# Pilgrimage in the Twenty-First Century

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## *A Kaleidoscopic Inquiry*

Edited by

Ian S. McIntosh, Dane Munro,
Alison T. Smith and Susan Dunn-Hensley

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# INTRODUCTION: THE JOURNEY, THE DESTINATION, AND THE COMPANY WE KEEP

IAN S. MCINTOSH, DANE MUNRO, ALISON SMITH AND SUSAN DUNN-HENSLEY

*"What is more important," asked Big Panda, "the journey or the destination?" "The company," said Tiny Dragon. (Norbury, 2020).*

Throughlines emerging from the 2023 Sacred Journeys 10th Global Conference in St Elmo's Fort, Valetta, Malta, organized by Dane Munro and Ian McIntosh—from which most of the papers in this volume are drawn—reinforce an undeniable trend. In the twenty-first century, the phenomenon of pilgrimage has expanded well beyond commonly understood and now stereotypical forms associated with the major world religions—namely a visit by an individual or individuals to a sacred place for religious purposes—where emphasis is placed on 'being there' in the holy cities of Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Bodh Gaya, Prayag (Allahabad), Amritsar, and so on. Medieval travel from Canterbury to Rome, or across the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula or the Sahara to Mecca, was a necessary and often dangerous trial for pilgrims. But their eyes were on the prize.

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the preparation for the journey, the journey itself, and the anticipated (and unanticipated) outcomes, are just as important as the destination. Consider, for example, the meteoric growth in popularity of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela and its replicas across Europe and beyond, including the UK, Norway and Australia. Here the emphasis is on the collective, and the pilgrim experience is distinguished by *communitas*, as defined by Victor Turner as a form camaraderie that transcends social standing or structure. It is the company we keep along the way, the stories we tell ourselves and others about our experiences, and the impact of our commitment to transformation that have

emerged as key considerations in redefining this and similar pilgrimages in the twenty-first century.

A failure to recognize the varied dimensions of pilgrimage is largely a problem of definitions that elevate the individual quest above all else. In summary form, most definitions of the journey to a shrine or sacred place for religious or spiritual motives go like this:

*Inquisitor: "What is a pilgrimage?"*
*Respondent: "The journey of a pilgrim."*
*Inquisitor: "And what is a pilgrim?"*
*Respondent: "One who goes on pilgrimage."*

While popular, and largely unchallenged, such a narrowly construed characterization of the sacred journey is misleading because it tells only half the story. It leaves out the best bits–the dialectical bits–the world in us and us in the world. And it prevents us from appreciating the broader significance of what is now recognized as a universal phenomenon—a universal truth of the human condition—namely, that pilgrimage is not just a means for satisfying individual needs and wants. It is also essential for the continued health of our societies, at once either affirming or challenging core beliefs and practices and charting a course for the future.

The spirit of the times in which we now live was forecast long ago in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* where there is mention of the arrival in Cornwall in the 800s of an oarless coracle (boat) from Ireland containing three men. They were brought before King Alfred, who asked why they had come. They replied: "We stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, we cared not where," (Beard, n.d.).

This is just one of the conclusions reached after a six-year (2018-2023) informal study of global media reports on pilgrimage in the popular press[1] and from the proceedings of previous Sacred Journeys conferences in Oxford, Prague, Berlin, New Delhi, Beijing, Maynooth, and Piran/Portoroz[2] (See McIntosh and Harman, 2017; McIntosh, Quinn and Keely, 2018; McIntosh, Munro and Farra-Haddad, 2019; Olsen, Munro and McIntosh, 2023; Quinn and Smith, 2022; Warfield and Hetherington, 2018).

In recent years there have been a wealth of new publications on sacred and secular journeys that also challenge the pigeonholing of pilgrimage within such narrow parameters (See Bloechl and Brouillette, 2022; Olsen

[1] View the many global pilgrimage articles on the Sacred Journeys Project social media page at: https://www.facebook.com/SacredJourneysGlobal/?ref=bookmarks
[2] For details on the Sacred Journeys project and previous conferences, see www.theCN.com/sj2014

and Timothy, 2021; and Warfield, 2023). Many factors have contributed to this trend of redefining pilgrimage, including the inspired leadership of George Greenia and Kathleen Jenkins of the William and Mary Institute for Pilgrimage Studies. The Institute has been a major driver of this expansive new trend in pilgrimage research and practice, as have the leading publishing houses, with a growing number of dedicated book series, including Routledge's Studies in Pilgrimage, Religious Travel and Tourism (Simon Coleman, John Eade, Ian Reader, Dee Dyas, and Jas' Elsner eds.), the CABI Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Series (Razaq Raj and Kevin Griffin eds.), and Peter Lang's Pilgrimage Series (Heather Warfield ed.).

In the study of global media reporting on pilgrimage referenced above—which informs our thinking on trends in pilgrimage practice—apart from accounts centering on world pilgrimages, including those less widely known but massively attended cases in Iraq (Arbaeen and Ashura) and India (Sabarimala and Vaishno Devi), the motives for sacred journeys in the twenty-first century are of a quite distinct order. Hundreds of pilgrimages have been recorded and analyzed since 2018—a small fraction of the number of long-existing and new instances—that were well outside the mainstream, and which are grouped here under the following often overlapping headings:

- Interfaith pilgrimage
- Healing and purification/good fortune
- Human rights, justice, and peacebuilding
- Virtual pilgrimage
- Celebration of creativity
- Honoring the deceased
- Identity and belonging
- Environmental protest/climate change/nature worship
- In search of the miraculous
- Intangible world heritage/cultural and religious tourism
- Politics/nationalism
- Labyrinths/mindful walking
- Communal transformation
- Miscellaneous

The six-year review of pilgrimage reports highlighted a growing number of pilgrimages in all the above categories, but in particular those associated with peace, justice and reconciliation, including racial justice, the rights of women (including Indigenous women), as well as environmental and climate-related pilgrimages designed to highlight the negative

consequences of our collective ways of life and our need to reconsider our basic operating principles in order to save the planet.

