



Authenticity and the Cyber Pilgrim

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Abstract

Pilgrimage is a spiritual-physical act done by adherents of every major faith system. Complicating the traditional pilgrimage ethos is the so-called virtual pilgrimage: a concept that I argue is not a product of modernity nor an act of the spiritually unmotivated, but rather something that was conceptually born in the fifteenth century as a response to feelings of ultimate devotion. The works of Felix Fabri illustrate how a potential pilgrim may “be out there” without ever stepping foot on an actual pilgrim road. This practice is becoming more commonplace due to advancements in the Internet and virtual reality. Thus humanity may have reached a point at which online pilgrimage or online faith worship could challenge more traditional formations of faith and practice.

Keywords: pilgrimage, cyber pilgrimage, online, Felix Fabri, virtual reality

Introduction

Yet there is undoubtedly an initiatory quality in pilgrimage. A pilgrim is an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu (Turner and Turner: loc. 248).

Consistent as Victor Turner and Edith Turner are in their theory of liminality concerning the pilgrim experience, they also argue that pilgrimage is the greatest act a devotee can perform in imitation of the founder of a particular faith, or the most deliberate action that brings the individual closer to God. Turner and Turner argue essentially that pilgrimage is an experience in “extroverted mysticism” (loc. 563). As the pilgrim walks a literal, tangible road, the act of walking is a test of physical endurance, tolerance, and mental strength. But this physical road, when walked upon for the purposes of pilgrimage, is much more than simply a path on which one travels to reach point B from point A. The road itself is significant in that it is the metaphysical-physical crossroad between the act itself and the mystical purpose; basically for

the pilgrim the road is a mystical throughway by which one takes a spiritual journey in as much as the body takes a physical one. Turner and Turner argue that the mystical nature of pilgrimage is beyond conceptualization in that its meaning is internal for the pilgrim. The psychological stress and spiritual evolution the pilgrim goes through may be as significant as any physical trial he faces along the way (loc. 580).¹

Though perhaps unintentionally, Turner and Turner make a case for something we now call “cyber-pilgrimage,” which according to its adherents, may be just as valid from a mystical-transformative perspective as any physical journey that a more traditional pilgrim may make. Even the term “traditional” with regard to the idea of the authenticity of the pilgrim experience needs some clarification or perhaps even redefining. Authenticity is a fluid idea, but essentially it deals with intent, purpose, and identity. The traditional pilgrim seeks a separation from a profane existence through spiritual travel. In so doing, the pilgrim becomes consumed by the devotional-spiritual act of pilgrimage itself whereby the pilgrim is no longer defined by the secular identity being left behind. But what if this traditional pilgrim does not or cannot be consumed by this devotional act? The physical act of stepping out onto the path and walking is, in some ways, the simple part of pilgrimage, especially in the contemporary context of pilgrimage. The mental fortitude to “leave it all behind” can be a far greater challenge. As thoughts of secular obligations, family, friends, work, or school creep into the pilgrim’s psyche, the pilgrim places one foot in front of the other while the mind becomes focused not on being consumed by the experience (something essential to pilgrimage), but rather on the thoughts of, and perhaps even a longing for, the “every day.” This longing is fatal to the pilgrim experience and it illustrates the core reason why social media use along the pilgrim road is so dangerous. Being always connected in that normal world means that in a very real way the pilgrim has never left.

The Physical Pilgrim

The act of “leaving” it all behind is something that physical pilgrims may take for granted. Because they are moving, literally, away from the more profane space of secularity and the every-day, there is a sense that a complete separation from that profane world has occurred. There may be something to this perspective. In fact, the physical movement away from normality and the immersive nature of the pilgrimage experience may place the physical pilgrim in a more advantageous position than his cyber counterpart.

Nancy Frey, for example, puts great emphasis on the aspects of physicality and touch in her discussion of pilgrimage. Along the Camino de Santiago in Spain pilgrims wear the scallop shell as an identifier; they carry large packs serving the dual purpose of ensuring they have certain necessities such as food rations, basic medical supplies, and clothes and providing a display of physical sacrifice. Rather than sending their bags ahead, the pilgrim labors and suffers (56). The physicality of the road to Santiago is one of the key features which connects pilgrims to each other and to the spiritual history of the Camino de Santiago.

