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Simon Coleman and John Eisner *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions*

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Simon Coleman and John Eisner
Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions.
Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995.

This is a book that can be read at many levels. Since one of the authors is a lecturer in art history, the book is beautifully illustrated both in color and black and white with high-quality photographs of icons, amulets, paintings, sculptures, buildings, rituals, people and places illustrating various aspects of pilgrimage. The pictures are there not only to assist in the description and analysis of sacred travel, but also to help the reader enter into the pilgrimage experience. Poetry and quotations from pilgrims of different faiths in different eras are provided with the same intent. The authors' list of the aspects of pilgrimage which can be compared across cultures and across historical periods is as follows: "ritual, organized travel, objects of veneration, the construction of temporary 'communities' at special sites, sacrifices of time and effort, requests and offerings directed toward sacred figures." The book covers Greek, Roman, Jewish, Muslim (several types), Buddhist, Jain and other faiths in India, and Christian pilgrimages down through history.

The authors mention how enormous and varied the literature is about pilgrimage, and they give some useful references. They also describe some of the bases for scholarly disagreements about how to approach the subject. Religious men have one agenda, social scientists have another; some historians have still another. Anthropologists at an interdisciplinary conference about the study of pilgrimage in London in July, 1988 echoed Emile Durkheim's view that the so-called "sacred" was a social construct. Religious men, of course, and some others did not agree with the social science viewpoint. The historians at the conference took issue with it, too, arguing that each pilgrimage site has been unique as have the cultures of each particular set of pilgrims and that scholars should not attempt to generalize or compare—they should just describe.

Simon Coleman, an English anthropologist, and John Eisner, who lectures on Classical and Early Christian Art at the University of London, try to strike a middle ground by giving what they think are the most salient facts and inviting the reader to make his own cross-cultural comparisons. They do believe comparisons are possible, saying: "There are indeed parallels in behaviour to be found across time and culture, even if the implications and meanings of such behaviour vary enormously." They refer, ever so briefly, to pilgrimage as a search for

selfhood, an insight that might also be applied to other forms of travel. They note, but do not elaborate upon, the political and economic aspects of pilgrimage. They mention, but do not explain in detail, the fact that pilgrimages proliferated in certain historical eras more than in others.

Obviously, pilgrimages have been taking place in many parts of the world for some three thousand years, more or less, now more than ever. Most of the time, pilgrimages move across civilizational boundaries and, in doing so, have implications much deeper than what Toynbee meant by intercivilizational encounters. Emphasis on a holy site implies that the sacred is concentrated more in some places than in others. Some believers deny that this is true. When they say that the sacred is omnipresent, they are also saying that the believer does not have to travel to feel its presence. Pilgrimages are usually communal experiences. Sufis, on the other hand, say that the K'aba is within the self; some Christians say that the cross is in the individual's soul.

This book will not answer all your questions about the phenomenon of pilgrimage, or even many of them, but it is an attractive and useful introduction to the topic.

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