

Special Issue "Sacred Journeys: Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Volume II"

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Special Issue Information

Dear Colleagues,

Hundreds of millions of people embark on pilgrimages (traditional or otherwise) every year. Though it is an ancient practice associated with a great variety of religious and spiritual traditions, beliefs and sacred geographies, recently pilgrimages have taken a new face; they can also be political, non-religious, or even irreligious. Irrespective of religious or spiritual provenance, pilgrimages are sacred journeys that facilitate interaction between diverse peoples from countless cultures, occupations, and walks of life.

At the 9th Sacred Journeys Global Conference hosted by the University of Primorska in Slovenia, we explored the varied personal, interpersonal, intercultural, and international dimensions of these journeys. The Sacred Journeys project, launched at the University of Oxford in 2014, covers all aspects of this phenomenon, including the supposedly non-traditional facets, such as pilgrimage as protest, pilgrimage and peace building, and the concepts of the internal pilgrimage and the journey of self-discovery.

This volume gathers a rich and diverse collection of interdisciplinary voices from across the globe, aimed at a global readership. Though we appreciate the importance of academic work with a strict focus, this Special Issue/book lies at the other end of the spectrum, representing by scholars and practitioners from many walks of life, both from the developing and the developed world. We provide a platform to writers who are strong in their faith and see pilgrimage as an avenue for increased closeness to their deity alongside others who do not practice religion at all; both see pilgrimage as desirable, meaningful, and life changing.

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Guest Editors

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Article

Materiality, Experience and the Body: The Catholic Pilgrimage of Sheshan in Shanghai, China

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Abstract: This paper foregrounds the Turnerian experiences of pilgrims themselves, for whom pilgrimage is perhaps first and foremost the process of experiencing faith with their whole body and mind. At the Chinese Catholic pilgrimage site of Sheshan, located in western Shanghai, multiple meanings and possibilities are written onto the body of the pilgrim as it interacts with sacred materialities. In the process, the pilgrim materially orients themselves towards the transcendent other and to people and events throughout time. The boundary between subject and object is increasingly blurred in the pilgrim's imagination, and pilgrimage becomes a 'porous' mind-body experience for them. In the process, as pilgrims repeatedly physically enact doctrine and doctrinal texts in the course of pilgrimage—while simultaneously rooting them in their own personal lives—Sheshan is, through the concrete actions of worshippers layered up over time, continually being re-made as sacred.

Keywords: Sheshan pilgrimage; religious experience; materiality; body; anthropology of experience

1. Introduction

On the mountain of Sheshan, located in Songjiang District, about thirty kilometers from downtown Shanghai, curious onlookers often stop to watch Chinese Catholic pilgrims praying and chanting as they approach the basilica at the summit—the peak of the pilgrimage. Yet, although observers may be attracted by the pilgrims' movements and expressions, it would be impossible to fully understand the pilgrim experience merely by watching. Instead—and contrary to prevailing views, which tend to focus on the political, economic, or otherwise functional facets of pilgrimage—we argue that from the pilgrim's perspective, pilgrimage is, first and foremost, the act and process of experiencing faith with one's whole being¹. In this, drawing on interviews and participant observation fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2021 with pilgrims at Sheshan and followed up in their home parishes, we foreground pilgrimage as the expression and practice of pilgrims' faith, which we explore in this paper through a focus on experience—specifically, Sheshan pilgrims' experiences of body, materiality, and the imagination.

Generally speaking, since the burgeoning of pilgrimage studies in the 1970s, two broad types of pilgrimage studies have emerged. One is the examination of the foundation and establishment of a pilgrimage, focusing on its construction within particular historical and political processes. Another is to focus on the social trappings of pilgrimages; scholars in this vein have discussed the connections between pilgrimage and tourism, secularization, migration, political and economic processes, globalization, gender, and more. For example, pilgrimage as constituting a regional sacred space (Bhardwaj 1973); as the production and usage of power to achieve specific social or political ends (Sangren 1993); as an economic process for the people and organizations that participate in it (Kosansky 2002); as a core part of ethnic, regional, national, religious, and gender identity construction (Borland 2003; Bowman 1993; Galbraith 2000; Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa 2008; Feldman 2007; Jansen and Kühn 2008; Jansen and Notermans 2012). Others have focused more



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directly on the pilgrims themselves, such as studies of the healing effect of pilgrimage on the body and mind of pilgrims (Peelen and Jansen 2007; Notermans 2007).

In the following ethnographic case study, we foreground experience, as developed by Victor Turner in *The Anthropology of Experience*, a collection of essays co-edited with Edward Bruner shortly before Turner's death in 1986. Turner's conception of experience was influenced by the German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey's differentiation between 'Erlebnis,' which means 'what has been lived through' and refers to lived experience and subjective internal perspective, and 'Erfahrung,' which focuses on the acquisition of intellectual knowledge and refers primarily to external, objective experiences. For Dilthey—and for Turner—'experience' is a basic unit of life: a 'living stream,' a fluid structural correlate. Turner then further distinguishes between pure experience as the passive reception of an event and experience as an intersubjective expression with a "beginning and an end, like a stone in a Zen dry landscape," forming what Dilthey calls "the structure of experience" (Turner 1978, p. 35). In this, then, 'experience' for Turner refers not only to the passive reception of the subject in internalizing external stimuli but also to the subject's attitudes, views, and feelings towards the external world. Turner argues that Dilthey saw experience as a collection of all human thoughts, visions, desires, and sensations that interpenetrate subtly and differently on multiple levels (Turner 1978, p. 35). Experience is thus also an attempt to transcend the boundaries between subject and object and to connect the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds; experience becomes, then, a matter of meaning, a relational structure that links past, present, and future. It "deals with how individuals actually experience their culture, that is, how events are received by consciousness" (Bruner 1978, pp. 3–4).

Furthermore, applying this to the Chinese context, the English word 'experience' is often translated in two ways in Chinese—*tiyan* (体验) and *jingyan* (经验). Some Chinese scholars have tried to distinguish between these two concepts, arguing that *jingyan* is all the perceptual impressions and inner evaluations that the subject gets through the senses. At the same time, *tiyan* is the subject's own strong feeling of 'meaning' in the process of seeking meaning (Xu and Yang 2010). The use of the term *tiyan*, as *Erlebnis*—instead of *jingyan*, as *Erfahrung*—here is intended to refer to an "inner experience" that is related to meaning and is also closely related to the body. In this way, the two concepts of *zongjiao tiyan* (宗教体验, religious experience/*Erlebnis*) and *zongjiao jingyan* (宗教经验, religious experience/*Erfahrung*)—which are also often used confusingly—can be distinguished. *Zongjiao jingyan* is something that anyone can acquire during religious activities, while *zongjiao tiyan* is the intense feeling of 'meaning' that believers have during religious activities—and should be regarded as the most important of all (Xu and Yang 2010).

This distinction provides a viable way of thinking about the discussion of pilgrimage as a religious experience, but it leaves out a key element—the body.² At Sheshan, bodily participation is essential to pilgrimage, and bodily experiences are often foregrounded by Chinese Catholic pilgrims themselves as of primary importance. As such, for this study, the body must be understood as the foundation of religious experience. In focusing on experience in the Turnerian sense, then, we are also moving away from an account of Christian (Catholic) spirituality that denies the body or focuses on the "ephemerality of the material world" (Badone 2017, p. 204). In her seminal analysis of Christianity's enduring influence on anthropology, Cannell (2005) pointed to anthropology's ascetism as a reflection of Christianity's own denial of the body; as Norget et al. (2017) have pointed out, however, this denial is more often a feature of Protestantism than it is Catholicism, which tends—overall—to place much more emphasis on materiality and embodiment. Napolitano (2017, p. 245), for instance, notes the Catholic Church's "long history of animating bodies, affect, souls, things, and landscapes . . . with particular political agendas of inclusion and exclusion."

As such, in the following discussion of pilgrimage at Sheshan, we foreground experience as understood with Turner's lens in mind, through pilgrims' own apprehensions of what they experience in the process of pilgrimage and with a particular focus on the porosity of the mind/body boundary (cf. Taylor 2007). In this way, in this article, we take the

view that focuses on pilgrimage as dynamically built on the actions of countless pilgrims. Their experiences, behaviors, and actions—rooted in their minds and bodies—ultimately constitute pilgrimage, and this substance of pilgrimage interests us in this article. The holy, sacred space of pilgrimage is a place and time where the pilgrim aspires to a psychological or physical connection with the divine.

2. At the Feet of Our Lady: Sheshan and the Sheshan Pilgrimage

The Sheshan Basilica is located on the western peak of Sheshan, in a district that has historically hosted an array of religious communities: during the Yuan dynasty, Songjiang featured a mosque for a local Muslim population, while during the Tang and Song dynasties, the area hosted flourishing Buddhist and Taoist populations. Catholicism was introduced to the area during the Ming Wanli period, with Protestantism following during the Qing Guangxu period. Sheshan itself has not always been a Catholic site; it has previously hosted many other Buddhist and Daoist temples—including Pu Zhao Temple, Zhao Qing Zen Temple, Hui Ri Temple, Xuan Miao Lecture Temple, Chao Yin Temple, and Maitreya Temple—but today the only remaining is the Xiu Daoist Pagoda. Nor is the county a heavily Catholic one; today, the county has hundreds of Buddhist temples and nunneries, often mixing Buddhism with Taoist traditions.³

Nevertheless, it is in Songjiang that the Sheshan Basilica was founded in 1863 by French Jesuits. Today—hosting a statue of Mary, Help of Christians, and an image of Our Mother of Sheshan—it is the only international Catholic pilgrimage site still active in Shanghai or China.⁴ Sheshan hosts multiple pilgrimage opportunities, some annual, some monthly, accommodating different intensities and varying levels of devotion to the faith. May—traditionally the month of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition—is the peak time for pilgrimages to Sheshan, with tens of thousands of Catholics descending from all over the country and, in pre-COVID-19 times, the world. Even the more indifferent faithful go on pilgrimage to Sheshan during this time, mostly with a church-organized pilgrimage group. The second most popular time of the year is October (the month of the Holy Rosary). There are also small spikes in attendance on the first Saturday of every month because it is a day of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. At these times, those in attendance tend to be Catholics who are more actively devout and visit Sheshan regularly.

In the Catholic tradition, pilgrimage is considered a ‘good work.’ This concept—of ‘good works’—is especially prevalent among older local Catholics, who often emphasize the act of doing ‘good works’ in a way that resembles the Buddhist term ‘merit.’ However, although pilgrimage is seen as a kind of good work that is also considered an act of ‘accumulating merit’ in the presence of God when asked, worshippers at Sheshan maintain that the favor they receive for performing good works depends on God, not on the amount or quality of the good works they perform.

Sheshan is a Marian pilgrimage site, like most Catholic pilgrimage sites worldwide—many of the most famous, such as Guadalupe, Lourdes, or Fatima, are similarly centered on the Virgin Mary. Unlike Protestantism, especially low-church Protestantism, which generally regards it as a form of idolatry, the Catholic Church has special veneration for the Virgin Mary, considering her the mother of the Church as well as the mother of God. The image of Mary as a merciful mother is deeply rooted in the hearts of Catholics at Sheshan, and their affection for her is reflected in their daily words and actions. Chinese Catholics often affectionately refer to Mary as ‘Mother Mary’, and regular pilgrims refer to visiting Sheshan not as ‘going on pilgrimage’ but rather in more intimate and colloquial phrasings such as ‘seeing Our Lady’ or simply ‘going to Our Lady.’ Some interlocutors described the feeling of going to Sheshan as ‘like going back to one’s mother’s home’ and referred to Sheshan as ‘Our Lady’s land.’

From a catechetical point of view, the faithful pilgrim can pray only to God. The saints do not enact any favors on their own; rather, they are meant to act as mediators, interceding on behalf of the worshipper before God—they are, as the Turners imagined, akin to a God ‘hotline’ (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 16). As our interlocutors dutifully repeated, “through

the Blessed Virgin, we reach Jesus.” However, in practice, the phrases our interlocutors more often employed in daily conversation can obfuscate this, such as when they said that they would ‘pray to the Blessed Virgin,’ ‘ask the Blessed Virgin,’ and so forth. Indeed, despite the official stance that Mary and the saints act merely as intermediaries, the Virgin Mary is often treated by our interlocutors if she were the main character of the narrative, whether in daily mentions of ‘worshipping the Virgin,’ the practice of praying directly to the Virgin for favors such as the healing of illnesses, or in the written texts displayed in pilgrimage sites. For them, the Virgin Mary is frankly more approachable than God and perhaps a better conversational partner—and Sheshan, as a place of pilgrimage to Mary, has naturally become a place often visited by those who are partial to her.

Although tourists visit Sheshan, the standard pilgrimage route is different from the tourist one. Among the several entrances to Sheshan, tourists usually enter through the northern gate, while pilgrims take the eastern entrance, the “Entrance to the Church of the Blessed Sacrament,” commonly referred to by believers as the “Laity” or “Friends” Gate. The entrance is a Chinese-style stone pagoda with a plaque inscribed with the words “Enter, to the Blessed Sacrament.” Halfway up the hill from the gate is a small church, the “Our Lady of Zhongshan Church,” commonly known to the faithful as simply the “Zhongshan Church.” In the square in front of the church—which can accommodate a thousand people—a couplet is displayed reading: “Stay for a moment in this hillside chapel and practice the rites of filial piety. Climb a few more steps to the hall at the peak and seek the grace of a loving mother.” Above the couplet is inscribed the line: “Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us.” The subsequent path from the gate to the Sheshan Basilica at the top of the mountain is relatively structured, centered on the ‘four points and one line’ of Zhongshan Church, the Three Holy Pavilions, the Way of Sorrows, and the Basilica. The church buildings and statues located in the pavilions are the most conspicuous material components of this pilgrimage, and they divide the pilgrimage journey into different stages following their respective positions on the hillside.

On weekdays, as part of regular worship, the faithful often attends Mass at Zhongshan Church early in the morning and afterward go to pray in front of the Three Holy Pavilions. These pavilions are located just to the west of Zhongshan Church and are each dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, St Joseph, and the Virgin Mary. Prayer in front of these Three Holy Pavilions is also considered an essential part of pilgrimage; most pilgrims we spoke to will begin by kneeling and praying there, even if they are in a hurry. Reciting Scripture, meditating, or singing hymns are common forms of prayer mentioned.

Next, pilgrims follow the Way of Sorrows—also known as the Via Crucis, or the Stations of the Cross—as it proceeds in a zig-zag path up the mountain, a path which was formerly called the ‘folded path’ as it was originally created to carry building materials up the mountain by hand during the construction of the basilica. Many Catholic pilgrimage sites around the world have a Via Crucis for pilgrims to follow. At Sheshan, it encourages the faithful to participate bodily in commemorating the suffering of ‘Jesus’ universal salvation’ through prayer and reflection at each of the fourteen ‘stations of the cross’—images of Jesus’ suffering on the day of his crucifixion. The fourteen stations at Sheshan were originally iron statues placed in 1873, but they were all destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Today, the fourteen statues are all wooden carvings.

The Via Crucis at Sheshan begins at a pair of statues erected in 1907 on the stone wall near Zhongshan Church—a white statue of an angel facing Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Eventually, the stone steps that zig-zag up the hill—with a Station of the Cross at each turn—will lead pilgrims to the basilica at the summit. Directly across from the south entrance of the Basilica is the altar known as the ‘Altar of Consecration’ or the ‘Altar of Thanksgiving,’ where a painting of the Virgin embracing Jesus is enshrined. It is placed in the same place as the altar in the previous basilica, an arrangement that was deliberately made when the current iteration of the church was built. As the place where the priest celebrates Mass and bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the sacredness of the altar is self-evident to the faithful. For some Catholics

we spoke to, the imagery of sanctity being perpetuated through materiality leads them to believe that the graces received by praying at this location might be greater. That is, they understand the altar and surrounding area as a place ‘closer’ to God and Our Lady. Doctrinally or catechetically speaking, the favor granted to the pilgrim is not meant to depend on physical proximity to these material places or images. Nevertheless, pilgrims at Sheshan often understood the site in this way: building not just on Catholicism as taught, but Catholicism as lived and experienced (cf. Orsi 2002)—on the rich meanings that these materialities have been and are still being given by the faithful, their practices, and ways of thinking.⁵

3. ‘Tangible’ Experience: Materiality, the Body, and the Senses

In front of the three pavilions, the most immediate sensorial and material impact is not only the sight of the three snow-white statues overlooking the pilgrims dotting the space before them, praying with the scriptures and rosaries in their hands and cushions under their knees; but also the sound of chanting that emanates from them, echoing in the air without any sense of conflict and sometimes accompanied by catchy hymns. In this sacred space and time, people and objects interact in a variety of ways, involving the use of Scripture, rosaries, candles, and other objects—easily distinguishing pilgrims from tourists in the crowd.

Religions “always involve material forms,” and it is “in this materiality that they become part of the experience and elicit responses, that they take on a communal life and enter into a continuous chain of cause and effect” (Keane 2008, p. S124). As scholars have noted, Catholicism places particular emphasis on materiality (Norget et al. 2017), wherein the sacred can manifest itself through material objects by being imbued with divine power and becoming ‘sacred’ through the act of blessing. For example, the rosary used by the faithful is usually a rosary blessed by a priest, and the images in a shrine are blessed—and so the rosary is not just a string of plastic or wooden beads, and the image is not just an ordinary statue or picture. Instead, they take on and are transformed through consecration to have a sacred meaning and function, helping the faithful connect with the divine or the transcendent other. This materiality also extends to, for example, the natural material properties inherent to a sacred site may also be considered sacred and potent. Spring water from the French Marian pilgrimage at Lourdes is commonly considered by pilgrims to have healing properties, and the water is often bottled for various uses—indeed, the water is available at the site for such purposes. Such ritualistic acts are familiar across many pilgrimages, a form of symbolic continuity that is common to various ritual systems: the fragmentation of something sacred and the mixing of the old and the new in order to accelerate its sanctification (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 116). In Sheshan, some parishioners told us that worshippers used to drink the muddy water that flowed directly from a statue in front of a garden on the mountain after a rainstorm, to pray for healing.

At Sheshan, a crucial aspect of its materiality is that it is—in addition to a site of pilgrimage—an active cemetery where many local officials and people have buried and continue to bury their dead. There are many famous shrines and tombs, as well as countless unlabeled tombs. Already in the 19th century, Father Gabriel Palatre recorded in his *Pilgrimage to Sheshan* that “the graves are arranged in all directions on the slopes of the hill. There, generations have rested for centuries. You can hardly tap a few times on this cemetery without causing the vaults of the graves to shake . . . Enter these dense thickets and you will soon find your feet on the graves, the roots of which often grow on the mounds of earth that cover the dead. Rich and poor, peasants and officials, priests of the Buddha, followers of Confucius, all these people’s ashes are piled haphazardly on the side of Sheshan” (Palatre 1875, p. 23). This practice continues: many parishioners have brought the ashes of their friends and family, specifically to be scattered or buried behind the Three Holy Pavilions. A nun at Sheshan said that this was “especially [true for] the Jesus pavilion, there are [lots of] ashes behind it.” Indeed, many elderly Catholics in the area ask expressly for their ashes to be taken to Sheshan after their death.

Pilgrims at Sheshan explained that there is both a theological and a practical dimension to this practice. On a theological level, Chinese Catholic catechism classes commonly teach that the Church is divided into three states: the church militant, referring to the Church on earth; the church suffering, referring to purgatory; and the church triumphant, referring to heaven and the glory of God. Communion is the point of unity across these three facets of the Church. In this sense, when the pilgrim prays for the souls in purgatory, the space and time of pilgrimage at Sheshan acts as a communion of these three facets of the Church—between the present, the departed, and the transcendent other. As such, for the deceased, burying the ashes at Sheshan means that ‘others come to pray, and you benefit too.’ According to the Catechism, when pilgrims pray for souls in Purgatory—where almost all souls go after death—these souls will be able to be purified of their sins and ascend to heaven more quickly, even if they had never met in life. The ashes and graves also serve as material markers to remind believers to pray for the souls in purgatory during their pilgrimage. Of course, some ashes have been buried for many years—but in that case, one parishioner told us that this did not matter, as “[the souls] may have gone to heaven, then they can be asked to pray for we who are alive.” This is an expression of their inner desire to be close to their faith by connecting themselves materially to what they consider to be a holy place, to be closer physically to their faith just as the space around the altar is considered to be more sacred. Other Catholics said they buried ashes behind the Three Holy Pavilions so that ‘it would be convenient for prayer.’ One parishioner joked that there were so many ashes buried on Sheshan that people often came during Qingming, the annual Chinese grave-cleaning festival so that they could accomplish both a pilgrimage and a grave-cleaning at the same time.

Materiality is a constant element of pilgrimage at Sheshan; as Coleman (Coleman 2014, p. S287) has noted, pilgrimages are often “mediated through new layers of sociality and alternative forms of materiality,” which build up over time. The process of pilgrimage is also a process of interaction between the pilgrim’s body and different materialities. Here, we next move to propose that for understanding pilgrimage at Sheshan, how pilgrims imbibe the materiality of Sheshan through their senses must also be incorporated; materiality includes more than substance, such as Scripture or a chair—i.e., ‘non-human’ existence in the ontological sense. After all, the faithful have “always carried holiness and sanctity in a specific material form, which exists both inside and outside their bodies” (Verrips 2008, p. 217). The pilgrim mobilizes all their senses to take in the holy place, and these sensory experiences are inseparable from the materiality of the pilgrimage. The layers of these bodily, sensory experiences are woven into sacred materiality—accumulated and repeatedly over time—constantly construct pilgrims’ understandings and conceptions of the materiality of Sheshan and the pilgrimage practices of the faithful, and vice versa.

3.1. *The Suffering Body*

Among pilgrims at Sheshan, one set of techniques for curating or effecting the desired bodily experiences is deliberate physical suffering. This, of course, is not unique to Sheshan; physical suffering is a recurring theme across various world religions, and it often turns up in pilgrimages—such as in long distances to trek on the pilgrimage path, or physical suffering, such as kowtowing and kneeling for extended periods of time. For example, Nordin’s (2011) study of Hindu pilgrimage in the Himalayas argues that pilgrims perceive physical or emotional hardship as simply a part of the pilgrimage process. They consider the experience of hardship during the pilgrimage to be valuable; afterward, the pilgrimage experience is re-told as an experience of overcoming hardship and gaining spiritually and mentally from it—whether this gain is in the form of proximity to God, a sense of atonement, or something else. Indeed, the pilgrim will intentionally increase physical labor and even physical pain during the pilgrimage. At this time, physical desire often merges with rejection and longing to be free of the flesh.

The Catholic Church does not officially encourage the faithful to deliberately undergo physical suffering simply for the sake of it; it is meant to be a voluntary choice. Neverthe-

less, what Morgan (Morgan 2009, p. 50) has referred to as a “material and penitential economy of the sacred” is a crucial part of lived Catholicism for many around the world, including at Sheshan. Many of the Catholics we spoke to said that they sometimes still intentionally ‘do penance,’ with the idea that this would help them to pray more effectively, or to receive better favors, etc. At Sheshan, fasting is one of the most common methods for ‘penance’; a significant number of those we spoke to argued that it was, in fact, the most effective method. Many fasted before coming to Sheshan with the direct purpose of reducing bodily waste. Still, fasting is not necessarily directed at controlling the body in the biological sense per se—rather, it is aimed at trying to experience the ‘sacred’ through control of the body. As pilgrims explained, the body is meant to be ‘emptied’ to allow itself to be more fully engaged in Mass and the pilgrimage as a whole; simultaneously, it evinces their belief in bodily suffering to atone for bodily sins. Fasting is a form of “the denial of the body, the foretaste of physical death that is experienced in pilgrimage practices . . . privileges the life of the spirit” (Badone 2017, p. 203). At Sheshan, pilgrims frame their decision to fast as both the ‘objective’ demand of the Church and as the ‘subjective’ choice to ‘do penance.’

Similarly, the act of kneeling and prostration in pilgrimage is not a dogmatic requirement; it should, formally, be considered the private gesture of the believer in order to express their respect for Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and other saints through such physical gestures that indicate reverence. For example, in the context of the pilgrim’s prayer at the Three Holy Pavilions, kneeling is not required by Church rules, or is it a liturgical necessity. Nevertheless, as a lay female pilgrim at Sheshan told us, “I have to kneel when I see the word of the Lord. I am comfortable when I kneel, but it is uncomfortable to stand. If you venerate, you will kneel down even if you don’t want to.” She knows quite well that the image she looks upon is certainly not God Himself, but the image mediates that encounter, and she ‘sees’ the God she venerates through the image and feels and expresses this veneration through their physical posture. The kneeling body becomes a figure that expresses multiple meanings related to faith; identity as a believer; various feelings, expectations, and emotions, such as a desire for favor and a sense of humility that they themselves are merely sinners before figures such as Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, this kneeling posture also brings with it a physical sensation common to the pilgrimage process—pain. The ground in front of the Three Holy Pavilions and the start of the Via Crucis is an uneven stone path. Many pilgrims who are accustomed to praying in the kneeling position carry kneeling pads with them when they come on the pilgrimage. The purpose of the pads is to protect the knees and reduce the pain and damage caused by kneeling for a long time, but there are always those who choose to kneel on the ground without any protection.

Certainly, sensitivity to pain varies from person to person, and the interpretation of said pain varies according to one’s own understanding of faith and one’s own experience—but one thing remains the same across the accounts we gathered: pain is not meaningless. Not only pain but also the discomfort and suffering that the body undergoes in the course of a pilgrimage. Whether it is the pain of kneeling for a long time or the exertion of climbing a mountain, whether it occurs naturally during the movement of the body or deliberately, these physical labors are an expression of the faith and—intentionally or unintentionally—elaborate upon the underlying meaning to faith and action. Thus, from the pilgrim’s point of view, the pilgrimage body is not merely a figure of expression or a representation of faith but a medium that actually connects with and produces effects transcendently—leading to, as we shall see next, an often porous boundary between the body and the transcendental.

3.2. *The Porous Mind and Body*

The term ‘porous’ here comes from two concepts proposed by Charles Taylor in his work *A Secular Age*: the ‘porous self’ and the ‘buffered self.’ Taylor uses these two concepts to refer to the human imagination of the boundary between the internal and external

worlds in pre-modern and modern, non-Western and Western societies. The ‘porous self’ refers to the fact that “the boundary between agents and forces is fuzzy in the enchanted world; and the boundary between mind and world is porous . . . the boundary between self and other is fuzzy, porous. And this has to be seen as a fact of experience, not a matter of ‘theory,’ or belief” (Taylor 2007, p. 39). In other words, the world affects us not simply by presenting us with definite states of affairs which we react to, nor simply by generating chemical-biological conditions within us—but through the way we act, behave, and imagine, this condition generates excitement or depression. In all these cases, meaning somehow emerges only when the world affects the mind/organism. In this respect, meaning is endogenous. But in the enchanted world, meaning exists outside of us; it already exists ‘out there’ before it makes contact with us; it can erode us, and we can fall into its force field. It comes upon us from the outside. In contrast, the ‘buffered self’ refers to “taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind.” (Taylor 2007, p. 38). Recently, Tanya Luhrmann and others in her interdisciplinary Mind and Spirit research project have explored the theme that the human mind is fragile—that ideas are powerful and can penetrate the mind (Luhrmann 2020). Under this hypothesis, cultural differences in how people imagine the boundary between the inner and outer worlds can alter the most basic of human experiences—their sensory experiences. Ng’s fieldwork with Pentecostal Christians in China, for example, found that urban Christians were less likely to have a sensory experience of God than rural Christians. Her findings echo Taylor’s contrast between the ‘buffered self’ and the ‘porous self’ with the modern West (especially the United States) and the pre-modern non-West, i.e., that the two selves’ can co-exist in the same social space and time (Ng 2020).

Inspired by this concept of the ‘porous mind,’ we argue that—although different from the larger ‘field’ of social space and time—at Sheshan, in the sacred space and time of pilgrimage, a pilgrim’s body can also become ‘porous.’ One parishioner surnamed Gao, explained her feelings to us as such: “Every time I cross the threshold of the Laity Gate I feel happy that I am ascending the holy mountain of the Lord. In fact, there are times when one is tired, but after singing a (holy) song, or praying the rosary, one climbs very easily and is not tired at all. While walking and praying the rosary, God takes away your sore feet, takes away your tiredness, and one is happy to have His company, and climbs up the mountain at once.” The phrases and descriptions Gao uses, such as ‘friendly,’ ‘happy,’ ‘joyful,’ and ‘relaxed,’ were recurring ones in pilgrims’ descriptions of the feeling of coming to Sheshan. Another pilgrim surnamed Lu, gave us an illustrative and exuberant description: “As soon as I stepped through the door, it was a ‘wow’ feeling of being graced—gosh! Mother, I am home! That’s what it feels like! Once you get to Sheshan, you’re relaxed!” In these accounts, as the body moves through physical space, closer and closer to the focal point of the sacred at the peak of the mountain, the religious emotions of the faithful become stronger and stronger—in other words, the experience of the sacred becomes more and more intense. The door of the Laity Gate is, as Gao put it, like a threshold—and stepping through it marks entry into the sacred, a place and moment “within time and outside of time,” accompanied by a distinct physical and mental change. As Lu said, “It’s that feeling of release, feeling like Mother Mary is going to save me!”

This ‘release’ and ‘relaxation’ is a physical and psychological experience, often resulting from a series of physical practices during the pilgrimage. For example, conversations with and gazing with purpose at images is a common practice among Sheshan pilgrims. Unlike in most Protestant denominations, images—or icons—hold a very important place in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and the role of images is directly linked with their physicality and materiality (Norget et al. 2017). In Catholic pilgrimage sites around the world, it is common to see the faithful kissing images or reaching out to touch them and then themselves (e.g., Peña 2011). In conversation with the images, the content of the prayers of the faithful in front of the Three Holy Pavilions varies depending on the object of the prayers. Another parishioner, surnamed Hui, said that when she comes to Sheshan,

she always goes to the Three Holy Pavilions to pray first, and specifically to St Joseph first. She told us that she does this because

“great St. Joseph did not say a word in the Bible, but always gave quietly. He is the protector of laborers, so in front of him we always pray for the men in the family, because the man is the head of the family. This is not to say that women are inferior to men, but that men should love women too, and women are like his body, and both sides are complementary. Although my husband is not a believer, I would like God to keep him safe, and I would like him to be tolerant when I am not very reasonable at home. I pray for the women in my family in front of Our Lady, and I will also have friends who ask me to intercede for them in front of Our Lady, and for the parishioners who cannot come to Sheshan. Also, if I see someone who is sick, I will pray for them before Our Lady. In front of Jesus [pavilion], I confess myself—for example, the sins I committed this recent week—and hope that God will forgive me. Although they are all small sins, I hope that they can be washed out often, just like putting them in the washing machine, otherwise they get dirtier and dirtier.”