¹ Turner and Turner also point to mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, and Mahatma Gandhi as examples of the power of mysticism, a power that is often misunderstood and difficult to quantify.

Additionally, in the Medieval Christian context of pilgrimage there is a great deal of focus on the devotion to relics and the idea of embodiment, as discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum. A Medieval man went on pilgrimage not only as a devotional or penitential act, but because he thirsted for a physical connective with the divine. Relics of saints or even contact relics associated with the life of Christ were a major force behind the development of pilgrimage. It is little wonder that Santiago de Compostela becomes such an important shrine as it is claims to hold the remains of Saint James himself (132).

Actual presence is also essential to the Muslim Hajj. This has to do not only with having contact with the Ka'ba or the black stone, but also with the community of others experiencing Hajj and with the very important act of ritual purity. The Hajj is an extremely strenuous physical undertaking and an exhaustive contemplative experience. It begins with pilgrims entering into the state of *ihram* (ritual purity). Each person changes their clothing in order to eliminate any markings of wealth or social class and women must work to hide their natural figures to avoid any semblance of sexual overtones. Pilgrims often describe the Hajj as a sea of people, each taking part in something that is both physical and effluvial (Westwood: 9-11). Feelings of ecstasy, passion, love, and exultation are normal for pilgrims and these are areas that the virtual pilgrimage may struggle to duplicate.

Despite some advantages of the physical pilgrimage – that a journey may be transformative due in part to its physicality – we also recognize that physical travel does not automatically equate with a mental break from the profane pre-pilgrimage world. In contrast, we consider the possibility of a journey reaching the transformative level without such physicality – through a cyber pilgrimage.

The Virtual Pilgrim

If the pilgrim can be physically removed from normal life but never emotionally abandons the everyday and, therefore, endangers the potential for authenticity and the transformative potential of the pilgrim act, then the inverse may also be true. Can a pilgrim who does not or cannot leave physically, reach a state of mental detachment from the everyday to the extent that, though the body remains, the mind and/or spirit can be on pilgrimage in the traditional sense? Mark MacWilliams believes that virtual pilgrimage, the ability and desire to undertake a religiously or spiritually motivated journey via the Internet, is the product of modern technological might and continued devotion to the metaphysical and mystical (315). There are many websites which offer virtual pilgrimage options for people incapable of physically leaving for an extended period of time due to health, finances, professional concerns, or familial obligations. For these would-be pilgrims, the virtual or cyber-pilgrimage may allow them to experience the potentially transformative power of pilgrimage despite whatever it is which restricts the actual journey. In fact, it can be argued that virtual pilgrimage has the potential to be a much more inclusive experience than a bodily pilgrimage. In order for a person to take part in the Hajj, for example, that person would need to be Muslim because no non-Muslim is allowed to enter the holy city of Mecca. However, anyone with an Internet connection can take the virtual Hajj offered by Beliefnet.com. This version of Islam's most sacred pilgrimage allows both non-Muslims and Muslims who cannot take the actual journey to participate in the ritual. The depth and meaning of that participation is, however, in question. Clearly, the virtual pilgrim does not have the same literal or physical connection to the sacred location or

to other pilgrims as the does the physical pilgrim, but this does not necessarily mean that the experience may be any less significant or transformative.

Even Victor Turner and Edith Turner, perhaps the most well-known scholars of pilgrimage as a physical act, agree that so much of the experience of pilgrimage is internal; meaning its power to transform and its connection to mysticism all occur *within* rather than *without* (loc. 560-600). Thus it may be possible for the virtual pilgrim, as much as for the physical pilgrim, to move away from the “‘familiar place’ that is ‘secular, mundane, every day, ordinary’ to a ‘far place’ that is ‘sacred, rare, often miraculous . . .’” (MacWilliams: 320). The mental aspect of pilgrimage is essential to the potential transformative experience. A virtual pilgrim may indeed have the ability to “go-there” in a more mental sense, but this is still a very real type of movement. This may seem like new-age mysticism or millennial brand spirituality seeking only convenience and expediency rather than devout spiritual practice. That is a very superficial narrative, especially considering “mental pilgrimage” is not a construct of modernity, millennials, or the so-called technological age. In fact, mental pilgrimage, which I will argue is the archetype for what we now call virtual or cyber-pilgrimage, was actually born as a response to feelings and actions of supreme devotion rather than weakening faith or lazy spiritual practice.

