

*Research article***Pilgrimages: Space, Polysemy and Three Cases**

Voyé Liliane, Karel Dobbelaere *

Catholic Universities of Louvain, Parkstraat 45 Bus 3601, B-3000 LEUVEN, Belgium

* **Correspondence:** Email: dobbelaere.voye@skynet.be; Tel: -32-(0)85-23 51 29

Abstract: This article is based on a study of the existing literature and field work on sites of pilgrimages. It is structured in three parts: pilgrimage and space, the polysemy of pilgrimages and a presentation of three examples of pilgrimages. First we discuss the relationship of pilgrimages with *space*. Going on pilgrimage implies a “displacement” towards a “particular place”, where there is an “internal circuit” laid out for pilgrims and visitors. Finally, we point out the “territory of recruitment”, where the pilgrims live. In a second part we discuss the *polysemy* of the pilgrimages. Persons may go on pilgrimage towards historic places of a religion to “revive” its message. It may also be “an act of devotion” or a “penitential activity”. Pilgrimages were and still are an “affirmation of an identity” and finally we stress “the logic of requests”. These are analytical distinctions but pilgrimages are mostly a combination of these functions. Finally, we present *three examples of pilgrimages*: one to the Relic of the Holy Blood of Jesus Christ in Bruges (Belgium), another to a Marian sanctuary in Banneux (Belgium) and finally the pilgrimage to St James of Compostela (Spain).

Keywords: pilgrimage; space; polysemy; functions; identity; request; devotion

1. Introduction

Pilgrimages are a practice one finds in all major religions, however, it does not have the same status in all of them. So the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five pillars of Islam being quite central and even an obligation for those who have the means. This religion also recognizes the pilgrimage to Medina where Mohammed is buried. In Buddhism, the pilgrimages are linked to the life of Buddha. There are also many sites of pilgrimages in Hinduism, among others to the sacred river *Ganga* and its sources. Hindus believe that bathing in the river causes the remission of sins and facilitates *Moksha*, the liberation from the cycle of life and death. As far as Judaism is concerned, the tradition recognizes three pilgrimage festivals. *Passover*, celebrating the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, *Shavuot*, being the celebration of the *Torah* given by God to Moses and *Sukkoth*, commemorating God’s help given to the people of Israel wandering in the desert for forty years after leaving Egypt.

As far as Christianity is concerned, the situation varies according to its branches. In Protestantism, always very reluctant towards what is not directly linked to the Bible and the Scriptures, there exists, since some time, what is called “spiritual tourism” and it seems to be in full expansion. It is organized around sites having marked the history of Protestantism. Among others we note especially Israel, places attached to the great Reformers or important figures for them — and for many others — like Johann Sebastian Bach or Albert Schweitzer, the “Museum of the Desert” in the Cevennes (France) or the footpaths of the Huguenots.

As far as Catholicism is concerned, pilgrimage is rather considered popular religion, meaning that it is part of practices which, according to the cases, the Church recognizes, tolerates, accepts with more or less reservations, or even challenges, notably since God himself is not at the centre of the move but secondary figures of Christianity like one or another Saint or, better, the virgin Mary. However, despite these possible reservations of the Institution, indeed its disavowal, numerous Catholics frequent these places. This practice has always been very common in Catholicism and one registers today that, even when the imposed practices (like Sunday mass) decline, such popular practices and, especially pilgrimages, tend to multiply and concern people whose bond with the church may be very loose, or even non-existent, which we will demonstrate later in discussing the pilgrimage to Compostela.

The next pages will be concerned with the pilgrimages associated with contemporary Catholicism in Western Europe. They are structured in three parts: the relationship of pilgrimages with space, the polysemy of pilgrimages with the different motives which are theirs and the presentation of three emblematic examples.

2. Pilgrimages and their relationship with space

The analysis of pilgrimage in the European context points out that it takes on a temporal and a spatial dimension. The first, which will be only briefly evoked, is more and more marked by touristic movements. They are more frequent during the summer vacations. It is also a period when there is less risk of bad weather which may disturb the circulation. However, due to the fact that Europe as a whole sees its population grow older, and consequently that part of it having no professional activity anymore, imposes its own calendar which contributes to a certain temporal spreading of pilgrimages. Furthermore, this is also accentuated by the fact that these pilgrimages are more than previously a matter of familial and personal initiatives and not now of an organization such as the diocese or the parish. And, as we will see later on in these pages, since they are quite often motivated by a demand for protection, for recovery...the pilgrimage is frequently linked by a more or less urgent actual need. The moment of such a displacement is consequently more and more privately chosen and may take place any time. However, certain pilgrimages have their own temporality. Thus the month of May, called “the month of Mary”, sees a multiplication of pilgrims towards the Marian sites.