As one of the priests at Sheshan explained to us, “One needs to see something, feel something, and the role of images is to help one lift one’s heart up through them. No one will take an image to be the real God.” Images are meant to help, then, to create the sacred atmosphere of a holy place and serve as a tool to help the faithful pray. The image is redolent with the power of the divine that is bound up behind it; their prayers in front of the image are considered to have a practical, tangible effect. At Sheshan, praying in front of the images in the basilica, through the ‘touch’ of their senses with the image—such as gazing and calling upon the name of God and the saints with their words—they enter into a certain interaction with the transcendent other through the image. This interaction indicates both the ‘outer world’ and the ‘inner world’ and is a reflective and embodied process.

3.3. Bodily Release

Another form of making the invisible, transcendent other tangible or able to be sensed is the organization of one’s thoughts and language.⁶ Whether it is parishioners Lu, Gao, or Hui, each said that they would “think about what they want to ask Mother Mary and confess to Jesus this time.” Each time they prayed at the pavilions might well be different from the previous, “depending on the specific needs of each visit.” Their prayers often involve—as detailed above—conversation with the image, either in one’s thoughts or out loud or through reciting Scripture. Their words are—as they were for Hui, above—a form of ‘release.’ But, there is also a physical release too, often sought by pilgrims at Sheshan. Lu, for instance, told us that she had once made a special pilgrimage to Sheshan for a young woman in her congregation who was suffering from depression. The woman called Lu one day to tell her that she was feeling bad, and Lu felt that while she “didn’t have the strength to help [the woman],” she would go on a pilgrimage to Sheshan the next day to pray for her.

During that pilgrimage, she felt so ill that she vomited while holding onto the railing. Undertaking the Via Crucis, she told us, “I felt bad from the first station, but I couldn’t throw up. I reached the seventh station and I kept throwing up, I wanted to vomit out all my intestines and all my internal organs, it was so uncomfortable.” She had fasted, however, that day, so there was “nothing to vomit up, just dry heaving, I felt very nauseous, I wanted to vomit out all my organs, so uncomfortable I wanted to kneel, but I could not breathe or stand up, ow, at that time I really wanted to sit on the stone steps to take a break, but then I also couldn’t sit down.” But, as she told it, by the end of this difficult path—by the time she reached the peak—she was no longer uncomfortable. The next day, the girl told her that she was feeling much better. As she put it, “that’s how it is sometimes, right, you pray for someone, she will feel it, she can feel it.”

Gao told us that she had also gained a similar experience of release in the process of praying Via Crucis:

Gao: You know what? Maybe the Holy Spirit touched my body, I don't know why I just wanted to cry, but I kept crying for a long time. I had seldom been so involved. I brought a friend with me that day to pray the Via Crucis, and he had not yet entered God, so maybe the Holy Spirit was working on me. The environment around me was very noisy, but my heart was always very determined. It was the experience of being with God's Holy Spirit, and I kept kneeling over there and just couldn't leave. My friend kept tapping on my shoulder, three times. When we were praying together on the Via Crucis, when we reached the seventh station, didn't we see Sister Ashi vomiting over there? That day, when we reached the seventh station, I vomited myself. When I vomited, I was clearing my inner sins or past traumas.

Interviewer: How long did it last?

Gao: I stayed for about 20 min, but I couldn't leave, I stayed there, and the experience of staying there was simply the happiness of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

Interviewer: What kind of happiness was it?

Gao: It was a feeling of relaxation and joy, a feeling of being connected at that moment, a feeling of being able to communicate with Him (God). It is comfortable, just comfortable all the time, very comfortable.

The Via Crucis allows the faithful to experience and feel the suffering of Jesus on his way to the crucifixion and, then, the joy at his resurrection. The great cross erected at the final point of the Via Crucis at Sheshan symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus, which means light and help—it is supposed to be joyful. As the pilgrim's journey progresses, the pilgrim's emotions change from initial suffering to relief and joy, accompanied as they are by Mary and Jesus. By the time Lu and Gao reached the final station, the 'suffering' was over. Gao gained a strong sense and experience of the Holy Spirit, the Divine Presence—the climax of the pilgrimage. This intensified perception of the divine is not merely a strong and firm belief in a passively accepted consciousness. Still, an active interpretation is given to the experience through the practice of the holistic body and mind, building on previous similar experiences. The 'happiness of being with the Holy Spirit,' in Xiao Gao's words, would have been something she had experienced before, given that it was something she recognized.

Gao and Lu's experiences are not a demonstration of what Coleman (2022) has argued is a trope of pilgrimage studies, the "spontaneous, unmediated experience of communitas-like connection with unknown others" (Coleman 2014, p. S288), but rather an experience thoroughly mediated by and building on their past bodily experiences, connecting not to unknown others but with the divine and known fellow faithful. Scholars have long argued that (Protestant) linguistic models for understanding faith overlook the "important roles of the body, experience, and emotion in religious processes—processes of belief" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 80)—especially for Catholicism. Rather, faith is developed as part of a "process through which primarily non-linguistic knowledge is produced and reproduced to generate a distinctive orientation to the world" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 81). Mitchell and Mitchell point, for instance, to how Maltese Catholics embody a Catholic habitus through bodily performance, such as learning not to bite the Eucharist or the learned appropriate postures and gestures of children taking their First Communion—eyes lowered, bowing at the knees. The reverence that Maltese Catholics display toward the Eucharist "does not demonstrate an inner orientation to the host in Communion—a 'belief in its capacity for salvation—but actively constitutes it'" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 86). In this process, the boundary between the body and the external world interpenetrates: on the one hand, the believer dedicates their pain, tears, nausea, and suffering to God; and on the other hand, the invisible and Divine Spirit crosses over from the 'external' 'supernatural' world and affects the body of the believer and, through the body, makes itself perceptible and tangible by entering the 'secular' realm. Here, the body is not only a

vehicle/representation of the meaning/text but a presentation of the meaning/text itself—bringing out the faith into the realm of the tangible.

4. Conclusions

This paper foregrounds the religious practice of pilgrimage in order to better understand the act of pilgrimage as understood by worshippers themselves, with a specific focus on the pilgrim's experience. Here, we dovetail with Coleman's recent call against "rigid characterizations of what is and is not a genuine or authentic pilgrimage," contending that scholars must "widen our horizons in recognizing physical, cultural, and intellectual terrains of pilgrimage activity" (Kosansky 2002, p. 15). Drawing on the Turners, we emphasize experience beyond a single transcendental moment and towards the wider foundation and layers of sacred materiality, understood and internalized through a porous body.

We have shown that materiality is a constant element in the pilgrimage process at Sheshan. Originally a place where Buddhism and Taoism flourished, Sheshan was constructed in a specific historical context and built on the concrete practices of the faithful to be the international Catholic pilgrimage site that we see today. This process 'sanctified' the materiality of Sheshan, such as the church, images, and so forth, which—over a long period of time—were created and given collective or individual, sacred or secular meanings. The sacred place as a tangible location necessarily involves many materialities, such as the natural material properties inherent in the sacred place itself; the materiality of substances or objects with religious symbolic meanings, such as buildings and pilgrimage artifacts; and the materiality of imagination with regards to ghosts or sacred images. On the one hand, the process of pilgrimage may be seen as a form of religious figuration. On the other hand, it is also a field in which the materiality of history and the present, the human body and the imagination, are constantly intertwined. These materialities help to construct the sacred space of Sheshan; create the sacred atmosphere; deepen the pilgrim's perception of the presence of the transcendent other, and stimulate the pilgrim's inner religious devotion and emotion. Furthermore, pilgrims' imaginations of the materiality of the past and present accumulate and repeat through time, constantly constructing the materiality of Sheshan as a sacred place and the pilgrimage practices of worshippers—and vice versa.

The process of pilgrimage at Sheshan is a process of interaction between the pilgrim's body and the materialities of the sacred site. This is particularly evident in the sensory experiences of pilgrimage, such as physical suffering, dialogue with the image, gazing upon the image, and so forth. In the continuous interaction between subject and object, the pilgrim can materially connect and interact with the transcendent other—such as God and the Virgin Mary—and point to people, events, and objects of the past, present, and future. Here, again, through the process of interaction between the body and materiality, the pilgrim gains the experience of transformation. The transformation can be physical or spiritual; in many cases, it is a dual experience of mind and body—such as the 'release' that worshippers often say they experience after a pilgrimage. Finally, when the pilgrimage is a religious experience, the 'body in pilgrimage' brings out the body in three senses—the physical, the social, and the theological—as the physicality of the time and space of the sacred place asserts itself. The Sheshan pilgrim's body is given multiple meanings and possibilities, interpenetrating the boundary between one's body and the external world. Pilgrimages are often 'functional' in terms of their immediate motivation, such as encountering difficulties and disappointments in life or hoping to accumulate good works, gain favor, or help someone in distress. But, from the perspective of the worshipper, pilgrimage is not simply an act of asking for blessings but a physical and mental practice that produces practical effects within a specific faith system and discourse.

The pilgrimage at Sheshan demonstrates how faith can be experienced simultaneously in the external physical body and the internal mind. At the external, visible level, pilgrims express their faith and longing through the material interaction between their bodies and holy spaces. At the internal, invisible level, worshippers experience pilgrimage as the spiritual activity of integrating the texts and doctrines of the faith, such as the

Catechism, with their own lives and experiences as lived. Although Catholicism is a religion with a strict ecclesiastical and hierarchical organization, the faith as lived contains immense room for personal expression to be imagined and acted upon, on top of the foundational meanings provided by texts such as doctrine and catechism. Thus, on the one hand, at the practical level, the faithful physically act out the doctrinal and catechetical texts in their pilgrimage while at the same time attaching their personal meanings to them. In fact, it is not difficult to find that a pilgrim's whole life—from birth, old age, sickness, and death to the extremely trivial events of daily life—may be closely linked narratively to Sheshan, and that pilgrimage is also a moment of encounter with the saints and with God in their religious tradition. On the other hand, through the pilgrim's imagination of the blurred border between the body and the transcendent other, the body tries to transcend the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside,' between subject and object, so that the pilgrimage can become an experience of the 'porous body and mind.'

For Catholics at Sheshan, pilgrimage might be thought of as divided into two senses: one, narrow, where the faithful physically go to holy places to make wishes, give thanks, and do penance; and two, broad, where the long road of a believer's life is metaphorically a pilgrimage to God and heaven.⁷ In this sense, the term pilgrimage is not merely an act of practice in a specific physical space and time but also reflects a psychological or spiritual state in which the faithful desire to be close to the divine presence materially, physically, and psychologically. For them, pilgrimage is a holistic experience that connects the pilgrim to the world in which he finds himself and to their own ongoing process of becoming whole on the path of faith—"always on the way," as they themselves put it.

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Notes

- ¹ The dominant approach in pilgrimage studies has been to emphasize the political-economic processes and social functions of pilgrimage, while pilgrims themselves and their experiences are often neglected. Related reviews and discussions can be found at [Huang and Zheng \(2021\)](#). Return to Person and his/her Experiences: Another Approach to the Study of Pilgrimage. Journal of ECNU, No. 6.
- ² Indeed, although it is beyond the scope of this particular article, a better umbrella term may be *tizhi* (体知), referring to bodily knowledge, reasoning and sensation.
- ³ Data from Songjiang County History, published in 1991 by the Shanghai Songjiang County Local History Compilation Committee. 上海松江县地方史志编纂委员会. 松江志[M]. 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1991.
- ⁴ In Catholic tradition, the "B" class of shrines is the second class of shrines after the only four Extraordinary Basilicas (in Rome and the Vatican), such as the famous Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes in France. The Basilica of Our Lady of Sheshan was also the first basilica in the Far East to be dedicated by the Pope.
- ⁵ Here again the distinction can be seen between Christianity preached and Christianity perceived and practiced, in other words, the doctrine taught in texts and pulpits cannot simply be equated with the actuality of the faith of believers. A discussion of this can be found in [Huang \(2013\)](#). Local Culture and the Formation of a Faith Community. Beijing: Zhishi Chanquan Press (黄剑波: 《地方文化与信仰共同体的生成》, 知识产权出版社, 2013年)

⁶ The Judeo-Christian tradition is generally considered to be typical of “literal” religions, with an emphasis on language and its use. We agree with this broad view, but the reason we have devoted a lot of ink to the details of the physical actions of ordinary believers during the Catholic pilgrimage to Sheshan is to point out that the non-verbal practice of faith is also a fundamental element that cannot be ignored, and that its exaltation of language or words does not automatically block out other messages, perhaps even equally important and crucial ones.

⁷ In terms of this imagery, John Bunyan’s “Journey to Heaven” is probably the most eloquent expression of it.

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Essay

The Struggle to Define Pilgrimage

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Abstract: This essay arises from research carried out between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2020 among pilgrims who had participated in the Camino de Santiago in north-western Spain and St Patrick’s Purgatory, on Lough Derg in the northwest of Ireland. Research focused on embodied experience in relation to pilgrim motivation, groundedness and the enduring power of sacred travel as ritual. Convergent considerations about psychology, theology and pilgrimage studies clarified perspective on descriptions and definitions of pilgrimage in contemporary literature. Long-standing questions about journey vs. destination are subsumed into a description of pilgrimage which emphasizes larger process. Interconnected elements of this process are a most significant part of the enduring appeal of contemporary Western pilgrimage.

Keywords: pilgrimage; St. Patrick’s Purgatory; Lough Derg; Camino de Santiago; Turner; spirituality; postmodernity; theological perspectives

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century surge of interest in pilgrimage has been noted by a number of recent articles reflecting on the contrasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the practice (for example, [Bailey 2022](#)). This surge included interest in ancient forms of pilgrimage established during the first millennium of Christendom and boasting a continuous lifeline. The research upon which this essay is based explored two such pilgrimages among 2018 and 2019 pilgrims to either a small, remote island on Lough Derg in County Donegal in the North West of Ireland or along the routes of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain. The desire of these pilgrims for a strongly physical pilgrimage was a particular focus and therefore the experience of embodiment and how that experience was interpreted formed the substance of the research questions. The research approach was interdisciplinary and included psychology, (in particular of the body), theology (in particular theological anthropology), and the intersection of these older forms of knowledge with the newer genre of pilgrimage studies. A phenomenological analysis which included both psychological and theological hermeneutics was the research method adopted.

Pilgrims and pilgrimage scholars who are familiar with both pilgrimages will recognise immediately that the nature of these two pilgrimages is vastly different in terms of duration, focus and spirituality, albeit with a shared root of devotion to one of the early Christian saints—St. Patrick for Lough Derg and St. James for the Camino. The pilgrimage to Lough Derg, still considered one of the hardest Christian pilgrimages,¹ is a three day-event with a potent combination of fasting, sleep deprivation and multiple repetitions of a long series of sequenced prayers and ritual gestures, whilst walking barefoot around and among ancient stone structures called ‘penitential beds’. The pilgrimage along the Camino routes requires long days of walking all the while oriented towards a future arrival at the shrine of St. James in the cathedral city of Santiago de Compostela. Engagement in other spiritual rituals on route is at the pilgrim’s discretion as is the duration, depending on whether or not the pilgrim chooses to complete an entire route in one pilgrimage (four



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to six weeks) or over a number of years proceeding along sections of the route in multi-annual visits. Despite these not insignificant differences, the common factor, that of the willingness to pursue an intensely physical experience through ancient pilgrimage patterns, was sufficiently curious to warrant further exploration. The research findings required not only review of the contested definitions and descriptions of pilgrimage found in recent and contemporary literature but clarity about what remains essential to the enduring appeal of sacred travel. This movement between review and clarity about the nature of pilgrimage is the substance of the following discussion, beginning with the permeations of the contemporary context and concluding by offering a new description and definition of this ancient form of sacred travel.

2. What Is Pilgrimage Now?

To ask, 'What is pilgrimage now?' is a recurrently critical question for pilgrimage scholars. It is one to which research authors have returned frequently, and indeed on occasion, in dedicated issues of research journals.² The contemporary context—the said 'now' of the question—is itself partly responsible for a much stretched range of answers for, as LeSueur observes, 'up until the middle of the last century, pilgrimage would have typically been understood in relation to religious practice' (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. 16). During the medieval period, for example, there was perhaps less room for nuance. The role of pilgrim was particularly visible, had an almost self-evidentiary purpose of piety and penitence and the pilgrim's personal and communal experiences, for all their colour, had remarkably similar themes, at least in how they have been preserved in literature, poetry, song and devotional texts from the period.³ By contrast, in the contemporary era, sometimes but not unanimously called 'post-modernity',⁴ no such clear pattern would seem to exist. Indeed, some suggest, as Greenia has, that today because 'everything is pilgrimage, nothing is pilgrimage' (Nickerson et al. 2018, p. 1). He contends, therefore, that a crucial first task when performing 'triage on definitional boundaries of pilgrimage', as he puts it, is to 'fess up to runaway metaphors'. With characteristic humour, he underscores his point with a memorable quip overheard from a journalist: 'it's hard to be a pilgrim in a latté world' (Ibid., p. 2). Haller makes a more acerbic assertion, in his exploration of whether pilgrimage can have any meaning in a scientific world, when he dismisses popular pilgrimage author Cousineau's recontextualising of pilgrimage (Cousineau 1998) for a post-modern readership as 'an understanding of pilgrimage' which 'opens the door to permit *almost any activity* being interpreted as pilgrimage' (Haller 2017, p. 27).

Novel descriptions leading to new definitions, followed by speedy critiques and contestations of such new definitions have become characteristic of much of the intellectual discourse of our post-modern era. In the wake of what some describe as the 'end of the grand narrative between different cultural and philosophical contexts' and any 'possibility of universal criteria to form a basis for all claims to truth' (Coakley 2013, p. 13), post-modernity has ensured that the 'taken for granted parameters around which pilgrimage was ensconced have come under scrutiny' (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. ix). It is possible to suggest perhaps, that postmodernity, with its deconstruction of any assumed uniformly applicable truths, has given birth to *Pilgrimage Studies* as an independent and distinct genre of study. Lest we imagine, however, that pilgrimage might therefore be now cleanly excised from its historical context and roots, Felski helpfully reminds us that any new context is 'a messy hopscotch and rich confusion, a spillage across period boundaries in which we are thoroughly implicated in the historical phenomena we describe', concluding aptly, 'pastness is part of who we are' (Felski 2011, pp. 579 and 578, respectively).

Literature which has become available through this relatively new genre of *Pilgrimage Studies* is largely of two broad categories. Personal accounts of doing pilgrimage or amalgamas of such stories is one such category. Historical accounts of this nature have been instrumental to pilgrimage historians endeavouring to assess the practice with fresh perspective. The distinct change in recent decades is the sheer volume of personal literature becoming published in both traditional and new ways. The *blog* medium, for example,

has become particularly popular among pilgrims of the Camino.⁵ A number of Confraternities of St. James⁶ also archive personal accounts.⁷ Spirituality and pilgrimage scholar, Bernadette Flanagan, in her study of pilgrimage (2019), has observed patterns in the subject matter and narrative style of such contemporary pilgrim accounts. In a virtual conference presentation of the same study in 2021,⁸ she offered a helpful thematic inventory of such literature from the mid-twentieth century to the present, converted here into tabulated form (see Table 1).

Table 1. An Inventory of themes in contemporary personal accounts of pilgrimage (After Flanagan 2019).

Timeframe	Patterns of Emphases and Themes
1960–1990	Pilgrimage as Religious tourism—distinctive visits to particular sites
1990–2000	Pilgrimage as ‘Spiritual Journey’—the inner world of the pilgrim their behavioural motivations in search of inspiration and awakening
2000–2010	Pilgrimage as Sacred Mobility—a way to gain deeper perspective on life; a distinct postmodern/Kafkaesque trend—the departure away from here; the emphasis more on what we are leaving behind than moving toward
2010–2020	Pilgrimage as a series of ‘experiential moments’—deep encounters with oneself (and includes a raft of autobiographies which are much less focused on rituals at a Sacred Centre and much more about how the experience is affecting one’s life and consciousness)

A second category of pilgrimage literature is that of pilgrimage scholarship based on primary and secondary research. Dyas believes that the ‘wide-openness of current pilgrimage research’ has been both helpful and unhelpful; helpful in the way that it has shaken assumptions and asked new questions and unhelpful, ‘when every journey from wine tastings to making patchwork quilts can be daubed ‘a pilgrimage’ she concludes somewhat impatiently (Dyas 2020b). More hopefully, McIntosh suggests that the great diversity in the work of contemporary scholars is ‘driving the dialogue on pilgrimage by contesting its definitions and challenging its paradigms’, ensuring, he continues that ‘pilgrimage studies will remain visible for many years to come’ (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. xi). He, Greenia and Quinn took further lead by adding to the list of diverse attempts at definitions in the 2017 William and Mary Symposium centred on the apparently straightforward question: *What is Pilgrimage?* (Nickerson et al. 2018, pp. 1–6). Quinn began with a pithy, universal view that wherever human beings are in the world they move and, because we are meaning-making creatures, she insists, humans imbue their movements with symbolic importance (ibid., p. 5). McIntosh suggests that pilgrimage is comprised of three interlocking journeys, the first, the quintessential ‘setting out’ of the pilgrim; the second is the level and significance of ‘the presence of other pilgrims’ met along the way and the third is what he calls ‘the journey of place’, the shifting socio-political-cultural context of the pilgrimage destination in and of itself (ibid., pp. 3–4). Finally, Greenia’s definition, (ibid., p. 7; Harman 2014, p. 9), which he supplements in a further presentation to the same symposium, (Greenia 2018, pp. 7–15) detailing six premises of the pilgrim and seven complementary aspects pertaining to the experience of being a pilgrim, reads as follows:

Sacred Travel may be viewed as a ritualized sequence of leave-taking from one’s normal life and social network, then during the trip an immersion in an altered state of ‘liminality’ or threshold, living usually with a unique polity of strangers which forms its own society or *communitas*. Eventually there is a reincorporation as someone transformed and endowed with holy experience and gifts that enrich the imagined community that was left behind.

Dyas too sought to include explicit reference to the spiritual dimension of pilgrimage so as to distinguish it from more tourist-like visits to sacred places, although she is resolutely open to the possibility of pilgrimage ‘occurring’ for a visitor who had initially set out simply

on such a secular tour (Dyas 2021). Like Quinn, she situates pilgrimage in a broad universal human practice, one she calls, ‘mapping meaning onto place’, which she observes has ‘massively revived’ in recent decades (Dyas 2018). Dyas also seems keen to expand in a direction away from the ubiquitous image of trail pilgrims such as the Camino walker, by stating strongly that the mode of travel is peripheral to the core pilgrimage experience which she describes as:

... a state of openness to spiritual engagement, through place and journey, whether planned or spontaneous, limited neither by mode of transport nor distance travelled. This encapsulates those who travel with clear intent and those who might find themselves unexpectedly ambushed by, and responsive to, the power of place (Dyas 2020a).

3. The ‘Turnerian Paradigm’ and Its Contests

Perhaps the most well-known ‘scholarly spat’ regarding definitions of pilgrimage arose when Eade and Sallnow challenged what they considered was the uncritically positive reception of Victor and Edith Turner’s work on pilgrimage in the latter half of the twentieth century (1991). The Turners were anthropologists whose field work in Africa was heavily influenced by the perspective of ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, in his *Rites of Passage* (1908/1960). They began to see correlations between the rituals of the tribal cultures they were studying and pilgrimage practices within their own faith tradition, Catholicism. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978) soon became, and for many still remains, a seminal text in pilgrimage literature. Alongside related articles credited to Victor Turner, their work has continued to sound somewhat of a discordant ‘rattle and hum’ in that same discourse. In part, the discord queries the level of influence that theories about traditional religious pilgrimage, have had or should continue to have upon our understanding of global studies of pilgrimage in contemporary discourse. And, in part there is a genuinely, critical examination of the detail of the Turners’ theory and its formative influence on interpretations of pilgrimage since then. Before speaking to these contests, let me describe the ‘emblematic core’ of the Turners’ contribution to pilgrimage studies.

In the Preface to the 1978 edition, Editor Turner likens the pilgrim to one ‘embarking on an adventure, ... like a spiritual work of archaeology, she is delving in the ancient past for the renewal of the original experience, ... not a fusty, dead past, [but] a journey to an actual place, where pilgrims touch the sacred object and then touch themselves’. This, she continues, is the ‘archaeology of experience, the anthropology of actual effectiveness and of the body’ (1978, p. xv). She cites Charles Laughlin’s conviction that ‘the full impact of the religious material of pilgrimage cannot be understood without some kind of plunge into the experience of it’ (ibid., p. xix). In such remarks Edith Turner captures the particular quality of her and her husband’s observations on pilgrimage—stepping into the pilgrim shoes with a kind of contemplative seeing of their world and worldview, documenting what was felt, observed and witnessed, yet all the while with an anthropologist’s eye. With an authoritative play on Mircea Eliade’s signature idea of the *axis mundi*, (the absolute Centre), in his various studies on the nature of religion (Eliade 1961, p. 21), the Turners emphasise an alternate pattern in pilgrimage-making of journeying to the periphery and finding the Centre ‘out there’ (Turner 1973). They adopted and adapted the ‘separation-liminality’ and ‘re-incorporation’ triad of tribal initiation ritual. They were particularly struck by the way, *communitas* spontaneously grows and becomes sustained among pilgrims (1978, p. 13). At first they defined this *communitas* as that ‘commonness of feeling’ that can be observed among pilgrims journeying together. It was to become perhaps the most contested conclusion from their research, some dismissing this ‘utopian kind of harmony’, (which a small number of other pilgrimage scholars subsequently concluded the Turners were insinuating here), as a particular bone of contention. For their part, in fact the Turners were quite precise in their use of the term *communitas* and even introduced qualifiers, such as ‘normative/ideological and existential to elaborate on particular types of *communitas*, which they believed they had observed arising among pilgrims. *Normative communitas*, they say,

describes the way in which pilgrims ‘mobilize and organise resources to keep one another alive and thriving’ on the pilgrim journey and ‘constitutes the characteristic social bond among pilgrims and between those who offer them help and hospitality’ along the way (Turner 1973, p. 194). They were always clear such *communitas* had a temporary nature.

However, ‘the Turnerian paradigm’, as it came to be called, was soon to be challenged as ‘deterministic’ and insufficiently heterogeneous. Such conclusions, certainly within pilgrimage scholarship, were most strongly articulated by Eade and Sallnow, as referenced above. They challenged the idea of pilgrimage as a universalism, particularly ‘a universalism of discourse’, and they argue that the only characteristic universal to pilgrimage is ‘the capacity of a cult to entertain and respond to a plurality’ (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 15). ‘There is no such thing as ‘pilgrimage’, they argue succinctly, only ‘pilgrimages’ (ibid., p. 3). In fact, it could be said that the Turners would concur, for they stressed how each ‘pilgrimage has its own entelechy, its own immanent force controlling and directing development’ (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 25). Eade and Sallnow also challenge what they perceive as the Turners’ insistence on ‘harmonious communitas’ (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 5). Instead, they contend that most pilgrimages, are, on the contrary, contested sacred spaces in some shape or form, and they argue that what is notable is not that pilgrimage ‘removes the sting of divisiveness’ (Turner 1973, p. 221), but rather the omnipresence of ‘conflicting perceptions and doctrinal schisms’ (1991, pp. 13–14). Post et al., argue that Eade and Sallnow were being provocative in that typical ‘postmodernist way’, by ‘dismissing all prevailing paradigms’. They also wonder how truly ‘new’ their own agenda was and they question whether Eade and Sallnow managed to distance themselves from the Turners paradigm as much as they would like to think (Post et al. 1998, pp. 54–55). It is worth noting that Post et al. themselves declare the Turners’ work as ‘too rigid’ or ‘one-dimensional’ (Ibid., pp. 56,64, respectively). Their take is similar to Coleman’s view, who while appreciating the new directions that pilgrimage scholarship was to take on foot of this ‘turn on the Turners’, suggests also that there not be as much difference between Eade and Sallnow’s ideas of pilgrimage as contestation of sacred space (and contested discourse), and what the Turners offer with *communitas*, (outlining several concrete examples), and concludes, rather witheringly:

In my terms, contestation can be seen as parasitic on the communitas paradigm, reinterpreting its analytical and ethnographic significance while also, ironically, keeping the shape and salience of its approach’ (Coleman 2014, pp. 285–86 and more extensively throughout Coleman 2002).

Despite this critique from Coleman, he began to collaborate with one of the authors, John Eade, soon afterwards to good effect, in continued, and it must be stressed, genuine efforts, to reframe pilgrimage for the contemporary era (Coleman and Eade 2004, 2018; Coleman et al. 2016, 2020). With Sallnow in the aforementioned text (Eade and Sallnow 1991), Eade had also challenged what they perceived as the Turners narrow focus on the place-centred element of pilgrimages, the destinations, the shrines etc. Instead, they suggested that pilgrimage can be better understood by observing it as various combinations of ‘people, places and texts’. In the 2004 collaboration with Coleman, which begins with an exhaustive account of the shifting emphases of pilgrimage definition, they add ‘movement’ as a fourth essential ingredient to their elemental combination of peregrination, in a bid to widen the analytic lens still further (ibid., pp. 22–24). Their addition of this fourth ingredient had particular relevance for my own research.

Sánchez y Sánchez and Hesp (2015) also welcome the way the debate about the Turnerian paradigm. Noting particularly how it supported the emergence of the genre of pilgrimage studies. They agree that it is challenging to escape the influence of *communitas* because, as they confess, ‘this communal experience is such a constitutive part of the (Camino pilgrimage) trail’ (ibid., p. 2) in particular. Perhaps, for similar reasons, the various contests inspired by these and similar debates (See, for example Pechilis 1992, 2017) have done little to dissuade scores of pilgrimage scholars from using the Turners’ pilgrimage paradigm, particularly the ideas of ‘liminoid phenomenon’ (Turner and Turner

1978, pp. 1–39) and the *separation-communitas-reincorporation* triad, as solid foundation for their interpretation of pilgrimage research (See for example Hill 2004; Greenia 2018; Kaell 2016; Warfield 2013).

4. The Theological Perspective

Another strong voice in this lively debate about the parameters of the definition of pilgrimage has been that of Peter Margry. His views also guide us into a brief exploration of some of the theological views on the contemporary experience of and discourse about pilgrimage, a perspective incorporated into this interdisciplinary study. In the opening chapter of his edited collection on *Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Modern World* (Margry 2008), Margry acknowledges that it can often be difficult to distinguish today between the nature of the many sacred journeys made as memorial visits *and* sacred journeys as pilgrimage. However, with considerable candour and clarity, he declares that ‘it is contra productive to use the concept of pilgrimage as a combination term for both secular and religious phenomena, thereby turning it into much too broad a concept’ (ibid., p. 14). He goes even further by adding that ‘secular pilgrimage’ is not only a term ‘so bandied about today’, but also one that is ‘oxymoronic’ (ibid.). Margry proceeds to describe pilgrimage as ‘a complex of behaviours and rituals in the domain of the sacred and the transcendent, a global phenomenon, in which religion and *a fortiori* religious people often manifest themselves in the most powerful, collective and performative way’ (ibid.). He acknowledges that apart from the fascination of researchers the more important factor in the surge of academic interest in pilgrimage is, ‘the great socio-cultural and politico-strategic significance of this religious phenomenon’ (ibid.). Multiple challenges notwithstanding, Margry offers his own definition of pilgrimage to companion his earlier description stressing that pilgrimage is ‘a journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physical healing or benefit’ (ibid., p. 17).