This new, veritable kaleidoscopic configuration of pilgrimage opens the door to a reinforced appreciation of the journey itself as holy and the land on which we traverse as hallowed. In a pilgrimage's liminal zone—being outside the routines of daily living—pilgrims recognize their shared responsibility to each other and to all those other living things with whom they share this planet. In this new arena of contemplative practice, the destination for pilgrims is not necessarily a specific geographic location. Rather, the holy place may be utopian in character, something to be strived for in each generation, like the search for a better, more just world.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, the devil tries to corrupt his 'patients' and snatch their souls from God and send them down a pathway to damnation. Every aspect of their lives is interrogated to see where they are on the balancing scale, and they are tempted relentlessly, hoping to tip them one way as opposed to the other. The Islamic concept of *Baraka* i.e., blessings or divine favor, is similar in nature. It implies that specific actions or circumstances can increase goodness, prosperity, and blessings, while others may lead to a decrease of these blessings. The twenty-first century pilgrim is also examining this balance of power and blessings, but not necessarily just from a religious standpoint. They are considering the very nature of humanity's footprints upon the earth, the historical consequences of their actions including colonization, slavery, oppression, discrimination, and the alarming and ongoing destruction of the environment. With this re-envisioned 'Screwtape' or *Baraka* effect, pilgrims are trying to reshape their lives to be more in tune with sustainable and compassionate ways.

Consider the following small subset of media reports on pilgrimage from the last six years that showcase this new spirit of the times. In each category there were many examples from which to choose, but we highlight just one of each:

1. Interfaith pilgrimage and societal healing. In what might be the world's largest annual pilgrimage, the Hindu Sabarimala pilgrimage in the southern India state of Kerala welcomes over 60 million devotees of Lord Ayappa. While emphasis is placed on *darshan*—making brief eye contact with the deity in the temple's inner sanctum—the pilgrims also honor the legendary assistance of both a Muslim and a Christian to Lord Ayappa in his earthly quest. Hindu pilgrims embark on this pilgrimage with interfaith cooperation at the forefront of their minds. They honor the Muslim Vavarswami by circling the Vavar mosque and perform various rituals as a sign of respect to him. At the termination of their

41-day period of fasting and abstinence, pilgrims perform similar acts of thanksgiving at the Arthunkal St Andrews Church where they remove their holy beads and bathe in the sea. The impact for peace of this pilgrimage in the multifaith state of Kerala is incalculable, but its growing popularity will surely be a harbinger for even more tolerant ways.

2. Good fortune and mercy. In Singapore, tens of thousands of Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian devotees seeking good fortune make a pilgrimage each year to the Da Bo Gong Temple on a small island whose name is 'turtle'. Legend has it that a giant turtle turned itself into Kusu islet to save two sailors. The temple is named after the God of Prosperity who is believed to grant good fortune, serenity, and protection to devotees. Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, is one of the temple's main deities, and she answers the prayers of childless couples.
3. Environmental protest and climate justice. In a self-described pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity, in 2023, the World Council of Churches (WCC) organized a visit to the Marshall Islands to meet with civil rights groups and activists to raise awareness about the effects of nuclear testing and climate change in Micronesia. More than sixty nuclear bomb tests were conducted causing long-term environmental and health effects on the Indigenous peoples, with the incidence of radiation poisoning-induced miscarriage, birth defects, and cancer reaching unparalleled levels. The hope of the WCC pilgrims was for people of faith everywhere to join with the Marshallese in calling for accountability to address the harm caused to the inhabitants of the region.
4. Celebration of creativity and miracles. In a miraculous healing, legendary French singer Edit Piaf (The Little Sparrow) was cured from blindness at the age of five after visiting St Therese's grave in Lisieux in Normandy. In what is France's second largest pilgrimage site after Lourdes, pilgrims pray over a reliquary of St Therese (The Little Flower). Many are familiar with the story of how Edith Piaf had been brought up by circus performers and suffered abuse from her alcoholic father. In what is described as a turn of God's mercy, it was a woman from the brothel run by Edith's grandmother who brought her to Lisieux. As was reported, many are touched by the idea that every little thing in life can be a pathway to God, no matter how modest, if it is done with love.
5. Nature worship. Japan's Yamabushi priests, who subscribe to elements of Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism, but primarily nature worship, conduct training sessions for pilgrims on their belief systems. Many

Japanese people aspire to undertake this training as part of their pilgrimage to Mt Haguro and its 110 cedar wood shrines at least once in their lives. Representative of spiritual renewal, Mt Haguro is one of the three holy mountains known as Dewa Sanzan. The monks help the pilgrims understand the significance of the journey of spiritual renewal by saying: "We overcome hell to be reborn at the top."