Without minimizing the importance of the temporal aspect, it is the spatial dimension of the pilgrimage that retains our attention here. The pilgrimage maintains a quadruple relationship with space: implying a displacement, a particular place, an internal circuit at this place and a relationship with a more or less large territory.

2.1. A displacement

Moving is an essential characteristic of all pilgrimages. It assumes a more or less long route which, certainly in origin, may have been complex and adventurous. So the pilgrims who previously went to Santiago de Compostela (Spain) arrived there on foot, through ways full of dangers: hostility

and distrust, plundering and sickness. Places to rest and food to eat were seldom found and if the pilgrims escaped all dangers, they reached the goal exhausted most of the time. The development of the means of communication that Europe has known since the sixties has modified these conditions of displacement. Of course, certain pilgrims choose to preserve as far as possible the traditional conditions of their journey, however, even then, the material conditions are much better than in bygone days. The train, the car and later the plane have reduced the distances and made accessible and near that which was before distant, even nearly inaccessible. They have also transformed the material conditions of the displacement, reducing, even abolishing these hard, uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous aspects. Furthermore, the development of tourism, being favored by these means of transportation and the rising standard of living, has contributed to the rapid development of pilgrimages, for example by offering certain emblematic sites of its environment in the touristic offering and “product”. For Marc Boyer [1], Lourdes (France) is an excellent symbol of this process. Indeed for him, this place of the apparition of the Virgin to a little shepherdess is in a way coming to complement an already rich “product” constituted by two major natural elements: the savage mountains of the Pyrenees, celebrated by among others Victor Hugo, with in particular the Cirque de Gavarnie, very near the site of devotions, and the multiple Spa Towns that this mountain region conceals. It is these which, in the 18th century, were at the origin of a strong fashion with the elites, a fashion that contributes now to a revival of success, this time with a much larger population [2].

This spatial dimension of the pilgrimage, the displacement that it supposes, takes on a very particular importance today. Indeed, this physical move, punctuated by difficulties and efforts, illustrates in concrete terms and sustains in a certain way a characteristic of numerous contemporary Catholics who refuse to adhere to a “ready-to wear” belief, standardized, and dictated by doctrinal teaching. They oppose to this a personal progression, which makes them (or not) construct by themselves their creed and to choose the components. For many, in the religious domain as in others, no authority is in effect henceforth capable of imposing his vision of what is good and the truth, nor of defining the meaning. And it is “oneself” who is invited to a work of invention all the more difficult since one operates on a moving horizon of a society steeped in uncertainties and affected by a marching movement forward whose control it seems to have lost [3]. All happens as if the pilgrim’s material advance might help him in the religious progress confronting him not only with the difficulties of the road but also at the same time with the difficulties that he encounters in his life and with the questions that these pose for him. Without doubt such a situation favors going on pilgrimage, of which one can only notice the progression today, as will be seen in the example of the pilgrimage to St James of Compostela. One will see moreover that taking the road to Compostela is not only chosen by catholic people who are more or less disorientated ; it is also frequently done by persons, religious or not, confronted by the demand of researching themselves which is imposed by the dissolution of ancient markers of absolute certainty.

2.2. *A particular place*

If the displacement may sometimes be self-sufficient, it is, however, mostly motivated by a place of destination, a goal, which besides the meaning it carries, takes on a spatial form. This place is invested with specific extraordinary and sacred characteristics which may be considered as miraculous. The power with which this place is invested and the attraction it exercises are often linked to the presence of a relic and/or a statue of the Virgin Mary; if that is the case it is quite often a site where an apparition of her might have taken place. Such a site may also be associated with a relic and/or the statute of a saint, thought to be endowed with the power to cure one illness or another

or with another capacity to help the pilgrims (as is the case in Padova, Italy, the city of St. Anthony of whom it is believed that he can help to find lost objects). The “gift” of these persons is generally associated with a moment or an event in the history of their life, which is supposed to explain why he or she is venerated and prayed to for such cases. It is interesting to note that no pilgrimage is oriented towards God as such. And it is rather exceptional that such places are centred on Jesus-Christ. This among others is the case in Turin, Italy, with the venerated Holy Shroud, the presumed burial garment of Jesus Christ, and also the Basilica of the Holy Blood in Bruges, Belgium, where a relic of the Holy Blood is venerated. We come back to that in our last section, a study of cases.