Roszak, pilgrimage scholar and theologian of the Catholic tradition, offers a critical appraisal of his home tradition but is also concerned that contemporary pilgrimage not lose some of the core formal content that distinguishes it from other forms of meaningful journey-making (Roszak 2019, 2022). He suggests that, ‘a theology of pilgrimage defines what makes pilgrimage valuable from a theological point of view, what justifies it, and what elements it has to contain in order to be classified as such’ (2022, p. 8).

Mindful of the significant heritage within his tradition, particularly pilgrimages linked to ‘places of apparition’, Roszak is nonetheless cautious about the ‘magical approach’ that some pilgrims may have had at times in their desires for change or benefits from making their pilgrimage (2019, p. 35). By contrast, he seeks to shift emphasis away from the magic and towards the power of physical presence in pilgrimage as, ‘a work of grace in incarnational embodied form’ and leading to ‘a recovery of relationship’. Additionally, he stresses that pilgrimage provides for a very important need in a ‘post-religious secular society, to see the world in the sacred manner, i.e., *sub ratione Dei*’. The point, he emphasises is not to ‘escape’ from the world but to ‘experience it more deeply, abandoning superficial life and turning to the profound understanding of it’ (ibid., p. 39).

In his most recent exploration on pilgrimage, Roszak traces the lineage of the religious dimension through the main historical epochs up to and including the contemporary. He believes that the theological dimension can often be missed, or eclipsed in the broad phenomenological perspective of much contemporary pilgrimage literature as, ‘it does not ask about the core issues’ (2022, p. 117). He offers the following Table 2 summarising some of the emphases of the various periods although aware that the brevity of description risks a measure of simplification (2022, p. 120).

Table 2. Main Themes of Different Theologies of Pilgrimage.

Patristic period	Place-centered
Middle Ages	God-centered
Modernity	Self-centered
Post-modernity	Problem-centered
Post-Secularism	Process-centered

Roszak then outlines eight contemporary definitions of pilgrimage, which include a theological dimension, before he offers a more exhaustive list of what he believes are those ‘formal’ theological aspects of pilgrimage that contemporary researchers, including many of those listed, often eclipse (2022, pp. 122–25).

5. A Working Description and Definition of Pilgrimage

The various pilgrimage scholars referenced above, even in this brief sketch, indicate how fertile the discourse on pilgrimage has become and how the various contestations therein have added to that growth and expanse. Having personally conducted research in the field it is hard to resist the temptation to enter the fray and offer yet another perspective on both description and definition of contemporary pilgrimage.

In the case of the two pilgrimages under the lens of this research, and particularly as I analysed the data, I became increasingly mindful of what I perceived as a “givenness” in pilgrimage, a multiplicity of possibility, as it were, which pre-exists the contemporary pilgrim in that the pilgrimage experience offers itself anew as a ‘living-world’ to each new and intending pilgrim in turn. Lawrence Taylor offers an insightful analysis of contemporary pilgrimage, when he says:

The plasticity and relative malleability of pilgrimage, the space it often leaves for individual and collective agency, and its ambiguous character as religious or secular activity all contribute to making it a uniquely potent way of maintaining or asserting a moral geography that reconfigures the world for personal and collective purposes (Taylor 2012, pp. 209–10).

There is much worthy of ‘unpacking’ in this analysis, but for the moment let me note the nuance Taylor expresses in asserting that pilgrimage offers something unique and particular to the contemporary pilgrim. This ‘something offered’, which I began to name as a ‘givenness’, encourages me to offer the following description of contemporary pilgrimage:

The living world of pilgrimage as process, is complex and potent, an ever evolving interconnectedness of many elements, including–place/s, (often but not exclusively peripheral, in what some call a ‘therapeutic landscape’⁹ Maddrell 2013, p. 64), particular locations, engendering story/stories (including often that of a revered or saintly person/event or both), performative ritual/s, (personal and communal both), the promise/possibility of a glimpse of the transcendent, history, hagiography, politics (past and present, local and international), a stewarding community/communities and, finally, a facilitative infrastructure.

This term ‘givenness’ initially had helped me describe more accurately how the internal rigour of the pilgrimage on Lough Derg and along the routes of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, require the pilgrim to become more body-focused. The research data suggested strongly that paying attention to the body in a mindful, deliberate way quickly became a non-negotiable aspect of both these pilgrimages. Kay, one of my Camino pilgrim research respondents, for example, reflects on it like this:

That whole thing of just walking and thinking- the rhythm of it; and the landscape is so varied and beautiful; you are walking through the vineyards and the fields, you know that kind of thing. I loved it. I just loved the Pyrenees, out of this world. Again, it’s the

rhythm and the discipline of the walking, there is just something about it, a whole kind of other awareness comes with it.

And Fiachra, one of the Lough Derg research respondents similarly reflects:

But it's something, like, sure such a pilgrimage is good for your faith like but the other thing is, I think it is good for your brain and body too. There's no mobile phone and there's no one getting at you. This is three days. You have time to relax, time to take in, and it definitely cleans the slate and it cleans the mind too. It's the whole thing you know.

Reluctant or willing, practiced or novice, the pilgrims testify to the requirement of, and soon enough the benefits of, becoming more consciously embodied. My literature trawls introduced me to the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Marion and his emblematic themes of 'gift and givenness'. Marion, (also a committed phenomenologist), speaks about what he called 'saturated phenomena'. Expanding on such an idea, he sought to communicate that the 'surplus' in phenomena means that 'neither concept, signification nor intention can foresee, organise nor contain it' and in that sense it remains necessarily open to 'an ever-emergent complexity of perspectives and meanings' (Robinette 2007, p. 91). In suggesting that pilgrimage is the kind of 'brimming-over, living-world', as I described above, ideas of 'surplus' and 'saturation' seemed fitting. Another of the Camino pilgrims, Brigid, who participated in my research describes it thus:

From that moment on the Camino became mine. I would no longer choose to do the Camino with anyone, I just do it for itself now, it's different, it's a path. I cannot imagine a year when I would not put my toe in the water and step out and get going. And I like the whole...(pauses), unexpected—what might happen—and you never know who you will meet or what you will be told or what you might share with a pilgrim stranger. It's just amazing. In one way it has become routine but then something fabulous to touch, to be involved in, the unexpected. It is like a great seed.

Marion's sense of 'givenness' allows for the 'ever-emerging complexity and new perspectives' which this brief review of some of the salient pilgrimage discourse on definitions undoubtedly reveals. In Marion's view, the most essential thing is, 'to live the meaning of it' (Marion 2002, p. 46). That said, at some point, the phenomenological researcher must work with the "spilling forward" from their data and make an attempt at least to 'distil wisdom'—to articulate meaning, to risk interpretation and to shape definition. Let me then offer such a shaping—a definition of contemporary pilgrimage as both a personal and relational process, mindful as Marion noted that 'no concept is adequate to the phenomena at which it aims' (Robinette 2007, p. 91). Coleman, also helpfully reminds that, while it is important that we continue to define what we mean by pilgrimage, we also need to remember that no single definition 'matters too much'. He believes we must resist an assumption that we will 'ever achieve a more precise, universally applicable set of criteria and finally pin down the activity of pilgrimage' (Coleman 2002, p. 362). In fact, he goes even further to say that it would be better to frame our studies with the sense that what we are doing is learning more about human behaviour through the prism of pilgrimage as 'case study', rather than focusing on pilgrimage as some kind of solid, unchanging institution, making for a most interesting proposition (ibid., p. 363).

Mindful of these caveats, I offer the definition below informed by my 'living with' the meaning and import of my research respondents' reflections on their experience, alongside my immersion into pilgrimage literature, theoretical reading on body psychology, theological anthropology as well as my own personal experience of both pilgrimages. The sense of 'saturated phenomenon', referred to above, is hopefully retained by contextualising this definition of pilgrimage as personal and relation experience within the pilgrimage world *as larger process*, as articulated in the description above. This new attempt at definition is resonant with many previous attempts.

'Contemporary pilgrimage, as a personal but relational process, involves an intentional setting out on a journey to very particular places, deemed sacred, special or holy; and while there, or on route there, or both, embodying significant

physical endurance and participating in a spectrum of non-ordinary, bodily gestures. In such places, this combination of movement and ritual, for many pilgrims, and including explicitly religious ritual for some, alone and with others, facilitates the pilgrim to become more attuned in their bodily selves, more rooted to the ground beneath their feet, yet simultaneously more alive to others and to the firmament of transcendence’.

In the post presentation discussions following my presentation of this new definition of pilgrimage at *Sacred Journeys 9* in Slovenia (July 2022), a fellow scholar wondered if it was too ‘all-encompassing’ to be particularly helpful. Whilst I understand the critique and acknowledge the number of sub-clauses I have included here, I continue to maintain that contemporary pilgrimage along ancient pathways must be viewed as a many-sided prism of persons, place, journey, ritual, movement, gesture, shot through with engendering stories and the imprint of aeons of footfall, experience and tradition. As well as the imperative to maintain the complexity of contemporary pilgrimage, the research strongly suggests that the multi-layered nature of the experience is intrinsic to its enduring appeal.

6. Conclusions

This essay arose out of a desire to locate findings from my pilgrimage research in the context of adequate descriptions and definitions of pilgrimage. It traced some of the fertile, sometimes discordant discourse under the lens of postmodernity. The relatively new genre of *Pilgrimage Studies* accepts that we ‘can no longer take for granted the meaning of pilgrimage for its participants, nor can we take for granted a uniform definition of the phenomenon of ‘pilgrimage’ either (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 3). I challenge the view that the Turners’ paradigm was decidedly ‘deterministic and problematic’ (ibid., pp. 2–3). I indicate how a contemporary theological perspective, a perspective considered sparsely present in more recent pilgrimage research analysis (Roszak 2022, p. 2) can inform our horizons. I present both a description and definition of pilgrimage which are reflective of the findings from my research and resonant with the definitions of others. I acknowledge that for all pilgrimage scholars, personal experience and worldview as well as the rigour of our research methodologies, shape our perceptions of and discourse about pilgrimage. All of these factors, amplified by the surge of interest in both making and studying pilgrimage, are part of the struggle to define it. Not all struggles are limiting. Conversely, this one enlivens pilgrimage discourse, includes welcome diversity and awakens all pilgrimage scholars out of the complacency of old presuppositions.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/aug/15/-sp-toughest-pilgrimage-st-patrick-purgatory> (accessed on 1 March 2019).

² See for example, IJRTP Volume 6 Issue 2 here: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss2/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

³ Examples of such literature include Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1951); A. B. Scott’s ‘*Latin learning and literature in Ireland 1169–1500* in *NHI Pre-historic and early Ireland*, Oxford 2005; ‘*Our Lady’s Dowry*’ A Ballad of Medieval England and associated with pilgrimages to shrines dedicated to Mary, Mother of God; *Codex Calixtinus* manuscript.

- ⁴ A defining mark of our times in academic and journalistic discourse is the tendency to critically pull apart all unacknowledged and even acknowledged assumptions and presuppositions, and so even the nomenclature given to epochs of time, for example, ‘post-modern’ can be subject to that same scrutiny.
- ⁵ 1 July 2021 Google search reveals a 59,900,000 count in response to ‘a Camino Blogs’ query, and is an indication of the veritable explosion in personal account literature. There are now websites dedicated to categorizing the blogs of others, see <https://www.caminoadventures.com/blog/best-camino-de-santiago-blogs/> (accessed on 1 July 2021).
- ⁶ Confraternities is the name given to groups of lay people who gather regularly to pray and reflect in devotion to particular saints. Although they are a less popular form of spiritual devotion today, many such groups remain active in the global Catholic Church. Confraternities of St James have a particularly strong affiliation with the Camino de Santiago.
- ⁷ For example, the Confraternity of St James in London, England have a rich archival account of personal stories.
- ⁸ Co-founder and Co-Director of the M Applied Spirituality with the Waterford Institute of Technology, (WIT), staff offered a number of spirituality research seminars in recent months as part of the inauguration of their new research hub, *SpirSop*. The hub is supporting a number of pilgrimage research scholars. This presentation on pilgrimage literature themes was offered virtually on 19 February 2021 and was based on the 2019 article cited in the references below.
- ⁹ Therapeutic landscapes are those where ‘the promise and possibility of more restful psychosocial states are experienced’, (citing Conradson 2007) and (Maddrell 2013, p. 64).

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Article

The Efficacy and Limits of Pilgrimage as Therapy for Depression

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Abstract: Western notions of pilgrimage produce images of religious adherence to known beliefs and their ritual expressions. Definitions of pilgrimage have expanded in recent decades to embrace treks to sites unattached to the sacred landscapes of traditional faith groups. Along with this expansion of meanings and practices has come a wider acceptance of travel for psychological transformation. Tourism can be argued as a modulated form of pilgrimage and traditional journeys of faith overlapping with instances of entirely secular tourism. Another purpose of pilgrimage can be as a therapeutic practice for those suffering from depressive disorders and related conditions. Its efficacy as therapy, along with its limits, are discussed in clinical and personal contexts with a view to including religious as well as secular perspectives. The pragmatics of such therapy are mapped against current trends in treatment.

Keywords: pilgrimage; tourism; therapy; depression; psychiatric conditions; author's personal case history



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1. Introduction

Research by psychologists and other mental health professionals tries to identify effective ways to manage and prevent emotional turbulence including depression. Because interventions may blend multiple techniques, aspects of traditional Western pilgrimages now encompass more than religious activities and traditional beliefs. New definitions acknowledge that individuals can craft their own versions of the pilgrimage out of personal belief systems. This study offers an in-depth explanation of how new forms and interpretations of travel can be deployed as self-monitored therapy for anxiety or depressive episodes. Embarking on journeys long and short can provide temporary relief from stress and upsets brought about by internal and external conflicts.

2. Materials and Methods

Archival research was conducted to explore the interrelations between the concepts of pilgrimage and mental health. This review was undertaken to find supporting sources that prove the benefits of embarking on pilgrimages in order to improve mental well-being. This study is based on the accounts of selected people, including our personal experiences as two academics and researchers, who were diagnosed with major depressive disorder, to find common elements among the narratives. We present these journeys through depression and the personal pilgrimages that were undertaken to overcome depressive episodes. We recount specific individual versions of pilgrimages such as travel and walking and examine their benefits to mental health. Theories and research from the fields of pilgrimage studies and psychology are used to analyze the narratives, prove the efficacy, and present the limits of pilgrimage as a form of therapy.

3. Discussion

3.1. Depressive Episodes

Feelings of depression are something that everyone goes through and usually fade away after a few days or weeks. Major depressive disorder (MDD), sometimes called clinical depression, on the other hand, is a mood disorder that lasts more than two weeks. An individual with MDD experiences low mood or loss of interest in actively participating in life events. There are other general symptoms such as tiredness, changes in appetite, feelings of worthlessness, and, sometimes, thoughts of death. Depressive episodes have varying durations but usually last about six to eight months ([Ada's Medical Knowledge Team 2022](#)). Specific symptoms include weight loss or gain, trouble falling or staying sleep or a feeling of constant sleepiness, feeling restless and agitated or very sluggish, being tired and without energy, feeling guilt, and having trouble concentrating or making decisions. Other more specific symptoms are anxious distress, melancholy, and agitation ([Bruce 2023](#)).

When the feeling of depression exceeds the amount of time indicative of MDD, it becomes persistent depressive disorder (PDD), the kind that lasts for at least two years. Similar types of depression may also be diagnosed as dysthymia or chronic depression, which might not be as intense as MDD but can still affect relationships and make functioning difficult. The severity of its symptoms lessen over time but can worsen again eventually. PDD episodes can last for years at a time, which can cause people with PDD to feel as though these occurrences are part of their normal lives.

There are other types of depressive disorders that have more severe symptoms: bipolar disorder, which was formerly called manic depression, depressive psychosis, perinatal depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, seasonal depression, situational depression, and atypical depression ([Healthline Website n.d.](#)). All of these types can be addressed with combinations of medication and therapy.

Usually, depressive disorders are treated with various modalities such as pharmacological, psychotherapeutic, interventional, and lifestyle modification. FDA-approved medications include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), serotonin modulators, atypical antidepressants, tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs), monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), and other medications such as mood stabilizers and antipsychotics. Under psychotherapy, on the other hand, are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy ([Bains and Abdijadid 2022](#)).

There are particular events in a human's life that can act as triggers for depressive episodes. Some of these include (1) changes in daily routines; (2) disrupted sleep; (3) poor eating habits; (4) stress at work, home, or school; (5) feeling isolated, alone, or unloved; (6) living with abuse or mistreatment; (7) medical problems such as Alzheimer's disease, stroke, or erectile dysfunction; (8) medications such as antibiotics and blood pressure drugs; (9) significant life events such as bereavement or divorce; and (10) traumatic occurrences such as accidents or sexual assault. These are just a few instances that can cause or trigger depressive episodes.

Medical News Today ([Medical News Today Website n.d.](#)) released an article that contains tips on how individuals can cope with these episodes. Treating depression involves a lot of work on the self. Per the article, one must: (1) Track triggers and symptoms. This helps in understanding one's emotions and behaviors; (2) Stay calm to help prevent severe episodes such as anxiety and panic attacks. This can be achieved through meditation, mindfulness, and breathing exercises; (3) Understand and accept depression. This can teach individuals to take control of the depression and be more open to receiving treatments, changing lifestyles, taking medication, and seeking therapy. Accepting does not necessarily mean that depression has become part of their identity; (4) Learn to separate oneself from the depression; (5) Recognize that self-care reduces the chances of having severe episodes. This includes eating a healthy diet, engaging in creative activities, and taking a soothing bath. Any activity that enhances mental, emotional, and physical health is considered a form of self-care. Some of the other tips are to (6) breathe deeply and relax the muscles;

(7) challenge negative thoughts; (8) practice mindfulness; (9) create a bedtime routine; (10) exercise; (11) avoiding alcohol; and (12) record positive experiences.

Aside from these self-improvement steps suggested to fight depression, it is also important to ask for help—whether from family and friends, a doctor, a therapist, or from support groups. There are many other ways to alleviate depression. Some of these are not necessarily conventional, and more studies are being written about them.

3.2. Travel and Depression

Travel can improve one's mental health. It can provide the mind with a sense of calm and healing and relieve tension and stress brought about by work or school. Travel allows for regular resets where people can feel the positive impacts of vacation for up to five weeks after return. Even the motivation to be productive and focused increases.

Traveling also helps individuals become more artistically and culturally inclined while providing a new perspective on life. Exposure to new cultures, making new friends, studying new languages, and experiencing different types of food and music can even aid in establishing and developing better problem-solving skills. Traveling, or going out in general, leads to creating new experiences and knowledge enrichment, which improves brain function and boosts mental health. Having something to look forward to causes individuals to feel happy and excited. It also helps in appreciating the environment at home after getting back from a different country. Travel is usually seen as a positive way to alleviate stress and depression (Brennan 2021).

Prior studies showed that there is a bidirectional relationship between not traveling and depression. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study was conducted in Korea to test the tendencies of adults to develop depression when not able to travel or leave their homes. It may not be that traveling directly prevents depression itself but rather inhibits the potential triggers that may prompt a depressive episode. It seems that symptoms of depression can be reduced through distractions from routine life patterns, which can allow one to feel refreshed. This can also be achieved by separating oneself from the daily living environments that cause depression. Meeting new people and having unique social interactions and developing peripheral social ties can play vital roles in preventing social isolation among adults. Going on trips as informal social engagement is common in adults, and this is a plausible solution to reducing loneliness and social isolation (Hyun et al. 2022).

3.3. Travel and Pilgrimage

While travel and pilgrimage are two independent endeavors, it may be ascertained that there is an intersection between the two. Pilgrimage has its roots in religion, with such journeys being undertaken by certain people of faith to feel more connected to their spiritual beliefs. Religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and others include pilgrimage as an important tenet of their beliefs. Believers of these religions take perilous, sometimes expensive journeys for various reasons: prayer, penance, or sacrifice. In Christianity, for example, pilgrimages that are undertaken to shrines of saints are believed to possess divine healing powers (de Botton 2012).

Pilgrimages have long been exclusive to people of religious backgrounds. New Age pilgrimage has gained popularity over the years, offering the same spiritual experience to those who do not identify with any particular religion (Reader n.d.). Secular pilgrimages have also gained popularity over the years, offering journeys that are not necessarily spiritual but might be personal to the pilgrim. The journey undertaken during a pilgrimage by itself can and does heal.

Pilgrimages offer other forms of healing beyond the spiritual. Idler discusses the physical and psychological benefits of spiritual and religious practices, including pilgrimage (Idler 2016). According to her, these practices enable us to view ourselves as part of a much larger picture. Spiritual practices may also lead us to healthier lifestyles, but she reiterates that while these activities provide healing, they must not be considered a means to an end.

3.4. Pilgrimage as Therapy for Depression

In 1982, a study was conducted to identify the effects of pilgrimage on anxiety, depression, and religious attitude. The specific pilgrimage studied was undertaken to Lourdes. Some of the participants had issues not only with mental health, but also with physical health. The levels of anxiety, depression, and religious attitude were measured using rating scales via three instruments: the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, the Depressive Inventory, and the Religious Attitude Scale. These levels were reassessed one month and ten months after the participants had returned.

The patients did not feel physically improved, but they claimed that they still found the pilgrimage beneficial because of their strengthened religious faith and that the pilgrimage had caused them to feel more relaxed, more content, and more able to accept their physical disabilities. The general emotional improvement noted could, then, be seen as a direct result of (1) merging with a community and experiencing companionship and solidarity and (2) sensations perceived internally such as being on holiday, a change of environment, and a spiritual atmosphere or ambiance (Morris 1982).

Warfield wrote in an article that there are general stages in the journeys made by pilgrims. She states that the moment a person decides to partake in a pilgrimage, their first stage has begun, and all the activities that happen from there are part of the journey (Warfield 2012). The second stage refers to the detachment from normal daily life, which includes the processes of buying travel necessities, filing leaves of absence, preparing oneself to be away from loved ones, and the like. The third stage is the actual journey to the sacred space, where the pilgrim could be in connection with other pilgrims or retreating into themselves. Documenting the journey could also be part of this stage. The fourth stage is the final preparation to enter the sacred space. The separation of this activity from everyday life is emphasized. During common rituals, pilgrims often become silent, remove their shoes, keep their faces turned toward on the shrine or sacred space, and clasp their hands as a sign of reverence. The fifth stage of the pilgrimage is the actual experience at the site. Various culture-specific practices are performed during this stage such as placing offerings, worshipping with or without sound, bell ringing, touching a part of the sacred space, weeping, kissing the sacred object, praying in front of the image, or placing an object at the shrine. The last stage is focused on the completion of the journey and on the return home to one's familiar surroundings.

Given these stages, one can see that the individual is taken both physically and mentally from their usual routine. They are introduced to a foreign land, environment, and state of mind. This serves as a break for the individual and allows for self-contemplation. Pilgrimage, then, becomes a significant process and event that provides a holistic framework for individuals to engage themselves in a biological, psychological, social, and spiritual manner. It can be used to address issues of healing, identity formation, group belonging, and spiritual development.

Often, pilgrimages require long treks through unfamiliar landscapes, giving the body physical exercise. People who lead these pilgrimages often warn of the physical toll that the journey might take. This physical exertion is a part of both the journey and the experience. In a world where technology encourages lack of physical activity, experiences that include physical exertion are of great value. This journey through unfamiliar landscapes may also require problem-solving skills not necessarily called upon in one's usual environment. Being taken outside of one's daily environment might cause shifts in perspective, which can lead not only to a more enriched world view, but also to a new way of looking at and dealing with problems.

One aspect that is also essential to the pilgrimage is the journey itself. By focusing on something besides oneself, pilgrimages offer mental healing to the pilgrim. At the very least, going on a pilgrimage encourages one to focus on the journey, taking one's mind away from personal problems.

It is known that experts in the field of psychology and pilgrimage studies have conducted research on the interconnection between the two. However, research on the

relationship between pilgrimages and neuroscience is quite rare. Jahangir and Maftoon discussed in their work that neuroscience plays a significant role in human belief systems through Paul McLean's concept of the triune brain (Jahangir and Maftoon 2012). He states that these three types of brains work within a single brain, like a biological computer that is interconnected, but each type has its own function. Psychologists and neuroscientists believe that the acts of worship have a luminous quality and that a particular part of the brain is responsible for transcendent human characteristics and appropriate social behaviors. This same part contains the feeling of courage that people require to get to know each other and feel a sense of togetherness. It is a place of empathy and common feeling. They also suggest that if God were to connect with humans, it is through this part of the brain. Given that there could be connections among pilgrimage studies, psychology, and neuroscience, pilgrimage can then be seen as a spiritual practice that can have positive effects on psychological behavior and could result in reducing antisocial behavior.

3.5. Personal Pilgrimage

The term pilgrimage no longer refers only to religious activities. Some participate in secular pilgrimages without believing that these journeys will bring them closer to the sacred. They seek these experiences to have time and space to reflect. As they journey, there is also an inner pilgrimage that progresses in an equal manner to the physical distance covered. It is said that every pilgrimage is a struggle with nature's terrain, silence, and the mind itself. The outer journey mirrors the inner journey into the pilgrim's psyche.

In today's demanding world, people have come up with the idea of personal pilgrimages that require one to stop using gadgets, unplug from all obligations, and get away from the noise of daily life without actually traveling to a distant land. Instead of traveling to remote areas in the world, there is a need to seek a remote part of the self in the midst of daily life. People are in search of a quiet mind and inner peace, with the aim, as well, of placing awareness on the mind and the heart. This can be attained not only through hours of meditation and strict discipline, but also through the pilgrim's trust in making their own retreat and finding their own self-discovery (Davis 2013).

Self-awareness plays a significant role in pilgrimages and in addressing depression. In the 1970s, Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School introduced the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) exercise. This program significantly relieved suffering in and improved the well-being of participants in his research. Psychologists have studied this technique's effectiveness on various aspects from cognition to emotion, as well as in stress management. Initially, self-awareness and meditation are practices that have been considered to be religious or cultural, but the program has since been recognized as a scientifically based practice (Pardue n.d.). In 2013, Pardue defined MBSR as a psychological process of bringing one's attention to the internal and external experiences occurring in the present moment, which can be developed through the practice of meditation and other training (Crumpler n.d.). When considering the concept and definition of mindfulness, this practice is quite observable in the practice of pilgrimage. Being focused on the present and the experience helps the individual become self-aware. The physical activities involved in traveling to different places keeps the individual's mind and body in the present.

3.6. Personal Pilgrimages and Depression (Narratives)

3.6.1. An Academic on a Motorcycle

In September 2015, I went to the northern part of Luzon, the largest and most populous island in the Philippines, to attend an annual academic conference of the country's professional organization for statisticians, in which I hold a lifetime membership. From the metropolis, where I live, I traveled roughly 900 km on a Kawasaki ZX-14R motorcycle, to and from Ilocos Norte, where the conference was held. That specific ride was a dream fulfilled for my teenaged self. Riding the motorcycle and hearing its engine roar, facing but aware of the perils, felt liberating. Riding a motorcycle takes strategy, from managing

one's own weight to practicing the right signals to continuously being on guard while undertaking a precarious journey—elements that are similar to being in service, according to veterans (Harper 2018).

I would say that despite having poor genes, everything else about my body is healthy and still at its peak condition, apart from my eyes. Months before that motorcycle ride to Laoag, Ilocos Norte, I was diagnosed with glaucoma. I understood that, more than going on an impromptu road race, I was on a race against time, knowing full well that my motorcycling career was likely to be truncated by this diagnosis. I then suffered from a retinal detachment in 2016 and was diagnosed with uveitis in 2017. Due to the pars plana vitrectomy for the retinal detachment, I had to maintain a facedown position for three days. I could sleep only on my left side or facedown. Octafluoropropane (C₃F₈ or perfluoropropane), a gas similar to air-conditioning refrigerant, was pumped into my eye. This same gas that saved my left eye also called for a travel ban of sorts; I was not allowed to travel by air during the entire seven weeks that the gas was in my eye.

In February 2018, a Baerveldt shunt was implanted in my left eye, a 1 mm tube that enables my eye's aqueous humor to drain properly. My medical team, including my brother who is a physician, advised me, and to their credit persuaded me enough, to let go of this hobby. Riding comes with the risk and probability of suffering head trauma, something that may lead to another retinal detachment. After my left eye started giving up, my resolve followed. I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder. These were dark times; even as I was receiving outstanding teacher awards and grant money, among other accolades, I was quietly bleeding, wishing to die, and entirely willing to sever my carotid artery myself.

Because good health calls for one to seek healing when one notices that something is wrong, I sought help from a therapist that my physician brother recommended. While this meant the expansion of my medical team by one more person, I say with full conviction that my therapist gave me back my life. After being prescribed medications to regularize my sleep patterns and mood, I got back on my feet and resumed working and traveling. Post-therapy though, I was at my best. The whole experience of major depressive disorder, no matter how high-functioning I was, no matter how unfortunate, allowed me to recalibrate and be more focused than ever, such that even amidst the worst of my depression I was productive: all the bills were paid on time, all the student grades were submitted on time. Even in the worst of times, I was always on time.

One thing I may deduce from the whole experience of going through literally and figuratively dark days, because of the maladies of my eye and from the depths of depression, is the belief that life has not been and will never be perfect, but we can always dance to the rhythm of it all and be in search of a new normal.

3.6.2. Pilgrimage for Healing beyond the Physical

Travel and pilgrimage are undoubtedly interconnected. Despite identifying as an atheist, I find visits to temples and other places of sacred worship, as well as mausoleums and war memorials, to be pleasant moments that soothe and calm my mind. Traveling allows me to escape the mundanities of daily life. These travels, which I consider to be pilgrimages to and from the self, allow me to improve my ability to compartmentalize, that when I embark on a journey, I am able to reflect on my personal burdens, respond to professional correspondence, and fulfill my professorial duties, among others, all while still being able to bask in the moments throughout my journey. I find beauty in being far from home, on a journey that has either been undertaken by many before me or one that only a few people have taken. I find each journey truly refreshing, and despite being miles from home, it is in those moments that I refill my store of thoughts, including the will to go on living and the reasons to continue doing everything I do, back home.