6. Social justice. *Nuns on the Bus* is a Catholic advocacy group in the United States. Their name comes from the fact that they tour the country on a bus and embrace the Church's long-standing commitment to social justice including stops at homeless shelters, food pantries, schools and health care facilities run by nuns. Often at odds with the Vatican, in different years, the nuns have tackled various themes including uplifting the poor and disenfranchised, fighting for women's rights, immigration reform, campaigning against the impact of outside or 'dark' money on politics, hosting voter registration drives, ending income and wealth inequality, and promoting affordable health care. As the bus only holds a small number of nuns, membership is rotated to include the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Daughters of Charity, and the Sisters of Social Service.
7. Popular culture. Pilgrimages to places associated with literary, musical, or artistic heroes including Jane Austin, Verdi, the Beatles, etc., are well known, but they are dwarfed by the new phenomenon in Japan of pilgrimage to sites linked to cartoon books (anime) that attract hundreds of thousands of young pilgrims from around the world. The term 'anime pilgrimage' has its roots in the 1990s when fans of the cartoon series *Sailor Moon* started visiting the featured temples. There are now towns in Japan where a big part of their economy depends on anime pilgrimage, where hallowed sites include restaurants, cafes, exhibitions, events, museums, bridges and so on. Being so moved by the anime themes, scene hunters (or *butaitanbou* in Japanese), search for the actual locations featured in an animated series in self-described pilgrimages.
8. Politics and nationalism. Red pilgrimage in China is attracting growing numbers of Chinese citizens, especially from the older generation. They visit locations with historical significance to the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to rekindle their long-lost sense of the class struggle and the spirit of proletarianism. Pilgrimages to former agricultural communes like Dazhai, which were dedicated to freeing the world from oppression, are now endorsed by the Chinese government. They are seen as a means of promoting the national ethos and also socioeconomic development in areas which are today typically

rural and poor. In the CCP's plan, red pilgrimages strengthen revolutionary traditions, enhance patriotism, and promote a unique national spirit.

9. Labyrinths and mindful walking. A worldwide labyrinth locator (https://labyrinthlocator.com) was launched in 2004 and now contains more than 6,300 labyrinths in over 90 countries. Labyrinths are used for walking meditation to quiet the mind, calm anxieties, recover balance in life, enhance creativity and encourage meditation, insight, self-reflection and reduce stress. Labyrinths have considerable antiquity with some examples dating back ancient Egypt and Greece. The most popular labyrinth today is inspired by one within the medieval Chartres Cathedral in France, though its spiritual use in those early times is unclear. Insight into the significance of labyrinths in the early 1800s is evident from a German utopian commune in Indiana that created a labyrinth as the first order of business. For them, the labyrinth symbolized the mortal life. After about an hour's walk, the long circuitous path led to a heaven-like chapel in the center described as "a pearl above price, and a crown of rubies." According to Marguerite Young (1966), it contained a golden book which contained directions for the building of a city where creation could begin again, with a promised solution to every ill that flesh was heir to.
10. Identity. A pilgrimage home to South Korea draws many of the more than 160,000 Korean children who were adopted by the West in the wake of the Korean War. During the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea was ruled by military governments who saw adoptions as a means for deepening ties with the West. Those who were adopted are now adults and are returning to their homeland on a life-altering journey to uncover their identity and reclaim their roots, both of which are understood to be fundamental for protecting and preserving their integrity and dignity.
11. Virtual pilgrimage. During the 2023 Israel-Hamas War, the Magdala Tourist Center created the 'Star of Wonder Virtual Pilgrimage of Peace' with the goal of filling the empty holy places with prayers of peace from all over the world. Located in the biblical town of Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee—hometown of Mary Magdalene—the Center featured live and recorded commentaries and reflections on biblical sites including Nazareth, Bethlehem, and El Karem, the birthplace of John the Baptist.
12. Intangible heritage. The first native-born citizen of the United States to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church was Elizabeth Ann Seton, the founder of the first Catholic schools in the United States. Each year

there is an annual celebration of 'Mother Seton' at her Emmitsburg, Maryland, National Shrine that brings together all girls and women named Elizabeth for a procession. In this pilgrimage of 'Elizabeths' from across the country, two are chosen to lay flowers at her tomb.

13. Communal transformation. The annual 'Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope' in Durham, North Carolina, is designed to transform the pilgrim's relationship with a place and its people. Organized by the non-profit Durham Cares, participants learn about the land's Indigenous peoples, visit a place where enslaved peoples lived and worked, and listen to civil rights leaders past and present. As Trevor Hudson says in "A Mile in My Shoes," "We are all on pilgrimage; every experience, interaction, or roadblock we encounter can become a grace-filled opportunity to respond with loving obedience to the gospel."
14. Mother Earth. In central America, Mayan pilgrimages are still conducted according to a ritual calendar. Pilgrims might be seeking individually focused social, economic, or religious goals, but they also recognize that humans perpetuate the gods' actions, just as the gods perpetuate and protect human lives, and this balance must be maintained for peace to prevail in both this world and the cosmos, providing a Gaia Hypothesis-like lesson on sustainability for us all (Palka, 2014,11).

In our kaleidoscopic inquiry into the nature of pilgrimage in the twenty-first century, we provide readers with an additional taste of this great diversity of contemporary sacred journeys. In the 10th Sacred Journeys Global Conference, we brought together a range of scholars from the Global North and South, working in diverse fields in the humanities and social sciences. Our network of scholars is engaged in research on the ancient history of pilgrimage, pilgrimage and literature, the development of new trails and the refurbishment of others, pilgrimage as an avenue for justice and peacebuilding, pilgrimage and intangible cultural heritage, and regional pilgrimages as drivers of domestic economies. We also see how pilgrimage can be an avenue for building interfaith cooperation, promoting reconciliation in the wake of conflict, and of dealing with the legacy of trauma and colonization.