These places which are the aim of the pilgrimage are quite often also “cosmically marked” and geologically particular: the grotto in Lourdes, “extremity” as St James of Compostela at the margins of Christianity, or summits difficult to reach as the Mont St Michel (France) and also the chapel on the rock python in Le Puy (France) which emerged in the surrounding plains in an abrupt way. Furthermore, many of the pilgrimage places which emerged in the 19th and the 20th centuries are found in rural locations and it is only later that, due to the activities generated by the pilgrimages themselves, cities emerged. It is not surprising that nature is an important constitutive element: many of these pilgrimage places that appeared in Europe at this time have arisen in a period in which secularization progressed quickly and was considered linked with industrialization and urbanization. The peripheral locations of these places acquired sense in the conflict between nature and city, between agriculture and industry, which has long been a structural dichotomy in European thinking. Recently one notices also that the criticisms against an economic development that does not take care of the environment and nature contribute to making certain pilgrimage places particularly up-to-date. Diverse ecological groups, for instance, call on the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi, the friend of animals and flowers which he called his brothers [4].

2.3. *An internal circuit*

Besides the heart of the place where the pilgrims converge, these places propose very often even in the heart of their territory an itinerary which brings them to different places where they might fulfil diverse practices. Thus in Lourdes, the pilgrim goes without doubt to the cave of the apparitions and will endeavour to touch the rock which embraces it. Next he may enter the basilica. Quite often the pilgrim will buy a candle and light it in order to put it on one of the racks disposed there for that purpose trying hard to find a place which according to him is possibly best exposed. He will also drink water of the sacred spring and quite often fill up a bottle with it to take home. And he will participate in the procession which takes place each day in the enclosure of the site, or at least, he will be present in order to wait for the benediction. Everything happens as if the pilgrim should go to different places and carry out certain codified gestures to give him the certainty to receive the favours he expects from his moves. We will discuss in the last section the case of Banneux (Belgium)

These diverse gestures take on an essential importance and are far from being insignificant, as a rationalist and positivist thought accuses. If Thomas Aquinas had for so long emphasized that men understand what is intelligible through what is sensible, the progress of anthropology and of ethology are just as abundant in this sense [5,6]. These show in fact and always more clearly that the sense is impressed in the body and that the corporal practices are by themselves of a spoken nature. The act is practice of memory, communication and recognition.

2.4. *A territory of recruitment*

And finally, the last aspect related to space: the territory on which the attraction of the place of the pilgrimage operates. Some are universal in the sense that they attract pilgrims from nearly all over the world. This is the case of Santiago de Compostela on which pilgrims converge following diverse pre-traced routes (see the statistics in the section 4.3), either in one stretch, or mostly in stages which they link up over some years. Here also the development of tourism has contributed largely to the fame of certain of its sites and has brought tourists-pilgrims there for whom they were previously unknown and/or inaccessible. At the extreme opposite, certain pilgrimage sites are “confidential” and are known only in a restrained neighborhood. Chèvremont, near Liège (Belgium), is a good illustration. It is visited only by persons from neighboring villages. They struggle up a steep slope punctuated with a Way of the Cross which leads to a chapel dedicated to Mary and finally to an abbey. And having reached the summit, it is customary for the regular visitor to eat fried eggs sunny side up in its restaurant. It is also a tradition for persons from neighboring villages to go with the family on pilgrimage to Chèvremont the Monday of the “Solemn communion”, a rite of passage for adolescents. However, since the decline of this celebration and its frequent reduction to a profane family feast, this habit has been largely lost. On the contrary, the annual pilgrimage of the local sportswomen and men persists, even if this event has largely lost its religious significance. All over Europe such sites exist, known and visited only by locals. They are part of their history and their memory and offer them periodically time and places of gatherings which may contribute to making them conscious of their identity. Even without a specific catholic dimension, the visit to these sites takes on a real sense.

The pilgrimage, whatever its fame, is in this way deeply anchored in space where its traces are otherwise often in conjunction with political markings and commercial itineraries, as the case of St. James will illustrate. As such, this pilgrimage has contributed to the history of Europe and to its identity.

3. **The polysemy of pilgrimage**

Today, the objective of pilgrimage is mostly to ask help and protection for oneself and for one’s own; it is also sometimes done to express thanks for an obtained grace. However, in Europe, a pilgrimage may meet other objectives and take on different other meanings. Many of the places of destination are moreover important sites of touristic interest, as is certainly the case with some of the cases we will discuss.