3.7. Going Out of the Social Comfort Zone

"I know a planet inhabited by a red-faced gentleman. He's never smelled a flower. He's never looked at a star, He's never loved anyone. He's never done anything

except add up numbers. And all day long he says over and over, just like you, 'I'm a serious man! I'm a serious man!' And that puffs him up with pride. But he's not a man at all—He's a mushroom!'. -Antoine De Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*

3.7.1. Pilgrimage Walk in the Metro

Before being diagnosed with major depressive disorder, I was already experiencing a constant state of anxiety. I have also had a few panic attacks while alone in the middle of normal daily activities. I had had it in my mind to seek professional help, but I always ended up putting it off, probably because I forced myself to function despite the situation. I am the kind of person who pushes these emotions to the back burner to focus on “more important matters.” Unfortunately, there were times when ignoring these emotions became too much. This is how I learned to cope through my own personal pilgrimage.

Living in a busy city is quite hard for people seeking solitude in nature. Luckily, I lived in a subdivision located on the boundary between the city of Manila and the province of Cavite. There are still places to go where one can find vast lands of nothing but greenery. The strong wind blows through the trees and the grass, the sun shines and sets perfectly without any buildings blocking it, and one can even hear goats as they roam with their kids. In a certain area of the greenery, there is a church with a cemetery behind it. Whenever I feel the void consuming me, I put on my running shoes and head toward this vast land—sometimes jogging, sometimes just walking. This, then, helps me clear my mind.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the whole world was affected not just physically, but mentally, too. According to the World Health Organization, for the last two years, the prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25%. Being forced into social isolation had become a major trigger for numerous young people (Kestel 2022). This pushed a lot of individuals to seek professional help, me included. I was having a hard time juggling work, studying, research, and personal matters. It was difficult to move around and go outside the way I usually did because of safety issues. The fear of catching the virus also caused anxiety. Because of these factors, I decided to consult with a psychiatrist to whom I was referred by one of my best friends. I found psychotherapy to be very effective, as I was able to better understand myself and my emotions. My psychiatrist, like any other, asked if I was physically active and I told her that I was, but the pandemic had disrupted my physical activity. She advised me to slowly ease back into finding my rhythm because moving around and being mindful of my surroundings would help improve my mental state. That was when I got back to jogging and walking, which I consider my personal pilgrimage.

Even when I moved to the province of Cavite, I still found myself running and walking when experiencing stress. The village I moved to did not have a lot of natural elements in its environment, but getting out of the house and feeling myself moving stimulates my mind and takes it off the stressors and things that bother me.

Pilgrimage, to me, is walking or jogging and being one with my surroundings, and doing these allows me to temporarily leave the realities of my normal day spent at home and at work. I enter a liminal zone where everything else in my life is paused and all I can think of is the strong wind, the earthy smell of the plants, the beautiful view of the sun, and the burn I feel in my legs, feet, and lungs. I am very much aware of my surroundings and myself. Doing this regularly aids in keeping my mind at peace because whenever I return home and resume my usual routine, my mind and my emotions are once again clean slates. I believe this form of pilgrimage is helpful in maintaining mental health and well-being.

3.7.2. Post-Traumatic Stress Pilgrimage

Kelly Isola is an anthropologist specializing in divinity. She has resided in and visited many countries including those in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Growing up, she was introduced to the cultures of the various countries she visited. Because she takes interest in the concept of the divine, she became an ordained unity minister. Around 2016,

she had a traumatic illness that caused her to be on life support for a few weeks. During those weeks, she experienced two near-death experiences.

According to her, going through this kind of trauma causes a person to lose elements of the “self.” She felt lost in many ways and could not recognize herself. Functioning was difficult and simply living is a chore.

“Over the last five years I have at times fought for life, consciously choosing life. Other times, there was no fighting needed. When in the grips of deep depression everything there is to do seems like hard work. When I see a voicemail on my phone, all I can think is that there is something else to take care of, something to manage, to be responsible for. And I have nothing left. I am empty.”

All these occurrences made her anxious every day. She felt so alone that she was unable to explain how she felt to other people, because she did not think anyone would understand. She was trying to function, not because she wanted to, but because she did not want to inconvenience anyone else. It seems as though living and functioning for herself was not something she could focus on.

Her path to recovery was not easy at all. She compared the process to the stations of the cross, where every part of the process was nothing but suffering. When one problem was close to being solved, another one appeared. She was in and out of the hospital because therapy and medication were not working the way they should. Eventually, she undertook more intense and more intrusive medications to help with depression. She decides to write about her journey and suffering. She claims that this whole process was her pilgrimage. Embracing her pain caused her to remember that she chose to live and still chooses to do so despite the hardships. She says that since beginning her pilgrimage, she has never forgotten how joy and suffering live side by side, and that neither lives without the other. It has helped her accept her depression and strengthen herself as she fights against it (Isola 2021).

3.7.3. Pilgrimage as a Break from the Mundane

Dr. Tamara McClintock Greenberg is a clinical psychologist based in San Francisco. She is the author of *Psychodynamic Perspectives on Aging and Illness*. According to her, traveling is a great stress buster. She claims that being stuck in our daily repetitive lives can take us away from what is actually meaningful and interesting to us, so taking a break is a must to allow the mind to relax, recharge, and rejuvenate. This can be achieved by crossing destinations off bucket lists. She says that traveling can take the mind off stressors. This results in lower cortisol levels, which makes people feel more content and calm. Based on a 2013 study, more than 80% of Americans surveyed had significant drops in stress just after a day or two of traveling. These forms of pilgrimage can be experienced simply by sightseeing, taking photographs, or exploring a destination on foot. Jacintha Verfegeal, the founder of Urban Pixels, a travel and lifestyle blog, believes in this kind of break for self-discovery. To some individuals, such as the author Patrick Rothfuss, a long stretch of road can teach more about oneself than one hundred years of quiet. Experiencing travel in a foreign country or area can help one to reevaluate and reinvent their life. Valerie Wilson, an expert on solo traveling and the founder of the Trusted Travel Girl Blog, agrees with this ideology. She believes that one learns valuable lessons while traveling that will broaden one’s perspective and make one more aware of and open to new things. She says that being confronted with differences in her journeys has helped her reevaluate her own principles and values.

Marta Estevez, a travel aficionado and the founder of the Passport Memorandum, thinks that people are not meant to be tied down to just one place. She feels that life is most fulfilling when she is outside, living through new experiences and learning from them. She claims that new experiences help rewire the brain and boost one’s mood and self-confidence. Even preparing for a trip causes happiness and excitement in individuals. Based on a study conducted in Cornell University, anticipating a trip can increase happiness, even more than acquiring something tangible.

According to Allan Hinton, a photographer from London who quit his job to travel full-time, traveling can help a person deal with larger life issues more gracefully and patiently. He experienced unfortunate events while traveling that made him more understanding of and patient with the inconveniences in life.

Adam Galinsky, a Columbia Business School professor, believes visiting and exploring a foreign place and immersing oneself in the local cultures and environment increases cognitive flexibility. It also enhances depth of thought. This, then, gives creativity a boost. Galinsky has written multiple studies on the connection between creativity and international travel. Extended traveling also improves other aspects of life such productivity, problem-solving skills, and progress in general (Nazish 2018).

3.8. Intercultural Encounters

Traveling exposes an individual to other environments and cultures, opening the rest of the world to that person. These cross-cultural experiences increase one's understanding of the world. As an atheist traveler, I count these among the many reasons why I set a goal to visit one hundred countries before I turn 40. I fully recognize my infirmities, and so, after I reach the nice, round number of 100, I will continue visiting the 96 or 97 remaining countries of the world, albeit at a slower pace. This secular pilgrimage allows for a full immersion in other cultures.

Many go on pilgrimages attempting to undergo not only a physical journey, but also a personal one. Part of this personal journey involves taking oneself out of one's comfort zone, in order to glean more experiences. Greenia in his paper included the "displacement from one's customary locale, daily routines and social position" as one of the essential elements of pilgrimage (Greenia 2014). Findings from a study by Higgins and Hamilton also reveal that a key theme that emerges from the understanding of pilgrimage by those who have undertaken it is that it involves a journey that is far removed from one's daily environment (Higgins and Hamilton 2011). Being removed from your usual environment invites you to look at yourself through the eyes of others from different cultural backgrounds.

More than finding differences between yourself and someone else's culture, going on a pilgrimage may also lead you to find people who share similar interests. Secular pilgrimages are often taken by people who have a personal connection to their particular interests. *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World* divides its list of secular pilgrimages into four categories: political; musical, sports, and life; spirituality; and death (Margry 2008). These include trails, memorials, and other significant locations. These pilgrimages offer insight into history, art, culture, and humanity. Just this year, people I know have been surprised upon learning of my trips to Central Asia. At the time of writing this paper, I have visited Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. These countries, which are not seen in the usual traveler's list, captured my interest for the mere fact that they are infrequently traversed. I am certain only of a few things in life, including that each country has its own story. Visiting war memorials, ruins, and mausoleums all remind me of how life can be short, and that after death we are likely to be consigned to oblivion after two generations. Having heard of the stories behind the people whose graves I visited also serves to remind me that greatness is earthly, that prominence is as temporary as our breath. Having such encounters contributed to my pragmatic approach in life, such that I can prepare for the contingencies of old age, while also embracing the possibility that I can die in the next minute.

The pilgrimages I have undertaken have also led me to interact with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Hearing their stories throughout the journey—their reasons for pilgrimage, personal histories, and travel anecdotes—has enriched my own experiences beyond what I initially expected. These interactions have taken me out of isolation and made me believe that I share the same issues and insecurities with people across the world, that I am truly never alone. I often leave these locations having gained a friend or two, mostly through my tour guides. Seeing the kindness of strangers toward people they do not know has also somewhat restored my faith in humanity, despite

the social conditions that I face back home. In such pilgrimages, I find more reasons to appreciate what we have at home in the Philippines.

Each pilgrimage is its own experience. Traveling, more specifically going on pilgrimages, may take a toll physically and financially, but the holistic payoff is well worth the investment. The intercultural encounters may be physically exhausting but mentally invigorating at the same time, and for all this worth, I travel whenever I have the chance.

3.9. Cognitive Changes

After traveling, I often return home feeling refreshed, despite the physical tiredness that I feel from having gone through a long journey. Traveling affords me the necessary break from fatigue caused by toxic environments, disappointing social conditions, and exhausting workloads. Prolonged exposure to non-polluted air has its own healing benefits. Exposure to different climates and different elements are also valuable additions to the range of experiences I have from these travels.

Returning to my daily life after travel always feels like a fresh start. I feel invigorated, relaxed, and ready to approach life head-on once more. Traveling also affects how I think. I can apply new perspectives, which I have picked up from my travels, to my work and my life. Stressful work and unsatisfactory relationships can create toxic environments that we are forced to deal with daily. This in turn can cause emotional fatigue and mental stress. Disagreeable political climates and disappointing social conditions may also cause feelings of toxicity and aggravate mental health conditions. Traveling allows one to escape such toxic environments, even temporarily. Going on pilgrimages takes it one step further, allowing one to focus on the journey, on something beyond ourselves.

A study examining the experiences of visitors to different heritage sites reveals that the restorative benefits of their pilgrimages to these sites is the highest among other benefits felt, including spiritual, social, and mental (Bond et al. 2014). This proves that pilgrimages have healing capabilities, spiritual or otherwise, that might be felt by those who undertake them. Pilgrimage requires financial and physical investment, but the effects it has on one's mind and soul are immaterial.

Spiritual practices have the capability of integrating different aspects of the human experience: emotional, mental, and physical. Going on a pilgrimage is one such spiritual practice. As I have reiterated many times, pilgrimages go beyond spiritual, as secular pilgrimages offer the same healing benefits.

Some may look at pilgrimages as mere distractions, but it is the kind of distraction that clears our minds, allows us to think more clearly, and turns us into more understanding beings. Going on pilgrimages broadens our horizons and offers us a look at the world in a way we have never seen before. This allows us to look beyond our own selves and appreciate that there is so much more of the world to be discovered.

Pilgrimages allow us to focus on the journey instead of focusing on ourselves. Often, these journeys take place in unfamiliar landscapes, forcing us to adapt, sharpening our wits and improving our skills. This adds to the overall cognitive benefits of going on pilgrimages. Everything you encounter during a pilgrimage can be charged to experience, to be used in the future.

3.10. Limits of Pilgrimage as Therapy for Depression

Pilgrimage and travel have been presented as beneficial to people's mental health, but there are instances when it does not necessarily work as a form of therapy. There are numerous stories where people quit their jobs to travel the world and return with a fresh, new outlook in life. Sometimes, these stories are exceptions. Not all people who decide to leave their careers for traveling are successful at finding themselves, because sometimes this path has an endless number of uncertainties. Travel does not always prove to be helpful in battling depression.

Dr. Joseph Cilona, a psychologist from Manhattan, claims that escapism in the form of travel could be done impulsively—which will likely lead to a rebound or return of

depression symptoms that become stronger than they were before. This is synonymous to turning your phone off for a while to get away from responsibilities, then turning it back on and finding that the notifications are overwhelming and difficult to handle. It is like running away from the causes of stress, only to find out that the depression still exists on the inside.

Traveling can be stressful, as well. Planning is not always exciting, because one has to make sure that everything is ready, and processes must be smooth. If one thing goes wrong, all the other aspects may be affected. This can become stressful. There are also uncontrollable factors in traveling such as flight delays and bad weather. This may be overwhelming and cause anxiety in someone with depression (Lauretta 2017).

Pilgrimage and travel also pose a negative effect in depression when they result in post-travel blues. This is when a person enjoys themselves as they forget their troubles and leaves them for traveling, and then return to the stressful reality. The trip planned was something they looked forward to, but when it is over, there is nothing left to be excited about, leaving them feeling stuck in their boring, routine lives (Kentucky Counseling Center Website n.d.). Pilgrimage may bring about tons of advantages in improving the mental health and lifestyle of humans, but it is not the cure for depression. It does not provide the complete benefits of therapy and medication. It helps in developing a positive attitude toward depressive episodes, but it cannot be the sole treatment.

4. Conclusions

The Pilgrim and the Patient

Modern times have redefined pilgrimage in that the word *pilgrim* is also used to describe a person who travels to foreign lands, regardless of whether for spiritual enrichment or sheer curiosity. As an atheist myself, I would rather frame my travels as pilgrimages as I do not travel for mere sightseeing and vacation the way a typical tourist might. It is during my travels that I recollect my thoughts best while gaining new perspectives that allow me to fine-tune the work that I do. Given these points, I cannot and will not recommend using pilgrimage alone to address depression. I have been on prescription medicine for two years, and I see my therapist every six weeks. Those factors, along with the work I do and the pilgrimages I take, are among the many that keep my sanity.

Even as the effects of pilgrimages are often examined using a spiritual lens, in that the pilgrim's spiritual growth and transformation is observed, the marvel of modern pilgrimages is increasingly extending to the secular. While pilgrimages were initially undertaken in pursuit of a spiritual or religious reconnection, of renewing or recollecting one's faith, non-believers like me undertake their own pilgrimages for various reasons, most of which are deeply personal.

Pilgrimages, as discussed previously in this work, do not only encompass journeys that are taken by the faithful for spiritual purposes. Pilgrimages include journeys that provide one with a transformative process: a chance to reconnect by temporarily disconnecting, a shift in perspective, a break from routine, a healthy diversion, and a holistic exercise for the mind and body. These pilgrimages, to illustrate the point in medical terms, work as food supplements do: no matter how high their sales figures have been through the years, and no matter how many people take them dutifully, these supplements are labeled as having no approved therapeutic claims. Food supplements, like pilgrimages, are taken with faith and in the pursuit of bettering one's health, whether with or without a factual claim that they will work. Supplements are called such as they are often taken with prescription medicine to address the health issue head-on. This is also the case with mental health conditions and pilgrimages. Pilgrimages work like supplements, helping one cope with mental health conditions, in my case for instance clinical depression, while I unfailingly taking medicine prescribed to me by a psychiatrist.

An important concept to keep in mind is that of anhedonia, or the loss of pleasure in things that used to bring such. In my personal experience, this was the first and most powerful manifestation of major depressive disorder. Driving no longer appealed to me,

although I had derived pleasure from it since I first got behind the wheel of the family car at the age of 16. At a certain point in 2018, traveling felt like a true burden, and any attempt at finding peace and quiet was met with ideations of suicide. My point is that pilgrimage, whether secular or religious, is not the first line of defense for mental health issues. To be blunt about it, it is difficult to be spiritual when you feel like killing yourself. It is nearly impossible to gather the strength to walk when you are not able to gather the strength to get out of bed to begin with. Pilgrimage is not a panacea but is rather part of a complementary approach.

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Article

To Leave the Land So as Not to Leave the Land: The Religious Motivations of Seasonal Migrants, Including Women, in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This chapter seeks to answer the question as to why, even though subsistence conditions militated against continuing to eke out an existence on unproductive holdings, many inhabitants in Ireland's western counties did just that. Particularly in the west of Ireland, Irish women and men found ways to remain on their lands and in their dwellings despite the enduring proclivity for permanent migration from Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The answer lies in the Irish penchant to engage in a variety of vernacular religious practices reiterated via expressive cultural forms like proverbs and reinforced via plays and films. In addition, an otherworld feminine perspective permeated their consciousness. For the Irish, their implicit religion—a complex network of symbols and practices—remained intact, so much so that seasonal migration endured, and the Irish preserved their homelands.

Keywords: Ireland; Roman Catholicism; seasonal migrant workers; vernacular religion; implicit religion; expressive cultural forms; Irish vernacular worldview



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1. Introduction

“Catholicism is the religion of something like ninety-six percent of the population, but the next religion isn't far behind”. (Kennelly 1988, p. 51)

Brendan Kennelly's words give us pause. Many people, including scholars, have labored under a taken-for-granted assumption that the island of Ireland, labeled in the early Christian centuries as *“insula Sanctorum et Doctorum”* (island of saints and scholars), is exclusively Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic. One need only think of the coming of St. Patrick to the island in 432 CE and the subsequent celebrations and devotions paid to him to grasp the impact of Roman Catholicism on Ireland (cf. Padovano 1980; Fisher and McGuinness 2011).

Moreover, many legacies of Ireland's monastic heritage are known. These include *peregrinatio pro Christo* or pilgrimage for Christ. In the Middle Ages, this practice resulted in the establishment of monasteries on the European continent. At home, abstemious living was practiced by monks in remote places like *Skellig Mhicil*; to this day, material cultural structures like “beehive huts” can be visited in remote areas of the Irish landscape. Studying this monastic heritage in tandem with the history of Ireland's ecclesiastical Patrician orders provides a rich understanding of the influence of Roman Catholicism at home and abroad.

Notwithstanding Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries and England's suppression of Roman Catholicism on the island beginning in 1536—and despite the rise of Church of England edifices in subsequent centuries and its members' active efforts to convert Catholics during the Great Irish Famine (Irish *An Gorta Mór*: The Great Hunger)—the reputation of Ireland as a Catholic country persisted. To this day, the Irish people acknowledge their Roman Catholic clerics, especially during events that mark rites of passage.¹

However, this view of Catholic hegemony overlooks the fact that, in certain places in Ireland, other types of moral/ethical—that is to say, *religious*—forces were at work. Sometimes they ran counter to official doctrines and dictates. For example, although members of

the Roman Catholic clergy frowned on the practice of seasonal work-related migration to Scotland and England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practice endured (McNally 1973, p. 91).² Temporary migration patterns persisted in the counties of Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, and Donegal because seasonal migrants were motivated by religious ideas and concepts oriented towards the maintenance and preservation of their homelands. The urge to protect family dwellings and, above all else, next of kin shaped the ideological lives of many Irish who resided in the west of Ireland, affecting their decisions to travel for work. Efforts were made to preserve with a near-religious fervor one another's home places (O'Dowd 1981, p. 80; cf. O'Dowd 1982; Heaney 1991). For seasonal migrants to Scotland and other places in the British Isles, the reiterated rhetorical dimensions of the obligation to "keep the home fires burning" amounted to a sacred and aesthetic value (cf. Healy 1978, p. 115; cf. Hynes 1988).

Although this chapter does not delve deeply into the specifics of Irish seasonal migration,³ it does build on previous work by addressing how vernacular and implicit religious ideas combined with orthodox Roman Catholic ones to form what might be seen as a "values triad" for migrants that resulted in a triplication of religious belief and practice.⁴ With this thought in mind, we can better grasp the aptness of Sheed's insight that "... a man is a better Catholic for loving his own people. Not to do so is to be deficient as a man, and deficiency in humanity remains as a deficiency in religion" (Sheed [1932] 1983, p. vi).

To fully grasp the meaning of Sheed's words, this chapter explores the meanings of vernacular and implicit religious practices in the west of Ireland. Readers will recognize some overlap between the two concepts, but they deserve individual exploration. First, a brief explanation of Irish seasonal migration is warranted.

2. Seasonal Migration in Ireland

Broadly speaking, seasonal migration refers to the periodic movement of groups of people in patterns shaped by weather, climate, economic conditions, etc. In Ireland, "... seasonal workers were people who had close ties to the land: small farmers, cottiers, agricultural laborers, and generally poor people with family responsibilities and no means of earning cash at home" (O'Dowd 2019; cf. Collins 1976; Holmes 2000; Hynes 1988; Moran 1988; Ó Gráda 1973; Quinn 2020, 2022). To a large extent, the harshness of living conditions in counties like Mayo, Donegal, Sligo, and Roscommon, coupled with the difficulties of eking out a living from the land, stimulated workers to engage in agricultural labor in the fields of England and Scotland. After their own fields had been planted, the Irish joined teams called "squads" that traveled to England and Scotland, mainly in the summer months. Given nicknames like "*spailpíni*" and "tattie-hokers" (spelled in various ways), they moved from location to location—Ayrshire, The Lothians, Perthshire—co-ordinating their packing and shifting with the ripening of the crops (Quinn 2020, p. 268).

This set of work patterns raises several questions. In periods when vast numbers of Irish people in other parts of the island were fleeing poverty, hunger, and disease by emigrating permanently, what stimulated Irish seasonal workers to engage in temporary agricultural labor and return to their homes at the end of the harvest season? Why was it different for this cohort of the Irish population? What inspired them to preserve their homelands and dwellings? To answer these questions, we turn to the practices of vernacular and implicit religion.

3. Vernacular Religion

Vernacular religion is defined as "religion as it is lived, as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995, p. 44; cf. Lantis 1960, p. 203). Unlike institutional or formal religious practices, with their set times for worship and service, vernacular religion is of the quotidian variety, meaning that it is experienced within specific localities that are rich in specific styles, sounds, stories, and concepts of the holy (cf. Bowman and Valk 2014; James and Johnson 1988; Locklin 2017). To put this a bit differently:

vernacular religion's practices unfold in identifiable cultural contexts, be they regional, linguistic, cultural, or economic (cf. Locklin 2017, p. xvii).

Within vernacular settings, both public behaviors and material cultural items are imbued with importance (Dempsey 2017, p. 200). Likewise, narratives of one's personal landscape factor heavily. As Mulligan (2019, p. 234) notes, "the interdependence of location and individual" is profound.

In Ireland, such interdependence endured well into the modern period. Irish communities tenaciously preserved landscape rituals at specific moments in the calendrical year. For instance, the lighting of midsummer bonfires was assiduously observed, notwithstanding the fact that they had been outlawed by British colonial authorities (Whelan 2018, p. 108). At other times, the people exercised rites of divination and propitiation; they practiced avoidance rituals to preserve trees and bushes deemed to be sacred; they exhibited respect for beings believed to be supernatural, and they recounted the particulars of their observances in stories and memories (Danaher 1972, *passim*).

Within this everyday world, Irish tradition-bearers (*seanchaí*) assumed remarkable importance (Delargy 1945). Men's oral traditional lore "dignified hardship, suffering, injustice and dislocation [and] establish[ed] a narrative framework that conferred meaning on these otherwise inexplicably painful experiences" (Whelan 2018, p. 116). Storytellers' narratives were sought after, cherished, and zealously guarded; rituals of the delivery of their verbal art were proscribed in terms of time as well as place (Delargy 1945). In the people's minds, storytellers were able to even out the playing field by celebrating "egalitarianism, human decency, and Christian charity immersed in supportive networks of mutual dependence and reciprocity" (Whelan 2018, p. 116).

Irish women's lore, called *bansheanchas*, although functioning in different domains, operated at the communal forefront as well, emerging in matters of health and healing and playing key roles in rites of birth and death. Similar to shamans in other cultures, women engaged in activities fundamental to the successful continuance of their particular group by predicting outcomes, resolving communal breakdowns, and mediating disputes (Ó Cruaíoch 2005).

These activities align with what Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch calls the "Irish vernacular worldview" which is defined as, first, believing in cosmological dualism, second, exercising a creative ethnopoetic sensibility, and third, recognizing the existence of the otherworld feminine (Ó Cruaíoch 2022; cf. Mac Curtain 1989). Standing in stark contrast to the concerns of Roman Catholicism, each component of the Irish vernacular worldview influenced everyday religious life; each is explored in detail in this chapter.

4. Implicit Religion

If vernacular religion is about daily lived interpretations and practices, what is implicit religion? As noted above, implicit religion bears similarities to vernacular religion but differs in terms of being defined as "a quest for meaning that originates in the life-world and expresses itself in a complex network of symbols and practices" (Nesti 1990b, p. 420).

One might better understand how implicit religion operates by examining the complex network of symbols and practices that comprise the Irish vernacular worldview. To reiterate, that worldview is threefold: the belief in cosmological dualism, the exercise of a creative ethnopoetic sensibility, and the recognition of the otherworldly feminine. Let us examine each in turn, exploring how they interlocked in symbol and practice.

5. Belief in Cosmological Dualism

By considering the annual pilgrimage to the mountain of Croagh Patrick ("the reek", as locals call it), we can grasp how the Irish coexisted with their natural world and, in so doing, expressed a dual cosmological awareness. The symbol was the mountain, the practice, the climb of it. The rite of climbing is understood as "movement through a sacralized landscape", one that *escaped the confines of the parish system*" (Whelan 2018, p. 110; emphasis added). As many as 20,000 people made a choice to climb Croagh Patrick in 1812 (Whelan 2018, p. 110).

These numbers are important, for they index decision-making on the part of the pilgrims. In his discussion of implicit religion, Nesti claims that “He who lives in the world can only ever inwardly experience ‘the struggle between a series of values, each of which, in and of itself, appears binding” (Nesti 1990a, p. 423). If pilgrimage practices lay outside of the conventional liturgical forms of the Roman Catholic liturgy, then the work of the “pilgrim” became one of decision-making. Indubitably, the choice was influenced by the groups to which individuals belonged.

Of course, as discussed above in terms of the religious triad, this is not to say that Roman Catholicism was insignificant at certain times in pilgrims’ lives. Nor was the climbing of Croagh Patrick the only expression of cosmological dualism in the landscapes thought to be sacred and where local pilgrimage practices held sway. One need only think of *An Turas Cholmcille*, arguably the longest continuing pilgrimage in Ireland, to grasp how indigenous members of a County Donegal community bodily resacralized their village in memory of *Naomh Cholm Cille* (Saint Columba), their founder saint. His well is believed to contain healing water; on the day of *An Turas*, and at other times as well, the water was—and is still—collected and carried home for curing purposes (Quinn 2010). “Such places and their pilgrimages, though they have certainly changed in many respects over the centuries, are old—rooted in eremitic traditions that, in the Irish case, were born and flourished under a non-Romanized form of Christianity” (Taylor [2012] 2016, p. 214; cf. Ray 2011). Even so, in these instances, we can perceive how the dual nature of Irish cosmology operated. Over time, the symbols of mountains and wells were understood to be on par with chapels, just as practices like the collecting of curing waters were considered to be on par with Mass attendances on Sunday. Although Roman Catholicism held sway—81% of the population pronounced that faith in 1834, and few converted to Protestantism—(Whelan 2018, p. 119), yet pilgrimages to sites that were understood by the people as being sacred endured.

6. Creative Ethnopoetics in Narrative Tradition

Now that we have provided some examples of cosmological dualism as an aspect of the Irish vernacular worldview, and shown how it was actualized symbolically and ritually, let us turn to creative ethnopoetics in Irish narrative tradition. Similar to a belief in cosmological dualism, symbols and practices can be located in creative ethnopoetics as well; however, they are revealed in cultural forms like proverbs, idioms, expressions, and narratives found in stories and plays (cf. Meider 1984). It is within such forms that one finds “the complexity and wealth of values and meaning that suffuse the world, experience, and the life of human subjects” (Nesti 1990a, p. 428).

An example *par excellence* of creative ethnopoetics is found in the Irish proverb *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*. According to Ó Hógartaigh, this is “an Irish language expression whose literal meaning is ‘It is in each other’s shadow that people live’ but which, more broadly, invokes a sense of community and interdependence” (Ó Hógartaigh 2008, p. 1n). This communal interdependence, called *meitheal* in the Irish language, is working together for the good of all. Similar sentiments are showcased in other Irish language proverbs like *Iomad na lamh a bhaineas a cath* (“Many hands make light work”) (Flanagan 1999, p. 65) and *Níl neart go chur le chéile* (“There is no strength without unity”) (Mac Con Iomaire [1988] 1994, p. 12). The saying *Giorra cabhair Dé ná an doras* (“God’s help is nearer than the door”) (Ó Rahilly 1922, p. 1) means that one need not travel far to locate succor or support. Likewise, the value of beneficence is highly regarded, found in expressions like *Aithnítear duine ar an ndéir* (“A person is known by his charity”) (O’Donnell 1998, p. 45) and the strengthening words, “Charity begins at home”. Interestingly, the importance of the concept of *meitheal* is coupled with the significance of daughters in the Irish expression *Tá meitheal iníon aige*, meaning “He has many daughters to help him” (Máiréad—Irish American Mom 2021).

Conrad Arensberg ([1937] 1968, p. 73), commenting on “reciprocities of sentiment and duty”, notes that the word “friend” in the Irish sense means family; thus, it is not surprising that attention to kinship is found in proverbs like *Faoi bhun chrainn a thiteas an*

duilliúr, “The apple didn’t fall far from the tree” (Power 1974, p. 13); *Is tibhe fuil ná uisce* (“Blood is thicker than water” (Flanagan 1999, p. 52); *Is treise dúchas ná oiliúint* (“Nature is stronger than nurture”) (Uí Bhraoináin 2007, p. 303); *An rud a ghintear sa cnámh is deacair a bhaint as a fheoil* (“What’s bred in the bone will out”) (Uí Bhraoináin 2007, p. 365); and perhaps most telling of all, *Inis dom cia leis a rabhair, agus inneósad duit créad dhéanfair* (“Show me your company and I’ll tell you who you are” (Ó Rahilly 1922, p. 7).