We circumnavigate the globe with these chapters, beginning in Australia. In his contribution, Ian McIntosh delves into the intersection of religion, migration, and human evolution, exploring the role of cosmology and culture in the peopling of the world. Drawing on Clive Gamble's research on migration and the human imagination, ethnographic studies in Arnhem Land, and pilgrimage theory, he investigates the spiritual dimensions

behind ancient migrations, particularly the journey of First Australians from Africa to Australia 50,000 years ago, shedding light on the symbolic thinking and global mobility of early humans, or what he calls the very first pilgrimage.

Moving eastwards across the Pacific Ocean to Canada, we have two chapters. Matthew Anderson asks whether a person can be a pilgrim in their own home country or region. At first, the answer might seem obvious. However, following a closer examination of the relationship between concepts of "home" or belonging, and Freud's concept of the Unheimlich or 'unhoming', Anderson explores how settler descendants in Canada can embark on pilgrimages in their own region as a form of decolonization.

Similarly, Ken Wilson's chapter explores the concept of *wâhkôhtowin*, or relationality, within the philosophical and legal traditions of Canada's Plains Cree, focusing on its potential for generating a sense of interconnectedness among non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples through walking pilgrimages. This chapter also explores Raja Shehadeh's memoir "Palestinian Walks" to probe its parallels to *wâhkôhtowin*.

From the United States, we have four chapters. Roy Tamashiro delves into the realm of peacebuilding, exploring how pilgrimages to museums for peace facilitate knowledge paradigm transformations. He introduces the concept of a pilgrimage into witness consciousness, a genre that merges traditional pilgrimage with an exploration of internal and external worlds. His study examines narratives and autoethnographies collected during a pilgrimage to sites in Montgomery, Alabama, focusing on the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum.

Anne Blankenship's chapter examines pilgrimages to former Japanese American incarceration camps, tracing their evolution from remembrance to activism in addressing current injustices. Incorporating demonstrations at immigrant detention centers intensifies the pilgrimage experience, deepening healing effects and community identification. Drawing on qualitative data, she highlights how these pilgrimages serve as platforms for sharing stories, fostering intergenerational healing, and advocating for social justice.

Alison Smith's chapter illustrates Charleston's response to its history of slavery, proposing a pilgrimage designed to foster healing and reconciliation. Drawing inspiration from Toni Morrison's 'Bench by the Road' project, this chapter delves into various approaches to remembering and acknowledging the legacy of slavery, highlighting the importance of embracing cultural heritage and amplifying marginalized voices in the process of reconciliation.

Jasmine Goodnow and Liz Mogford explore the universal phenomenon of spiritual journeys in search of the sacred, examining how the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a revival of home gardening as a form of sacred

experience. Amidst unprecedented stress and mental health challenges, gardening provided solace, connection with nature, and spiritual fulfillment, akin to a micro-pilgrimage. Drawing on concepts of pilgrimage, liminality, and nature connectedness, the chapter delves into the transformative power of gardening in fostering spirituality and evoking the sacred within home spaces.

Traveling east across the Atlantic Ocean to Ireland, E. Moore Quinn reflects on the holy wells in County Donegal, Ireland, noting their significance as enduring memorials to early saints. While numerous scholars have explored Irish pilgrimage traditions, few have examined how historical events like wars and famines influenced these practices. Quinn turns her attention to one site of ritual Irish worship known as *An Turas Cholm Cille* in an exploration of villagers' memories related to colonial incursions and clerical intrusions.

In the United Kingdom, Susan Dunn-Hensley focuses on routes to The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham and considers what motivates pilgrims in the twenty-first century to walk recently restored ancient pilgrim routes. Using English Romantism as a lens, her chapter explores how the pilgrims' concerns and priorities mirror those of the English romantics, arguing that the impulse to leave home stems from the continued problems ushered in by industrialization, and the rapid pace of today's technological growth. Pilgrims speak of a desire to return to nature, to community, to an idyllic past colored by a strong sense of nostalgia, and to some form of the divine.

In Belgium and France, Laura Lewis and Eunice Gorman embark upon a 'dark tourism' itinerary to Vimy Ridge, Commonwealth War Graves, and the Menin Gate, exploring the intersections of secular pilgrimage, hauntology, and genealogical ancestry. They investigate how the sorrow and losses of past generations, particularly those killed in World War I, continue to echo in the lives of the living, prompting visits to these sites for remembrance and commemoration.

Turning to Italy, Mary Watt delves into the enduring allure of Rome, exploring how the city's iconic status as the ultimate destination has shaped Western culture and imagination. She examines the creation of mental itineraries by literary figures like Dante and Petrarch, suggesting that reading about Rome can be a form of pilgrimage. She further considers how these literary journeys have influenced subsequent visual representations of Rome in art and film, highlighting the profound impact of Rome across centuries.

In a joint chapter from Malta and Slovenia, Dane Munro and Tadeja Jere Jakulin explore the emergence of revenge tourism post-COVID-19, causing concern in tourism circles due to fears of over-tourism and quality

issues. They investigate contrasting experiences of tourism revival, from the crowded streets of Malta to the undisturbed pilgrimages of Slovenia, using interpretative research methods.