3.1. *A return to the origin of the faith*

The pilgrimages in Palestine and in Rome have not and never had as their main intention to expect graces, favours or even miracles. Travel to these places was for the pilgrims to revive the sense of their own Christianity, immersing themselves in the geographic places of its origins, to make the landscapes in which Christ, his mother and his followers lived revive a message that otherwise would only come to them by means of books and preaching [7].

It is certainly not only in Palestine and in Rome where one can find pilgrims essentially motivated to this search. But these two places are what V. and E. Turner call “prototype pilgrimages” [7]. These are places which have a particular significance for a religion since they evoke its foundations and its history, in this case the Bible with its stories and Rome representing the history of the Church. Returning to the theories of Van Gennep, the Turners add that Rome is

essentially a “liminal place”, a place that goes beyond the normal order of life and that brings the person who is there to a transitional state (the ‘*communitas*’) where she/he is given another view of the world and where new types of relationships between men/women and ideas seem to become possible and desirable.

3.2. A travel and place for devotions

Certain pilgrimages are accomplished with the intention of praying in order to venerate Christ, the Virgin or a saint or to pray for the salvation of one’s soul. In that case, the intention is above all religious. It is however rather rare that it is so and that other motives do not go together with this intention. When this intention exists, it is mostly combined with other aspects, and in particular with a demand for either assistance or protection, which we will evoke later on.

3.3. A penitential activity

In past times, many pilgrimages were made as penitence, sometimes required by the ecclesiastical authorities. However today, in a time when the sense of guilt is often considered a result of structures and no longer of the person him/her self, it is only rarely that pilgrims fulfil this aim. Researches in Europe show indeed that belief in sin, the devil and hell decreases as does the acceptance of the disciplinary authority of the Church. Nevertheless this does not totally exclude that some believers may perform a pilgrimage as a penitential rite. Such rites are often linked with specific places. It is known that it was frequent in the past that the pilgrimage to St James of Compostela was imposed on someone by the “Tribunal of Penitence” by way of expiation (sometimes for a crime) or to purge a civil penalty. The most famous of the places of pilgrimage devoted to a penitential activity is without doubt the Irish pilgrimage to Saint Patrick’s purgatory (Ireland) where pilgrims inflicted on themselves strictly codified mortifications as punishment and expiation. However in the course of time, these mortifications have also been greatly softened. But it is still possible today to see pilgrims inflict on themselves certain suffering as in Fatima (Portugal) to approach the sanctuary advancing on their knees.

Besides these particular sites, penitential rites may also be observed in all places of pilgrimages, where one may find signs, written or otherwise of requests for forgiveness. Moreover, when one arrives at pilgrimage places, it often strikes one to see a number of confessionals, with people waiting for their turn. Without doubt they find there an environment and an atmosphere favourable for this move that is more and more rare in parish churches.

3.4. An affirmation of identify and a political message

In older times, when religion was a dominant power and was associated with royalty, political power “needed” spiritual legitimation, not only for itself but also to be recognized as legal by the population. Today in Europe, the religious power has lost its authority and the States insist on their religious neutrality on the basis of the constitutional separation of Church and State. Furthermore, urbanization and mobility have contributed to deeply modify the feelings of territorial belonging. Nevertheless, the importance of territorial identity did not decrease for a majority of the population in Europe. On the contrary, globalization seems to go together with it. This is what Robertson calls the “glocalisation”, to wit the coexistence of a certain economical and cultural universalisation of the world together with the reaffirmation of national, regional and even local identities [8]. And nowadays, the massive movements of refugees sweeping over Europe reinforce this sentiment,

notably on a religious basis; “we are Christians, they are Muslims”. The most striking example is without doubt the one of France, where an extreme right political party, the *Front National*, claims “Saint Joan of Arc”, to whom its members pay tribute each year.

In this context of globalization and migrations, it is not surprising that places of pilgrimage associated with such identities have a certain success. It is for example the case of Czestochowa (Poland) whose Virgin is called “Queen of Poland” and is associated with the Polish claims for independence and notably with the successful combat of “Solidarnosc”. For the Portuguese, Fatima is the emblem of their country and, in the other European countries that have known an important immigration of Portuguese, one may find very frequently cultic places dedicated to her.

If many European countries have their patron saint, the same is true of many regions. So Bigorre (France) is dedicated to “Notre Dame de Lourdes” who, besides her international appeal, sees her Virgin considered as the guardian of this region of the South West of France. Many localities also have their own saint. For instance, a stained glass window in the cathedral of Quimper (France) bears the effigies of all Virgins venerated in divers cities and villages of Brittany. Each has its own image and specific attributes, each has its own public.