In the west of Ireland, Irish people’s use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions aligned with their climbing of Croagh Patrick and their visiting of holy wells. Their “nature-sense”, that is to say, their physical connection with the natural world, aligned with utterances of their traditional oral lore. “The original meaning of the word ‘nature’ . . . derives from the Latin *natura* . . . ‘what man was born from’” (Keller 1994, p. 82). Indeed, unlike Roman Catholicism’s institutionalized religious spaces, it was the place where the people lived, their “cosmological townland”, so to speak, that informed their beliefs as well as their behaviors. The natural landscape instilled in them a strongly idiosyncratic concept of a *home land*, a fervent cosmological bonding (Dallat 1991; MacDermott 1972; Ó Ríordáin 1980).

There are additional expressions of creative ethnopoetics in terms of the Irish sense of place and attention to its preservation. A well-known dialogue in *Gone With the Wind*, the 1939 film based on a novel by Margaret Mitchell (1936) and set in the period of the American Civil War, exemplifies how the cultural belief complex was reinforced. In the scene, an Irish father, Gerald O’Hara, and his daughter, Scarlett, are discussing “Tara”, their home and family plantation. The conversation is multilayered, with expressions about land, family, what it means to be Irish, and what it means to be a woman of Irish descent. Interpreting his daughter’s disregard for the land, the father insists: “*Why, land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts* (emphasis added)”.

Scarlett protests that her father “sounds like an Irishman”; he rejoins:

It’s proud I am that I’m Irish, and don’t you be forgetting, Missy, that you’re half-Irish, too. And, to anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them—why, *the land they live on is like their mother*.

Then, pausing momentarily to forgive his daughter for her youth and innocence, he returns to his main point by insisting: *It will come to you, this love of the land. There’s no gettin’ away from it if you’re Irish* (*Gone with the Wind* 1939—Love of the Land/Tara’s Theme scene 1:00–1:29; emphasis added).

If narratives are believed to be faithful replicas of the nature of the world and human experience (Bennett 1989, pp. 301, 305), then this Irish father’s words ring true for consumers imbued with like-minded persuasions; those observers possess similar “implicit cultural assumptions that members of [a] speech community rely on to interpret instances of situated discourse” (Basso 1984, p. 50). Put another way, Gerald O’Hara’s sentiments fit into a “primary framework” (Goffman [1974] 1986). His narrative expresses the idea that one’s land is the *raison d’être* of existence. His paternal exhortation to his daughter conjures up a sense of purpose, even destiny. Harking to Ó Cruaíoch’s otherworld feminine (to be discussed in greater detail below), O’Hara’s reference to Tara in terms of the maternal, expressed in the words “the land they live on is like their mother”, is particularly profound, as is his confidence that the inevitable will ensue, for he gives voice to the idea that, in due course, his girl child will “grow into” Irish vernacular religious belief. To encounter statements like these is to, in Basso’s understanding, “expose the major premises on which they rest” and to realize that those premises “have the power to establish enduring bonds between individuals and features of the natural landscape” (Basso 1984, pp. 22–23).

If Gerald O’Hara’s words were expressed in isolation, devoid of similar expressions found in other ethnopoetic examples within Irish oral tradition, one might be disinclined to place much weight on them. However, such sentiments are reinforced in narrative contexts elsewhere. For example, in the 1952 film *The Quiet Man*, based on a short story with the same title (Walsh 1933)⁵, a parent—this time a mother—speaks to her son from the grave, conjuring up memories of home, landscape, and the familial affection they once shared:

Don't you remember, Seáneen, and how it was? The road led up past the chapel, and it wound, and it wound, and there was a field where Dan Tobin's bull chased you. It was a lovely little house, Seáneen. And the roses! Your father used to tease me about them, but he was that proud of them, too (*The Quiet Man* (1952) Location—Derryerglinna, Co Galway, Ireland 0:18–0:42).

In this monologue, one finds descriptions of not just *any* winding road but a very specific one, the one that wound “past the chapel”; moreover, that road did not *just* wind; rather, it *wound and wound*. Furthermore, adding to the sense of place, the mother's description identifies a particular spot, a field, where an unforgettable event occurred that involved a named neighbor and his cattle. That specificity amounts to what Basso (1984, p. 22) calls a validation of the premises upon which they rest.

Additional discursive features depict not only the land but the dwelling. Seán's mother describes it as a “lovely little house”, evoking the flowering of life with images of well-tended roses. Her narrative is delivered in exclamatory prose shaped with images of playfulness and familial pride. As the scene unfolds, the mother's recollection serves to explain her son's return; he adds weight to her memory by contributing his own. He addresses his birth and his future, saying, “. . . because I was *born* in that cottage over there and *I've come home* and it's *home I'm gonna stay*” (*The Quiet Man* 1:30–1:38; emphasis added). The son's distinct reason for coming back to his birthplace finds expression in lines that evoke foundation, return, and permanence. It is in these kinds of religious anchors that we perceive Irish migrants' awareness of what they owed and to whom they owed it, coupled with the realization of what it meant for them to carry out obligations to kin within their lived experiences.

The third example from popular Irish culture is found in *The Field*, a 1965 play written by John B. Keane and adapted for film (Keane 1966). The initial lines that address the importance of the land are sparse, but their meaning, accompanied by metaphor, is poignant. Just as Gerald O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* attempts to teach his daughter the meaning of place, so, too, does the father in *The Field* state to his son that the field is “worth fighting for, boy”. (*The Field* 1990, 5:49). Pausing with baskets of seaweed intended to enrich the patch they tend, the elder puts their efforts on par with the Divine: “God made the world, and seaweed made that field, boy” (*The Field* 1990, 4:37–4:42). To emphasize the be-all and end-all of their existence, he picks up a white-headed dandelion, declaring, “This is what we'd be without the land, boy”. With a few gentle puffs, he blows the spent flower's wisps, which scatter in all directions in the wind. With the dandelion's newly naked and exposed head in his hand, he holds it in front of his child's face, looks directly into his child's eyes, and nods to reinforce what it would mean to be in the condition of the scattered and lost (*The Field* 1990, 4:48–5:06). The profundity of the symbolism is clear: God may have made the world, but it was kinsmen working together that kept *their* world intact.

We are reminded of Bennett's (1989, p. 291) “belief story”, and the concept of a “cultural belief complex” wherein narratives are believed to be faithful replicas of the nature of the world and human experience (Bennett 1989, pp. 301, 305). Rather than being an escape from the quotidian dimensions of life, religious behaviors engage even as they transcend.

Later in the film, the father confronts the institutional religious system of Roman Catholicism by defiantly asserting that there is “another law, stronger than the common law” (*The Field* 1990, 53:32–53:35), and when the priest asks, “What's that?” the father's passionate reply is spat out: “the law of the land” (*The Field* 1990, 53:38). Although the priest attempts to claim institutional church authority, he admits that “there's just a thin veneer of Christianity painted over these people” (*The Field* 1990, 48:39). And in one of the more memorable soliloquies in the film, the father narrates the particulars of his family's sacrificial journey:

When I was a boy, younger than Tadgh there, my brothers and sisters had to leave the land, because it couldn't support them. We wasn't rich enough to be priests or doctors, so it was the emigrant ship for all of them. I were the eldest, the heir. I were the only one left at home. Neighbours [sic] were scarce. So my father and I,

we had our breakfast, dinner, and tea, working in that field without a break in our work. And my mother brought us the meals. One day, one day my father sensed a drop of rain in the air and my mother helped us bring in the hay before it was too late. She was working one corner of the field, and I was working in the other. About the third day, I saw her fall back, keel over so to speak. I called my father, I run to her. My father kneeled beside her. He knew she . . . he knew she was dying. He said an act of contrition into her ear and he asked God to forgive her her sins. And he looked at me, and he said, 'Fetch a priest.' Fetch a priest . . . And I said, 'Let's—let's bring the hay in first. Let's bring the hay in first.' My father looked at me with tears of pride in his eyes. He knew I'd take care of the land. And if you think I'm gonna face my mother in Heaven or in Hell without that field, you've got something else coming. No collar, uniform, or weapon will protect the man that stands in my way. (*The Field* 1990, 53:44–56:00)

It is here that we witness the key issue raised in this chapter: the near-futile attempt in some places in Ireland to hold on to the land, as well as its inability to sustain all of those who were born to it. The father explains that, for him and his siblings, a lack of money stood between them and advancement to the professional classes. He adumbrates the unwritten rule that children, especially firstborn children, must devote themselves to family care (Robertson 1953, p. 36). In addition, he elaborates on his belief in the importance of land over life—and a mother's life at that.

To endure all that the father's and son's efforts entailed was to commit what Taylor calls "acts of *moral geography* meant to constitute, reconstitute or reconfigure the meaning and *moral valence* of . . . *landscapes* in relation to both individual lives and collective cultural formations . . . linking one to another" (Taylor [2012] 2016, p. 211; emphasis added).

For those that stayed, who did not migrate permanently, temporary migration to Scotland amounted to an extension of many of the same kinds of work they did at home. For their kin, their work took on a sacred mission: to preserve their family's holdings (cf. O'Dowd 1991). Eugene Hynes (1988) reveals that "[T]he family and its particular farm came to be united symbolically [in the sense that] it was vitally important 'to keep the name on the land.'" Cousins sums this sense of duty well: "Neither famine nor eviction loos[en]ed the hold of the peasantry in much of the west" (cited in Ó Gráda 1973, p. 75; cf. Smyth 1983; Knott 1984). The land was their religious symbol; their hold on it equated to their implicit religious behavior as it is defined above: "a quest for meaning that originates in the life-world and expresses itself in a complex network of symbols and practices" (Nesti 1990b, p. 420).

7. The Conception of the Otherworld Feminine

It is at this juncture that we turn to the third aspect of the Irish vernacular worldview as set forth by Ó Cruailaoich, which is "the symbolic and socially functional significance of the conception of the otherworld feminine" (Ó Cruailaoich 2022). Numerous manifestations of the sacred feminine, replete with a variety of powers, exist in Irish tradition. These include the *bean leighis* (woman of healing), the *bean chaointe* (keening woman at the wake), the *bean sí* (English banshee, death messenger), and the *bean feasa* (woman of knowledge or wise woman) (Ó Cruailaoich 2003, passim). Aligned with these ideas of the sacred feminine is that of the woman who cares for her "holy ground", recognized as the nation but even more importantly, her family's land. In this regard, it was women, especially daughters, who took center stage. Meagher (1986, p. 342) asserts, "Economic conditions [at home] were very important . . . in shaping conceptions of the roles of [Irish] single women. . . . The wife's role was to be a mother; the daughter's role was to work". Most telling in this regard is the Irish proverb, *Is é do mhac go bpósann sé ach is í d'iníon d'iníon go bhfaighidh tú bás*: "Your son is your son until he marries, but your daughter is your daughter forever" (O'Donnell 1998, p. 30).

With this *bon mot*, we see Locklin's insight actualized: for the Irish, their religious lives and practices unfolded in specific cultural contexts that were regional, linguistic, cultural,

and economic (cf. Locklin 2017, p. xvii; see Figure 1). In the words of Victor Turner (1973, p. 200), it was “meritorious to choose one’s duty”. Lambert (2001, p. 181) adds that of all the ideologies of independent Ireland, women’s roles became increasingly circumscribed to caring for the family within the home. Those roles were reinforced by sayings like “Me own house and me own garden [or yard]” (cf. Quinn 2009, p. 197; personal communication) and by the well-known expression, “*Níl aon tinteáin mar do thinteáin féin*” (There’s no hearth like your own hearth). When one considers the personal politics of identity, a sense of place—particularly one’s *home* place—operated as a predominant factor (Wilson and Donnan 2006, p. 122; cf. Blunt and Dowling 2006).

The dwelling marked a “basic unit of distinctive Irish settlement and therefore of Irish social organization”. It symbolized and affirmed ideological positions about women:

The cottage as an ‘Irish citadel’ stands for [the] preservation and reproduction of Irish language, tradition and folklore, for which *women* were considered to have paramount responsibility in their capacity as caregivers . . . Thus the isolated rural cottage represented the realization, both in the physical fabric of the landscape and in the moral and spiritual domain, of the ideal form of Irish society. (Nash 1993, p. 49; emphasis added)

As for the hearth: in each and every Irish dwelling, it epitomized protected personal place and “the social life of the house” (Danaher 1995, p. 16). It extended beyond the walls of the dwelling, for its upkeep symbolized the strength of community and nation (Kenneally 2012, p. 225). “[T]o keep the fire continuously lit . . . was to symbolize the longevity of the clans” (Quinn and Delay 2017, p. 113). Evans notes:

The kitchen and the hearth are the very core of the Irish house, and the turf fire burning continuously day and night, throughout the year, is the symbol of both family continuity and of hospitality towards the stranger. When it goes out, it has been said, the *soul* goes out of the people of the house. (Evans 1957, p. 59; emphasis added)

Evans’s characterization of the turf fire as the “soul” of the dwelling enables one to grasp the importance of the hearth in the vernacular religious lives of the Irish, especially in the west of Ireland. Moreover, Evans’s metaphoric use of the word “soul” to describe the hearth of the dwelling harks to the kinds of women’s everyday religious behaviors that suffused the concepts of Irish sacred space. Is it any wonder, then, that the desire to return to the metaphoric meaning of the Irish hearth was so strong?



Figure 1. Tattie howkers digging potatoes. John Clark Maddison Collection, circa the late 1890s. Used with permission.

8. Conclusions

Extending the understanding of Irish religious belief to perceive it as a triadic complex enables us to recognize that specific places and particular localities play a salient role in determining how the Irish understood themselves as religious beings in the world. Challenged in this chapter is the well-entrenched perception that the Republic of Ireland is predominantly a “saintly” island oriented to Roman Catholic practices. Although Ireland has been thought to be a Roman Catholic island—so much so that it has earned the label “the land of saints and scholars”—and even though, for centuries, Roman Catholicism was perceived by many to be the predominant religious organization that informed Irish beliefs and practices—this chapter reveals that the tenets of Roman Catholicism constituted only some of the religious guideposts that informed seasonal Irish workers’ choices of religious activities and behaviors. Especially when it came to the beliefs that motivated them to engage in agricultural work abroad in the British Isles, other religious sensibilities were powerfully influential; to a large extent, they dictated how Irish people chose to act. Even though the “tattie-hokers” were reported to attend Roman Catholic religious services faithfully while working in the potato fields of England and Scotland (O’Dowd 1991), the need to protect their home places was a daily preoccupation for the men as well as the women. Proverbial lore associated with women is indicative of the fact that, like their fathers and brothers, Irish women were compelled morally to fulfill the working roles to which they were assigned by their families. To do so equated to the practice of vernacular religion, with its focus on human beliefs lived and experienced in myriad ways in the world (cf. Primiano 1995, p. 44).

In order to ascertain the implicit religious persuasions of seasonal migrants, the chapter utilizes the insights of Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch and his promotion of the idea of the existence of an “Irish vernacular worldview” comprised of belief in cosmological dualism, creative ethnopoetics, and the otherworldly feminine. The first, dual cosmology, can be witnessed in communal practices that transcend the confines of organized religion; these include pilgrimage journeys to Ireland’s sacred mountains and visitations to the wells of founder saints. The second, the creative deployment of ethnopoetics, can be located in folkloric items like proverbs, customary sayings, narratives, and dialogues found in films. Collectively, examples from those genres help to explain seasonal migrants’ decisions to emigrate on a temporary basis only. Indubitably, migrants who undertook seasonal migration were shaped not by their “literal past” or “the ‘facts’ of [their literal] history”, as Brian Friel notes in his County Donegal-based play *Translations*, but by the “images of [their] past embodied in language” (Friel [1981] 2000; emphasis added). As this chapter has shown, those images, repeated regularly and passionately, indexed local and familial lands and dwellings.

The third piece Ó Cruaíoch’s Irish vernacular worldview addresses the otherworldly feminine, which he locates in lore about the *bean sí* (fairy woman), the *cailleach* (wise woman), and other figures like the healing woman (*bean leighis*) regarded favorably for having special powers within the tradition. This chapter extends Ó Cruaíoch’s ideas by recognizing Irish women as keepers of the hearth, the “soul” of Irish dwellings. Irish women were “elevated as the cultural arbiters of religious observance [and] valued for their inherited practical know-how” (Whelan 2018, p. 107). They lived roles that were inscribed in proverbs uttered about them and idioms used by them. The saying “Me own house and me own yard” is but one example.

Ian Reader notes that manifestations of implicit religiosity surface in day-to-day behaviors like folk customs shared community practices, and feelings of identity (Reader 1993, p. 16; cf. Bailey 1983). Examples of these have been reiterated throughout this chapter. The evidence shows that to merely focus on the Christian or Roman Catholic belief system as a factor affecting the behaviors of seasonal migrants to Scotland in the twentieth century is to miss—or dismiss—the compelling magnetism of the vernacular and implicit religious forces at play.

These fresh lines of inquiry offer a broader perspective on religion in Ireland, one that moves us far from the boundaries of “Catholic” and/or “Protestant” and towards the

awareness that binaries fall by the wayside when one considers vernacular worldviews and implicit symbols and practices. In addition, these insights are valuable in terms of opening up categories of awareness regarding emigrant groups entering Ireland at present, for they are probably entering with their own sets of vernacular beliefs and implicit symbols and practices, all of which deserve to be honored and respected.

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Notes

- ¹ Tom Inglis (1988) argues that when it comes births, weddings, confirmations, deaths, etc., in many places in the Republic of Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church continues to figure predominantly.
- ² McNally (1973, p. 91) notes that clerics were concerned that their parishioners’ faith might be compromised by travel.
- ³ For further information on Irish seasonal migration, see (Collins 1976; Holmes 2000; Moran 1988; O’Dowd 1991, 2019; Ó Gráda 1973; Quinn 2020, 2022).
- ⁴ Marian Bowman’s (2004) triadic perspective bears similarities to the one presented here, but it is not the same in the sense that Bowman places more emphasis on the individual than the group. There are other distinctions to note as well.
- ⁵ The story appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 11 February 1933.

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Essay

Pilgrim Reverence as a Pathway to Ecological Conversion: An Analysis of Phenomenological Journaling along the Way

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Abstract: By fostering reverence, walking The Way can facilitate a critical tool in the promotion of what Pope Francis calls ecological conversion in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Re-reading a series of personal phenomenological reflections she wrote during the course of her 2012 and 2017 pilgrimages along the Camino Frances through the lens of philosopher Paul Woodruff's theory of reverence, the author explores the emotional sources of reverence pilgrims experience through the course of pilgrimage. Cultivated through a body of non-religious but characteristically pilgrim-oriented ceremonies, ritual activities, and acts of perception, the pilgrim reverence the author experiences and observes does not seem to draw from any single theological lexicon; it seems rather to extend, in all cases, into and beyond a feeling for the human community, to the earth itself. It is a spiritual exercise open to humanity itself, where pilgrims have the opportunity to foster recognition that everything is connected in our social, environmental, and economic ecologies.

Keywords: *Laudato Si'*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Herbert Spiegelberg; *Reverence*; Camino de Santiago; Pope Francis; Paul Woodruff; phenomenology; ecological conversion; journaling



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1. Introduction: *Laudato Si'* and the Call to Ecological Conversion

In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Francis addresses humanity in its entirety, entreating people of every nation to pursue universal communion with the earth and all creation. Such communion, he argues, is only possible through large and small acts of liberation. Various global forces—anthropomorphism, technocracy, and free-market consumerism— weaken the bonds of communion by exploiting the cultures and gifts of small communities, diminishing and obfuscating the value of individual labor, and treating the whole of creation as the material wealth of people, political, and economic entities who own or otherwise possess it. In this, he aligns himself with the sustainability movement, which recognizes environmental policy is intrinsically tied to economic and anthropological interests—to consider one body of concerns without the others is akin to cutting off the leg of a stool.

Directing his comments specifically to Christians at the beginning and end of the encyclical, he calls for an ecological conversion, where the Christian's relationship with Christ is marked by a commitment to protect creation in its entirety. Being "protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue;" he reminds practitioners of the faith, "it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (Franciscus 2015, III.217). Christians are to be stewards of creation, not to presume right of dominion. This ecological conversion, which must lead to a vocational commitment to protect and serve the entirety of God's creation, is only possible by cultivating the eye of the heart. Persons of faith transform their relationship to the world when it is something they see with wonder, awe, attentiveness, joy, humility, and love. Francis draws on Martin Buber's (1958) *I and Thou* as an intertext, remarking that just as each human being is a Thou to God, a "subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object [. . .] it would also be mistaken to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination" (Franciscus 2015, III.82).

Extending his comments to all members of the human community through the text, Francis argues that a return from the abyss of “self-interested pragmatism” will be critical for the preservation of our common home. The protection of the earth and creation will necessitate adopting new models of global development, enacting new laws and policies, and continuing community activism. More importantly, he argues, it necessitates the transformation of individuals’ perceptions of themselves relative to the world. Although he does not cite Aldo Leopold, Francis’s words echo the foundational tenet of “The Land Ethic”: “In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and respect for the community as such” (Leopold 1989, p. 204).

While Francis aligns the new humanity with Leopold’s vision, he goes beyond Leopold’s systematic approach to a land ethic, addressing the phenomenological shifts that must occur within each individual to make it possible. It is only through seeing the world and one another through the eye of the heart that a universal communion with the earth and its creatures will ever be possible. It is love that will save us—specifically, *philia*. To draw from philosopher Charles Starkey, reframing our perceptions will foster “a fundamental change in moral perspective, because it internalizes the recognition of interdependence and in doing so changes our vision of the land, not merely the scope of our cost-benefit calculations. Just as we “see” people differently if we consider people, as people, worthy of some baseline level of respect, so we see the land differently if we consider it worthy of a baseline level of respect” (Starkey 2007, p. 91).

According to Francis, the new eco-ecumenism will entail revolutionizing the way we see ourselves and locate ourselves in the world, and will involve experiencing an authentic love for every single thing, to recognize its beauty, its dignity, and its Being. In order to see that everything is connected and begin to act accordingly, Francis states, our “concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (Franciscus 2015, V.91).

Since reading the encyclical in 2015, I have felt that the Camino de Santiago offers a space for a transformative encounter such as Francis calls for, in so much as it compels the pilgrim to negotiate the cultures and gifts of small communities, and no matter what mode of transport they take, gives them a more deeply embodied experience of encountering the land communities they move through. Moreover, and equally importantly, it is an increasingly ecumenical space within which individuals can experience diverse cultural perspectives.

Between 1985, when the Archdiocese of Santiago began recording pilgrim arrivals (2491 pilgrims reported), and 1993, when UNESCO inscribed the Cathedral de Santiago as a World Heritage site (99,439 pilgrims reported), the pilgrim routes of Santiago de Compostela welcomed an exponential increase in the number of pilgrims visiting the rural agrarian regions of Rioja, Galicia and Castilla Y Leon in northern Spain (Bader 2018). Nearly 350,000 pilgrims journeyed to Santiago in 2019 (Oficina del Peregrino 2019); while the number dipped to around 50,000 during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oficina del Peregrino 2021), based on data the pilgrim’s office in Santiago has reported each year, the numbers of pilgrims can be expected to continue rising exponentially for the foreseeable future.

Importantly, given Francis’s appeal to all of humanity to seek encounters that lead to authentic love for the world and its inhabitants, the percentage of pilgrims who do not walk for religious reasons is increasing relative to the total of pilgrims. At the completion of their journey, pilgrims are asked by the Oficina del Peregrino whether their motives were “Religious,” “Non-Religious” or “Religious and Other.” The percentage of pilgrims who identify as not walking for religious reasons has increased from 6.14% of the total population of pilgrims who arrived in Santiago in 2011 to 20.43% of the total population of pilgrims who arrived in Santiago in 2021. Rather than being a statistical outlier, this increasing percentage of pilgrims who walk for non-religious reasons has trended significantly upward over the past decade. More details are shown in the comparative table of responses (see Table 1).

Table 1. Table documenting a sample of statistical trends in the motives of pilgrims over one decade of data collection by the Office of Pilgrims in Santiago.

Year	Religious and Other	Religious	Non-Religious
2011 (Oficina del Peregrino 2011)	93,147 (50.80%)	78,969 (43.07%)	11,250 (6.14%)
2014 (Oficina del Peregrino 2014)	120,474 (50.62%)	101,042 (42.46%)	16,467 (6.92%)
2018 (Oficina del Peregrino 2018)	156,720 (47.87%)	140,037 (42.78%)	30,621 (9.35%)
2021 (Oficina del Peregrino 2021)	77,298 (43.2%)	65,063 (36.37%)	36,551 (20.43%)

2. Writing in Place: A Pilgrim's Phenomenological Method

Through my childhood and early adulthood, I had only the most cursory relationship with the earth or my impact upon it. Having sensory processing issues, I avoided many of the sensations I encountered outside, and became quite bookish. I intellectualized my relationship with the world, and while I was an early adopter of certain sustainability-oriented activities such as recycling and a concern for water rights, the land communities I moved through as I grew up were largely a backdrop to my existence. As the evidence of human impact on our environment has grown, and the existence of a global environmental crisis looms large, I began mitigating some of my behaviors and voting for policies that supported systemic change in our consumption-production-use practices. Over the past decade, however, my concerns for the ecological crisis have moved away from an investigation of what solutions and mitigations can be found in public policy and legal oversight, and toward an investigation into cultivating my emotional experiences in both the land communities I belong to, and those through which I merely pass. Like environmental writer Rudolph Bahro, I now see the present moment, and every moment, as providing an opportunity for a shift in the individual and collective conscious. As he notes:

The ecological crisis is a unique occasion to develop a new mode of consciousness to save humanity from destruction. We must widen and perfect our self-awareness in order to free ourselves of the conditioning of our birth and socialization.

(Bahro 1994, p. 219)

With heightened self-awareness, I can engage in the land communities I move through as intentionally as possible. In furthering my resolve to pay attention to them, I have elevated the importance of attention in my life. As I will explain below, phenomenological writing assists me in this engagement. As a writer, I have discovered that describing my lived experience within the dictates of phenomenology is a natural attention practice with revolutionary ends.

It is not coincidental that my focus began turning inward in 2012; the shift correlates with my first pilgrimage to Santiago that year. As a consequence of long hours walking in silence and near silence through meseta, forest, wine grove, and more, I found myself engaging in recording my apperceptions throughout the journey. My journaling during the sojourn focused on developing brief imagistic snapshots of how I experienced the places that I moved through, and the other lives within them. Take, for example, the following journal entry, typed on a smart phone during a break in the day's walk on 31 May 2012:

*Outside the Autoservicios
a dog is tied up,
pacing
in search of its master.*

*Its cries are sharp
as a rock in the heel,
the tender sliver
of longing.*

*They bloom wild and azure—
blue as the morning glories
covering the steel roof
across the street—
mounting one another
in perfect desire
for the sky.*

Upon my return home, as I archived each of the brief impressions I had preserved in writing alongside my pilgrim's credential, I realized how much the apperception of each encounter fostered within me a sense of profound spiritual intimacy with those places and the lives within. The fact of it encouraged me to continue this mode of writing as a way of grounding me and enlivening my sense of place wherever I happened to find myself.

3. Notes on Methodology

By the occasion of my third pilgrimage in 2017, a habit of writing my phenomenological experience of place had been formed. It had become more narrative through the years. I now habitually carried a journal and well-appointed black pen which were exclusively devoted to these exercises. Adoption of an older writing technology allowed for more discursiveness-in-writing along the Way. My short imagistic snapshots of being-in-place were replaced by more sustained impressions such as this, penned on 17 June 2017 during a rest stop at the side of the pilgrim's path:

Along the red clay road, the white granite stones lie here and there, clinking softly when we scuff up against them, sending them knocking into one another. Strange to think, but they are both a perpetual part of this landscape, and utterly mutable at the same time, being scooped and kicked, blown and weathered through the ages—moving, moving, ever moving from ditch line to ditch line, like pilgrims, I suppose. Stones like pilgrims. Pilgrims like stones. We may as well be the smallest rocks in this rural land, bouncing off one another without comment, fighting the erosion of this place, never wedded to the bedrock.

Before dawn, when we set out, they were invisible on the road. N set to shuffling in short steps, perhaps afraid of rolling her ankles. As the sky lightened, they became shadowless and formidable in their density, like tiny black holes. I later noticed her gait became longer, more confident.

Now they reflect the sun at an almost uncomfortable intensity, blazing like the hottest part of a flame, their long blue shadows extending toward our feet. It is no more comfortable to look to the horizon, where the origin of their light burns. I close my eyes and see them ghost-imprinted along the landscape of my inner eye—a negative relief of dark stone against bright road.

Over time, my writings have evolved in style and in scope. I have expanded the phenomena included in my observations to include reflexive thoughts I am engaged in while pursuing an activity, and include observational reflections of behavior demonstrated by myself and others. These decisions are not merely aesthetic, but philosophically founded—an evolving poetics-at-work informed by the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and the explicit phenomenological method outlined by Herbert Spiegelberg in *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. Spiegelberg was a philosopher who studied under Alexander Pfänder and was well-acquainted with Edmund Husserl. Spiegelberg's life's project was to

train individuals in phenomenological observation—encouraging both individual practice and workshop participation. The project, for him, was deeply ethical. It was a way of diminishing our solipsistic objectification of the world, and a way of elevating the possibility of what he called ‘inter-subjective agreement.’ There are our perceptions of what we encounter, there are others’ perceptions of what they encounter, and beyond that, the world as it is—a collection of beings we shall never have full grasp of. The four steps he identifies in the process are *intuiting*—holding the encounter with a phenomenon in your awareness, *analyzing*—examining the phenomenon and the scope of the encounter, and *describing*—writing down your description as if the reader had never had the experience. *Through the process of writing, the careful and ethical practitioner must also outline their intuiting and analyzing processes* (Spiegelberg 1960, pp. 659–75).

The humility undergirding this practice is apparent—and something which I find deeply attractive. As is the emphasis it places on individual experience as an epistemological method. If I mean to know the world, I should not sticker it over with concepts or derivatively ascertained knowledge—I must pay attention to it—how I perceive it, the emotional veil through which I perceive it. Attending to our encounters and their emotional tinctures with deep attention and mindfulness is, for the classically trained phenomenologist, a first and final act in human freedom and ethical engagement. For me, it is the only practical means by which to foster a lifetime of devotion, a sense of responsibility.

Merleau-Ponty’s writings, which I had first read as a philosophy undergraduate, and which I revisited in the years between the first and third pilgrimages in the hope of honing my phenomenological practice, has also informed my practice in three ways. In his seminal work *Perception and Phenomenology*, he posits that humans should not regard the body as a biological or physical thing, but as the locus of all experience, the source of all knowledge. As he states,

But our body is not merely one expressive space among all others, for that would be merely the constituted body. Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes. [. . .] The body is our general means of having a world.

(Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 147).

The body is our general medium for having a world. We have no access to the world without the fundamental tools of our perception. Reminded of this premise after revisiting his texts in 2015–2016, my subsequent writings began to reveal more care to examining the body, my body, as a locus of knowledge, documenting the nuanced responses it has while navigating specific environments a great deal more. This has meant, in part, focusing a great deal more on how each of my senses engage in my environment and give rise to acts of perception, memory, and desire. It has also invited me to shift my investigations into how specific spaces, natural, curated, and created, invite bodies to engage with them in specific ways.