From Israel, Amir Mashiach delves into the universal practice of pilgrimage to explore the debate within Jewish tradition regarding pilgrimage to the tombs of the righteous. Mashiach draws on rabbinical literature, the Kabbalah, Chassidism, philosophical thought, and Halakha to present diverse perspectives on this practice.

In Lebanon, Nour Farra-Haddad examines the southern Lebanese border region in the light of civil and religious resistance initiatives for peace. Despite the Israeli invasions in 1982 and 2006, villages have been rebuilt, and new peace-oriented tourism projects have emerged, such as Iran Park and Saydet Em El Nour statue, showcasing interreligious solidarity and dialogue. These initiatives aim to attract visitors for pilgrimage experiences and tourism activities, highlighting the importance of local community involvement and the interest of pilgrims and tourists in peace-building.

Moving eastwards, in his chapter, Tahar Abbou explores pilgrimage to the Blessed Tree, a well-known Islamic holy site in Jordan which has stood for about fifteen hundred years. Its main claim to fame is that it witnessed the encounter of the monk Baḥīrā with the Prophet Muḥammad when he was eight or twelve years old while on a trade caravan from the Ḥijāz (modern Saudi Arabia) to Shām (modern Syria and Lebanon). The chapter discusses the status of this Blessed Tree and Muslim scholars' views on seeking its blessings. Abbou also examines the rituals pilgrims perform at the tree and their impact upon them.

Finally, Mikolaj Wyrzykowski explores references to pilgrimage in David Lodge's novels *Paradise News* and *Therapy* and attempts to show how a particular way of writing can become a form of therapy in a game structured like a labyrinth. Lodge's use of polyphonic narrative, humor, and the carnivalesque, allows the reader to understand how sacred journeys survive in post-secular fictional depictions of liminal travels.

As stated earlier, within these pages we have moved away from stereotypical depictions of pilgrimage, and also of Eurocentric analyses dominated by WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich and democratic) perspectives—to use evolutionary biologist Joseph Henrich's (2020) term—to a more universal approach that is not bound by 'old school' and individual-focused definitions of this universal practice. Each of the topics highlighted here makes a significant contribution to our broader understanding of pilgrimage as a multi-faceted endeavor that is central to our understanding of what it means to be human. We anticipate that this book will stimulate new waves of pilgrimage research in equally diverse fields, including on

motivations, personal and societal impacts, and regional and global significance.

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# CHAPTER 1

# THE VERY FIRST PILGRIMAGE: AN INSPIRED TRAJECTORY OUT OF AFRICA TO AUSTRALIA

IAN S. MCINTOSH

*"Your feet will never take you where your mind has never been."*
—Evangelist Bill Winston

## Introduction

The place of religion in the story of human evolution is well documented (Bellah, 2011). So too is the connection between ancient migration and cumulative cultural evolution (Bellwood, 2013; Henrich, 2020). However, the link between religion and migration, between the emergence of symbolic thinking and global mobility, is far less obvious. Is there a spiritual or religious dimension to the story of the peopling of the world?

In this chapter,[1] I build upon the groundbreaking research of archaeologist Clive Gamble (1994; 2013) on the evolution of human imagination in response to the age-old question "Why are people everywhere?" Specifically, I draw upon my own ethnographic research in Arnhem Land, Australia, as well as pilgrimage and cognitive dissonance theory to explore the role of cosmology and culture in the migration of some of the ancestors of the First Australians 'Out of Africa' beginning 70-100,000 thousand years ago.[2] In the long journey from Africa to Arabia, to India, and South-east Asia, my focus is 50,000 years ago when these

[1] An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 10(4).
[2] While not an established fact, the Out of Africa hypothesis has mounting academic support over its rival multiregional hypothesis. See Oppenheimer, 2004; and Petraglia et al, 2010.

pioneers took the seemingly irrational step of crossing the sea from what is now Indonesia to the uninhabited continent of Australia, which, for all they knew, did not exist. [3] This was an extraordinary step, because:

> For more than three million years water had been a danger to the human [and their predecessors] and a barrier, limiting and constraining [their] movement. [They] could not cross a lake or a deep, wide river, nor could [they] venture outward from the seashore (Festinger, 1983, 31).

Image 1. Map of early human migration from Africa to Australia beginning 70-100,000 years ago.

Now they were perched on the edge of the known world. Did they see smoke rising over the horizon or birds flocking in that direction, and consider this to be a signal from the ancestors that their destiny lay over the waters, or was their decision linked to superstition, warfare, famine, or disease? Was it in response to an environmental calamity or was there a need for a new beginning, a complete separation from what had gone before, or were they inspired by the vision of an influential person or group? After taking this fateful step there was no going back. Australia would be their home for the next 50,000 years.

[3] Molecular clock estimates and genetic and archaeological studies suggest an initial colonization of Australia around 50,000 years ago. See Allen et al, 2020.

In my speculations on the nature of early human mobility—based largely on an intriguing narrative associated with the place of the rising sun in north Australian Indigenous mythology—I look beyond conventional explanations of "human drift", i.e., that populations increased when times were good, and primates extended their base into new territories to meet their expanding needs (see Carotenuto, 2016). However, being led by their stomachs or simply the lure of greener pastures does not explain the possibility of a sea voyage 40,000 years before the first appearance of boats in the archaeological record. An alternate explanation is needed to advance our understanding of the motivations of *Homo sapiens* for this epic sea crossing.

