

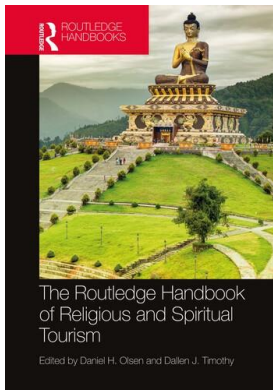
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### **Secular pilgrimages in a post-secular world?**

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## 8

# SECULAR PILGRIMAGES IN A POST-SECULAR WORLD?

## Experiential journeys and hope for the future

*Chadwick Co Sy Su*

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the phenomenon of secular pilgrimages. In particular, I focus here on areas of agreement, disagreement, and subsequent convergence in the literature and individual scholarship regarding religious and secular pilgrimage. In doing so, I ask several questions. First, is “secular pilgrimage” a worthwhile label to be used for the long term? Second, what qualifies and does not qualify as secular pilgrimage? Third, what directions can be taken to ensure that pilgrimage sites, whether religious or secular ones, remain sustainable? Fourth, what possibilities exist for the development of countries and sites both in the Global North and Global South as pilgrimage locales? Fifth, how can religious privilege be replaced with a sense of shared humanity? Several assertions and recommendations will be made for the reader to consider.

To answer these questions and make reasonable recommendations, I draw from some of my previous research on this topic (Sy Su 2017, 2018b) as well as others who have wrestled with defining and negotiating secular forms of pilgrimage in a post-secular world. I approach this topic also from my life experiences as a “militant atheist”. I have no compunction about being public about my atheism, and I am willing and able to point out inconsistencies with religion—indeed, this atheism is part and parcel of my thought process while writing this chapter. However, unlike other militant atheists who are intolerant of religion and “see themselves as riding to the defence of a world besieged by threatening nonsense” (Kitcher 2011: 2), the militancy of my atheism is tempered by a willingness to find common ground, as tolerance in other beliefs and actions can be “a pragmatic [and effective] tool for avoiding a clash of fundamentalisms and for ending wars about truth and justification” (Fiala 2009: 142).

### Secular pilgrimage?

Defining secular pilgrimage may seem simple enough. Often used as a foil to the “sacred” and implying a disassociation with religion, “secular” pilgrimage can be defined as any journey filled with meaning devoid of religious or spiritual content or experiences. However, pilgrimage is generally considered a term with religious parallels, describing journeys motivated by religion or spirituality. Margry (2008) argues that the term “secular pilgrimage” is

troublesome at best—a forced intermixing of seemingly incompatible or oxymoronic terms. Indeed, “it is contra-productive to use the concept of pilgrimage as a combination term for both secular and religious phenomena, thereby turning it into much too broad a concept” (p. 14). This was exemplified by Morinis (1992), who broadly, or probably too broadly, defined pilgrimage as a “journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal” (pp. 4–5)—diluting the term to imply through suggesting that any travel that is meaningful is a pilgrimage. As an example, Knox and Hannam (2014) have playfully extended the pilgrimage as a metaphor to describe what they label “hedonistic” types of tourism that encourage the fulfilling of sensual pleasures and self-indulgent lifestyles. They argue that this is a valid use of the term “pilgrimage” because historically religious pilgrimages were partly hedonistic in nature, and as such any journey in search for authenticity and pleasure can be termed a pilgrimage.

In this context, I have always had a certain discomfort with the “pilgrim” label. Before entering into pilgrimage studies, I considered pilgrimages to be solidly in the domain of the religious. As I have studied travel and pilgrimage, I have come to consider the journeys dealing with non-religious locations and motivations to be also pilgrimages, albeit with the qualifying adjective “secular”. When I travel, I consider myself a “traveler”, a term which to me is probably the most neutral term one can use in order to forego having to justify whether or not I am a pilgrim and why I feel this way. As I have written elsewhere (Sy Su 2017), I think that pilgrimage and travel are one and the same, and I continue to do so. Religious people may have had pride of place at the table of pilgrimage centuries ago. While they may still have that pride of place, non-religious people now have a seat, or even several ones, at the table. In the same manner that virtue was previously thought of as the exclusive province of the theist (Hickson 2020), the atheist now has land in the provinces of both pilgrimage and virtue.

For my purposes here, I am interested in the use of technology, and how through technology one can undertake a pilgrimage without ever leaving the comforts of home. A concrete example of people this is watching a live feed of people climbing Mount Everest or participating in rituals at religious sites virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while virtual travel is better for the natural environment and can further democratize (virtual) travel to places that hold special meaning to people around the world, can this really be considered pilgrimage? What about pilgrimages of the “self” that are mediated by books and meditation, where one can sit in their homes and find themselves through inner journeys rather than taking an arduous journey to some “center out there” (Cohen 1992)? Or what about walking labyrinths, in which a person walks through a labyrinth-like design while meditating and finding themselves (Griffith 2002; McGettigan & Voronkova 2016)? Without the act of real movement outside of a home environment, can these activities be considered pilgrimages?