A second notable way that Merleau-Ponty informed the evolution of my phenomenological practice during the re-encounter was by granting me a more-than-creative license to observe others’ behavior—in particulate and as a collective, and to present it in the context of what I am experiencing. As he will later state in “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,” “Nothing prevents me from explaining the meaning of the lived experience of another person, in so far as I have access to it, by perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 65). In other words, phenomenologists can encounter others’ behaviors as phenomena; as the perceiving subject perceives these expressions, they are indeed a logical and appropriate subject for those seeking to engage in a philosophical observation of phenomena.

All this to say that the scope of what I was attempting to do with these writings was initially much smaller than is usually warranted attention in an academic journal. As phenomenology has been adopted for use in the social sciences under the name of participant observation, there is something of an expectation that first-person experiential

writing has limited or qualified use as particulate evidence—a testimonial, perhaps, or to serve as echolocation for the interpretive *I* of the researcher. As indeed it should when used as an evidentiary method within the realm of the social sciences.

Phenomenology, however, originates as an existential enterprise, emphasizing an individual's acts of the will (and creative processes) as a first and final vehicle of meaning, freedom, and agency. My phenomenological writings are undertaken in this more fundamental spirit—to hone my attention to my experience of the world. By heightening my levels of sensory awareness to that which surrounds me and how I engage with it, I become more sentient of and sensitive to the beings that exist in a shared context with my own. As David Abram articulates, “this genuinely ecological approach [. . .] strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surrounds us in the open field of the present moment” (Abram 1996, p. 272).

That being said, my reflections, accompanied by analysis and in an intertextual reading with Paul Woodruff's *Reverence* below, reveal a pattern of engagement which may be useful to other pilgrims as they seek to develop an ecological consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty himself suggests in *Sense and Non-Sense*, the particularities of my experience, or yours, or his, are the portal to shared understanding. “We will arrive at the universal not by abandoning our particularity,” he reminds us, “but by turning it into a way of reaching others, by virtue of that mysterious affinity which makes situations mutually understandable” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 92). I believe this. And so I write.

There will be readers of these passages who recognize they have experienced phenomena in a similar way; there will be others who are invited into a deeper engagement with their own phenomenological encounters by reading mine. And there will be others still who demand quantitative evidence to support what is perceived as a generalized argument about the pilgrim experience. I will redirect this third group of readers back to the project of phenomenology as Spiegelman and Merleau-Ponty imagine it, and as I have embraced it.

4. Reverence and Its Emotional Origins

In a slight volume titled *Reverence*, philosopher Paul Woodruff carefully resuscitates reverence, that “ancient virtue that survives among us in half forgotten patterns of civility.” As he notes in the earliest passages of his text, “We have the word ‘reverence’ in our language, but we scarcely know how to use it. [. . .] right now it has no place in secular discussions of ethics or political theory” (Woodruff 2001, p. 3). For Woodruff, as well as Francis, the project of restoring humans to their proper place and giving them a vision for a common future is an intercultural and ecumenical enterprise.

I had the good fortune of coming across *Reverence* as I was returning to the reflections I had written during my 2017 pilgrimage. My own writings suggest that the cultivation of reverence may be a foundational experience at the heart of the pilgrim experience, as well as the more general phenomenological experience of authentic love that Francis discusses in *Laudato Si'*. In accordance with Woodruff's argument in *Reverence*, the reflections suggest that the cultivation of pilgrim reverence for creation—human and non-human—is fostered through the ritualized and highly ceremonial experience of three linked emotions: respect, humility, and awe.

His brief treatise on the emotional sources of reverence helped me discern patterns of respect, humility and awe that I experienced as a pilgrim but had not heretofore identified or named. These emotions arose in a series of ritualized, embodied practices I had undertaken during the course of the pilgrimage and deepened my sense of care and concern for our fragile planet and our fragile human community to a point of felt mutuality—as if we were bound in an intimate spiritual relationship. It felt like an ecological conversion, indeed. A conversion that had not arisen through religious practices, rituals, or ceremonies, but within decidedly pilgrim practices, rituals and ceremonies. Given the increasing numbers of pilgrims who do not walk for religious reasons, I found my own experience to potentially be an illuminating and invigorating ecumenical opportunity for others as well.

The narrative examples below attempt to illustrate how the journey of four weeks along The Way possesses the potential to engage a pilgrim in ecological conversion. Within each, I read my original phenomenological reflections, written in 2017, in dialogue with Paul Woodruff's theory on reverence, which I read in 2019. It should be noted that each brief essay is a composite of three or more discrete reflections I made through the course of the journey and is written in the third person. To give the reader a better idea of where the initial phenomenological reflections begin and end, I have italicized the passages I have taken from them and provide the original text with dates in Appendix A.

5. The Singularity of Things: Rituals of Respect

Within several days of initiating their pilgrimage, pilgrims' bodies adopt a new circadian rhythm. For all but the deepest of sleepers, the flight of nocturne is light and lyrical, taking on the serene character of duck slumber on a still pond. It is entered easily, and departed easier still—the sleep of those thrown into a strange new intimacy with strangers. *Without alarms or other accoutrements, a rustle or a shift heard just before dawn within the dormitory sends pilgrims gliding into awareness, shedding sleep as if it were water. Thus, by five in the morning, many awake (A1).* Some immediately slide out of their bunks and softly tread toward the bathroom; others begin the stealth process of packing what little they have had out back into their backpacks.

And here begins the first lesson The Way has to offer: a lesson on the singularity of things. At the beginning of each day, hands are compass; by them and them alone the pilgrim sets her course. *Within the habitude of darkness, everything that is touched, used, or organized, identifies itself by texture alone. By the raw weave of its t-webbing straps, a toiletry bag is found. By its silky cord, a travel wallet is lifted and secured. By the soft angle of its heel, a sock is oriented, crunched up, put on (A2).* Again and again, over the course of thirty or more days, each object is touched, pulled out, unrolled, rolled, folded, stuffed, packed, with a respect not observed in consumer culture, where our relationship with things is utterly mediated by their use or social value. *One pilgrim dresses, another slowly pushes his sleeping bag in a stuff sack, a third applies sunscreen; things are used and stowed away in backpacks without haste and with a consummate sense of intimacy (A3)—*pilgrim hands assessing each object with a level of deliberation and respect that it is not given anywhere else. To be sure, the things the pilgrim carries are respected because they cannot easily be replaced, and because they are useful—they would not be there otherwise. This makes sense: a thru-pilgrim on The Way will have no more than ten percent of their body weight packed in their backpacks. Often, this means no more than a change of clothing, a small toiletry bag, a quick dry towel, a needle and thread for blisters, shower shoes. Nonetheless, this careful attention to the things themselves, the sojourner's ritualized care for them, shifts the frame of their shared existence. The things carried are not merely things possessed, things of use—they are things with a particulate nature of their own; they are things with which the pilgrim has a relationship . . . they are things in his or her care.

As the pilgrim attunes herself to the particularity of things, the world is reinhabited as well. Wrought at the speed of footfall, one's attention is drawn toward a world that illuminates itself—a bee nosing dozily in the arms of a lavender shrub, the sharp ochre color of an ancient cistern beaten by afternoon light, the wizened blue grey shadows of a ventricular chestnut tree. For years to come, the pilgrim's journey will be recalled not through an itinerary, nor through a sequence of episodic events, but through these flickering encounters with flora and fauna, rock and wind, air and water.

Such encounters play a critical role in the formation of a sense of place for the traveler, while more often than not the character of cities and villages remains largely ahistorical. Attempt to prompt a pilgrim's recollection of their journey by saying the name Villafranca Montes de Oca and you'll be unsuccessful; the words hang together loosely, signifying a shadow of meaning, like a murmured rumination said under the breath, heard from another room. But the place will materialize again and again in body memory, through its own being (A4). Thousands of miles away and years removed, the pilgrim can and will return to the steely shale paths of the steep hills and wooded pine groves that brace the place carrying that name. Images of shrub bouquets of

raspberry are set as a seal upon the heart, as is the mesmerizing dance of the thousands of butterflies summering there.

There are occasions when a preoccupation with weather, injury, or illness pulls the pilgrim's attention away from the particularity of things. When his early-morning attention wavers, the ritualized space in which the pilgrim interacts with things is diminished. On one such occasion, a British pilgrim descended from the monastery dormitories at St. Juan Ortega in the grey darkness of a day that forebode rain. Without turning on his head lamp, he felt around for his poles in the corner and found ones he believed to be his, based on where he had left them in the stand, their height, and the nicked foam grip on one handle. The overcast day was breaking an hour and a half later when he discovered that they were not his. He had already walked four and a half miles when he discovered the error. I and my daughter encountered him nearly an hour into our own day's journey, just as the rain began. He was returning to the albergue in the hope of finding the owner.

It is no surprise, then, with this new habitude of focusing on the particular character of things, that we begin to recognize other pilgrims by their things. *As I came into Logrono on my last pilgrimage, I recognized a man who had stayed in the next bunk of an albergue I had stayed in 50 kms before—not by his face, voice or manner, for he was standing silently with his back to me at some distance. I recognized him by his light grey towel—the same towel that had been pinned to the back of the pack that leaned up against the lower bunk when I first arrived to the albergue three stations before. It was unextraordinary and rather non-descript by aesthetic standards. But it was particular.*

Later, when I was handwashing clothing in a utility tub outside, he came past me to hang the towel on the line in the late afternoon sunlight. Although we had never spoke or been in one another's presence during our earlier encounter he warmly smiled in greeting and tapped his head, looking at my wide fuchsia headband, as if to say 'It is you, I recognize you by your headband. Hello again.' I returned his warm greeting (A5). Ours was a mutual recognition of the singularity of people whom we will pass and encounter, but whom we will never know. It was made possible by cultivating an appreciation for the singularity of things.

6. Night Walking and the Alien Body: Ritual Humilities

Thirty to forty minutes after rising the first pilgrims will begin walking. They are soon followed by others, and then others, leaving in solitude and in pairs (A6). Through the dark before dawn, the pilgrim's path is more whisper than song. For this, its missives are easily misunderstood.

Night walking after sunset seems to be fairly uncommon, except for those few pilgrims who commit to walking forty or more miles a day, or who get a late start. It is, however, very common to begin walking before dawn. And for as common as it is along The Way, for many pilgrims walking before daybreak it is both an unsettling and centering practice—one that makes pilgrims acutely aware of their own vulnerability.

In nearly all cultures, night and its missive, wilderness, are realms of danger. *During their early-morning walks pilgrims are reminded of the primordial fear they have inherited from their earliest ancestors. Each, to a certain degree, feels a nascent vulnerability under the veil of night. They subdue it by harnessing all their senses, putting them to service on behalf of the present. They attend to each step, each sound, each shape that merges from the shadows, as if it were a singular point of focus. Completely engrossed with the task of navigating their way through the darkness, many will lose awareness of time, of people, of thoughts and distractions. Their headlamps jive and bobble, illuminating tree roots and fences, dolmen and dells. The feeble light jostles the horizon of the just-beyond, articulating the hazards at their feet with slow syllables of shadow. Until daybreak, it is the single measure of certainty (A7).*

Through the early hours, the path's blazes are veiled in obscurity. Pilgrims strike out on the day's journey, only to find The Way obscured by darkness. *At an intersection on a barren street or at a divergence in the stony path they find themselves forced to choose when no clear choice presents itself. And this provokes a second anxiety—the fog of discernment (A8). Some will plod on through what Frédéric Gros has called "the tremulous fear of choosing" (Gros 2014,*

p. 6). *Those who are unwilling to make the choice will stop until daylight breaks (A9), others will take a false turn and find themselves at some point forced to double back, sometimes for miles (A10).*

If, as Woodruff has noted, “reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations” (Woodruff 2001, p. 3), night walking germinates its tiniest seed, offering pilgrims conditions in which they are moving through strange and unfamiliar places with heightened sensitivity to both their bodies and their surroundings. Pilgrims who dare to walk beneath the cover of darkness attenuate their capacities to be present to whatever lies beyond their control, and to be centered by it. The shifting torchlight horizon and shadowy crossroad that lie before them offer uncertainty.

This uncertainty is the first gift of humility, a gift re-given every day. After arriving in Santiago, pilgrims are reminded of the instructive humility they have been given at the hand of night—how it compelled them to walk more by faith than by sight for hours and hours at a time. “Your night that lacked light has now become a torch of living faith,” a sign in the Pilgrim’s Office in Santiago reads. One can imagine that no matter what name she gives to her religion or spiritual tradition, no matter whether she possesses any at all, the pilgrim will read that sign and once again feel the soft humility of uncertainty during her night walking, giving the experience its due reverence in a new day.

Night walking offers pilgrims a second gift as well: an unadulterated experience of their own bodies. As our ancestors did before daybreak, we walk more by ear, and less by eye. *A pause just beyond the eclipsed threshold of the albergue reveals the river’s song somewhere to the east. Perhaps the leaves of the trees loft and murmur, as if in mimicry. Somewhere, too, wheat stalks and grape vines stiffly shudder, few songbirds sing. And then the first step: the striking, alien sound of one’s own footfall on an ancient Roman road or even more ancient riverbeds, an empty city sidewalk or spare forest trail (A11).*

The second gift of humility is enfolded in the lonely song of one’s own step, taken in a mostly silent world. At no other time of day is the pilgrim so aware of the alien sound of the self as in the morning—the silence of the world frames it so starkly. This second gift carries on well into the day, the week, the journey. From the first hours, their bodies betray sojourners time and again, announcing itself through alienness, awkwardness, and pain. *Through long days of walking in well-worn clothes most pilgrims become intimately familiar with their own odor, unmasked by cosmetic and detergent indulgences. As the sun climbs high, the skin breathes heavier and heavier. The scent that rises is elemental, composed of the fragrances of foods one has consumed, of salty sweat mingling with bacteria, of greenening wind and radiant sun. It may be outright appalling; for all, it is somewhat alien as well—the bloom of one’s body steeped in its environment (A12).*

The scent will be tamped down at the end of the day by the fragrance of the water one bathes in; it will change again as one passes through the stone sanctuary of a church or takes in food once again (A13). In most cases the relational and ritualized cycle of the body’s scent with its environment does not mortify pilgrims until they begin encountering ‘fresh’ sojourners who, with well laundered clothes, are doing shorter or day trips during the last one hundred kilometers of the journey (A14). It does, however, recover them to what their contemporary lives have stripped them of—an intimate sensory experience of their bodies breathing in and out with the world.

Countless pilgrims will suffer from tendonitis, severe scrapes, or bruises during their journeys, injuries that will slow them or force them to reengineer their walking habits. And no matter how many months a pilgrim has spent breaking in boots before beginning the journey, blisters will often crowd within the tender canyons of one’s toes or rise like an archipelago across one’s soles. Such injuries are more than awkward—they are instructive, crippling the expectations of those for whom the destination is the goal. Elevating the body and humbling the will, they remind it of its weak and unstable footing in the world.

7. The Time of the Snails: Rituals of Awe

The Way wends west toward Fisterra, a place named for what the ancient Celts believed was the end of the world. The sunrise is never witnessed except by those pilgrims

who, like Orpheus, turn backward. The snail's rise, however, can be witnessed by pilgrims every morning, and it is a remarkable sight.

As the steel sky blanches into tin, the nocturnal kingdom of the European garden snail (Helix aspersa) reveals itself. In the darkness they have held their congress within the forests and fields bracing the path or roadside, but they are creatures of earth and water, not wind and fire. Their soft feet and antennae slowly undulate beneath their tiger eye shells as, guided by a remarkable homing instinct, they cross the road, finding their way back to their cool burrows before the sun regains its command. For as far as the eye can see, these tiny caravans punctuate the Way. So does the fine lace of their mucus trails, which glisten like the quicksilver stripes of a zebra fish darting through a coral reef (A15). Pilgrims will transect hundreds and thousands of these translucent trails for miles without realizing the kinship that they possess with these tiny mollusks. They have entered the time of the snails.

For one, over the next thirty days or more they will feel a shift in how they perceive and speak of distance. *How far something is will be felt and articulated by landmark, or by time of day—not in arbitrary measurement units such as miles or kilometers. “How far are you going today?” one pilgrim asks. The other replies, “Logrono,” or “I’ll see how I feel after I stop for lunch.” Even those who possess a guidebook, who regularly pull out its maps and possess a well-planned itinerary which was designed with daily mileage in mind . . . even they begin to conceptualize distance from the vantage point of the position of the sun, of bodies in space (A16).*

And this remarkable time of the snails is not merely characterized by slowness, but by a return to navigating by instinct. Like his snail brother, the pilgrim possesses an acute ability to find clean water. He will enter an unfamiliar city or village and find his way to a fountain or community water source (A17) with no more effort than it takes to arrive. Therein he will fill his bottle and rest, rest and rise and walk again, as if he too possessed the snail's extraordinary capacity for finding his way home to a place he has never been.

At the end of their journey, many pilgrims will walk on to Fisterra to watch the sun set at the edge of the world. Although the blazes will guide them for the fifty miles it will take to walk to the small village that bears the name *Finis terrae*—they will use that acute ability to find life-giving water in order to navigate the way seven additional kilometers to the peninsula beyond which, jutting out into the sea, marks the farthest western point in Europe. Through the night they will hold their congress, feast amid the flora and fauna, these creatures of earth and water . . . and then they will discover that the time of the snails is not easily left.

The next morning, before the sun rises and regains its command, nearly all will take a bus back to Santiago—the first motorized transportation they have been in for a month or more. They are awestruck to discover what, at least at a conceptual level, they already knew: what would take an hour in a vehicle on the interstate takes three or more days by foot. Just as the person who has eradicated sugar from her diet begins to sweat or feels heart palpitations when she has a glass of wine or a rich cream dessert, so the pilgrim feels the effects of the vehicle's sounds, smell, speed. She suffers acute symptoms, (A18) physically feeling that which studies have for some time already revealed: speed, automatization, the false value that we place on it in our lives lived elsewhere, is a violence to our systems.

In *The Land Ethic*, Aldo Leopold remarked, “Conservation is a state of harmony between man and land. Despite nearly a century of propaganda, conservation still proceeds at a snail's pace” (Leopold 1989, p. 207). Of course, in saying this, he is decrying the slow laborious level of human investment in conservation initiatives, yet had any of the variables in his life led him to walk The Way and enter the time of the snails, he might have been more optimistic. As the pilgrim knows, a snail's pace has much to teach us about living harmoniously with the land.

8. Concluding Remarks

One may fall in love quite suddenly, but entering into and sustaining a relationship with one's beloved requires intention and attention. So it is in our relationship with the Earth. While respect, awe, and humility are the necessary phenomenological conditions

for fostering a sense of ecological communion, fostering a sustaining relationship with the Earth is like any other. To this end, there are intentional practices such as phenomenological writing that I have normalized as a pilgrim. It has fostered an ecological conversion that I have taken back into my engagement with the land communities I belong to at home. Other pilgrims may find phenomenological writing to be such a source of eco-spiritual formation as well.

As Woodruff argues, “Reverence survives and flourishes within [an agnostic age] because it is something that human beings need in order to face the most obvious, common, and inevitable facts of human life—family, hierarchy, and death. When rising doubts cloud the certainty of religious claims, reverence is all the more important (Woodruff 2001, p. 110). We live in such an age. But if *Laudato Si'* provides a blueprint for a common future by reminding us to observe reverence for creation, the Caminos of Europe do what Francis's encyclical itself cannot, as the percentage of pilgrims who do not walk for religious reasons increases. Pilgrimage helps to foster the phenomenological conditions for reverence—the reverence so needed in this age. It does so by altering our ritualized relationships with objects, ourselves, the earth, and one another, creating a truly ecumenical space where people of all and no faiths can exist with one another and the world in an ‘authentic humanity.’

Many hikers would note that this phenomenological experience of marked by rituals of awe, respect humility is characteristic of any long distance thru hiker's ethic; however, I would suggest the great narrative tradition of the Catholic church, and the spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage, enriches the experience for religious, spiritual, and non-religious pilgrims alike. For centuries, the Church has recognized pilgrimage as a foundational spiritual exercise in reverence. It lays bare the pilgrim's physical, emotional, and psychological vulnerabilities—because vulnerability—not certainty—is the only space where spiritual growth can occur. It is the place where we are reminded of our humble place in the web of creation, to respectfully give and receive from community, to find said community where and when we can. The message, it would seem, is transcending its origins, as new generations of pilgrims are drawing on and cultivating this age-old virtue of reverence, transcending the painful certainties by which they heretofore framed their existence.

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Appendix A. Excerpts from Original Journals

1. 18 June 2018: *The others are still organizing themselves in the dorm; I have finished and am waiting near the boot room. It is remarkable to me the fierce courtesy I feel and witness when waking in these communal spaces. Sleep comes so lightly and departs equally lightly—seemingly for all who have awoken at five—I heard one alarm, and there are some forty people awake and silently preparing their things. One person is dressing quietly near the next bunk—I cannot hear more than a whisper of fabric moving against itself. Everywhere, as people are engaged in activities, they are demonstrating extraordinary respect for the communal silence.*
2. 24 August 2017: *Last night on the trail I had the strongest sensation I was back on the Camino. It was the way in which I arranged the spare things I carried and navigated my way through them in the darkness. With the slightest touch, I could discern a pair of underwear from a shirt, the t-webbing of my toiletry bag from the t-webbing of my water bottle's d-ring, and so*

forth. During pilgrimage, the miniaturized spaces we inhabit and the constant movement we take demand order and a deep attention—I rather like it.

3. see 1. above.
4. 1 July 2017: As we spoke during dinner, I. asked if we had first met at the albergue in Villafranca Montes de Oca and I laughed, trying to remember. Closing my eyes, I could place him on the trail—but only by the way of two images of places where we were talking—a gorgeous yellow cistern, and later, in the shadow of an immense chestnut tree. S. seems to have the same problem with names, but grounds place more narratively. I've lost track of the times we've had to resort to relaying events that happened in a place in order to orient her to them.
5. 23 June 2017: I came into Logrono this afternoon and recognized a man who had stayed in the next bunk of an albergue I had stayed in—I think in Los Arcos. He stood with his back to me at some distance, motionless and silent. And yet I recognized him. Not by any aspect of his physique but by his towel—light grey microfiber. It had been secured to the back of the pack that leaned up against the lower bunk across from mine three days ago. As unremarkable as it was, it named him. Later he came past me to hang the towel on the line in the late afternoon sunlight as I washed my clothes. Although we had never spoke or had really encountered one another during the sojourn three days earlier he warmly smiled and tapped his head and gesturing toward my wide fuchsia headband. He too recognized me by what I carried.
6. 2 July 2017: The numbers in which people arrive and depart albergues seems to be set to different norms. Before dawn, people gather and depart alone or in very small groups. At the end of day there is a more communal energy among them, often arriving in a gaggle. And sounding like one too.
7. n.date. [evidently forgot to add] This morning I felt a hyperawareness to my environment, a sort of primordial fear. Nightwalking through a strange environment requires more focus than in my neighborhood, even if both come with a certain level of heightened awareness. Even though I was walking with three other people, I found myself attending each step, each sound, each shape as if it were a singular point of focus. It created a certain kind of flow—the attention I poured out on the things my headlamp poured light on, as well as what lay just beyond. I lost sense of time.
8. 23 June 2017 Fairly early in our journey from the albergue in Logrono this morning, we came to a fork in the road where the shell trail marker was not present. Newly alone with S after the departure of L., and with no other pilgrim in sight to consult, I found my heart sinking with the thought of the unknown, and the decision I would have to make—to stay until someone else lighted the way, or to make a decision that could inevitably be the wrong one. It's a bit remarkable how little it takes to steal my sense of security—not knowing where a decision will take me, or the knowledge that I am wasting time.
9. 6 July 2017: We just passed an older pilgrim sitting on the side of the road. In the darkness, it was a bit alarming to see him emerge from the darkness as he rose. When we approached he asked us where we were headed and explained that he had been waiting nearly an hour to confirm he was headed in the right direction. After answering we continued on our way, and haven't seen him since.
10. 29 June 2017: today we met someone who took the wrong turn and had to double back four hours in.
11. 18 June 2017: I sit outside waiting to begin the day's journey. The river is moving slowly in a bright tone somewhere to the east. But there seems to be a wind, so perhaps it is the leaves of the trees. Here and there, close and farther away, the world is breathing—the fields of wheat that we passed yesterday, and the orchards beyond. A few brave songbirds sing, but it is too early yet for the parliament. And then the crackle of my foot as I shift my weight—loud and arresting.
12. 4 July 2017: The Downy People we encountered have, at long last, made me wildly aware of my own odor three weeks into this pilgrimage. I smell like the shore of a wild land, bearing tinctures of salt and sunlight and wind. It is not pleasant, but not as repulsing as bodies do as bacteria blanches the skin. But next to the Downy People—who are wafting their artificial

- floral scents over me, I am completely overwhelmed by the elemental fragrances of my body. And their scent is making me nauseous.*
13. 28 June 2017. *Ah, the scent of the water here! It smells like the courtyard of the church, damp with the rain.*
 14. *see 11 above.*
 15. 1 July 2017 *The snails gracing the fields we've been walking through these past two days seem otherworldly. In early morning I delight to find them crossing the road and hanging from the grasses like earrings, and then to disappear again into the cool field bed by ten in the morning. They are everywhere—for as far as I can see, their bodies dust the road like small white stones. But then so does the gloss of their mucus trails, which glistens in the early morning sun.*
 16. *I've always found it interesting how we Midwesterners talk about distance. If someone asks one of us how far some place is, we respond in terms of hours it will take to get there—presumably by way of driving at least 70 miles per hour on a highway. Here, perhaps due to the influence of John Brierly's pilgrim guide—pilgrims regularly chart their course-to-destinations by their resting place. Still not distances.*
 17. 7 July 2017 . . . *I have become a divining rod. Or less gloriously, a water buffalo. My orientation to the oases of water that we find along the way is remarkable now . . . all my senses are heightened to its physicality. I enter a shadowed part of the road where the water fountain is not yet seen, and nonetheless it announces itself. The temperature of the air has changed and is doused with dampness. It has an aura I can perceive at some distance.*
 18. *At the smell of the exhaust, as the bus approached, I felt physically sick. I am not faring much better in these ten minutes since it jerked out of park and started rumbling toward the highway—there is too much noise, too much vibration, too many mechanized stimuli tearing my attention from the ever loving present I've been inhabiting for four weeks.*

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Article

Pilgrimage as Self-Discovery in an Ecological Community

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Abstract: Pilgrims become open to self-discovery in a Gestalt of the personal and communal. Traditional pilgrimage integrates pilgrims into a community of faith. Long-distance hikes through wilderness, such as the Appalachian Trail, may be interpreted from this lens. However, the environment/space/place of wilderness situates pilgrims beyond a traditional religious frame. The sacred does not manifest from a schema of established religious symbols because wilderness trails disrupt preconceptions, breaking through the self's strategies of centering. The disruption of one's prior orientation to community, customs, and conventions that form the self's symbolic schema opens the hiker to what Levinas references as "the delirium that comes from God [as] a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention". The other as transcendent presents herself and exceeds "the idea of the other in me," (Levinas). Pilgrims may discover an existential dialogue with the sacred other, the human or extra-human. The Gestalt of the personal and communal extends beyond traditional boundaries, encompassing human and extra-human beings.

Keywords: wilderness; Gestalt; environment; space; place; pilgrimage; sacred journey; self-discovery; ecological community

1. Introduction

Nearly 45 years ago, I set out on a journey of self-discovery, healing, and meaning making. I had recently been discharged from the Marine Corps when my close friend, whom I considered my soul-brother, challenged me, claiming that he and I were in a "spiritual rut". He proposed a remedy to the malaise. We would purchase backpacks, give our possessions away, and embark on a long-distance hike in the wilderness, in this case the Pacific Crest Trail. The sojourn extended beyond that initial trail, lasting for several years, and served to integrate us into a community of faith.

Years later, I initiated a research agenda, studying the intersection of sacred journeys, the places/spaces through which they track, and transformation unfolding therein. I focused on comparing long-distance hikes in the wilderness with traditional pilgrimages such as the Camino de Santiago. On one of my first information gathering trips, I visited three key sites: the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (hereafter cited as ATC) headquarters as well as the David Lesser Shelter and a hiker hostel, the Bears Den, both on the trail itself.¹ In the shelter and hostel, I looked through the registers—notebooks wherein hikers leave messages. At ATC headquarters, I studied archives of various shelter registers, finding evidence of personal transformation, of hikers interpreting their journeys as spiritual, and of the importance of wilderness space and places along the way. One hiker, whose trail name was Famino,² left a lengthy testimony exemplifying the power of the Appalachian Trail (hereafter cited as AT) in personal transformation. He wrote the register entry while at Bears Den in northern Virginia, a little over 1000 miles into the journey starting in Georgia and finishing in Maine.

Famino writes that this is "My first serious entry in 900 miles!" Prior to his long-distance journey he had been homeless, living in Washington D.C. and addicted to drugs. He had two choices, "Sleep on the street or sleep in the woods". So, he had just enough money to take a train to Harpers Ferry, where he learned about the AT. He writes, "I took



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five days and hiked to this shelter! The temperature was 17 the nite [sic] I stayed here, my bag was a cheap 45 [degree] bag". This was in December. He decided to hike the entire trail. He continues, "So this brings me to 12 April 2001, Springer Mountain, Georgia. Nearly a thousand miles later, I am back here, very excited to say the least!!!" He draws a smiley face. He continues to write, "Now for what I really wanted to write: I haven't gone down that many times [fallen] since I was hooked on crack and living on the street! See you in Maine!!" (2001).³ Clearly, Famino had been living outside of community as a homeless person. He made a personal decision to travel to Harpers Ferry, hike up to a shelter on the AT, and then go to the southern terminus of the AT at Springer Mountain, Georgia to begin a long-distance journey.

2. Personal Journey

From a Heideggerian perspective, Famino realizes his life is an issue. Heidegger writes concerning Dasein, "*Being* is that which is an issue for every such entity" (Heidegger 1962, p. 67). He continues, "Because Dasein has *in each case mineness* [*Jemeinigkeit*], one must always use a *personal* pronoun when one addresses it: 'I am', 'you are'" (p. 68). "Dasein is mine to be in one way or another. That entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue, comports itself towards its Being as its ownmost possibility" (p. 68). Gadamer uses horizon as a metaphor in relation to Dasein comporting itself to its ownmost possibility. He writes that Human life is "never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon" (Gadamer 1985, p. 271). The horizon presents various pathways among which to choose, and each choice opens Dasein's ownmost possibility of still more choices. Gadamer continues, "The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion" (Gadamer 1985, p. 271). In light of this moving horizon and Dasein's own possibility, it can choose itself and its journey, or not, it can live authenticity or inauthenticity.