Framing the potential power of the virtual experience may be likened to the emotive experience readers have when engulfed in powerful works of literature. The virtual pilgrimages discussed below create a contained experience for the would-be pilgrims – in much the same way that literary readers become contained within their chosen narrative. Louise Rosenblatt discusses this very concept arguing that because literature is organized to create a certain context it thus regulates the imaginary environment for the reader. The reader can then be emotionally transported to a different time and place that, at least temporarily and psychologically, establishes an actual esthetic experience (40). Patrick Howard takes this idea one step further by claiming the relationship between the reader and the text is an “embodied” one, thus using the very same terminology used by Bynum with regards to the Medieval pilgrim.

The following examples illustrate the potential power of the virtual pilgrim experience and while stressing the possibility of the type of embodiment articulated by Howard.

Felix Fabri and the Mental Pilgrimage

Felix Fabri was a fifteenth century Dominican preacher and active pilgrim. He was also one of the first pilgrims to write memoirs of his journeys. In fact, according to Kathyne Beebe, Fabri was so dedicated to bringing his personal experience to the faithful of Germany, that he adapted his works for no fewer than three different linguistic audiences: first in Swabian-German for his more secular benefactors, then the vernacular *Pilgerbuch* for the nobility, and finally in Latin for his fellow Dominicans (39). These works became widely popular in the region around Ulm, Germany. Fabri’s texts chronicled his two journeys to Jerusalem and one to Mount Sinai, and because so few people at the time could claim such an impressive pilgrimage resume, his works were even more significant to his followers and adherents. According to Beebe, in the 1490’s a group of Observant nuns in Medingen and Medlingen requested that Fabri further adapt his works to meet a unique and specific need – that he create a text which would guide them along a spiritual pilgrimage so that despite the

fact that their devotion required they remain cloistered, they could make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land not as a physical endeavor, but as a “contemplative, devotional exercise” (39-40). The nuns’ request included detailed travel logs, day to day rituals, description of shrines, and physical challenges so they could fully participate in the pilgrimage in a metaphysical or spiritual way. They wished to be-there in the most real way possible, not just read about another pilgrim’s experience; they wanted to use the experience to help create a different but still authentic pilgrim road. The result of this request was that by 1495, Fabri produced a document known as the *Sionpilger*, which provided what the nuns requested for mental pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and even Santiago de Compostela.²

What Fabri created for this cloistered community is conceptually the same thing Beliefnet.com attempts to create for would be Hajjis, the opportunity to be-there without going-there. That being said, we must consider how Fabri’s mental pilgrimage fits into Turner and Turner’s widely accepted theory of physical liminality. Turner and Turner maintain that a pilgrim must physically traverse a mystical road, even if the experience or transformative moment is internal, that internal experience can only occur following the movement “out-there.” Turner and Turner, however, may overestimate the physical and underestimate the metaphysical. MacWilliams argues that broken down to its core, Turner and Turner are really arguing that the pilgrim must simply move from a place of profane normality to one that is in some way sacred and unique. MacWilliams claims that a virtual pilgrim who is completely devoted to the mental exercise and spiritual importance of the pilgrimage can be as much out-there as any pilgrim walking the actual road (326). Modern pilgrim memoirs such as Rosemary Mahoney’s *The Singular Pilgrim* and Hape Kerkeling’s increasingly popular work *I’m Off Then* use strong contextual language in order to create a sense of connection to the reader. Pilgrimage writers want the reader to more fully understand the experience, and to that effect they use overly descriptive language to provide a contextual experience complete with sights, sounds, and feelings. But while these writers want the reader to understand the experience, they are not really attempting to *include* the reader in the pilgrimage. One can also find similar, albeit much shorter narratives, on the Americans on Camino Facebook page. The page is littered with personal thoughts, narratives of experiences, and even photos and short videos of the Camino de Santiago. This Facebook group is an invaluable source for information concerning the Camino as well as a location where pilgrims can continue to connect long after their physical journey comes to an end, but the page does not, nor is it attempting to, take the place of the pilgrimage itself – it does not offer an alternative to the physical pilgrimage. That alternative, however, is fast becoming a reality.

