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# The Geographic Contribution to Studies of Pilgrimage: Introduction to *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces*

Robert Stoddard

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, [rstoddard1@unl.edu](mailto:rstoddard1@unl.edu)

Alan Morinis

*The Mussar Institute, Vancouver, BC*

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# INTRODUCTION

## *The Geographic Contribution to Studies of Pilgrimage*

The religions of humankind, from the great traditions of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, to sectarian cults and tribal religions, have all singled out spatial referents as places that embody or enshrine the religious ideals of the culture. These sacred referents and the complex web of logistics, demographics, economics, and related activities that associate with the visitation patterns to such sacred places are the subject of this book.

Sacred places and sacred journeys of pilgrimage exist in important forms throughout the world. This universality is illustrated in this book by settings in Europe (Nolan and Nolan), Arabia (Rowley), Malaysia (Din and Hadi), the United States (Prorok, Rinschede), Japan (Shimazaki), and India (Caplan, Karan, McCormick, Singh, and Sopher). The greater number of discussions about South Asian pilgrimage arises mainly from the religious variety in this region, as reflected by papers concerning Jain (McCormick), Sikh (Karan), and Hindu (Caplan, Singh, and Sopher) traditions.

Even though these papers represent a variety of cultural settings and religious traditions, they focus on the basic contributions that the geographic perspective makes to the field of pilgrimage studies. Because of its integrative nature, geography provides an important framework for studying the complex phenomenon of pilgrimages. Scholars who seek to understand spatial relationships — the focus of geography — necessarily incorporate phenomena that may also involve anthropological, sociological, economic, religious, and environmental topics.

In addition to their integrative characteristics, geographic studies often focus on the perception of places — a perspective that is especially important in pilgrimage behavior. Pilgrimages occur because people believe specific places are holy, and, thus, undertake religious journeys so they can worship at those places. What makes a particular place sacred in the eyes of believers? This is a fundamental question for pilgrimage scholars in gen-

eral, and especially for geographers interested in explaining the movement of pilgrims. An answer is not easy to discern, but McCormick, Nolan and Nolan, and Prorok all discuss aspects of this question in this volume.

Also related to the topic of place perception is the attachment individuals have to a specific place. Love of home and reluctance to travel elsewhere are feelings that vary tremendously among people and, therefore, must be incorporated into any geographic model that is designed to explain spatial behavior. In pilgrimage studies, this attachment to place takes on additional meaning because, for some pilgrims, it adds to the sacrifice of the religious journey. Pilgrimage, therefore, pertains to attraction of places: the secure place of home and the distant place of the divine.

Pilgrimages invariably require spatial movements and, thus, involve the geographic concern with distance and its effect on behavior. The effects of distance are especially pertinent when contrasting pilgrimages with travel for economic goals. In contrast to the distance decay functions that apply to most human movement, where interaction between close places tends to be much greater than that between widely separated places, travel to pilgrimage sites may be expressed by contrasting spatial relationships. On the one hand, travel by pilgrims often does reveal the same effects of distance as movement for other purposes because, for many pilgrims, traveling is undertaken merely to get to a sacred place and long distances deter many potential travelers (as noted by Din and Hadi, for example, ).

On the other hand, when movement itself is regarded as a form of worship or sacrifice, the role of distance may differ from the usual distance decay function. Distance is no longer regarded as a hinderance to travel, but instead, it becomes an opportunity because movement is something valued. The importance of movement per se is especially obvious in religious processions and circumambulations, where the goal is certainly not to arrive at a distant place. The importance of the act of traveling is less clear in journeys that involve a long circuit to several pilgrimage sites, such as the one around Shikoku Island (Shimazaki). The trip can be regarded as only a necessity required to get from each holy site to the next in the series, or the movement may be interpreted as part of the total act of worship. Clearly, for some pilgrims, the act of traveling to a holy place has religious significance, with greater merit resulting from more sacrificial forms of movement (a result discussed by Din and Hadi and by Shimazaki).

In addition to studying the effects of total distance on movement, geographers often examine routes of movement. Understanding routes may depend on network analysis where paths that minimize distance between origins and destinations are compared to the volume of traffic on specific routes. When applied to the movement of pilgrims, however, an optimal route cannot be defined just by time-distance or cost-distance because the ideal approach may be defined by a path of sanctity. Certainly pilgrims

moving along a prescribed sacred way lined with shrines seldom follow a pilgrimage route that is the most direct line between origin and destination.

Geographic contributions to pilgrimage studies also include the examination of nodal regions (catchment areas or pilgrimage fields) generated by pilgrims (Caplan and Karan). Questions of relative sizes, hierarchical relationships, overlapping zones, and changes in each of these aspects of nodal regions are some of the topics that contribute to a better understanding of pilgrimages.

One of the fascinating modifications to the normal nodal region is one having a mobile node, which occurs when pilgrims are attracted to a "place" that wanders. Situations where the pilgrims' destination varies spatially may occur when the sacred position is that occupied by a wandering saint (McCormick) or an image of veneration that is carried from place to place (Nolan and Nolan).

These themes, as well as others addressed in this book, present a perspective that is geographic and, thus, contribute an essential component to the body of literature produced by several disciplines. Scholars seeking to understand the complex phenomenon of pilgrimage can achieve success best by combining the observations and insights obtained from a variety of academic fields.

Geographic research on pilgrimages may range from a focus on activities at a particular place, involving a specific religious tradition, to one concerned with more general characteristics of journeys to sacred places. The studies contained in this book incorporate aspects of both the general and the specific, which makes it difficult to organize the chapters in a sequence that is entirely consistent. Nevertheless, the topics in this volume commence with those addressing pilgrimages in general (Section I) and then focus on those in Christianity (Section II), Islam (Section III), Hinduism (Section IV), and Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism (all in Section V). The volume closes with a treatise on the quest of place by Wagner (Section VI).

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*Robert H. Stoddard  
Lincoln, Nebraska*

*Alan Morinis  
Vancouver, British Columbia*