As such, I find myself in a continual need for conceptual clarity regarding what exactly constitutes a pilgrimage. My views of what can be considered a pilgrimage have been shaped immensely by the writings of Goodnow and Bloom (2017) and Greenia (2018). Goodnow and Bloom (2017) suggest that research and philosophical debates regarding the dichotomy between sacred and profane has not had much change since the 1960s. They go on to define one of the features of pilgrimage as it being time and space set apart from ordinary life. Goodnow and Bloom also outline 12 properties of the sacred. Of these 12, commitment defined as a focused attachment to the sacred, stands out to me. Also of the seven components of pilgrimage proposed by Greenia (2018), the idea of pilgrimage being a body-centered enterprise is singularly important, in that traveling itself is a *sine qua non* for something to be called a pilgrimage. Indeed, as Collins-Kreiner (2010) points out, pilgrimage unavoidably

calls for movement across space. I thus believe that these two factors (commitment and body-centric movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar) must be in place before a journey can be called a pilgrimage.

### **What destinations and activities qualify as secular pilgrimages?**

Having negotiated some of the difficulties in using the term “secular pilgrimage”, here I examine different categorizations that have been claimed to belong under the umbrella of pilgrimage. For example, walking as therapy has been described as pilgrimage by Warfield et al. (2014), who assert that pilgrimage is a therapeutic activity for many people, not only physically but also psychologically, socially, and spiritually. In addition to thru-hiking, which is defined as walking long distances of up to thousands of kilometers along the Appalachian Trail over several months, and having the same motivations to walk as those who walk with religious intent on the Camino de Santiago (Bader 2018), there are micro-pilgrimages, operationalized by Goodnow and Bloom (2017) as lasting four days or less to a place reachable by a four- to five-hour drive. Bader (2018: n.p.) differentiates the micro-pilgrimage from the traditional, in that the former is closer to home, shorter, and more economical than the latter.

National parks, such as Yellowstone, also carry touristic, pilgrimage, and pecuniary valuations (Ross-Bryant 2013; Bremer 2016; see also Chapter 12 this volume). Yoder (2018) uses Monte Verde in Costa Rica as an example of how ecotourism sites are “made sacred.” As noted by Sharpley (Chapter 11, this volume), people can find different geographical locales such as wilderness and rural areas, seascapes and oceans, and gazing into the night sky as sacred or spiritual locations, even when they are engaging with these spaces for secular or more hedonistic reasons. As such, in the same way that manifestations of the “hierophanies” or manifestations of the sacred can be found at religious sites, “kratophanies” or the appearance of power is also a likely outcome in aesthetic landscapes and places that inspire wonder and awe.

Visiting war memorials and sites of remembrance are also generally viewed as secular pilgrimages (Seaton 2002), even though they have religious connotations, in part because of their bent toward peace education. The works of Tamashiro (2018) on bearing witness to inhumanity, McIntosh (2015) on the Palestinian conflict, and Blankenship (2018) on Jewish visitors to Holocaust memorials in Berlin are but a few examples in this regard. These works are reminiscent of recent research on dark tourism or thanatourism, which involves travel to places relating to death or other types of human tragedy (Stone 2013; Stone et al. 2018; Martini & Buda 2020). Indeed, my own studies on thanatology and the process of plastination have led me to the conclusion that visits to places of death and the processing of these sites by visitors can be both construed as sacred and secular pilgrimages of and toward the self (Sy Su 2018; see Olsen & Korstanje 2020).

In the same way that visits to see religious figures and leaders in person or to visit their birthplaces are common in religious pilgrimage (Becker 2006; Navarro 2015; Kim & Chen 2020), people also take secular pilgrimages to places associated with the lives, accomplishments, and deaths of celebrities and philanthropists (Wesolowski 2019; Soligo & Dickens 2020), and pop culture locations such as where certain films, books, and songs are set (Brown 2016; Chen & Mele 2017; Salamone 2018) may also be considered secular pilgrimage. Places such as Strawberry Fields in Central Park, New York City, with its association with The Beatles (Kruse 2013), Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee (King 1993; Alderman 2002), and the graves of Ludwig von Wittgenstein and Oscar Wilde (Middleton 2009) most readily come to mind, being reminiscent of the discussion in the previous paragraph on dark tourism and death.