In early 2016 the website CaminoSantiago360.com and associated app were launched offering virtual pilgrimage options for those who are unable or unwilling to make the physical journey to Spain. Not simply a guidebook or collection of personal narratives, CaminoSantiago360.com boasts that it offers an authentic pilgrim experience. From the homepage:

² Such a document goes even farther than the famed twelfth century Codex Calixtinus, book V of which is normally identified as the first true Pilgrim’s Guide to the Camino. Fabri’s work would go beyond guidebook as it attempted to include the reader in the pilgrimage rather than simply provide information for a future physical journey.

With Camino de Santiago 360° you can put on some virtual reality glass and get into a pilgrim's boots. This app will take you to an immersive and interactive trip in which you can choose your own point of view . . . this app has been shot in spectacular environments and will immerse you in the cultural, historical and human richness of the Camino de Santiago: art, culture, hospitality, effort, self-improvement.

Virtual pilgrimage, as well as the mental pilgrimage created by Fabri, attempt to bring the would-be pilgrim into the experience itself, not just provide information and pictures – one is observational, the other experiential. MacWilliams offers this:

Through text, sound and image, the virtual pilgrim can scroll/stroll down the Via Dolorosa, with each image juxtaposed with the corresponding biblical passage about Christ's journey to the cross . . . The heart of any pilgrimage is visual – seeing the visible traces of saints and divine beings in the evocative power of the temple buildings and sacred objects and in the powerful rituals that take place in the natural splendor of their setting (loc. 321).

But is virtual pilgrimage a viable replacement of the tangible connection offered by actual sacred travel? This may depend on what type of experience the pilgrim-to-be wishes to have. One of Nancy Frey's key points concerning the pilgrimage experience is that inauthenticity occurs because pilgrims focus too much on "doing it right." They attempt to create some type of "real" pilgrim journey, usually by attempting to avoid modern conveniences, but this is dangerous. A crucial point for pilgrimage is that its function and meaning change for the individual as well as over time. Thus Frey points out that sacred travel is, "best regarded as *plural, contested, and subject to change*" (55). Basically, there is no pre-ordained right way to engage in pilgrimage. Moreover, there are multiple types of and purposes for pilgrimage. Connie Hill-Smith provides the following typology for sacred travel:

1. Instrumental Pilgrimage: to accomplish specific goals
2. Normative Pilgrimage: calendrical; done during specific holy days as an act of ritual
3. Initiatory Pilgrimage: liminal and transitional
4. Obligatory Pilgrimage: a requirement of a particular faith
5. Wandering Pilgrimage: no predetermined goal but rather a response to a feeling or "call" (238).

Hill-Smith maintains that an online or virtual pilgrim can accomplish all of these pilgrimage forms. As an example she argues that in the virtual world of *Second Life*, an online interactive virtual reality simulation, pilgrims on Hajj can create avatars in traditional pilgrim clothing who participate in the exact rituals performed by physical pilgrims. They can converse with other pilgrims, pray together, eat together, fast together, and encourage each other. Considering Frey's argument above, these experiences are seemingly just as valid as any other physical pilgrim experience.

Pope John Paul II: The Virtual Pilgrim

Pope John Paul II's 2000 Holy Land pilgrimage is a prime example of the validity of online-virtual pilgrimage. Rather than seeing virtual pilgrimage as the easy way or a mere convenience to the somewhat partially committed pilgrim, Pope John Paul II illustrated that

the virtual pilgrim may operate from a place of deep devotion and desire for spiritual connection and ultimately hopes for a chance at a transcendent experience.