Ricoeur explores Dasein and the movement of various horizons of meaning through textual hermeneutics, "What is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). When readers project themselves into the text, they distance themselves from the everyday, the natural attitude. Ricoeur writes, "The world of the text . . . is not therefore the world of everyday language. In this sense it constitutes a new sort of distanciation that we can call a distanciation of the real from itself" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). If we insert a long-distance hiker or pilgrim in the place of a reader, the journey becomes the occasion of reading, and the space/place through which it tracks, the text. Persons encountered along the way, including the pilgrim walking, become characters in a story. Ricoeur writes, "Through fiction and poetry new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). So long-distance hikes, or sacred journeys, present pilgrims with new possibilities.

The liminality of the journey, the distanciation of the real from itself or from previous structure, distances pilgrims and hikers from the natural attitude. A sacred journey, versus a mere vacation hike, separates them from a marketplace reality, a reality of negotiated valuation, and gives them space to reinterpret their life stories in an alternate value situation, a new horizon of meaning, which is also a new orientation of faith. Similar to the distinction between a recreational hike and a sacred journey, Gadamer distinguishes an episode from an adventure and points to the liminality of adventure, its symbolic orientation. He writes:

Episodes are a succession of details which have no inner coherence and for that very reason have no permanent significance. An adventure, however, interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts. Thus an adventure lets life become felt as a whole, in its breadth and in its strength. Here lies the fascination of an adventure. It

removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life. It ventures out into the uncertain. (Gadamer 1985, p. 62)

Every venture out into the uncertain involves faith. Famino may have begun his excursion to Harpers Ferry as an episode, but it became an adventure. He entered into the liminality that interrupted the pattern of events in his life up to that point. He felt life as a whole, saw a new horizon of meaning, and set forth on an adventure, a walk of faith. Gadamer writes, “‘Reality’ always stands in a horizon of the future of observed and feared or, at any rate, still undecided possibilities” (Gadamer 1985, p. 101). In this way, reality requires an act of faith.

So it is in sacred journeys. The pilgrim’s being-in-the-world becomes pregnant with new possibilities and then birthed in the opening created by a pathway across Spain or through the wilderness of the Appalachian Mountains. During the journey, they might attend a rescripting of their ownmost possibilities in the context of their life story, open themselves to a new horizon of meaning. In so doing, they walk in faith toward the uncertain horizon.

Another example comes from a hiker whose trail name is Sugar Daddy. He writes, “Before doing this hike, I was extremely obsessive about my job, to the point of costing me my wife—I thought the company deserved everything I could give it b/c [sic] they had hired me, but didn’t extend the same courtesy to my wife” (David Lesser Shelter Register, 9 July 2001).⁴ He becomes introspective and wonders whether this hike has been helpful. The ordeal of the journey causes him to open himself up, to examine his life story, a hermeneutic of his own person. He continues writing, “There is no point in beating myself up over past mistakes, but I will not allow myself to repeat them over and over again either. At what point do I become special enough to like myself? To quit caring more about the opinions of others than of myself?” Clearly he is distancing himself from the marketplace, questioning the value that this prior reality framed for him. He goes on to write, “I thought I was hiking, partially, to answer these questions. I’ve been walking wounded since my first day, and that has helped heal my heart, but when does my mind get fixed? My brother[,] for those that have heard the stories[,] and I are very similar people—we’ve just chosen different routes for self-destruction [and] those are blazes I don’t want to follow any more”. Blazes reference the white paint marking trees, rocks, and posts that guide hikers on the AT. A pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago may have written, “those are arrows I don’t want to follow any more” in reference to the yellow arrows marking the way to Santiago de Compostela. One interpretation of Sugar Daddy’s register entry is that he is rejecting a previous incarnation of himself. He is questioning his place in a previous faith community. The new blazes lead toward another horizon, a shift in faith and a realization of another community.

3. An Alternative Community

These accounts of self-discovery also allude to an alternative community. Not all hikers use trail registers, neither writing in them nor reading the content. Some hike for reasons that have little to do with a spiritual journey and will become less involved in the evolving alternative community. Those who do use the registers know that their entries will likely never be read in the marketplace reality. They write for an audience of fellows. They share confessions of the deepest secrets, opening themselves to one another in what the Turner’s refer to as *communitas*, the social aspect of pilgrimage that is “social antistructure,”

a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances. It is a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship. (p. 250)

Self-discovery happens in the nexus of the personal and communal. The philosopher William Ernest Hocking points out a relational expanse of three in the phrase “Here we

are": "I exist," "we exist," and the "meeting ground" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Pilgrims and long-distance hikers come together in this relational expanse wherein bodies interact. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Sensation is intentional I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary law. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 213–14)

In this way, those who journey together form a community of faith, even when they do not share the same religion.

Though the Camino de Santiago is steeped in Christian tradition and surrounds pilgrims with its religious iconography, it has begun to attract those from other faith traditions as well as those who have no faith tradition. The Appalachian Trail is associated with no faith tradition, being a National Scenic Trail. However, given the mythic grounding of wilderness and its unique American expression, voiced by Thoreau, many long-distance hikers embark for religious reasons. Thoreau wrote, "in Wildness is the preservation of the world," (Thoreau 1957, p. 609) and tapped into a mythic account of wilderness stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. Wilderness is presented as a space of reorientation, renewal, of birthing a people. Wilderness is the space beyond human culture giving rise to a new community whose values are not circumscribed by a marketplace system.

4. Symbolism of Sin

Traditional pilgrimage allows pilgrims to distance themselves not only from the marketplace but also from sin. Turner writes, "On such a journey one gets away from the reiterated 'occasions of sin' which make up so much of the human experience of social structure" (Turner 1974, p. 7). It is sin that bends the world, giving rise to a need for preservation, an unbending. Thoreau looks to Wildness for preservation, or unbending. Turner continues, "One piles up a store of nagging guilts, not all of which can be relieved in the parish confessional, especially when the priest himself may be party to some of the conflicts. When such a load can no longer be borne, it is time to take the road as a pilgrim" (p. 7). Unbending is a goal for traditional pilgrims. Turner writes in this regard that the journey brings about "salvation or release from the sins and evils of the structural world, in preparation for participation in an afterlife of pure bliss" (p. 8). But what of contemporary pilgrims who do not share this faith tradition? What of those who do not use a vocabulary that includes sin? What of those who do not imagine their journey as a preparation for an afterlife? On the other hand, these pilgrims from another tradition may understand the journey as sacred in the sense of release from various "evils" of the structural world, or as a preservation of the world.

A closer examination of the symbolism of sin indicates that non-traditional pilgrims share commonality with those more familiar with the vocabulary of sin. If a hermeneutics of sin shows it to be a kind of alienation, encompassing the symbolism of alienation, then pilgrims without faith traditions share a similar religious journey described by Turner. Christian Norberg-Schulz gives an example of alienation characteristic of the modern condition. He writes, "In general, man no longer forms part of a meaningful totality, and becomes a stranger to the world and to himself" (Norberg-Schulz 1988, p. 11). He points out a resolution to this alienation in rediscovering "the world as a totality of interacting, concrete qualities" (p. 16). Given this hermeneutic of sin, pilgrimage presents an opportunity for release from the meaninglessness of alienation and a reorientation to the world as a totality of interacting concrete qualities. This release is an unbending of the world that has been twisted by sin. Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the architects of Central Park in New York City, characterized the health benefits of the park as making possible an "unbending of the

faculties" (Olmsted 1997, pp. 79–111). He points out two key elements common to parks that produce the desired "unbending of the faculties": "scenery offering the most agreeable contrast to that of the rest of the town", and in conjunction, a place of gathering (p. 87). The interacting concrete qualities of landscape and those gathered in that place serve to reorient participants toward a renewed sense of meaning. In such parks, as well as along pilgrimage paths and wilderness trails, persons from faith traditions and those without such traditions, while walking, participate in journeys of transformation. Whether the place of transformation is realized as a sacred site or as catalyzing transformation without acknowledging anything sacred, the environment/space/place along the route interacts with the person who is on a journey. Religious or not, pilgrims encounter what Turner refers to as "critical points in the ecosystem—contact points with other worlds" (p. 207).

5. Gestalt of Meeting Ground and Others

Returning to Hocking's relational expanse of three in the "Here we are", with a focus on the "meeting ground," David Rodick writes, "Within this 'meeting ground' or 'zone of adhesion,' we breathe intersubjective, native air" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Gabriel Marcel comments on the meeting ground, the "here we are," writing, "In all of these situations the encounter does not take place in each of the participants, or in a neutral unity encompassing them, but *between* them in a most exact sense, in a dimension accessible to them alone" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Plato's *khôra*, that space out of which the created order emerged, providing "room for all things that have birth" (Plato 1975, p. 52b) or "providing a situation for all things that come into being" (Plato and Cornford 1985, p. 52b) gives a picture of the meeting ground. The "I exist" and "we exist," Heidegger's Dasein, unfold in the spatial womb, the space through which the journey passes. The journey ushers pilgrims into a spatial event wherein persons who discover a community of faith find meaning together.

So, the nexus of the personal and communal cannot be understood in abstraction from the meeting ground. Both the Camino and the AT become the meeting ground, forming a Gestalt with persons who are not isolated unto themselves but relate through *communitas*, which gives rise to a community of faith. Self-discovery happens when the self and other selves come together in the meeting ground, which in the case of pilgrimage is sacred space, formed out of places constituted by indigenous bodies. In other words, it is formed by concrete, embodied persons interacting versus being conceived. In addition, places along the way are embedded in the Gestalt formed by their own constituents, elemental forms that cannot be analyzed apart from their emplacement, their habitat. Aron Gurwitsch writes regarding the constituents of a Gestalt, "What they are as constituents of one Gestalt they are not as constituents of a different one. The way they look, their 'physiognomy,' their entire *habitus*, changes, and this holds regardless of whether they are subordinate or dominant in the new structure" (Gurwitsch 1979, p. 209). They manifest themselves, give themselves in relation to the surrounding environmental milieu. Each place along the Camino or the AT is uniquely formed through the interplay of constituents, pilgrims with one another and indigenous bodies, and in relation to the organic whole. Gerardus Van der Leeuw writes, "It is an organic whole which cannot be analyzed into its own constituents, but which can from these be comprehended" (Van der Leeuw 1963, p. 672).

Levinas points out that what happens to the I in forming the identity does not derive from abstract reflection; "It is not to be fixed by reflecting on the abstract representation of the self by self; it is necessary to begin with the concrete relationship between an I and a world" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). The primordial relation between the I and the world wherein the I is revealed, writes Levinas, "is produced as a *sojourn* in the world. The *way* of the I against the 'other' of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself*" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). The "at home" in this description "is not a container but a site where *I can* where, depending on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). In discussing the identity of the I, Levinas writes, "The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being

whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (Levinas 1969, p. 36). What is happening along the way in the interplay between sojourners, in the encounters sojourners have with other body-subjects who are indigenous to the places through which they sojourn, and in relation to the meeting ground itself, shapes the becoming of the I and Thou. As becoming unfolds, sojourners, each a "complex, intentional 'Body-Subject in-the-world'" (Lanigan 1975), forming a Gestalt in a field of "Body-Subjects" in dialogue, give themselves to meaning making and a community of faith (Lanigan 1975, p. 131).

6. Manifestation of the Sacred

It is in the formation of a community of faith while sojourning that the sacred breaks in through a realization of one's responsibility to one's fellow. Levinas writes, "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" (Levinas 1989, p. 85). I do not realize my responsibility until I question my being, whether I am justified when I have usurped the place of somebody else. Until this questioning, I am the center of Being, and others, who are mere objects of use and not "complex, intentional Body-Subjects," orbit me. But the sacred disturbs my centering of myself, calling me to another center I share with others. A voice calls out to Moses from the burning bush, "put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). Though Moses seems alone on this wilderness mountain, the Other whose presence appears in the fire disturbs the vortex Moses had created for himself.

The mythic grounding of wilderness as sacred space manifests my responsibility. This myth of the Chosen People receiving commands outlining ethical relationships and thereby forming a community of faith becomes a symbolic fire calling from the bush that will not be consumed, from the sacred journey. A key *mitzvah* from the Torah reads, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). Deuteronomy 10:19 reads, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt". Leviticus 19:34 reads, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God". Israel becomes a community of faith in the *liminal* space of wilderness where an identification with the stranger brings about a shared center and where the capacity to give hospitality to the stranger is discovered.

In giving and receiving hospitality, the usurpation of someone else's place ceases to divide. God invites Moses into the sacred place, giving him hospitality and showing him the way of invitation. Sacred ground becomes a place for all to find fellowship. Levinas discusses this relationship while reflecting on Psalm 119, verse 19, "I am a stranger on the earth; do not hide your commandments from me". Levinas points to Leviticus 25:23 as a hermeneutic frame of reference for the Psalm: "No land will be alienated irrevocably, because the land is mine, because you are but strangers, housed in my land" (Levinas 2002, p. 66). The commandments in Psalm 119 emphasize one's obligations to the other. Levinas writes, "the condition—or incondition—of strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man closer to his fellow man. Men seek one another in their incondition of strangers. No one is at home" (Levinas 2002, p. 66). No human is home in the wilderness, nor while on a sacred journey. In the liminality of this space beyond culture, the Chosen People find their responsibility to one another. So those who practice sacred journeys find their responsibility to a wider community of faith. They sojourn together in the Gestalt of an ecological community of faith. It is a faith community in the unfolding of a mutual journey to a sacred destination.

In the wilderness, we are all strangers who receive the hospitality of the extra-human inhabitants who dwell there. Through the sacred journey in the wilderness, I learn to open myself to the Other, to receive hospitality from those who open their home to my sojourn. Levinas writes, "To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object" (Levinas 1969, p. 49). In the encounter of body-subjects giving and receiving hospitality, objects of use fade. Cavanaugh writes, "The term *peregrinus*, from

which ‘pilgrim’ is derived, recognizes this liminal status: the meaning of the term in Latin includes foreigner, wanderer, exile, alien, traveler, newcomer, and stranger” (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 82). As fellow strangers, transcending the centering of ourselves by ourselves, we look into the faces appearing before us. Levinas writes, “The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (Levinas 1989, p. 83). Calling me into question includes my ideas, my thematizing of others, my projecting a net of conceptions on the others.

Wilderness itself has been thematized. The space birthing the Chosen People had already been thematized as evidenced in the unfolding mythic journey. Max Oelschlaeger points this out in relation to the meaning of wilderness in this context. The Hebrew word for wilderness, *midbar*, carries with it a thematized meaning. He writes:

The shepherd-farmer mythology ‘bespeaks a deeper psychic conflict’ than any simple antipathy between herders and farmers. It represents a persistent opposition to civilization. In this mythology the wilderness assumes a deep symbolic meaning, representing both (in Genesis) the shepherd’s departure from the detested city (itself symbolic of the high cultures) and the exodus from slavery into the desert to face Yahweh’s challenge. (Oelschlaeger 1991, pp. 48–49)

Midbar was the space beyond the cultivated fields that Nomadic tribes, “shepherd-farmers,” inhabited. Moses leads his people from the high culture of Egypt and into the solitary space of *midbar* in a temporary sojourn. The shepherd nomads who sheltered Moses during his exile from Egypt would not have referred to their own dwelling place as *midbar*. The mythic perspective comes from a people of high culture who venture into a perceived wasteland as evidenced within the myth. The sojourners complain to Moses for leading them to the *midbar* to die. They cry out for civilized food: the fish, melons, leeks, garlic, and onions of Goshen.

If I am to encounter the face of the other, I must bracket these preconceptions. Opening myself to the liminality of the wilderness means not casting a net of conceptions. Merleau-Ponty characterizes phenomenological bracketing as turning “back to the things themselves” in a “return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks” (Merleau-Ponty 1956, p. 60). The *liminal midbar* is the space prior to knowledge for the Hebrews, a primordial turn that opens them to transformation, to becoming the Chosen People, ethically bound in a relationship with the God of this wild space, a relationship not conceived in the high culture of Egypt. A sojourn on the Appalachian Trail wherein long-distance hikers turn to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks becomes a journey of transformation. The face of the Other for Moses and the Chosen People was the God of the wild space. The face of the other for long-distance hikers is the face of the Other, actually many Others, who dwell in the wild that is not wild to those who dwell there. It is their place. A relationship with these extra-human inhabitants of the wilderness, these who are radically other, requires a primordial turn to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks.

7. Manifestation of the Other

How does a human being steeped in a marketplace reality, whose conception of the extra-human constituents of wilderness holds them as either standing reserve for use, objects of aesthetic pleasure, or some romanticized ideal, realize a relationship of I and Thou? Levinas, interacting with Buber, writes, “The I-Thou relation consists in the confronting a being external to oneself, i.e., one which is radically other, and in recognizing it as such. This recognition of otherness, however, is not to be confused with the *idea* of otherness. To have an idea of something is appropriate to the I-It relation” (Levinas 1989, p. 64). Levinas shows the importance of bracketing conceptions, of the impossibility of encountering the face of the other through a screen of ideas. Dialogue only happens between beings who are radically other, who have ceased from throwing the net of conceptions over the other, turning them into one’s ideas, which is really turning them into one’s self. Again,

Levinas quotes Buber, “Man can become whole not by virtue of a relation to himself but only by virtue of a relation to another self” (Levinas 1989, p. 66). In the relation with the other self, the face, dialogue unfolds and the ethical presents itself. Levinas again says, “Only a being who is responsible for another being can enter into dialogue with it” (Levinas 1989, p. 66).

In bracketing preconceptions, this ethical relation of responsibility extends to extra-human beings. Levinas writes, “the tree, too, instead of being of use to me or dissolving into a series of phenomenal appearances, can confront me in person, speak to me and elicit a response” (Levinas 1989, p. 70). It is in the primordial turn, always already present prior to my thematizing, that the face, even of a tree, confronts me, calls to me. Levinas describes a subjectivity prior to the play of consciousness, prior to self-consciousness, which does not “resemble self-consciousness. It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other” (Levinas 1989, p. 93). The oneself, the subjectivity prior to the play, “cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity” (Levinas 1989, p. 94). Prior to casting my net of knowledge, the tree shows itself, confronts me. I begin to realize a wider community.

8. Conclusions

While journeying through the meeting ground, the sacred manifests as a responsibility for the one whose face gazes at me. The liminality of the spatial wilderness releases me from a prior cultural hold, a marketplace thematizing value on the objects within its purview. Levinas writes, “the delirium that comes from God . . . is a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention” (Levinas 1969, p. 49). The Other as transcendent presents herself and exceeds “the idea of the other in me,” which Levinas calls the face. “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure” (Levinas 1969, pp. 50–51). Pilgrims may discover a new community formed in the existential dialogue of the journey. In the dialogue with the sacred Other, who might appear as the human or extra-human face encountered in the journey, I am measured, and in the measuring, I ask whether the *Da* of my *Dasein* is usurping the place of the Other? In this way, the Gestalt of the meeting ground, the personal and communal, extends beyond traditional boundaries, those prescribed by the marketplace, and encompasses human and extra-human beings. In the context of pilgrimage, or a long-distance hike in the wilderness, I discover myself as a member of an ecological faith community. I become ethically bound to my fellows.

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Notes

- ¹ The ATC is located in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, about 1025 miles north of the southern terminus and about 1168 miles south of the northern terminus. Bears Den is 1005 miles north of the southern terminus and 1188 miles south of the northern terminus. The David Lesser Shelter is 1016 miles north of the southern terminus and 1177 miles south of the northern terminus.
- ² There is a long-standing tradition on the AT wherein hikers receive “trail names”.
- ³ Bear’s Den Trail Register, 2001. Note that entries remain in the form from which I transcribed them. I added square brackets to clarify the notes.
- ⁴ All of the register entries in this paragraph are from Sugar Daddy, David Lesser Shelter Register, 9 July 2001.

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Article

The Adriatic Catholic Marian Pilgrimage in Nin near Zadar as a Maritime Pilgrimage

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Abstract: Following the general approach to pilgrimage as established by anthropologists and other scientists, the paper analyses the pilgrimage in Nin to Our Lady of Zečevo. More specifically, this pilgrimage will be observed as a maritime pilgrimage, following relevant recent research. Based on the oral story about the apparition of Virgin Mary to a widow, the statue of Mary is transported from Nin in a boat procession via sea to a mediaeval church on the nearby uninhabited island of Zečevo. Pilgrimage practices include many sensorial and symbolic practices, so it will be analysed from several points of view and more than one theoretical approach, including the relational approach and mobility turn, applied also to maritime pilgrimage with a reflection on influence of tourism on pilgrimage activities, especially in the Mediterranean. The paper relies on the field research from 2020–2023 in Nin near Zadar in Croatia which has been supported in part by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project ‘PILGRIMAR’ (UIP-2019-04-8226).

Keywords: Marian maritime pilgrimage; Adriatic; Mediterranean

1. Introduction

Each pilgrimage, observed as a part of culture in a broader analytical sense within the scope of cultural anthropology, is a special case (Eade and Sallnow 1991, pp. 2–3). It closely connects to the history and changes throughout time in a specific local community and many different approaches and interpretative frames can be applied to it, as it cannot be understood in its entirety (ibid.; Turner and Turner 1978, p. 148; Coleman 2002, p. 363). This paper approaches the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Zečevo in Nin near Zadar in Croatia as a heterogenous phenomenon (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 2; Coleman 2002, p. 357), incorporating more “discourses with their multiple meanings and understandings” created by pilgrims, local inhabitants, religious representatives, tourists, visitors and so on (Coleman and Eade 2004, p. 5; Coleman and Elsner 2003). In this sense, the pilgrimage in Nin will be analysed from several points of view and more than one theoretical approach. Throughout the text, an ethnographic account with a thick description of selected information (Geertz 1973, p. 27) with historical specificities (Asad 2002, p. 116) will be given in order to meet analytical questions and debate on their different meanings. This pilgrimage will be observed and interpreted from the aspects of person (body), place, text (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 3) and movement (Coleman and Eade 2004). This aspect will be broadened by the relational approach (Ingold 2000; Sidorkin 2002) and mobility turn (Urry 2002) connected to nature and reflected in “processes, effects and therapeutic mechanisms” of pilgrimage including embodiment, nature walking and social significance (Jørgensen et al. 2020, pp. 34, 44). In order to explain some of the workings and meanings of this pilgrimage beyond the new paradigms, older structural and phenomenological approaches will be used, especially the notions of *communitas* and *liminality* (Turner and Turner 1978), combined with the notion of how societies remember through traditional enactment connected to collective memory (Connerton 1989). The paper will also address “multivalent connections among religious, political and economic processes” (Coleman and Eade 2018) present in this pilgrimage from its first mention in 1516 until today. This will include reflection on UNESCO intangible



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cultural heritage safeguarding policies and diaspora issues (cf. Coleman and Eade 2018, p. 4), as well as relations between religious festivities and tourism (Boissevain et al. 1979; Boissevain 1996) in this pilgrimage within the Mediterranean context (Albera 2006).

The pilgrimage to the small island of Zečevo will be analysed more specifically as a maritime pilgrimage which includes using sea vessels (boats) to cross the path through the sea with the sacred object to the location with historical or folklore connection with the sacred object or place (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 3). The wooden statue of Virgin Mary is transported by a boat from the parish church of St Anselm in Nin on the 5th of May and 5th of August followed by other boats steered by the local people. The path from the church includes the passing of the procession with the statue through the streets of the town towards the little harbor, the travel across the sea to the small island of Zečevo and back, and the procession around the small church with the statue during the Holy Mass on Zečevo. In addition to by boats, pilgrims come to the island on foot. The pilgrimage is based on the official story about the apparition of Mary to a young widowed shepherdess in 1516 (Jelić 1900).

The methods used have been open interviews with local inhabitants, Catholic Church representatives, representatives of the local tourist office, city authorities, as well as pilgrims coming both from the local community and outside of it, from places surrounding Nin and further, from Croatia and abroad, mostly diaspora. One of the methods used was participant observation in which I engaged as a Catholic and shared with interviewees some of my views on religion and pilgrimage, what in part helped gain more in-depth view of the workings of the whole pilgrimage as well as life in Nin in general. Being aware that every ethnographic gathering of information and the following cultural anthropological interpretation are partial and in part subjective, I provide in this paper just one of the possible insights into the maritime pilgrimage in Nin. The Shrine of Our Lady of Zečevo is one of the places researched under the project "PILGRIMAR: Adriatic Maritime Pilgrimages in Local, National and Transnational Context" (UIP-2019-04-8226) from 2020–2024, supported in part by the Croatian Science Foundation.

2. Historical Overview and Changes of Pilgrimage in Nin

The statue of Virgin Mary in Nin is estimated to be made around the 14th–15th century and typical for the time as Mary carries the Christ Child (Strika 2011, p. 19). The small chapel within the church of St Anselm in Nin in which the statue is situated was built by the bishop Juraj Divinić after the apparition in the 16th century (ibid.). The statue was prior to that kept in the small chapel of Saint Mary, dated in 1335, which was a part of the monastery complex of hermits living at the island of Zečevo from the 13th until the end of the 15th century (Katić 2023a). The oral story was noted and accepted by the newly appointed bishop Divinić in 1516 and the Catholic Church officially established the pilgrimage the next year, as noted by the historian and archaeologist Luka Jelić in 1900. According to the story, a white-robed hermit first appeared to Jelena in Jasenovo near Vrši on 9 April 1516 and ordered her to go to the church on Zečevo where she will be further instructed of what to do in Mary's honor so that God does not send his rage (whips) on Christians. On 4 May 1516, Mary herself appeared to Jelena in the church on the island of Zečevo with a message of what people should do. This was accompanied by the tears shed by the image of Mary, so that everybody present in the chapel could see the miracle and believe Jelena. Our Lady told Jelena that the faithful should pray to Her on the island of Zečevo and in the nearby chapel of St James so as to be "converted" to the right path, as well as delivered from their sins and the Ottoman threat. She supposedly said that whoever orders the mass to be held at the chapel of St James, makes Holy Confession, fasts whole Monday and takes the Holy Communion, She will provide them with a complete forgiveness of their sins each Monday in the chapel on the island of Zečevo.

The significance of a Marian pilgrimage in Nin should be observed with the awareness that the town was the first official settlement of the Croatian people from the 7th century after the Great Migration of Peoples (Strika 2011). The Croatian kingdom with the center in

Nin was approved as independent by the Pope John VIII in the 9th century. The kingdom encompassed the areas beyond the sea, towards the inland, the area from which pilgrims would later come to venerate Mary in Nin. Recent research points to one of the earliest representations of Mary in Croatia from the same period on a bursa-reliquary in Nin (Vedriš and Maraković 2021). Mary has been seen as a protectrice of the Croatian people, what has been continually confirmed by the Catholic Church in Croatia (cf. Hrovatin 2023) and expressed overtly by the Croatian people as interviewees say. The continuity of veneration from 1516 or earlier is unlikely due to many wars and political and social changes that took place in the following centuries (Katić 2023a). Certain is the confirmation that the veneration of Our Lady of Zečevo was established in 1516 and that pilgrimage as an organized festivity took place in Nin at the end of the 19th century as noted by Jelić (1900) and confirmed by older inhabitants (this research).

The sense of Nin as an ancient Croatian town of kings still remains in the imagery of both local people and people coming there from all over Croatia and diaspora from abroad. The apparition happened at the time of hardships the local people endured which were caused by the Ottoman and Venetian wars, and it served to strengthen Christian and Slavic identity, according to the earliest description (Jelić 1900). The important place of this shrine among other historical Marian shrines of the Croatian people is seen in that its catchment area in the past was more than 50 km inland, with the communities interdependent on the economy of sea and land. It attracted more pilgrims than any other shrine in this area, and certainly Mary as the strongest saint had her central place there compared to other saints venerated in surrounding places. Visiting each other during Church holidays and saint days was a usual practice and it was an important aspect of social life, maintaining relations among various local communities (cf. Christian 1989). One version of the oral story says that on 21 April, prior to the event on the Zečevo island, Mary appeared to Jelena near today's church of Our Lady of Jasenovo on a vine in the vineyard in Vrsi, which was at the time populated by the people who had cattle and sheep. Vrsi has until today been considered a shepherd and farmer's village in comparison to the town of Nin as a more urban place, connected to the old Croatian kingdom. To this day the hostility between the two neighbouring places remains, but they both participate in the pilgrimage, not unusual for many such cases in Europe.

According to the interviewees, until the beginning of the 20th century there was a transaction of goods among different communities within the catchment area, even during the pilgrimage. The fact that most of the sea travel on the Adriatic took place along the eastern Adriatic coastline due to the possibility of finding a safe shelter during bad weather, made this area beneath the Velebit mountain ideal for trade (Tomičić 2020). There were several trade fairs held in Nin during the year and a mill in Nin was in function where people from various places would come to exchange or sell their goods and mill their crops into flour. The same people would also come on pilgrimage in May and stay in the houses of the local people in Nin for three days. Mostly they would come for religious purposes, mainly absolution of sins and healing in the shrine, but also the socializing aspect was strong, including dancing their folk dances after the procession. Until well into the 20th century, the pilgrimage gathered all those people from the inland and the continental area, as well as fishermen and sailors' places and islands around Nin. Most interviewees talk about warmly receiving those people into their homes, and later, during pilgrimage and celebration, feeling a belonging to the same ethnic and religious community, including welcoming Orthodox Christians and other ethnicities.

One version of the oral story mentions the statue of Mary coming on a raft through sea to Nin after the Ottoman attack of the monastery on Zečevo and church bells ringing without a bell ringer to welcome her arrival. This story influenced its maritime aspect. However, there are no confirmations that the pilgrimage was at all maritime until the end of the 19th century (Katić 2023a). When comparing the description of pilgrimage in Nin from the end of the 19th century (Jelić 1900) to its versions from most of the 20th century which local people remember, several changes can be traced. One is the shift in the direction

of the land procession from the harbour near the mouth of the river Jaruga outside the town historical walls towards the harbour Gospin Mul/Muja (Our Lady's Harbor/Wharf) closer to the town. This change happened because of the development of Nin, building of new roads and change in trade in which the river no longer served as a safe harbor for those coming to the mill and to trade goods. The symbolical placing of the statue on the three ancient leftovers of the Roman pillars, more precisely three capitals, was replaced by the placement of the statue on only one capital near the main church before going to the new harbour. In the description of pilgrimage by [Jelić \(1900\)](#) larger sailing and trade ships came from the other nearby significant trading ports of Privlaka, Pag and Vinjerac testifying about a more pronounced maritime aspect of this pilgrimage at the time. The change from sailing towards motor ships and boats as well as tourism taking over as one of the main economies today on the Adriatic Sea (cf. [Boissevain 1996](#)), has led to a decrease in the number of sea vessels participating in the pilgrimage. In recent decades, only several smaller boats owned by local families accompany the statue across the sea, with a larger one carrying the statue.