Study abroad programs also fit the definition of secular pilgrimage, with DeGraaf et al. (2013) arguing that at least a semester spent overseas is equivalent to a pilgrimage. Sienkewicz (2018) presents a cogent argument that an integrated studies curriculum enhanced by the opportunity to participate in a one-day walk is a form of pilgrimage. Smith (2019) describes a short-term study abroad program as a chance for academics to impart their enthusiasm for pilgrimage, while at the same time allowing students to make their own discoveries. The opportunities to reflect on different systems of belief may be seen as a journey to the self, a point that I myself make in describing my travels and teaching Intercultural Communication courses in my home university (2017, 2018b).

Of course, there is a long history of comparing tourism to pilgrimage or at least a form of secular pilgrimage (Ambrosio 2007) with tourists as secular pilgrims (Knox & Hannam 2014). Indeed, as my cogitations on the matter have evolved with my increasing involvement in pilgrimage studies, I am reminded of Bauman's (1996; see Tidball 2004) argument that the successors of pilgrims are the vagabond, the stroller, the player, and the tourist, which parallels with Reader's (2014) descriptions of department stores and airport malls as pilgrimage sites. Because of this the sacred and profane, and by implication, pilgrimage and tourism, can never be examined without considering its dichotomous other.

### Sustainability

With increases in travel technologies and both full-service and budget airlines advertising discounts on fares, air travel has become accessible to people across a much broader spectrum of socioeconomic classes than in the past. At the same time, technology has also facilitated the growth of remote work, a concept that was close to nonexistent three decades ago. Indeed, the "gig economy" has increased economic flexibility and has contributed in part to an increased propensity to travel. However, this increased propensity to travel has resulted in threats to environmental sustainability, including in some cases threats to the very existence of pilgrimage sites (Shinde 2007). I witnessed this firsthand when I made a journey to Tai Shan (Mount Tai) in Tai'an in China's Shandong Province, the most famous of the five holy mountains of China. In part because the journey to the mountain was not difficult, I encountered hordes of journeyers, even though the temperatures were in the low single digits before wind chill. What made the journey a challenge to me was seeing how this UNESCO Heritage Site's existence was being threatened by overtourism. While I would describe Mount Tai and its footpaths as reasonably clean, there was a lack of waste disposal facilities, as attested to by the water bottles and polystyrene food containers strewn around the site. Every quarter hour or so, our walk was interrupted by the sound of a fellow traveler hocking up phlegm and spitting it onto the ground. The nadir was, unfortunately, in the queue to the restrooms, if one can call those as such. The restrooms were unpartitioned, in that people could see each other defecating while squatting on a toilet. These infrastructure threats certainly took away from any sense of holiness. If Tai Shan was to have inspired emperors and artists to write poetry and songs, my experiences at the site inspired in me, a far inferior person, revulsion, leading me to commit to the discipline of pilgrimage studies.

With increasing populations and disposable income (Allan et al. 2017), it can be reasonably inferred that travel to sites both holy and secular will also increase. There is thus a need for approaches that ensure that pilgrimage locales are responsibly visited by present journeyers and will be preserved for generations to come. Something as simple as conspicuous guideposts or brochures suggesting proper behavior within a site may lessen instances of improper waste disposal. To another extreme, alternative sites for pilgrimage and tourist

activity may be developed. Charyn Canyon, located in the east of Almaty in Kazakhstan, is a Central Asian alternative to national parks in the United States, as is the Ala-Archa National Park in the outskirts of Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan.

From a Western perspective, Herrero (2008) describes the old route to the Santiago de Compostela as having nearly been destroyed by roadbuilding. The plenary indulgence awarded by the Catholic Church to those who confess and take communion at the cathedral can be inferred to have led to pilgrims arriving *en masse* on motorized transport, at least until the 1980s (Lois González 2013). The passage of time has inexorably resulted in damage to the images of the Pórtico de la Gloria or the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral's main gate (De los Rios Murillo & Montero Delgado 2019). Even if we were to take away human traffic from the equation time is a most formidable enemy when it comes to the erosion of both human-built and natural sacred sites—humans just speed up this inevitable process. Fortunately, cooperation between the public and private sectors, along with academics and scientists, has resulted in a Santiago de Compostela that inspires awe instead of ruminations about a past long gone. It has been restored, quite simply, to a walking city (Lois González 2013). In a similar vein, there is also a growing literature examining how natural sacred sites can be preserved for both present religious rituals and use by future generations (Wild & McLeod 2008; Verschuuren et al. 2010; Pungetti, Oviedo & Hooke 2012).

