

BACKGROUND NOTES ON PILGRIMAGES

STUDENT TOOL 1

Pilgrimages have been in existence for many thousands of years. One of the earliest known pilgrimage sites was in Abydos in Egypt, believed to be the place where Osiris, King of the Dead, died and was reborn. People may have gathered there as early as the 31st century BCE. Many of the major religious traditions have pilgrimages to special sites or places they consider sacred. However, secular pilgrimages (not related to a religious tradition) are also popular with many people even today.

Listed below are a few definitions of pilgrimage-(you may wish to consult a dictionary or encyclopedia of your own for other definitions).

Journeys of devotion, penance, thanksgiving, or the fulfillment of a vow.

[Concord Encyclopedia of World Religions \(2006\).](#)

Any long journey, especially one undertaken in quest of something for a particular purpose.

[Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary \(1989\).](#)

A pilgrimage entails a journey from one place to another, from one aspect of one's life to another. As a result of this movement, many people experience pilgrimage as a transformation. Religious pilgrimage, in particular, can be viewed as a movement from the profane to the sacred, from everyday life to an encounter with the divine, or from local, conventional religion to a radiant religion experienced in a far-off place.

Gesler, Wi (1996). Lourdes: healing place of pilgrimage, *Health and Place*, 2 (2) pp.95-105

In their book *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Society* (1978) Victor and Edith Turner describe the pilgrimage experience as analogous to a rite of passage that has three defining stages:

1. A separation from society that includes **preparation** and the start of the journey.
2. The liminal stage that includes:
 - a. **the journey itself**
 - b. the encounter with objects, symbols and rituals at the site itself
 - c. the **encounter with something sacred or special**
3. Reintegration (returning home)

In Québec over 1.5 million people per year make the pilgrimage to the Shrine of Ste. Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary. The shrine is located about 35 km northeast of Québec City. It has a large basilica that contains a statue of Ste. Anne as well as relics. People claim to receive cures for physical ailments after making the pilgrimage and praying to Ste. Anne.

Preparation for the journey	The journey	Objects, symbols, rituals at the site	Encounter with the sacred or something special	Returning home and possible effects on the individual and the community
May take many forms: having a request, needing help, prayer, etc.	May travel alone or with a guided group	The basilica, the statue of Ste. Anne, relics associated with Ste. Anne	The healing presence of Ste. Anne; a place where many have received favours	A sense of having accomplished a spiritual duty; being part of a large religious community

Explanation based on elements found in the Québec Education Program, Ethics and Religious Culture, p. 505.

Religious experience can take many forms. It can occur in daily life through contemplation, the admiration of nature, while observing rituals or when praying, amongst others. Religious experience can also be exceptional, such as conversions, transformations, reforms, visions, ecstasy, pilgrimages and others. The sites of religious experience are varied: it can manifest itself through the spirit, the body, a community or a gathering. The way that religious experience is transmitted can be through stories, texts, or ways of life. The common thread of religious experience is that it has a profound effect on those who are participants. For the individual it can lead to transformation, liberation, healing, discovery of the meaning of life compassion etc. For the community, it can lead to a deeper involvement or sharing of experiences. For the ways of life it may lead to asceticism, life as a hermit, monastic life, secular living, or a life devoted to others, amongst other effects.

Definition of Religious Experience – Various Sources

William James attributes four characteristics to religious experience:

1. **Ineffability:** The religious experience is simply beyond words. The participant cannot express the experience so that it can be understood by others; it is very particular to the person experiencing it.
2. **Noetic quality:** The religious experience has a sense of the spiritual or sacred, an encounter with an ultimate reality or a divine presence. It is often expressed as a mystical quality.
3. **Transiency:** Religious experiences are often very brief and fade quickly; however, they are memorable.
4. **Passivity:** The person in the religious experience has a sense that his/her will is non-existent and that he/she is being acted upon by a greater power.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Modern Library, 1994. Pp. 414-415

Religious experience: “Any experience carrying as its content the presence of something divine or transcendent. Religious believers may report such experiences as those of being in the presence of God... or as being able to comprehend a timeless and eternal divine order to the universe.”

Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2008

Religious experience

“Common to all religions is the idea that worshippers, in some way or another, can experience the absolute, or God. This experience is most obviously recognizable as a kind of heightened state of being-ecstasy, trance, exaltation, or calm-that reaches beyond the everyday.”

Wilkinson, Philip. *Religions*. New York: DK Publishing, 2008. p. 24