In this chapter I propose a rationale linked to Gamble's (1994, 244) conclusion of purposive, imaginative and deliberate action in the peopling of the world. In the case of the First Australians, I speculate that the decision to head to sea was driven by a search for the sacred and, in particular, the cognitive dissonance associated with the anticipation of the fulfillment of prophecy, as defined by Festinger (1956).

In my hypothesis, the mechanism driving migration is still visible in the world today as pilgrimage, especially those cases in which religious communities send forth their members into the world to bring back lessons, inspiration, or truth, for the greater common good (See Clift and Clift, 2004; Greenia, 2018; McIntosh, 2020; Turner and Turner, 2011).[4] I contend that when the universal pilgrim steps outside of the routines of his or her daily life and steers a course in the direction of some great unknown—whether it be the meaning of the divine or to find one's place in the sacred order of things—one can almost hear the echo of the footsteps of those first pilgrims out of Africa.

Whatever the nature of human religion 50,000 years ago when the ancestors of Australia's Aboriginal peoples stood at land's end, the reasons for mobility then are just as applicable today in terms of our desire or need for pilgrimage, and for transcending time and space in the quest for understanding and growth. This need to explore, to know, and affirm, is ever-present and is as essential as ever for building stronger societies in the face of today's many challenges. As Rabindranath Tagore (2013) says, we are forever grappling with ideas of a tethered but protected life within a structured and settled society and the freedom of the soul to wander endlessly in search of the numinous. In this chapter, I will add to this a third and most vital step, namely, bringing home the fruits of those exploratory

[4] Consider, for example, the Amish rite of passage known as Rumspringa where youth experience and reflect upon the non-Amish world in a period spent away from the home community.

journeys to the parent community. I suggest that the dialectical relationship between dealing with those inescapable physical realities to which humans have always had to respond, and the cultural and religious dynamic linked to the search for the sacred, has fueled our journeys since the dawn of time and will continue to do so in the future.

## The Context for Migration

Between seventy and hundred thousand years ago, the forebears of some of Australia's First Nations left Africa on an immense journey. After some 2,000 generations—interrupted perhaps by the Toba volcanic eruption on Sumatra 74,000 years ago which resulted in six to ten years of "nuclear winter" and the near extinction of humans,[5] —the passage through new and unfamiliar territories of these first modern human beings terminated in the Sahul, a supercontinent that included mainland Australia, Papua, and Tasmania. By some estimates, as few as several hundred people made the sea crossing in this first occupation of the land "Downunder" (Allen and O'Connell et al, 2020; Tobler et al, 2017). More significantly, given the nature of oceanic currents and wind patterns, their voyage from south-east Asia to Australia is deemed to have been deliberate rather than accidental (Allen and O'Connell et al, 2020; Norman and Inglis et al, 2020).

Research on the key drivers of ancient human migrations has emphasized access to food and water resources, predator evasion, climate change, population growth, the search for marriage partners, as well as the idea of a "selfish gene" (Dawkins, 1976) and the "territorial imperative" (Ardrey, 1966). In this chapter, I argue that the spiritual predisposition of early humans—which was linked to brain size or encephalization (Gamble, 2013)—was the equal to any other factor. This is why I describe this vast trek of the forebears of Australia's Indigenous peoples as an inspired journey or the very first pilgrimage.

Understanding the possible religious or spiritual motivations for early mobility, beyond the evidence provided by skeletal remains and tools, mitochondrial DNA, and historical linguistics, and so on, is a highly speculative task. My conclusions must always be tentative as the subject matter is centered on the very origins of human stirrings.

Following the cognitive revolution of c.100,000 years ago, when our brains reached a certain level of evolutionary development, we began to see the world in poetical, mythological or spiritual ways. From this point onwards, alone among the species, we would reflect upon our place in the

[5] See Prothero (2018) and Oppenheimer (2004, 84).

universe and on our mortality. Is it a coincidence that when humans first began to think through a mystical lens, they would seek answers to their questions over the horizon? That while their allegiance, as bearers of a culture acquired as members of a society, was to territorially-bound sacred core beliefs (Durkheim, 1965), they also perceived a greater whole and a "center out there"—which Turner (1973) describes as the pilgrim's goal.

Population dynamics and climate change may have fueled human mobility in the first instance, but they cannot explain why a small band of coast-hugging hunter-gatherers—encountering the world for the very first time—kept on moving, including across a considerable body of water. In attempting to answer this question, researchers like Peregrine, Peiros and Feldman (2009) stress the need for an interdisciplinary approach but are silent on the influence of what the philosopher Nietzsche (1998) calls the "world symphony"[6] on the peopling of the planet. I suggest that rather than being motivated by purely material factors, the pilgrim pioneers were drawn in equal part by a desire to supplant chaos with a sacred world order of their own that would provide them with an opportunity to flourish, as I describe later.

Textbooks describing the origins of religion—defined here as systems belief and practice relative to the sacred that unite a moral community (Bellah, 2011)—provide few clues on mobility. Even detailed research on the human legacy by Leon Festinger (1983)—whose earlier thesis on cognitive dissonance informs the conclusions in this paper—sheds but little light on this topic. Festinger uses the expression "psychological confusion" in the wake of failed religious predictions or interventions to explain the emergence of increasingly more complex forms of religious expression, but does not link such circumstances to mobility.