### **Replacing religious privilege with shared humanity**

Even with views starting in the 1960s that religion was on the decline (Luckmann 1963; Berger 1967; Gorski 2003), religion still occupies a place of privilege in post-secular societies. This is not surprising, given that around the world an estimated 85–93% of people claim some sort of religious affiliation (Pew Forum 2012). At the same time, different government types view and treat religion differently based upon whether they view religion as truth, danger, utility, or identity, the last which calls for so-called respect for religion (Modood 2010). Yet regardless of how governments interact with religion, religion still undergirds much of the world's sociopolitical structures, including policymaking and views of what constitutes morality, ethics, and values. The dominance of religion also undergirds the debate regarding the privileging of religious forms of pilgrimage over their secular counterpart. An example of this is the Way or Camino of St. James to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where recent studies have shown that today, many of the people who walk the Camino are not Catholic, but rather either of different religious faiths or no faith at all (Frey 2004; Doi 2011; Egan 2011). Many of the people who travel to Santiago via bicycles or, worse, take buses or drive cars, are not considered “true” or “authentic” pilgrims by those who walk the Camino, as are those who are not religiously affiliated. While those that cycle or drive the Camino may consider themselves “pilgrims”, as those for whose motivations are not religious or spiritual, they are considered by those walking the Camino to be nothing more than “tourists” who have no desire for spiritual improvement or who chose to eschew the physical travail of the Camino (Graham & Murray 1997).

At least from my experience as an academic in this part of the Global South, secular pilgrimage is certainly the proverbial poor cousin in the pilgrimage family. In the Philippines where I live, pilgrimage trips are almost exclusively described as being religious in nature, with secular pilgrimages being labeled as educational trips (Moncawe 2017). Given that “pilgrimage” has a religious overtone and is popularly held to be the province of the religious, adding the word “secular” to it as a modifier appears to be an unnecessary deference. Maybe it would be better if instead of using the term “secular pilgrimage” the term “experiential journeys” might be a better descriptor. Using this term would remove the religious overtones



and at the same time maintain the good faith accorded to individual travelers where their unique, personal experiences are recognized with no attempt to either denigrate or romanticize their perceived motives. Indeed, the term “experiential journeys” recognizes the shared human experience where everyone, irrespective of religion, is attempting to derive meaning from life and searching for occasional relief from the sufferings or humdrum of daily living. I actually prefer this term to any usage of “pilgrimage”, in part because if the point of going on pilgrimage is to negotiate with a god for favors such as fertility, healing, or deliverance from harm, not only does the act of pilgrimage question the supposed omniscience of god—a telling inconsistency that removes any claim to sacredness—but also converts pilgrimage into a business transaction between pilgrims and god(s).

Conversations with theist colleagues and the resulting introspection from these conversations have led me to recognize that there are more similarities than differences within humanity, and as such, I would now much rather look at religious pilgrimages as journeys that allow people to process their experiences and come to terms with their circumstances. Whether they believe that these circumstances are given to them by a god is irrelevant to me; what is relevant to me is that they are doing what they can to understand these experiences. On that point, we are all the same. Even as I was raised Catholic, transitioned to agnosticism in my late teens, became atheist in my early 20s, and am unlikely to be religious ever again, I recognize that living is a chore made easier by the presence of other people who are able to recognize the difference and in spite of such recognition, lessen disagreement.

### **Looking to the future with optimism**

In the end, there will always be theists and atheists. What makes the future bright, at least for me, is that in spite of fundamental differences in belief, people from both sides of the aisle have the ability to work together to improve the quality of life for everyone. While I have presented alternative terminology in this chapter with the use of “experiential journey,” I do so first in an attempt at inclusiveness before looking at it as a clean break from the religious fetters of “pilgrimage.” Whatever viewpoints one has about morality, god, and the afterlife, common ground can be found in the decision to preserve sites of human and natural value, regardless of whether they are labeled heritage, pilgrimage, or tourist sites, for future generations to enjoy. While it is usually unsafe to generalize, I daresay that every person is likely to end their stay on this planet without being able to visit even a tenth of its attractions. Indeed, there remains a multitude of places to be developed, commoditized, and marketed to broaden human experience and alleviate the burden of overtourism on more popular locales. Such an ambitious goal will enable governments, whether local or national, to improve the facilities and better manage and preserve these well-trodden places.

Even though I have visited 84 countries, I will probably never see the entirety of this world. However, I have seen enough to make certain reasonable conclusions, including the fact that beauty can be found everywhere, whether from the polluted and crowded railways of Dhaka, Bangladesh to the Gullfoss in Iceland. I wish to help in the preservation of all sites of human and natural value so that many more people in the years ahead can see the places I have seen and from which I have derived immense pleasure and equanimity. As such, humanity needs to better educate students, as future travelers, to recognize the stories behind these places of beauty and inspiration and how they can help people find common ground with others. In breaking down religious and cultural barriers, people can learn to live and let live, and in so doing help with seeing the difference with openness of mind and a willingness to question assumptions, as I am willing to do.

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