Chapter 3
Pilgrimage, Tradition, and Authenticity: The Revival of the Chartres Pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the Chartres pilgrimage is an example of religious travel that provides an ‘authentic’ pilgrimage experience, in contrast with commercially packaged tours. This focus on tradition and authenticity is achieved by the gruelling nature of the walk, the use of medieval cathedrals as points of origin and destination, and a connection to Catholic rituals. The chapter examines scholarly literature on pilgrimage and religious tourism to show that the organisers are seeking to promote an experience that is distinct among religious tours. Furthermore, the chapter considers how the pilgrimage is illustrative of religious expression in post-secular times. At a time when the secularization thesis is being questioned, and where religion has become of greater importance for politics and policy formation, how religious identity is expressed, and how religious practitioners maintain their sense of the sacred in ‘a secular age’, are important questions. The work of Habermas and Taylor is analysed to see how the pilgrimage reflects religion in post-secular times.

INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage sites are important to many religious faiths, providing a physical space where visitors can enter the realm of the sacred and connect to their faith at a deeper level. An important part of the pilgrimage experience is that of traveling to another
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place, sometimes in the company of fellow believers, and leaving behind the familiar comforts of home. During the Middle Ages in Christian Europe, pilgrimage was about “penitence, expiation, purification, and redemption” (Tomasi 2002: 13). These ideas continue to motivate pilgrims of all religions today. However, there are other motivations that might also inspire modern pilgrims, including self-fulfilment. In contemporary times, pilgrimages and other forms of religious travel continue to inspire large numbers of people to transit the globe. In 2016 alone, around 1.8 to 2 million Muslims undertook the Hajj to Mecca according to figures released by the Saudi Arabian government and the BBC, and estimates for Catholics attending World Youth Day in Poland were between 2 and 3 million (Mazurczak 2016). These are only two events among innumerable other pilgrimages across many religions taken in various parts of the world. ‘Secular pilgrimage’ to non-religious sites is also attracting attention from scholars (see Margry 2008), and the onset of a digital age has given rise to virtual pilgrimages conducted online (MacWilliams 2002). These journeys raise a number of questions, such as how the logistics of such travel is organised, by whom, and what motivates such journeys in a time that social scientists continue to define as secular. In what follows we will attempt to explore some of these wide ranging issues through an examination of one particular pilgrimage, the annual Chartres pilgrimage in France that begins in Paris and ends at Chartres Cathedral.

This chapter argues that the revival and popularity of the Chartres pilgrimage is an example of an attempt to provide an authentic religious and spiritual experience amidst capitalist consumerism in a time of increased secularism. This chapter focuses on the organisational structure of the pilgrimage and its operations, rather than the subjective experience of those who undertake it. An ethnographic study of participant reactions to this pilgrimage would no doubt be of value, but will require a different hypothesis and methodology. This chapter will restrict itself to analysing how the modern Chartres pilgrimage is organised and run, and examine objectively the methods and strategies that its organisers employ to offer pilgrims an event that purports to be more authentic than packaged pilgrimages and off-the-shelf religious travel. Furthermore, the origins of the Chartres pilgrimage in medieval times will be outlined, before examining its modern revival and itinerary. How it is organised and marketed will then briefly be assessed. These points will lead to a consideration of its claim to be an authentic experience that offers contemporary pilgrims an analogous journey to that undertaken by medieval pilgrims. It will be argued that there are three main strategies employed to make the event more authentic, which include the use of Christian rituals and symbolism, the creation of a sense of the liminal among participants, and the promotion of a feeling of separation from everyday life. Finally, the wider social and cultural context of the Chartres pilgrimage will be considered, as an example of the public display of religious faith in an age that is described as being secular. Employing the work of theorists such as José Casanova, Charles Taylor
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