Pilgrimage as a Rite of Passage

by Shirley du Boulay

For many years pilgrimage was thought to be a strange exercise popular in the Middle Ages, but now largely consigned to history. Today it is a growth industry. What does this enthusiastic revival tell us about current thinking on religion and spirituality? What are the issues involved in the practice of pilgrimage, essentially the journey to a place believed to be sacred? asks Shirley du Boulay.

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Pilgrimage is more than just a walk from one place to another. It is a rite of passage. I suggest that insights from the three stages identified by anthropologists in all rites of passage – separation, the liminal state and aggregation or incorporation, when the passage is consummated, shed much light on the contemporary interest in pilgramage. We need rituals and symbolic acts. Today they are in short supply, so when we find them we embrace them eagerly.

So first – separation. In the great age of pilgrimage travelling was dangerous and the pilgrim was encouraged to make practical arrangements in case he did not return. He was advised that if he had any money he should make his will; some pilgrims even made private agreements with their wives as to how long they should wait before remarrying if the pilgrim did not return. Pilgrims often made donations to the poor before leaving so they could have the best of both worlds, appearing generous yet losing nothing, by making the gift conditional on their not returning alive.

Pilgrimage is as much about the inner journey as about the physical journeying. The medieval pilgrim would make his peace with anyone he had wronged, make a sincere confession and go to Mass. Finally he would seek a formal blessing – even his wallet and mantel, his emblems, rucksack and staff would be blessed. He was thus, in a sense, initiated into an "order" of pilgrims.

So setting out on a pilgrimage was a serious matter and when I walked with some friends along the Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury, it was a serious matter for us

too. It was only 150 miles and the outer dangers were minimal, but when the time came to set off I was surprised how nervous I was, though I had no idea what I was fearing. With hindsight, I realise that I knew I was embarking on an inner journey and feared what might emerge. I think I was probably right to be apprehensive.

Liminal State

The phrase "the liminal state", used by anthropologists to define the second, and longest, part of pilgrimage, was new to me, but became one of the great experiences of this walk. It is an elusive stage, neither here nor there, betwixt and between, on the threshold. The anthropologist Victor Turner writes that

> "Liminars are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and levelled to a homogeneous state through discipline and ordeal."[1]

At first, this seemed very theoretical and little to do with walking across south-east England, but I soon began to experience the joy of leaving behind the ties of normal life. After a couple of days it was clear that status and authority had indeed gone and with them many of the roles we usually carry. There was no longer any significance to whether I was male or female, single, widowed, married or divorced; I was no longer in the role of employer or employed, consumer or producer, respectable citizen or apprehensive law-breaker. The pilgrim has no secular responsibilities, no image to maintain, little choice of what he wears or where he sleeps. (He is also blessedly free of the need for political correctness, so I do not intend to say "he or she".) Perhaps most of all, the pilgrim is not in competition with anyone, for pilgrimage is not a race. The pilgrim has no ambition but to reach his goal, though he does not know how, or even if, he is going to do so. Lost to the world, he becomes a mere speck of humanity, trudging along his chosen path, his only duty to keep going. What freedom there is in this realisation. Why should one ever want to live any other way? Surely such simplicity might become addictive?

Along with living in the liminal state comes the question of whether the significance of pilgrimage lies more in the journey or in the arrival. The supreme example of people for whom the journey itself was important were the early Christians, who made no plans, simply trusting to God to direct their footsteps. They even went to sea rudderless, letting the winds and tides take them to a destination known only to God. The whole question of the balance between journey and arrival is keyed up by this extreme of having no goal, simply travelling for its own sake. The other extreme is the pilgrimage taken by coach or plane, when the journey is simply something that has to be done, not an experience in itself.

My instinct is that the Celts were right and that, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive."

Purposefulness

The physical movement of pilgrimage symbolises purposefulness. It is an intention to find meaning, an incarnation of the inner journey. Just as it is not possible to say "I'm not enjoying bereavement, I think I'll skip this", so the pilgrim does not stop walking simply because his back is aching. The message of pilgrimage is always to go deeper into the present moment, not to try to escape it.

But even if the journey is the more important, what of the arrival, the consummation, the goal? Where is the journey taking us and if its goal is, as the classic definition of pilgrimage has it, "a place believed to be sacred", just what is a sacred place?

People have always sought the sacred and the earliest sacred shrines are as old as humanity itself. The idea of the sacred place, the *temenos*, is an archetypal theme that has run through history since early man first worshipped at natural sites such as a spring, a stone, a great height or a tree. When these four natural elements – water, stone, mountain and tree – were found together on the same site it was supposed to constitute a sacred whole and such places were developed as places of worship. A familiar example is the typical Christian church, where the raised chancel represents the mountain, the cross or crucifix the tree, the altar is often made of stone and the baptismal font is the container of water. How appropriate that God should be worshipped through symbols of his creation; that temple and the natural world should be symbolically related.

Sacred Area

So just as the sacred area has its source in the natural, so man honours the abode of the sacred by giving it some sort of protection – a fence, a wall, sometimes, as in Indian temples, by building as many as seven concentric enclosures. And it is no accident that the Greek word *temenos* comes from a word meaning to cut off or sever and that "sacred" means dedicated, set apart. The veil of the Jewish Temple protects the area called the Holy of Holies and it was this that was rent at the moment when Christ died. In Christian churches the sanctuary is often separated by a grill or a screen. The Orthodox have the ikonastasis behind which only the priests are allowed and, even in the most austere Christian church, there is usually a railing at which the faithful kneel to receive the Eucharist. The symbolism is clear – within the sacred area is stillness and safety; outside is chaos and danger. No wonder we seek its protection.

So perhaps behind the current interest in pilgrimage lies the age-old desire to stand on holy ground, to be in a place where the veil between heaven and earth has grown thin. That great scholar of comparative religion, Professor Mircea Eliade, said "Every pilgrimage shrine is the archetype of the

sacred centre."[2] In a sacred place we may experience the transcendent, the "timeless moment", a universal God, above the differences of religion or denomination.

But we also seek the sacred place in ourselves. I sometimes wonder if we are drawn to holy places because we need to externalise the sacred centre within us all. The thought that God is within us is too frightening; we need to locate him somewhere else. Perhaps, too, we need to find God in a particular place before we can realise that he is everywhere.

I am coming to think that the sacred place in ourselves is the place where we can feel love and that making a pilgrimage is one way of externalising that search, of concretising it, for otherwise we might drown in our longing to reach the transcendent reality. Pilgrimage, the journey to the sacred place, changes us. If making a pilgrimage can help us to understand something about separation, about living in the present and about the true nature of the sacred place, then no wonder it is again acquiring the popularity it once had.

Notes

[1] Turner, V. *The Ritual Process* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
[2] Eliade, M.T., *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovish, 1959.