Several examples we discussed show that beyond the religious signification, the identity dimension connected with certain places of pilgrimage is accompanied by a political significance, notably through affirming a perceived national reality, rightly or wrongly conceived as threatened. It is the case with the tribute given to Joan of Arc and also with the cult to the Virgin of Czestochowa. And we will see later that the pilgrimage to St James of Compostela was originally associated with the “reconquista” of Europe which was threatened by the Moors and with the defence of European Christendom. These places are considered by a given group as being for them “totemic” places, in Durkheim’s sense. They are “concrete and material things” generally belonging to the vegetable or animal kingdom (here places) which, as was stated, are very often found first of all in natural areas and marked by a particular topography, “things” with what is believed “to sustain very particular connections” [9] and which serve as reference and emblem. It is in this sense that one has to interpret for example the wearing of an image of the Virgin of Czestochowa by members of Solidarnosc at the time of the Polish struggle for its independence in the 1980s.

3.5. *A logic of a request*

If these different motives of a pilgrimage persist in diverse ways, there is one that does not lose its importance, indeed far from it. Persons going on pilgrimage to ask for a “grace”, a blessing, a protection are always very numerous. Our case study of the Holy Blood Basilica (Bruges, Belgium) will give a precise illustration. But many other studies gave evidence of the pre-eminence of requests according to the reasons motivating pilgrimages. This is the case for example of the pilgrimages to Banneux (Belgium), which we will discuss in the section on case studies, or to Beauraing (Belgium), two Marian pilgrimage places. An analysis of the motives of more than a thousand pilgrims going to Beauraing shows that if 4 percent of them go for praise and adoration, 91 percent go there to ask the Holy Virgin something concerning their daily life and that of their family or friends [10]. One may not be amazed at this when one knows that Europeans generally give greatest importance to the family and then to their friends [11].

It is furthermore interesting to notice, as we have already done, that numerous places of pilgrimage are dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Certainly, there are also some dedicated to one or another Saint, generally “specialised”, to whom one prays for a particular sickness or situation. Some

of these places, but only a few, put Christ at the centre of the devotion (in Bruges, we return to that). However, it is indisputably places of Marian pilgrimages which are the most numerous and the best known. The Turners explain this by advancing that Mary is the personification of the Church in its non legislative aspects [7]. She represents tenderness and compassion and shows herself vulnerable towards suffering, as divers moments reported in the Scriptures attest to. Moreover, Mary, like the Saints and like Jesus in his humanity, do not belong solely to the “divine” and may thus appear as closer and consequently more able to understand the problems of humans. There is between them and the pilgrims a kind of complicity which makes them the privileged intermediaries and therefore more solicited.

If pilgrimages may thus take on different significations, frequently several of them intermix. This is notably the case with motivations linked to requests, on the one hand, and prayers on the other hand. The latter is rather unusual and rarely exclusive.

4. Three examples: Bruges, Banneux and St James of Compostela

It is of interest to illustrate the theories with concrete examples which are wholly topical. Three types of pilgrimages will be discussed. The one of the Basilica of the Holy Blood in Bruges (Belgium), which is one of the rare examples of a devotion to Christ and where the impact of worldwide tourism is clearly perceptible. The Marian sanctuary of Banneux (Belgium) which offers a clear example of a mainly regional attraction and of an internal circuit. And St James of Compostela (Spain) having in recent years a growing success and whose importance rests above all on the international and very old routes which lead to the city and which also had at its origin a political and military significance.

4.1. *The relic of the Holy Blood of Jesus Christ*¹

The Basilica of the Holy Blood is part of the historical and cultural patrimony of the city of Bruges (Belgium) and is one of its frequently visited sights², however, it is also part of its religious patrimony. One can visit the basilica daily and late in the morning and early in the afternoon one may revere the relic of the Holy Blood of Jesus Christ on the throne. On a table next to the throne pilgrims and tourists are invited to register their intentions and considerations. The archives of the basilica contain the registers of the written intentions from the last months of 2003 until the end of 2015. These we could study: about 5 registers per year. Each register has about 1100 to 1500 messages, half of them were written by tourists who limit themselves to a signature, a date and sometimes the name of their country; the other tourists wrote a short message: a supplication, an expression of gratitude or an evaluation. Comparing these intention-registers over time, we could notice that since 2003 a growing proportion is non-native speaker, which indicates that the visitors are mostly tourists. E.g. in the summer months of 2015, nearly all registered messages were from tourists. They visit the city of Bruges individually, with the family or in a group and come overwhelmingly from Western Europe, Latin and North America. The pilgrims are a minority, coming especially from Belgium and its neighbouring countries.

