

# commentary

John Eade

## The expanding field of pilgrimage studies: Beyond binaries

### **Beyond binaries**

Let me begin by congratulating Michael Di Giovine on his initiative and thanking him for his invitation to comment on this interesting collection of papers. His initiative reflects two key features of pilgrimage studies – an openness towards the multi-faceted nature of pilgrimage and a willingness to operate across disciplinary boundaries in order to understand pilgrimage's many faces.

In the short space available, I want to comment on some theoretical issues which the papers raised for me. The first refers to the use of binaries. Binaries have long been used in Western intellectual thought, of course. They were used with great skill by ancient Greek philosophers, and mediaeval Christian theologians adopted their techniques before they were employed in a secular guise by such pioneers of social science as Toennies, Durkheim and Marx. Much use has been made in pilgrimage studies of the Turnerian binary of structure and anti-structure, and contributors to this collection were invited to engage with two other binaries - *communitas* and contestation, unity and difference.

Binaries are clearly very useful as analytical tools, and these papers demonstrate the advantages of viewing their empirical data through the lenses that the editor has provided. At the same time, some of the contributors look at their material through other lenses which reflect (excuse the pun!) the ways in which pilgrimage studies has developed during the last twenty years. It is these more recent developments that I want to discuss here so that we can place the *communitas*/contestation binary into perspective.

### **Beyond structuralism**

The Turnerian model was shaped by the structuralist preoccupations of the 1960s and 1970s. Victor Turner played a major role in the anthropological attempt to revise structural-functional models of society as their failure to explain adequately conflict and change became ever clearer. His analysis of ritual among the Ndembu (1967) showed how conflicts generated by a central tension within its social structure were resolved through public ceremonies. He later applied the binary of social structure and liminal anti-structure to understand the liminoid contexts of pilgrimage in 'modern'

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societies where, following the Durkheimian binary, individualism rather than collectivism was predominant. Michael Sallnow, in his impressive ethnography of Indian pilgrimage in the High Andes of Peru (1987), joined others in showing the failure of this model to explain the complex interweaving of structure and change, unity and division. Ironically, the critique of the *communitas* model ended up being used in another binary – *communitas/contestation*!

Disaffection with the *communitas* model actually emerged as structuralist models were being abandoned under the impact of post-structuralist and post-modernist critiques. These intellectual moves were influenced by wider developments – decolonisation, the collapse of communism, transnational migration, and single-issue campaigns against various forms of (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual) inequality. The failure of Western grand narratives to explain this changing world became evident, and attention turned towards emergent forms of movement and mixture. During the 1990s, although nations had become the dominant collective unit with the collapse of empire, what held them together became more complex as globalisation encouraged the transnational flow of people, information and images. To understand these mobilities, scholars spoke of hybridity, third spaces, scapes, spheres, new ethnicities, diasporas and a variety of "posts": post-socialism, post-nationalism, post-multiculturalism, post-secularism, etc.

These developments have influenced the expansion of pilgrimage studies. We can see this influence in the themes chosen by pilgrimage scholars (journeys, heritage, material objects, gender, race and ethnicity, for example), an openness to non-religious forms of pilgrimage (spiritual and secular), an appreciation of the overlaps across pilgrimage and tourism, the more subjective ways of writing in reaction to objectivism, and the move away from a representational, phenomenological approach towards immanentist focus on sensations, feelings and embodiment.

### **Hybrids, fuzzy thinking and incoherence**

In the short space left, I want to pick up three themes from the (non-exhaustive) list above drawing on a very enlightening paper by Philo, Cadman and Lea (2011). Their review of the debate about 'new spiritualities' associated with 'New Age' developments since the 1960s alerted me to themes which appear in this collection of articles, viz. hybridity, fuzzy boundaries and incoherence. These themes are good to explore because they show us the advantages of moving away from binary models.

New spiritualities are an example of the tendency towards mixing different symbolic and material elements which scholars have noted in other contexts, e. g. the cultural mixtures or 'new ethnicities' generated by minorities in British cities. Hybridity defies the either/or binary logic which elites use to defend religious boundaries, so that 'Catholic Jews' are considered problematic 'since the seeming purity of one identity (say, Catholic) is "contaminated" by the ideas-and-conducts associated with another (say, Jewish)' (Philo et al., 2011, p. 10). The notion of a coherent, bounded (collective or individual) identity is questioned not only by hybridity but also by the idea that

boundaries may be fuzzy or liquid and people may neither be coherent in their thinking nor in their practices. Such an approach reflects the ways in which the 'construct of the sovereign, autonomous, self-possessed human subject has come under fire ... in the social sciences and humanities' (p. 12). It also reveals the influence of 'non-representationalist objections to prioritising the role of human cognition ... over our supposedly more immediate, embodied, engaged, even "animalistic" responses to the world-as-it-comes-to-us (eg. Thrift, 2000, p. 12). We are encouraged to explore 'emotional geographies' and other ways in which we interact with other people, material objects and our environment through bodily practices.

The papers reflect in a number of ways the directions outlined above and in my opinion, this is a major strength of this collection. The clearest illustration of post-modern moves can be seen in Doi's discussion of walking practices along the route to Santiago de Compostela, which draws on the philosopher, Deleuze, to understand 'pilgrims' bodily movements and their environment. She adopts a non-holistic approach towards 'fractal-like' things, i.e. those which 'are observable sporadically in various activities and are not a reduced-sized copy of the whole'. The fluidity of the interactions that take place along the camino and the temporary nature of the groups that emerge along the camino are also a feature of Cazaux's account, while the paper by Jonathan and Sukanya Miles-Watson on another route – this time in the Himalayas – not only explores the links between pilgrims, locals and the changing landscape, but also invites us to think about the subjectivity of the writer and their social positioning. The other papers by Rana Singh, Klimova, and Afferni et al. illustrate the tensions between what should happen at particular shrines and what actually happens, returning us more firmly to the binaries with which we began.

Hopefully, I have said enough to place the *communitas*/contestation debate in a wider theoretical context. Pilgrimage studies has moved far beyond the preoccupations of the 1980s, even if value is still found in a heritage shaped by binary thinking as these papers show. Although some still refer to such banalities as 'a pilgrim is half a tourist ...' and utilise the simplistic binary of host and guest, we inhabit a much richer world of grounded research where we engage with a sometimes contradictory, ambiguous array of diverse thinking and being, involving both those whom we try to understand and our sometimes contradictory, inconsistent selves.

## References

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