-) personal life of voluntary responders from a local religious (Christian) community. The community is located in Tahitótfalu, in the northern central part of Hungary. As one of the protestant (Calvinist) communities in Hungary, this is the largest within the Central-Danube region of Hungary, listing 970 registered church members, accounting for appr. 5.6 per cent of the total number of members within the region.

The research was twofold: first, the authors examined the preparation, guidance, execution and influences of a pilgrimage on individuals who participated in it. Secondly, the effects on the religious community have been examined. Primary research was used in order to build a deeper understanding of pilgrimage in the spiritual life of the individual members of the local religious community and of the wider community as well. Interviews were conducted in the local village, with more than one hundred people who are adult registered members of the religious protestant community for at least 10 years. For a control group, a smaller community of the same religion (from one district of the capital city) was included in the research.

During the interviews, the following questions related to the personal impressions and experiences of the pilgrims were implemented:

- 1) *When and why had you first considered to participate in pilgrimage?*
- 2) *For how long were you planning your participation?*
- 3) *What did you sacrifice (give up) by taking part? How did it affect your personal expenses, time, human and work relations, etc.?*
- 4) *With whom did you plan to go for pilgrimage? Alone / in fellowship with the community members / together with family members and friends*
- 5) *How did you prepare for your pilgrimage?*
- 6) *What did you feel and experience (i) during your journey, (ii) reaching the sacred place, (iii) at the sacred place, and (iv) returning home?*
- 7) *Looking back to your pilgrimage, what have been the perceived outcomes?*
- 8) *Have you told about the experiences and impressions you went through to other members of the religious*

*community? How did you do this?*

- 9) *According to your knowledge, did your fellow pilgrims – if there were any – have similar impressions like you?*
- 10) *In which aspects of your spiritual life have you been moving forward?*

In addition, the following questions were asked concerning the community issues:

- 1) *Did you let other members of the community know about your plans to go on pilgrimage?*
- 2) *Did your community help you in preparation?*
- 3) *Were there other members who encouraged / discouraged you in respect of pilgrimage? What were their reasons for promoting or permitting?*
- 4) *How long after the pilgrimage did you appear in the religious community?*
- 5) *Did the religious community let you know their appreciation and welcoming of your return?*
- 6) *Did the community require that you share your experiences about the pilgrimage?*
- 7) *(The next questions are applicable only if you answered positively to question 6.) How could you convey your impressions and spiritual feelings from your pilgrimage?*
- 8) *Following your testimony, did anyone indicated to be interested in participating in pilgrimage in the future?*
- 9) *What did you advise to the other community members who were interested about pilgrimage?*
- 10) *Have you considered how the enthusiasm and devotion of the religious community members changed after you had shared your experiences about the pilgrimage?*

## Results

### *About personal experiences*

Most of the people's choice to participate in pilgrimage is based on other individuals' opinion, seeing it might bring a possible change in their life. A further determinant was the possibility to break out of monotonous everyday life belonging to a spiritual-religious community they are familiar with. In this regards, our results are in agreement with Cheer *et al* (2017) who found that spiritual tourism is centred on specific drivers such as religious observance, ritualised practice, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance. In their study, spiritual tourism is perceived as a laboratory in which individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality in a way that is not always available in daily life.

Regarding the process of preparation for a pilgrimage, it was not a simple decision for the respondents, however they were planning it for months or even for a whole year. It involves both a spiritual and a psychological preparation and also the acquisition of appropriate knowledge. They would like to make the most of their journey – and they also try to take into consideration the basic factual knowledge about the main attraction. Thereafter in our analysis, religious tourism and pilgrimage are not divided sharply, because none of the respondents deemed pilgrimage only as a religious experience but as a tour at the same time.

For the respondents, physical preparation had a significant role as well. It is entirely not surprising if we think about a classic pilgrimage tour, where the participants are requested to walk miles along the road. The human leaves their comfort zone: this is one of the most important motivations, however, it might mean a challenge to stay away from home and its comfort for a long period of time. The survey participants emphasised that they tried to alleviate the lack of luxury with previously planned more simple, less comfortable lifestyle - and this advice is more prominent for respondents than other issues related to the journey.

Contrary to the Nastase-Taleb (2017) analysis, the authors found that the pilgrimage enriched people with new acquaintances and did not bring seclusion or solitariness. Almost every participant marked the role of the family: some of them applied for the tour with their family members or invited them but they were not interested. The respondents did not address this as a private matter, thus, it allows us to state that participants might perceive the pilgrimage experience as a phenomenon, being able to define their whole way of life. They would like to share it with those immediate to them or live through it with them.

None of the participant thought that the pilgrimage requires too much sacrifice. The level was linked to the established goals of the pilgrimage. Regarding preparation of the tour, the majority preferred to organise the pilgrimage together rather than individually. The most important result for the participants was the formation and the subsistence of a religious community, together with a positive approach in relation to life's burdens. The last burden mentioned were medium and long-term period goals. The possible reasons include the following: physical pressure, lack of comfort and its long lasting presence, and the experienced mental adventures. Recalling the

pilgrimage and the revitalisation it gave the participants in assisted them to endure and survive ordinary problems.

### *In-depth interviews related to the community impacts*

The research respondents were participating in the pilgrimage as a member of a religious community – some of them with their own, well-known community while the others were travelling with strangers – but it was crucial and not questionable after their journey to continuously attend a religious church for worship or prayer. As a conclusion, we can say that a pilgrimage is a meaningful episode for actively present religious community members and not for non-congregation members.

It was unequivocal in every case that the participants announced their purposes and every congregation accepted and noticed it with enthusiasm. Some of them reported dissuasion by other members, and every time it was supported by worries and fear: protection from physical exertion in older age for example. However, in contrast to this example, openness was much more prevalent: the experienced members motivated and supported applicants /candidates while others inspired them with their inquiries.

Many respondents have written memoirs to make their transmitted information more colourful and to re-experience their travels in the framework of a community event. This implies a promising chance - when somebody is informed by a well-known, reliable person it can contribute to convince them to subsequently become a pilgrim, providing an opportunity to resolve their mental or psychological issues.

## Conclusions

In order to discern which path is authentic, one needs to take a moment to become settled and quiet. Gathering in silent contemplation and prayer in supportive communities can help someone to offer his or her concerns or questions to God Almighty, also to release burdens. Our results confirm that the transformations of individuals during pilgrimage have positive effects on the life of the community, and, in turn, the community itself reinforces the members in their spiritual beliefs.

Not negligible, the research recognises that pilgrimage has a great importance to spread information and share experience about atmosphere, mood, and spirit. As mentioned in the opening line, most people decide to participate in a pilgrimage based on other's opinion and personal sources. Consequently, after their return, participants recruit and inspire others, they reach out to their religious communities and members, promoting pilgrimage widely.

Their return is also followed by honour and respect because of the fact that they went through these trials and tribulations to prove their religious commitment.<sup>[6]</sup> Participation might be more valuable and might have more impact that is important for the community if these journeys are frequent and repeatedly organised. We can say that pilgrimage as an external stage or scene of practice of religion; the experience of godliness, has an inspirational and encouraging effect on the participants and on their religious community as well.

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6. This is akin to the title '*haji*' which is used to denote a Muslim who has undertaken Hajj to Mecca

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