



RESEARCHING PILGRIMAGE

Continuity and Transformations

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Abstract: Pilgrimage is one of the oldest and most basic forms of population mobility known to human society, and its political, social, cultural and economic implications have always been, and continue to be, substantial. This study aims to examine key issues, arguments and conceptualizations in the scholarship on pilgrimage in order to better understand how it has changed over the years. The findings indicate a shift to a postmodern approach within the study of pilgrimage, particularly with regard to the increasingly obfuscated boundary between tourism and pilgrimage reflected in the terms secular pilgrimage and religious pilgrimage. Dedifferentiation has penetrated the scholarship in terms of its features and its multidisciplinary treatment by researchers. **Keywords:** pilgrimage, post modernism, religious tourism, dedifferentiation. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage, one of the religious and cultural phenomena best known to human society, is an important feature of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. A pilgrimage has been defined as "A journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (Barber, 1993, p. 1). Today, pilgrimage is defined differently, as a traditional religious or modern secular journey. The phenomenon is currently experiencing resurgence throughout the world, as longstanding shrines still act as magnets to those in search of spiritual fulfillment (Digance, 2003).

Pilgrimage is one type of "circulation," which is a form of population mobility. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, mobility has become an evocative keyword and a well-known interdisciplinary field of study with a powerful discourse of its own. The concept of mobility encompasses large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information throughout the world, as well as more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space, and the movement of material things in everyday life. Issues of movement—too little

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movement, too much movement, the wrong type of movement, or poorly-timed movement—are of great importance to organizations, governments, and the lives of many people (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006).

Present-day tourism studies employs a “new mobility paradigm” that offers a conceptual framework for understanding the nature of the tourism phenomenon (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004). According to this framework, “places are seen as dynamic,” as “places of movement”. “Places are like ships,” posits Bærenholdt et al., “moving around and not necessarily staying in one location” (2004, p. 146). A recent survey of mobilities research stresses a number of important aspects of this emerging field of study, including focus on the relationship between human mobilities and immobilities; analysis of the relationship between mobility systems and infrastructural moorings; and the inter-relational dynamics between physical, informational, virtual and imaginative forms of mobility (Hannam et al., 2006).

But while the phenomenon of migration has gained much attention in the literature, different forms of “circulation”, and “religious circulation” in particular, have received much less attention (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990). Nonetheless, these forms have no less an effect on the environment, and indeed may have an even greater one. This stems from the large numbers of participants, their cyclicity, and the large numbers of people which they affect (Nolan & Nolan, 1989). Pilgrimage also creates other population mobilities such as trade, cultural exchanges, political integration, and the less desirable spread of illnesses and epidemics.

Pilgrimages have powerful political, economic, social and cultural implications, and even affect global trade and health. Pilgrimage inevitably necessitates spatial movement and for this reason stimulates geographers’ concern with distances travelled and the phenomenon’s affect on behavior. Pilgrimage is also an important subject due to its scope and spatial influence: each year, an estimated three to five million Muslims make the Hajj (the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca on a specific date), some five million pilgrims go to Lourdes in France, and approximately 28 million Hindu pilgrims visit the River Ganges in India (Singh, 2006). Researchers are beginning to recognize more fully the powerful and contingent roles of religion and spirituality on a range of scales, from the corporeal to the institutional and the geopolitical (Holloway & Valins, 2002).

This article examines how in recent years research on pilgrimage has shifted toward post-modernism. It also points to discrepancies between the ‘old’ paradigm, predicated on the assumption that religious elements lie at the core of pilgrimage, and the results of more recent studies of secular models of travel, which show that post-modernism furnishes an alternative and complementary approach to explaining the shifting boundaries between the post-modern tourist and the post-modern pilgrim. Studies focusing on these types of journeys are at the forefront of the postmodern debate over movement and centers, global flows, social identities, and the negotiation of meanings (Badone & Roseman, 2004).

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