As stated earlier, there is a strong correlation between human migration out of Africa and cultural and genomic evolution, but a deafening silence on the rise of spiritual practices as a driver of the mobility that made this evolution possible. Robert Clarke (1997), for instance, argues that the spread of humans across the globe was due to three factors: anatomy, technology, and social organization. And yet he begins his book "The Global Imperative" with a potential fourth factor, namely the numinous. Unfortunately, beyond this quote from Albert Einstein, he does not elaborate:

> The individual feels the nothingness of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and

[6] Nietzsche (1998, 48) says: "The philosopher seeks to hear within himself the echoes of the world symphony and to re-project them in the form of concepts."

> in the world of thought. [They look] upon individual existence as a sort of prison and want to experience the universe as a single significant whole (Clarke, 1997: 2).

Indeed, religious scholar Huston Smith (2001) uses the expression "a god-shaped hole in the human heart" to describe our motivation for seeking that fundamental connectedness with other parts of the universe. Smith argues that the void can only be filled with the divine, thus setting up the eternal quest for understanding the purpose of our existence.

In apparent support of this view, from at least 50,000 years ago, graves and grave goods, painted tools and bones, carved artifacts of "impossible creatures," and cave paintings suggestive of sympathetic magic, indicate that the lives of human beings have been forever bound within a quest to find out who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.[7] Are migration and the emergence of religious practice thus intimately entwined? Did the concept of the void translate into an innate longing for something outside of oneself, something transcendental and transformative that became the object of an external quest? In the modern era, does this same compulsion find expression in scientific discovery leading us into space in an ongoing search for the ultimate answers to our questions?

The idea that a longing for value in life—a belief that existence is not accidental or meaningless—was a key driver in human migration, is the proposition explored in this paper. My goal, therefore, is to move beyond explanations that describe migration as being unplanned or not even comprehended by those involved, or simply inherent in human nature (King, 2007, 16).

My contention is that without such a consideration, the momentous journey out of Africa and across the waters will continue to be misunderstood. As Bertalaniffy (1968, 8) says, we are not just the playthings or victims of history. Our actions and decisions are informed by socio-cultural systems. When human populations moved, whatever the cause, they took with them their understandings of the world.[8] As author Maya Angelou (2004, 424) says: "You never can leave home. You take it with you everywhere you go."

There are many fields of scientific research that might be brought to bear in this inquiry, including archaeology, anthropology and social

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[7] See Aubert et al (2019) on the 44,000-year-old therianthropes—part-animal, part-human rock art figures—hunting wild pigs and dwarf buffaloes in Indonesia. These may be the oldest known evidence for the human ability to imagine the existence of supernatural beings.

[8] In precolonial days, Indigenous Australians traveling outside their home territories would carry their sacred paraphernalia with them.

psychology, but my raw material comes entirely from the ethnographic record of northern Australia. The religious practice and oral history of the Yolngu (Aboriginal) peoples of Arnhem Land guide my thinking as I explore the question of what a sacred dimension to travel might have looked like at the dawn of time, especially in the realm of the mythical and structural—outer action with inner meaning. The emerging field of pilgrimage studies, in particular the notions of the "hero's journey" (Campbell, 1949) and 'communitas and liminality' (Turner, 1973), allow for speculation on the capacity of pilgrims for strengthening a community's core sacred beliefs by bringing home the lessons of encounters on new frontiers. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, I posit the idea that many of today's pilgrimages exhibit the same elements central to the never-ending quest for the sacred and represent a faint echo of these original journeys out of Africa.

## An Inspired Trajectory?

The extraordinary success of the human species in colonizing the world was due to an inherent ability to occupy diverse and extreme environments, including deserts, rainforests, mountains, and even the Arctic Circle. As Bellwood (2013, xiv) argues, human evolution through myriad genetic and cultural innovations is fundamentally linked to this process of colonization of new territories. He says that internally generated mutations and cultural innovations found new and fertile ground on which to proliferate and expand to a degree unthinkable if the carriers all stayed at home. Clarke (1997, 7) concurs, and adds that humans were compelled to extend their reach to every habitable part world by their very nature for:

> …without the option of mobility, a group must practice a considerable degree of self-restraint in both numbers and lifestyle. This option requires that we sharply restrict both our population and our individual consumption levels, something that few…are willing to accept if we have other alternatives.

And the nature of this mobility? Some researchers argue that humans have a roaming or wandering gene and that people simply expanded outwards from the center following the line of least resistance like ink on blotting paper. Marsella and Ring (2003, 3), for example, say that humankind has an instinctual and inborn disposition and inclination to wonder and wander in search of new opportunities and horizons. This inclination to go "walkabout", however, is inaccurate, for this so-called wondering and wandering took place within a specific cultural context, a living, breathing culture that would have imbued travel with deep meaning.

Indeed, Nicholas Wade (2006, 76) asked the important question that provoked this inquiry, namely that we might be able to learn about the motivations of the first migrants from the cultural and religious practices of groups like the Australian Aborigines.[9] In his book on the faith instinct, however, he merely repeats the conventional interpretation as follows:

> Rather than trek determinedly into the unknown or expose their families to the hazards of exploration for its own sake, it is more likely that…they moved a short distance and stayed put. After a number of years, as new births swelled the group's size, it would have divided so as to prevent the usual discord that wells up in larger foraging populations.

Likewise, Peregrine, Peiros and Feldman (2009,177), in a proposition that also ignores the cultural dimension, say that:

> Human groups have never been isolated or stagnant; rather [they] moved amoeba-like across the face of the earth—interacting, absorbing, repelling, intermixing, and being absorbed by other groups.