Another change in recent decades is organizing the second, repeated celebration with procession in August, as people say "for the diaspora", what happened after Croatia gained its independence as a state in the 1990s. A larger number of boats participate in it with expatriates who come during summer to visit their families and spend their vacation in Nin, so they have the opportunity to participate in the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage was before the end of the 20th century organized on the 15th of August, Feast of the Assumption, but since many needed to get back home to USA, Australia and various countries in Europe, the locals decided to organize it sooner, on the 5th, when Mary of Snows is celebrated as well as the national holiday of Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day, which commemorates, among other things, the end of the 1990s war in Croatia.

While in St Mac Dara pilgrimage priests are overloaded with regular holy masses in the parish church and on the island ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 9), masses and processions in Nin are organized to suit the established feast of Our Lady of Zečevo and its celebration. From the early morning there are several masses, the first at 6:00 a.m. for the blessing of pilgrims before the trip, and the later ones welcome pilgrims from afar who come during the day and locals who go by boat or by car (usually elderly and ill people go by car). During the Holy Mass on the island at 11 a.m., the priest blesses the boats and all other travel means, as well as people and nature. The mass is served by the parish priest with his co-adjutors guests from surrounding parishes whom he invites each year, as it was done in the past. The official feast of Our Lady of Zečevo is held on Monday preceding the feast of Ascension of Jesus, so the archbishop of Zadar comes to lead the Holy Mass in Nin which allows for the participation of a larger number of people than on the island. For some it is not exactly pilgrimage, but also commemorating the event of the apparition, so they say "We are going to the Apparition (Prikazanje)" when they talk about going to the island of Zečevo and also to the festivity on Monday.

Gender roles in traditional pilgrimage activities have also changed up to today, so the male sacristans clean the church in Zečevo and prepare a special flower wreath for the final festivity, which was the exclusive role of young unmarried girls several decades ago. They also organize some of the other activities, including preparing (dressing) the statue of Mary with the help of nuns, in addition to their regular role of coordinating the processions and transport of the statue by boats or by car. Although the priest is in charge, most of the activities and instructions are completed in agreement with the sacristans. The organizational problems in recent years arose from the overload with the tasks, and lack of transmission of the tasks to younger members of their families or congregation. In 2022, they forgot to place the thread with flowers onto the capital stone near the church, and as I was standing close by, waiting for the procession to make a circle and take some photographs, they placed it with my help as it was cumbersome to carry by one person. Yet, participating in the pilgrimage, walking on foot and in processions, singing and coming to the Holy Mass is still observed by the younger generations, mostly because the whole

families gather and go together. Additionally, a special prayer group consisting mostly of older married women is very active in maintaining different prayers before and after the masses, including rosary, litanies, Anima Christi and other. The church choir is very active too, mainly composed of married women who are not from Nin. There is also a Girls' Society of Our Lady of Zečevo, the task of which is to carry the banner with the image of Virgin Mary during the procession. When the girls from the Society are prevented to carry the banner due to everyday obligations, it can be carried by any woman, which was not so in the past when it was the exclusive role of unmarried girls.

When talking about going by boats to the island of Zečevo, local people describe it as something that is logical for them living near the sea. Unlike those at Dergh, locals who are fishing for personal needs in Nin do not identify themselves as fishermen, mostly because they are not registered officially as fishermen by the state authorities. Nonetheless, most interviewees talk about fishing smaller amounts and using fish as a part of their traditional, everyday diet, so that it goes without saying that they use boats also for fishing. They sometimes compare it to hunting game, among which they mention ducks and hares. According to the interviewees, hares are present also on the island of Zečevo reflecting its name—the island of Hare(s). Although in Galway there are some signs of motivation for continuation of the wooden boatbuilding as part of the need to go fishing (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 7), in Nin it is not the case, as tourism has been taking over the local economy and overwhelmed the locals, so any additional strain, including the safeguarding of this know-how, would take time they cannot provide for now. The lack of interest has also hindered the inscription of the making of wooden boats into the national Register of Cultural Goods as intangible cultural heritage, and this further reduced the prospects of its continuation. Even with the inscription of the holiday of Our Lady of Zečevo in the Register 2013 as intangible cultural heritage, there has not been a significant change in the locals' attitude towards these connected traditions, so no new activities have been started nor some abandoned cultural practices revitalized, as proscribed in the document of the inscription (Resolution on pronouncing, 2013). So, it continues as a religious event with the similar pace as before the inscription. This is also due to the fact that the Tourist Board Nin suggested the inscription, recognizing it as a living heritage worthy of such a confirmation on national level, however without the active grassroots involvement of the local people and Church (ibid.).

However, the heritagization of this pilgrimage happens on other levels and the Tourist Board Nin leads the way. The Board invites cultural associations to come in their national costumes to pilgrimage and dance after the Holy Mass. It also invites media to cover the pilgrimage and announces the event as part of tourist attractions on their official site (The Church Holiday, s.a.). Interestingly, it has not been received by tourists massively, which is according to intangible heritage safeguarding policies a positive thing (Information Sheet, s.a.). Rather, tourists, while on their holiday, just stumble upon the procession through the town streets and thrillingly take photographs, some just observe the event, and some join the procession by walking, but only in Nin, not on Zečevo.

Going back to the significance of boat travel, the island of Zečevo is an important spot in the seascape as, according to the local people, it provides shelter to sailors and fishermen from bad weather, storms and strong winds (bora). Unfortunately, with a lack of archival sources, it remains only a guess that the wandering 13th-century eremite monks found a shelter there during their voyage and a secluded place to dwell and pray. The eremites built a church and monastery on the island of Zečevo and the oldest mention of Mary is connected to their presence (Katić 2023a). The church in St Mac Dara was also probably built by the hermit monk as described by Katić and McDonald (2020, p. 9). Unlike in St Mac Dara, if it does not take place by boats due to bad weather, the statue is transported from Nin in a van to the island of Zečevo and people come mainly by cars to the crossing from the land to the island and then walk several miles to the church there. The trip by boats takes around half an hour, a bit more than the one in St Mac Dara (Katić and McDonald

2020, p. 17), while walking on foot from St Anselm church in Nin to Zečevo takes around three hours with two main stops for prayer and rest.

Newer pilgrims' practices, some of which will be further explained here, do not stay confined only to Nin, but pilgrims, both those from Nin and those coming to Nin, regularly visit other shrines in Croatia and worldwide, depending on the occasions and their spiritual and social needs, but this goes beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Embodied Experience, Heritagization and Constructing Seascape within Pilgrimage in Nin

There are many similarities of pilgrims' motifs, feelings and processes in Nin with those so far described in literature (Badone 1990; Frey 1998; Jørgensen et al. 2020). After the arrival to the shrine in Nin, pilgrims embark upon a plethora of ritual practices, including walking around the statue of Mary displayed in the middle of the shrine three or more times, going underneath the carrier of the statue and giving gifts in money near the assigned place or close to the statue. They pray rosary, kneel, some go on their knees three times around the statue, or around the altar, they light candles, pay for the mass for their family and/or deceased ones and go to confession so they can participate in the Holy Mass later and receive the Holy Communion.

The pilgrims in Nin follow the path, which was established during centuries, based on the authorized oral story confirming it each year over again in space. The important two stops are the churches of St James and Our Lady of Jasenovo, which with the starting one in Nin of St Anselm and the final one of Our Lady of Zečevo on the island, make four churches altogether on the pilgrims' route. People rest near the two churches on the road, and some leave their rosaries on the vine near the church of Our Lady of Jasenovo where the apparition took place according to the story. Along the road, girls and women pick flowers in the fields, so called Our Lady's flowers (Latin: Ranunculaceae) near one well before the second stop. One pilgrim said about picking the flowers: "As much as it is tradition, so much it is the rest for the soul. Really, when you come to this field, you have a feeling that nothing is happening in the world" (Hodočašće Gospi od Zečeva, s.a., author's translation). Walking in this pilgrimage is also a way to connect with the space of the entire Nin area, as pilgrims going on foot pass near vineyards, meadows, fields and houses. One of the pilgrims usually takes their bicycle, but uses it only for return, while they walk towards the island pushing the bicycle along the way.

Along the road, a special type of friendship and fellowship is made as most pilgrims share with each other their religious and life experiences. In addition to this aspect, pilgrims in the interviews talk about rethinking their everyday life, and some their whole life, their hardships and sorrows, relationships with other people and so on. The prayers for a specific healing have significantly been reduced in recent years, and more prayers for the overall wellbeing of the whole family are prayed, as well as for the spiritual benefits, such as absolution of all (life) sins, building a better person according to the Biblical texts and Christ's teachings they hear about during the masses and in sermons. The older people pray also for the whole country of Croatia. In 2022, one lady said they pray for Ukraine because there is war, remembering the 1990s war in Croatia, and for world peace (Hodočašće Gospi od Zečeva, s.a.), the latter being one of the common recent instructions from the Church.

The older inhabitants also mention a different path that went until the middle of the 20th century near the river Jaruga and salt fields. At the time, the walking on land and sea travel were combined into one pilgrimage as described before. When pilgrimage took place at that first harbour near the river, as soon as the statue would be placed on the ship, pilgrims would wet their feet and legs in the sea and wash their face as part of traditional ritual practices with the meaning of the blessing and inviting health. No one washes in the sea with this belief today. I did not even wet my feet when boarding and disembarking from a boat, unlike what Katić and McDonald experienced (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 17). However, in August, some go against the overall attitude that pilgrims should not bathe in the sea, mostly because they need to undress and show most of the body in a

swimming suit which is not acceptable to the Church. So, they take a swim even before the main mass on Zečevo, as well as afterwards. Some of the locals hold a grudge against the swimming pilgrims, although for rare tourists taking a swim they have no objections, as they do not expect tourists to know the acceptable conduct during the festivity. In May it is still too cold, so there are no swimmers then.

As on land, so on sea, boats pass along the way from Our Lady's harbour towards the church of Our Lady of Zečevo on the island which can be seen from the harbour. Joining the trip by boats is open for everyone provided there remains enough space after family members, relatives and friends have boarded. During the transition by boats to the island of Zečevo there is not much talking, unlike when walking, during which people talk a lot in between the prayers. The person navigating the boat is important to all onboard, as the passengers have to give their trust to him (it is always a male) in hope nothing will happen to the boat while at sea. However, it also depends on good behaviour of the passengers and not tilting the boat with sudden movements, of which we were warned by him before the journey last year.

The island of Zečevo is uninhabited, and this allows space for the mystification of this sacred place by pilgrims. It is always challenging for pilgrims to come there, and I also felt it on the way, especially when going on foot and crossing sea to get there. The clearance of the space, trees nonexistent due to strong bora wind, only smaller shrubs, pointy herbs and some wildflowers, with stone pebbles along the way. The silence because there is no traffic, no murmur of the people, except pilgrims, combined with some rushes of wind whistling and sea waves splashing. All this impacts greatly the mind and body, the senses and thoughts of the pilgrims, only to reveal the church at the end of the way. The church is the last post of the pilgrim's path and beyond it there is only sea. Similarly, coming by boats across the vast sea surface also touches pilgrim's senses. Splashing of the waves onto the sides of the boats sometimes sprinkles the pilgrim, rushes of wind blowing through hair and face while sitting in an open boat, and sun, if clouds are not hiding it, hitting directly on the top of the head. At the end of the sea way a small church reveals itself, beyond it only arid uninhabited land. Even coming by car is challenging, as the road is not friendly to the tires. In addition, crossing over an improvised wooden bridge sometimes results in a car falling into the shallow salty sea, not friendly to the metal body of the car. Into the shallow sea sometimes also step in pilgrims when the water rises during high tide. Those who know about this transitory path take their towels on the trip, take their shoes off once they reach the passing and purposely go barefoot through the water. I did it also, and it gives a sense of relief from walking and heat as well as transition to the uninhabited island at the same time. For me, it was the most liminal practice, more than the travel by boats on sea and passing by the fields on foot.

After the mass in the church on Zečevo, people socialize, and some have a traditional picnic. Interviewees describe how it was important to have lunch there after the whole day of fasting, walking and praying, as it would be too strenuous on body to go back on an empty stomach, especially on foot. Today it is not that everyone should leave as they came, so some combine going back by cars or by boats, although they arrived on foot, some who came by cars go back by boats, and other combinations.

4. Discussion

A significant influence on the attitudes of pilgrims have official discourses of a religion, and in case of Catholicism those can be Biblical texts, teachings, and sermons (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 3). The first major step towards establishing the pilgrimage in Nin was the recognition of the shepherdess and widow Jelena's vision as valid in 1516 by the Catholic Church (Jelić 1900). Those were the years after the devastation of the area during war between Venice and Ottomans, with some other political problems (Novak and Maštrović 1969, p. 542). War, disease and famine caused displacement of people from Nin (ibid.), and other religions besides Catholic were available for people to choose, including Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Among that turmoil, the official acceptance of the apparition and

establishment of pilgrimage resulted in a firmer connection of the area (cf. [Maunder 2001](#), p. 32; [Katić 2023b](#), p. 9) and brought people back to Nin and to the Catholic Church.

With the officially authorized oral story, the Church significantly shaped most of the practices of pilgrims on the pilgrimage in Nin, while retaining its important religious goals, such as Confession and Holy Communion. The influence of not only written texts of sermons and holy masses, but also of the oral story in its several variations in Nin, have been an important constructive element of the “ontology of the sacred and its epistemology” in this pilgrimage ([Coleman and Elsner 2003](#), p. 4). Through those texts the Church influenced the believers and pilgrims to strive to behave in a proper, ethical and moral way, thus shaping people’s worldview for centuries. These attitudes and feelings are present among pilgrims in Nin even today, similar as in other European societies shaped by Christianity ([Badone 1990](#), p. 22). The sacred ideal pilgrims seek ([Morinis 1992](#), p. 2) by achieving spiritual and bodily cleanliness can be met in the shrine and during pilgrimage, what many pilgrims mention. It is important for them to prepare well, both physically and spiritually, so they fast and go to confession. These organized activities during pilgrimage, including masses, confession, processions and other, “provid[e] a basic framework of activity into which particular groups and pilgrims can insert themselves” ([Coleman 2000](#), p. 162). Together with traditional ritual practices, all those activities make this pilgrimage “a form of movement that is also a type of embodied replication” (*ibid.*) of what is considered the authentic and historical pilgrimage by its participants ([Boissevain 1996](#)).

The pilgrimage and shrine in Nin function as many in the world, as described and interpreted by many scholars so far, among which those mentioned in this paper, including ([Turner and Turner 1978](#); [Boissevain 1996](#); [Christian 1989](#); [Badone 1990](#); [Frey 1998](#); [Coleman 2000](#); [Jørgensen et al. 2020](#); [Katić and McDonald 2020](#)). The differentia specifica from most described pilgrimages is that the pilgrimage in Nin is undertaken by travelling on boats to the nearby island, similar as in St Mac Dara ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#)), with the statue of Mary onboard. Commemorating the apparition and the oral story by going to the pilgrimage to the island of Zečevo, while transporting the statue of Mary across the sea and back, is an aspect of this maritime pilgrimage belonging to the ways in which memory is maintained and how societies remember through practice ([Connerton 1989](#)). There are some aspects of this pilgrimage that might point to a long tradition of Christian Marian festivities in this central part of the eastern Adriatic appearing parallel to and influenced by similar ones in the Mediterranean. The oral story mentions arrival of Mary to Nin on a raft and this detail is present in several other stories along the Mediterranean coast in places having a similar tradition of maritime pilgrimages, not only connected to Mary but also to other saints, for example in Boulogne-sur-Mer in France ([Lim 2020](#); [Katić and McDonald 2020](#); p. 3, footnote 3). It was not uncommon that various sea vessels sailing through the Mediterranean on sails and with oars would be wrecked, either during a bad weather or battle. In shipwrecks the images or statues would often be washed ashore and in many cases given special divine powers by the people who found them ([Remensnyder 2018](#), p. 314). Most of those sites also have natural salt marshes nearby, including the one in Boulogne-sur-Mer in Camargue (cf. The history of the Aigues-Mortes salt marsh, s.a.), and several in Venice (cf. Caorle, the small Venice, s.a., Maria, 2020) which opens other analytical questions which will not be addressed here. The idea of moving Mary represented by a statue on a boat each year to commemorate this miraculous event goes into the realm of sharing of Mary among the people in the Mediterranean and “sacralizing” her statues “through prayer and pilgrimage” ([Slyomovics 2020](#)). So, there still may be further research completed to reveal the pathways of veneration of Mary and other saints as boat-driven statues, especially along the Adriatic coast.

The maritimeness of this pilgrimage is to be found also in the relation towards the sea by the local inhabitants who venture on a trip to the shrine by their boats, which they usually use for fishing and transport to short distances around Nin, similarly as in St Mac Dara ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 7). The changes in the way of life of the local people, mostly tourism taking over as the main economic income ([Boissevain et al.](#)

1979), reflect in the pilgrimage in Nin itself and its maritime aspect. The reduction in the number of boats participating in the sea procession and lack of willingness to travel by boats even at the slightest windy weather, all point to the change in the perception of the environment and oral story about Mary that fades among the younger believers since the 2000s. Katić and McDonald describe that many pilgrims come to St Mac Dara only out of tradition and curiosity, and are less motivated by their religious beliefs (Katić and McDonald 2020, pp. 19–20). The interviewees retold how fifty or more years ago a priest who was also a sailor in his youth encouraged the participation of boats in the pilgrimage in Nin. This reveals how the Church and its representatives can significantly shape these non-institutional practices, but also how even those aspects of pilgrimage which make it specific can be fragile and start to change during time. Heritagization might turn the whole issue around and motivate the younger again to participate in the event by boats, but this for now remains only a possibility.

Unlike the locals in Dergh (Katić and McDonald 2020), the people in Nin do not identify as fisherman. However, their activity of fishing small amounts of fish for family needs whenever they have the opportunity makes them people who live from and by the sea. In this sense, their participation in the procession by their boats across the sea fits into the symbolic aspect of their local, as well as of broader Mediterranean culture (Albera 2006; Boissevain et al. 1979). When asked about the posts where they usually fish, the locals named a few, among which also those around Zečevo. Zečevo is not that important for fishing, nor is it the border between some island communities. Rather, it is an important passage through the eastern Adriatic Sea from both the continent and from south (Kozličić 2000), also providing a shelter in case of bad weather (Katić and Blaće 2023). It served also for navigational purposes as many other sacred buildings (temples, churches and so on) on the Mediterranean Sea (Gambin 2014, p. 9). There is the possibility for all interested to be transported by the locals for free by boats as part of the sea procession, which is more pronounced in St Mac Dara to which there is no land path (Katić and McDonald 2020, pp. 18–19). The combination of trust, excitement and going almost to the unknown in a small boat is felt by those who embark on the sea trip for the first time, what Katić and McDonald also experienced at St Mac Dara (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 15). In this sense a type of *communitas* is formed (ibid., Turner and Turner 1978), with the shared feeling of presence in a fleeting moment in time while moving towards the sacred or special place on the island (cf. Coleman 2002, p. 358) either by boats or on foot. Other boats joining in the pilgrimage are those of expatriates, yet most of them just arrive on the island of Zečevo without participating in the boat procession (cf. Boissevain 1996, pp. 6–7), as do also some of the tourists passing by the island.

Although it appears a structured pilgrimage, managing the pilgrimage in Nin depends on only several parishioners, the priest and nuns who engage in various preparation activities. The problems of passing on the activities to the younger generations are not clearly seen, but sometimes hinder some of the practices, for example organizing the boat procession. There is a difference between believers and non-believers visible in organization, the latter sometimes being only observers (cf. Coleman 2000, p. 159). Mainly local families closer to the Church in general organize and head the procession, carry the statue, carry the banners, use boats and manage other parts of the pilgrimage (cf. Boissevain 1996). Change in power relations, including gender roles (Maddrell and Scriven 2016 in Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 11; Dubisch 1990) among the members of Nin community during recent decades reflects in the preparation of flower decorations for the pilgrimage by male sacristans rather than young unmarried girls, carrying of Our Lady's banner by young women rather than unmarried girls, and older people organizing parts of pilgrimage with almost no transmission of the tasks to the younger members of their family or to the other interested parishioners. The interviewees mentioned there exists also a latent difference between locals and diaspora/expatriates who come once a year and participate in the celebration while also visiting their families (cf. Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 8), which

is why the celebration on the 5th of May is more for the local people (cf. [Boissevain 1996](#), p. 13).

The uninhabited small island with the mediaeval church is also a *differentia specifica* of the two maritime pilgrimages, in Nin and St Mac Dara ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 13). One part of the oral story describes how the monk in a white robe appeared to Jelena, obviously connecting the veneration to monks (*ibid.*). Katić and McDonald noticed that hermits living on remote islands are important for shaping maritime pilgrimages ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 9). A hermit dwelling in mediaeval times is significant to people in Nin from historical point of view as probably the place of the origin of veneration of Mary ([Katić 2023a](#)), as well as a shelter for boats during bad weather and a passage in the sea along usual sea pathways. However, it is exactly what hermits mostly sought, this emptiness of the small island, that enables pilgrims even to this day to engage with more focus on their individual processes while journeying ([Frey 1998](#); [Jørgensen et al. 2020](#)). The uninhabitedness of this island allows also for the two opposing communities in Nin and Vrši to meet at a symbolically neutral terrain as well as for the meeting of numerous pilgrims coming from afar, from the surroundings of Nin as well as other parts of Croatia and world, mostly expatriates. In most cases, the feeling of coming home when coming to the shrine on Zečevo from any place in the world, including the nearby Nin, holds people together and gives them a sense of belonging ([Coleman 2014](#), p. 288), while revitalizing the pilgrimage ([Boissevain 1996](#), p. 12). The pilgrimage in Nin is an important opportunity to gather Croatians from diaspora in recent decades, especially after the Croatian state independence since the 1990s. Unlike expatriate tourists, other types of tourists are mainly observers who see this pilgrimage as another cultural and social event in the tourist destination, and do not collide with the locals in pilgrimage activities or “destroy” the event (cf. [Boissevain 1996](#), pp. 6–7).

Rather than only “evoking time and place that no longer exist” to make the “right experience of the pilgrimage” ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 13), in the opinion of the interviewees the participation in pilgrimage in Nin and on Zečevo extends the presence of the sacred there (cf. [Feldman 2017](#)). This allows for respect and worship through the memory of the apparition and commemorating the apparition event itself, including transport of the statue by boats (cf. [Connerton 1989](#)). In this sense the spiritual and bodily experience of the believers is authenticated and much is expected as they search for predictable experience (*ibid.*, [Coleman and Elsner 2003](#), p. 6; [Morinis 1992](#), p. 21 in [Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 13). For pilgrims, the repetition of the feelings and sensations from the last time they went on the pilgrimage ([Jørgensen et al. 2020](#), p. 46) creating a certain sense of home through movement and memory ([Coleman 2002](#), p. 364) is affecting their view of the significance of this pilgrimage. Having a picnic at the island of Zečevo, similar as the one in St Mac Dara ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 19), additionally strengthens social ties, and so does the freedom to mingle and join one another on the way back by changing means of transport. Both occasions create *communitas*-like feeling among the pilgrims, as well as bring them closer together, similarly to what was observed in Saint Olaf pilgrimage ([Jørgensen et al. 2020](#), p. 39).

The official participation of the priests and the Zadar bishop has been in service of the pilgrimage itself, and each year it authorizes over again both the oral story and the pilgrimage in Nin itself ([Coleman and Elsner 2003](#), p. 6). With this official involvement in organizing confession, holy masses, processions and sermons with the newest messages from Vatican, the Church fully participates in the maintenance and continuation of the pilgrimage in Nin. Touching the statue while circumambulating it, taking flowers home for extending blessing from the proximity of the sacred, expectation of healing and so on, all make part of the pilgrimage, as many other studies have shown. Almost inevitable need or possibility to get wet once at sea, and the enticement of the water to humans, including religious purposes ([Eade 2023](#)), is part of the past maritimeness of the pilgrimage in Nin, while picking flowers and refilling water at the well is practiced even today. All those official and unofficial “trivia” ([Coleman 2014](#), p. 289) say a lot about the following of the tradition,

while respecting their natural environment (cf. [Jørgensen et al. 2020](#)), learning about the practices believers consider proper, about prayers from own members of the family as well as feeling of full participation in (re)creating the event itself (cf. [Connerton 1989](#); [Boissevain 1996](#)) and in paying respect to Mary. The awareness that Mary appeared there and the oral story that she arrived on the raft all contribute to the miraculous discourse and creation of the shrine as a pilgrimage place ([Eade and Sallnow 1991](#), p. 17) with maritime aspects. Both travelling by boats and walking also connect pilgrims to the past (cf. [Coleman 2000](#), p. 161; [Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 23), as they go along the path of pilgrims before them and visit important churches connected to the oral story.

Fellowship on the road and on sea, various motives for embarking on pilgrimage, rethinking of one's own place in the world and relationship towards their surroundings (nature, city, village, job) and towards people (family members, partners, work colleagues) in many aspects correspond to the observations so far in recent pilgrimages around the world (cf. [Jørgensen et al. 2020](#), p. 45). The "embodied experience-movement that effects sensorial, emotional and affective stimulus" has a significant effect on pilgrims and those who join walking with pilgrims ([Maddrell and Scriven 2016](#) in [Katić and McDonald 2020](#), pp. 11–12). In addition to that, the sense of faith and need to participate in the long tradition of this pilgrimage is still very strong among pilgrims in Nin. By choosing what to (re)tell and give one's own interpretation of the experience during pilgrimage ([Frey 1998](#); [Jørgensen et al. 2020](#)), people in Nin shape themselves as pilgrims (cf. [Coleman and Elsner 2003](#), p. 5). The type of presence within the nature while walking, including picking flowers, has already been noted in previous research as part of liminality and freeing from everyday structure ([Turner and Turner 1978](#)), with tendency to transform pilgrims or walkers into a more focused ones with better connection between body, mind and environment, including nature and social surroundings ([Jørgensen et al. 2020](#)). Similar to the practices at Saint Olaf Way ([Jørgensen et al. 2020](#), p. 40), pilgrims in Nin share among themselves their personal stories, their experiences of the sacred not only connected to the pilgrimage, Mary and the shrine, but also to their everyday life in which the sacred is also present for them or during visits to some other sacred places or while venerating other sacred persons.

The "geographic catchment area of the pilgrimage" ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 5) in Nin extended in the past to the inland due to economic and ethnic reasons, while today it has shrunk to the surrounding places, not further than 20 km in range. However, the pilgrimage attracts diaspora and tourists, so the catchment area symbolically extends to the whole world. In this sense, this pilgrimage shows how changes in society locally and changes in the way of life globally reflect within it as in other areas and aspects of the local life and place ([Eade and Sallnow 1991](#)). Additionally, the connectedness of historical ways of trade of goods is reflected in the catchment area of the shrine and pilgrimage. The displays of national symbols, ethnic belonging, belonging to Christianity and so on, show how political economy can be important in shaping local shrines and pilgrimages ([Coleman and Eade 2018](#)).

Heritagization within the pilgrimage in Nin is visible in the waning of the overt display of identity via symbols of the national costumes, banners and on boats, while at the same time participating in the pilgrimage because it is a religious tradition, as interviewees say. This would correspond to the observance by [Katić and McDonald](#) that "folk beliefs being performed at the pilgrimage have diminished in importance over time" ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 6). However, unlike the pilgrims in St Mac Dara, the faith in the sacred still governs a majority of the pilgrims coming to Nin, so the remnants of the old practices are being accompanied by "festive, social, identitarian, and economic aspects" rather than "overcome" by those ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 7). In addition, the overt showing of faith through participation in the official and unofficial religious and social practices, inward prayers and so on, is still very much present in the pilgrimage in Nin, contrary to what [Katić and McDonald](#) pointed out for the St Mac Dara pilgrimage in which mostly socializing and leisure activities take over ([Katić and McDonald 2020](#), p. 10) and Perast where religious aspect is vague ([Katić 2023b](#), p. 10).

Regular believers, non-believers, priests, nuns, the prayer group, Girls' Society of Our Lady of Zečevo, the members of the choir, sacristans, tourists, expatriates and others, in different ways join in and confirm heterogeneity of the pilgrimage in Nin. So, multivocality and heterogeneity of the shrine, the image of Mary, and this maritime pilgrimage in Nin, testify how they can "reflect and affect aspects of people's lives" (Coleman 2002, p. 360), and that *communitas*, social cohesion, liminality and contestation can co-exist in a wider area connected to one pilgrimage (ibid., p. 361). It is also not always a Turnerian anti-structure of the society (ibid., p. 356) but rather a type of social, religious, and cultural (meta)structure existing for short period of time in a restricted space connecting people via repeated religious, bodily and metaphorical practices to the past (Turner and Turner 1978; Connerton 1989). At the same time, the pilgrimage can absorb in its structure continual changes through time, which is visible in Nin. The comparison of maritime pilgrimages (Katić and McDonald 2020; Katić 2023a) with the one in Nin, shows that even seemingly similar pilgrimages combine differently their historical, environmental, societal, economical, religious, and other aspects through time and space (Eade and Sallnow 1991, pp. 2–3).

5. Conclusions

The gathered data on the pilgrimage in Nin in Croatia, as well as its comparison with the maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara in Ireland (Katić and McDonald 2020), show how important coastal and island history and seascape are to the creation of this specific type of maritime pilgrimage. Maritime pilgrimages show some specificities regarding the connection to the sea and how it relates to the land, yet at the same time they comprise many aspects present in the pilgrimages already analysed in different parts of the world and world religions. They contain expressions of identity, embodied experience in connection to the sacred, nature and landscape, in this sense also seascape, socializing, practiced religion and overt showing of faith, inward journeys of individuals, openness of the pilgrimage to receive various types of pilgrims, including expatriates, as well as just travelers, tourists and passers-by, and so on.

The aspects of the importance of sea as a source of food, its vastness allowing transport of people and goods, including boats as means of travel, and its imagery as a part of the broader sacred creation, including its juxtaposition and connectedness to the similar importance of land, its imagery and safety, all become inscribed through centuries in the symbolism and practice of a maritime pilgrimage such as the one in Nin. The recent processes of heritagization and touristification of this maritime pilgrimage make it an even more complex phenomenon for the analysis and open various analytical and interpretative questions.

Semantics of the place is, among many other cultural aspects, built upon the spiritual and social significance of the shrine, with constant changes during time, yet the matrix of the pilgrimage tries to be maintained by the pilgrims and the Catholic Church. The matrix consists of transporting the statue of Mary to the island of Zečevo situated remotely from the inhabited part of Nin and Vrsi, as well as the official Church ceremonies, while unofficial practices of pilgrims change during time, including even the transport of the statue and pilgrims by boat. The tension between two communities, Nin as the one more oriented to the sea and Vrsi as the other one more oriented to the land, remains part of the imagery of this pilgrimage.

This research shows that pilgrimage as a part of living culture in one area remains a fertile field for further research, and maritime pilgrimages open some new questions and workings both within the local community connected to the pilgrimage site and natural surroundings as well as among pilgrims who come to visit the shrine.

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