Originally, the Pope intended on making a chronological biblical pilgrimage, starting with the holy city of Ur, considered by many biblical experts to be the city mentioned in the book of Genesis as the birth place of the patriarch Abraham. The Pope, recognizing the importance of Abraham as the “model of unconditional submission to the will of God,” (Stanley) and as a shared prophet and source of unity between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, wanted his journey to begin at the beginning. From there the Holy Father would travel to Egypt to pray atop Mount Sinai where the Bible says God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, then he would move on to Israel and Palestine. As devout as his intentions were, secular realities and complex international politics trumped his desire for spiritual transcendence.

Lengthy discussions between the Pope and the President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, eventually broke down and the Pope was denied admission into the country. So strong was the Pope’s desire to begin his pilgrimage in Ur that he organized a virtual visit in an effort to make his biblical chronology more authentic. Using large screens, the Vatican broadcast images of various holy sites creating a virtual travelogue which included desert scenes, paintings, and churches. The Pope ritualized the virtual pilgrimage by offering prayer and incense poured in a copper pot signifying the sacrifice of Isaac. The Pope may not have been physically there in Turner and Turner’s understanding, but the spiritual meaning and power of this constructed event offered an experience the Pope identified as “pilgrimage.” It would be difficult to argue that the Pope’s virtual pilgrimage was any less an act of devotion because it took a stationary form; he was focused, present, and engaged in the experience, separated from the profane distractions of normality. This mentality continued as he then made his way physically to other significant locations.

The Cyber-Seder

As real or authentic as the cyber or virtual experience of faith practice or pilgrimage can be, it is difficult to argue that nothing is lost in the virtual experience compared to the physical one. The warm embrace of fellow pilgrims or the smells of a communal meal following a long day of walking in solitude are just a few examples of what may be lost in the virtual world. But we must not mistake difference with authenticity. Simply because the experience is not identical does not mean it is any less valid or potentially transformative. It is also important to note that just as some things may be lost in the virtual pilgrimage, there are potential gains in the experience as well.

The virtual word offers a sense of timelessness as well as the reality of always-ness. From a psychological perspective this always-ness is a powerful allure for the virtual pilgrim. Speaking more on the process of virtual grieving, Matt Huston argues that when events are set in the virtual realm, the experience is extended and potentially never-ending. The experience can be public or private based on the setup of the website being used, and one is not constrained to travel during a particular time of year, which is often based on arbitrary vacation schedules of an employer. The pilgrimage can be consistently experienced and re-experienced in perpetuity, while the physical pilgrimage may be a transformative experience existing only in memory once the event itself is consigned to the past (39).

A persuasive example of the power of the virtual experience comes from Brenda Brasher's *Give Me That Online Religion*. In this work she discusses virtual pilgrimage and cyber-inclusion as evolutionary processes. Like Huston, she argues that cyber-time is sacred time. If used appropriately, the online world is orderly, neat, and also expansive – a virtual cosmos of opportunity (48). She claims that there is a time-shifting element to the Internet experience in which the user can get lost, not realizing how much linear time has actually been spent online. This can clearly be a dangerous attribute as well; the Internet is filled with limitless paths down which to travel, not all of which are productive. That being understood, “getting lost” is a ritual or at least a spiritual experience which is fundamental to the pilgrimage process, and in this vein one should hope to “get lost” online. Brasher chronicles several virtual pilgrims along their respective journeys, but the story of Ashley is particularly relevant.

Ashley used the Internet to begin learning about Judaism, first using popular search engines to learn basic facts concerning the faith and its history. At one point in the process she wanted to become more of an active participant in the faith, but felt she was not ready to put herself out there by physically visiting a temple. What she found were websites offering virtual tours of Jerusalem and one that offered to place a written message or prayer on the Western Wall for those unable to make the journey to the city (Brasher: 73). Eventually she joined a cyber-Seder organized for a joint experience of physical attendees at Lincoln Center in New York and virtual participants from around the world. Even in this inclusive environment, some questioned what the virtual users were actually doing. Were they participants or observers? The question was put to the event organizer, Michael Dorf, during the Seder and he looked into the video feed and simply stated, “We don't know” (Brasher: 76).

Whether or not those at Lincoln Center viewed those online as active participants in the Seder was, at least partially, insignificant. The experience was powerful for many of those who logged on, especially for Ashley, who officially converted to Judaism following the event.

Were the Online Visitors Actually Participating in the Seder?

