

Why Travel?

Theology



Introduction

The relationship between human spirituality and movement is a key theme across world religions. In some cases, religious traditions have enshrined the importance of travel in the practice of pilgrimage; in others it is related to missionary activity and congregational worship.

*'Whan that Aprille, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the
roote...
Thanne longen folk to goon on
pilgrimages...*

Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Prologue

“

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Mark, 1:35 [English Standard Version]

If a traveller does not meet with one who is his better, or his equal, let him firmly keep to his solitary journey; there is no companionship with a fool.

Dhammapada, Ch. V, v.61

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Key Aspects

Travel as Pilgrimage

Many religions have a strong concept of pilgrimage as an act of faith or spiritual discipline. In some cases this is to reach a particular destination: the Hajj to Mecca in Islam or the pilgrimages to Jerusalem in Christianity, for example. It is important to note that these journeys cannot be substituted as travel choices. In other cases, attention is drawn to the spiritual and social benefits of the journey itself.

Travel as Mission

In proselytizing religions, travel is an important consequence of missionary activity, where believers may be commanded to spread the word of their faith to new peoples and nations. In many cases, this travel has been long distance, aided by transport development, and has contributed towards the learning and discovery of new languages. On the other hand, the spread of religions competing for new converts across the globe has sometimes contributed to tension and conflict.

Travel from Persecution

Instances of religious persecution have frequently caused religious groups to migrate long distances so that they can practice their faith freely. The journeys of persecuted Puritan sects to the Americas in the seventeenth century, or the diaspora of Jewish communities following persecution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are well-known examples. As opportunities for travel have changed so these have determined patterns of settlement and survival for groups fleeing persecution.

Practical Implications

- **Travel motivated by religious belief is often non-transferable: pilgrims often have to reach a particular destination.**
- **Access to travel for religious worship or pilgrimage is important. Transport policy does not always fit with these demands, for instance imposing parking restrictions during Friday prayers for Muslims, or poor public transport provision on Sundays for Christians.**
- **We should be aware that religious beliefs can also play a role in restricting people's travel choices.**

Key Questions

How can we better accommodate religious travel needs in transport policy?

How will religiously motivated travel change in an age of high-speed connectivity?

Travel as Worship and Meditation

Many religions emphasize the importance of collective worship, the practice of which often requires regular travel. In Britain, crowds would travel to hear itinerant Methodist preachers, which contributed to the spread of the movement. In other countries, believers will walk many miles to attend their local centres of worship. Movement and travel can also be seen as part of spiritual meditation. The Parikrama in Hindu and Buddhist ritual involves meditative circumambulation around a sacred object or shrine.

Travel Restrictions

Some religious traditions place restrictions on travel. The Hindu law books ban taking voyages by sea or visiting lands beyond India, based on the belief that certain daily rituals cannot be performed while travelling. Jain monks and nuns are required to walk everywhere as the only pure means of travel, while Jewish traditions prohibit travel on the Sabbath. These restrictions can sometimes have a social or gendered dimension.

Further Reading/Resources

Nicholas Shrady, *Sacred Roads: Adventures from the Pilgrimage Trail* (1999)

Insightful account of the experiences that arise from religious pilgrimage.

M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls* (2003).

Exploration of the restlessness of the soul from a Christian perspective.

Michael Wolfe (ed.), *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (1998)

Fascinating tour through a compendium of writings on the Muslim Hajj.

Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (1991)

Authoritative exploration of missionary travel from the Roman Empire to the present.



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