What these researchers fail to explain is this predilection or need for movement within the ever-changing cultures of *Homo sapiens*. How did early humans make sense of, or rationalize, mobility? Specifically, what was the mechanism for travel beyond the comfort zone, the *axis mundi* or sacred center of their communities? Beyond meeting their reciprocal obligations and responsibilities to ensure the survival of their social group, what was driving these peoples into the great unknown? What were the needs of the group that would endorse the quest of certain of its members to put their lives at risk in the exploration of the new?

Without doubt, there were very real causes for migration, but I am looking well beyond the hypothesis of people gradually moving in the direction of more fertile lands and favorable climes in tandem with population increase and the slow outstripping of resources in any particular area; "Dunbar's number" of 150 meaningful social contacts being the trigger for a group to splinter (Dunbar, 2010).[10] In such a scenario, the

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[9] Festinger (1983, xii) warns against the use anthropological data about contemporary groups to support interpretations about the past because of the significant psychological and social differences between modern and ancient peoples.

[10] In *Facing Mt. Kenya,* Jomo Kenyatta (1985) says that when tribal numbers reached the thousands, rendering it impossible to live as a group where members could refer to one another as father, mother, sister, brother etc., they had to rely on tribal identity to facilitate the rendering of mutual support as an all-important matter.

journey would continue away from occupied territories into new unpopulated lands. Some people would stay behind in the "parent" group and others leave in the "advance" group. Those left behind would either flourish, "back migrate", or perish, or become mixed with other groups. There was no guarantee that the migrating groups would themselves survive, but others would continue the journey after their demise, or even overtake them.

In search of what I call an inspired trajectory out of Africa, I draw upon pilgrimage theory and my own ethnographic research among the Yolngu of northern Australia to shed light on mobility in small-scale traditional societies.

In the time frame under scrutiny, the global human population was probably in the tens or hundreds of thousands at most and evidence suggests that members of this first wave of Australia's indigenous peoples met few other primates on their long journey across the globe, with the possible exception of Neanderthals (Green et al, 2010; Stone, 2004) and archaic humans like *Homo floresiensus* or "hobbits" on the island of Flores (Aiello, 2010). This opens the way for speculation upon the mechanics of human mobility from first principles.[11]

The picture of human migration becomes infinitely more complex with ensuing waves of migration out of Africa. Interactions with other populations, including the Neanderthal-like Denisovans in Asia, contested landscapes, competition for resources, "demonic" male violence, rival ideologies, personality cults, and so on, are all deserving of their own analyses in relation to early human migration.

My analysis ends with the arrival of the first peoples in Australia upwards of 50,000 years ago. Once there, they circumnavigated the continent in both directions before finally exploring and settling even in the now relatively inhospitable desert interior. Researchers have posited no satisfactory reasons for these extraordinary journeys or described why mobility was subsequently replaced by largely sedentary or transhumant lifestyles within a complex maze of "songlines" associated with the tracks of highly mobile religious deities. Subsequent research will consider the place of the numinous, or the quest for a "world symphony", as a critical mobilizing factor.

[11] Note that the period in question is well before the rise of agriculture and the phenomenon of surplus food, commerce and trade, permanent settlement, the division of labor, and growth of cities and civilizations.

## Challenge and Response

My starting point for exploring early human mobility is Arnold Toynbee's (1934) theory of "Challenge and Response". By challenge, Toynbee was referring to unpredictable occurrences that posed a threat to the livelihood of a group. Such a challenge, however, was not necessarily negative for it often carried within it the germ of an opportunity. By response, Toynbee was referring to the actions taken by the group to deal with these new conditions. Population growth, climate change, resource depletion, and so on, are all examples of such challenges. As Schmandt and Ward (2000, 1) argue, "response required vision, leadership, and action to overcome the threat and create a basis for survival and, hopefully, prosperity." Such responses, they say, included everything from inaction to a major change in the living arrangements of the group. These changes might be centered upon the introduction of new technologies, revised patterns of social organization, or transformed economic practices, or a combination thereof, and the success of these interventions was rarely immediate. Rather, the results often unfolded over a considerable period.

When considering the way that small-scale societies might respond to a challenge, it is important to acknowledge their extreme conservative nature. The ethnographic record is replete with examples of how the spirit of collectivism was ingrained in the minds of the people, including with iron-clad codes of ethics and duties, as in the case of the western Asian Yezidi people described by Gurdijeff (2002). He tells the agonizing story of a Yezidi child bound within a crude circle drawn by antagonists on a playground from which he could not escape. Honor and tradition preclude any possibility of this, and the child was at the mercy of his tormentors until Gurdijeff himself created an escape route by opening the circle. Something that is usually invisible, namely the strict social boundaries of a collective, is made visible in Yezidi culture. Such communities are bound together by beliefs held to be sacred, and these are defended against all outsiders. Within the circle is everything held to be precious, and they live as in Plato's Cave, finding comfort and security in the shadows. Only when there were few or no alternatives would they attempt something as dangerous as moving beyond the familiar, meaning outside the circle. As Gell-Mann (2009, xi) says, inertia is a strong motivation and people typically do not relocate away from their tightly knit traditional community—often linked to a specific environment—unless forced to do so.

Resistance to change in belief systems, even in the face of disconfirming evidence—as with paradigm shifts in science (see Kuhn, 1962)—is the hallmark of small-scale societies. Through the experience of