The Jewish Seder includes the re-telling of the biblical story of Passover, discussion of the story about meaning and purpose, sharing wine and food, and celebrating the liberation with fellow Jews. On the surface it does seem that those online could do all of these things. They could hear the story, they could discuss it via online chatroom features and even send questions to those in physical attendance. They could share in the food and drink if they prepared their own meal (though this would not be shared in the same sense as the food for those at Lincoln Center), and they could participate in the general celebration of freedom. Virtual participants also had the option, or perhaps more to the point the possible distraction, of getting lost online or being removed from presence by the reality of the world around them, the profane world. Those at Lincoln Center were physically and spiritually invested in the ritual to a different degree. Being at the Seder and sharing a physical table meant that the distractions from the profane world were non-existent. Thus the virtual participants were forced to be more focused and did not have the benefit of having likeminded people around them to help maintain that focus.

Can the Cyber-Seder be Transformative?

There does not appear to be anything which nullifies the online experience as one of potential transformation, but likewise there is nothing to ensure it either. The same is true for those in physical attendance. In the case of Ashley, it is safe to say that the experience was powerful enough and transformative enough to the point that she actually changed systems of faith and converted to Judaism. It literally transformed her understanding of God, faith, and the world around her. It is difficult to imagine that being at Lincoln Center would have had any greater measured effect on Ashley's ultimate experience. But it is important to note that this is due to her own intentional, focused participation, not because of the virtual experience itself.

Online Participation and the Social Media Experience

The practice of online faith or virtual pilgrimage compared to physical participation are very different experiences, but it is important not to mistake *difference* with *potentiality*, that is, the potential for the transformative experience. As illustrated above, virtual experiences can be powerful and every bit as real as physical experiences. While the medieval pilgrimage may indeed have been about physical contact, movement of the body from place to place, and as Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, the embodied experience – pilgrimage types and constructs – have evolved and are continuing to be redefined. Technology has allowed modern people to be “out there” without having to leave “here” (25).

Felix Fabri illustrates that as early as the fifteenth century, the concept of a type of disembodied pilgrimage had developed. The nuns for which he wrote *Sionpilger* were completely invested in the spirituality and ritual of pilgrimage, even if they could not complete the physical components of a traditional pilgrimage. With respect to Fabri and his work, his contemporary world is beyond the scope of what is normally considered the medieval period and his evolutionary (or even perhaps revolutionary) thoughts on pilgrimage may, in fact, be looked upon as a bridge between the strictly medieval ideas of pilgrimage into something resembling what we can now refer to as virtual pilgrimage. There is evidence that the idea of the disembodied pilgrimage may predate even Fabri.

There exists an account written by Einhard, a Frankish courtier and close companion and biographer of Charlemagne. The tales include the retelling of a miraculous healing of a man with a vile illness. Einhard, having heard a tale of the healing, was so struck by the enormity of the experience and the power of the divine that even though he did not witness the miracle, felt its strength to such an extent that being there would not have changed his feeling or understanding of the event itself.

Although I myself did not see the miracle I am about to describe, I am able to believe the account of those who told it to me no less than if I had seen it with my own eyes. Thus, without any hesitation or doubt, I have decided to present it not as if I had just heard it, but rather as if I myself had actually seen it (Whalen: 93).

Einhard is transferring the experience from one he heard about to one he experienced. This is a profound change in the normal physical understanding of the medieval world. Einhard, writing in the ninth century, seemingly defies convention by making his second hand

experience a first person narrative. This is not what Bynum defines as the embodied experience; however, it is a disembodied experience closely related to Fabri's work, the virtual pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II, and the cyber-Seder.

Virtual faith practice is an evolving and hugely complex issue. It is important to note that the idea of worshiping in a virtual-online environment or even taking part in a virtual pilgrimage is a very different practice from engaging in the more secular-profane activity of social media. On the one hand, social media distracts one from the intentional, present experience by keeping one connected to the world, which is supposedly left when undertaking pilgrimage. On the other hand, virtual pilgrimage uses connective technology to help the cyber-pilgrim escape the profane and enter into a sacred experience. Online social media and websites offer the potential for a transformative experience through virtual pilgrimage.

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