¹ A more extensive study will appear in: K. Dobbelaere and L. Voyé (2019) Analysis of the written “intentions” of the visitors of the Basilica of the Holy Blood. In G. d’Ydewalle (ed.), *Bruges and the Holy Blood Procession*. Bruges: The Noble Brotherhood of the Holy Blood.

² The touristic guide of the city of Bruges includes it in the first of the proposed three walking visits of the city called “World Heritage”.

The fact that the majority of visitors are henceforth tourists, who, as “passers-by”, visit the basilica among other sights in town, defines in a large part the content of the registered intentions. Indeed, many are general demands, expressing no special or precise reason. Most of these tourists come there without preconceived intentions, but invited by the silent sphere of the basilica, they use these moments to think about their daily life and troubles. Most of the visitors, being tourists or “locals” who might come more or less regularly, think first of all about their family, their relatives (without forgetting the deceased members of the family) and friends — “Lord, keep our family and friends healthy”, and they pray for harmony in the family — “I pray for reconciliation after a misunderstanding”, for health — “A prayer for a gravely ill grandson”, for recovery — “give my loved one a new matching heart”, also, but more sporadic, they ask to help the suffering sick that they may endure their affliction. Here as in other sites of devotions or pilgrimages, the family and its physical and moral wellbeing appears as being the major concern of our contemporaries. Less often we read prayers concerning their studies — “Lord, may I be successful in my exams” or jobs — “to improve my work situation”. Least of all are prayers concerning moral or religious tensions in certain families — “Lord, grant me the conversion of my grandchildren, children and my husband”. Yet, the distress of a family or a pilgrim may be so great that the prayer becomes a cry of distress — “My God Jesus, I would like so much to love you but it is impossible. For twenty years I prayed each day to be able to love you. Pardon me please, I would rather not have lived at all”.

It is also interesting to note that, far from being dominant, certain intentions refer very clearly to typical characteristics of our actual society. In most of the cases they are mentioned in reference to family members or friends. Among others, divorces that, being not new, happen more often than in the past and are quite often seen as normal — “Dear Lord Jesus, help us in these days of sorrow for the divorce and lead us towards the best solution”. In the prayer-intentions we also found references to pestering at school and in the job — “Lord, do not allow my children to be nagged in school and in the job”. Prayers concerning unemployment and the difficulties to find a job are also registered — “My husband is unemployed, may he quickly find a good job”. And people pray for help in cases of alcoholism — “Help me Lord to become sober”, and of obesity — “make my children loose weight”. Even technical problems are put before Jesus — “We have a problem with our PC, help us to find a solution”.

Besides questions referring nearly always to members of the family, relatives and friends, some intentions evoke the secularization of society in general and the estrangement of Church and belief. And the latter is very often pointed out in reference to familial and personal situations, more specifically the decline of belief of the husband, the children and the grandchildren — “Lord bless our children and grandchildren; may they remain true to the Christian faith”.

If the written intentions concerning the family and their moral and physical problems overwhelmingly express a demand for help, we noted also words of gratitude for a healing — “for the complete recovery of a dear friend”, for the nice things happening in their lives — “thanks for sixty years of blessings”, and some add to that a prayer that it may continue this way in the future — “Dear Lord we are back again: thanks, thanks, thanks! Please help us further, we come back”, and some even extend their thanks for all the blessing given to their family and to all mankind — “Thanks for all favours given to all people in the world”. Indeed, words of thanks appear less often in the registers compared to demands for help, but this is related to the great number of tourists who mostly come only once in their lifetime to Bruges compared to pilgrims who come from nearby and especially to give thanks for a given favour: a recovery, a successful surgical intervention or “Thank you Lord that my husband has survived this terrible accident”. If there are

expressions of gratitude given by tourists, they are mostly very general like: “thanks for all the good things happening in my life” or “Lord, thanks for all that has been given to me and which I have yet to receive”.

The international character of the visitors is also clearly expressed in demands for peace. Indeed, even if most prayers appeal for peace in general — “Give us peace in this world”, it is more in reference to countries where there is actually war that such prayers are said, in recent years especially for Ukraine and Syria — “Bless those in Syria who have lost their homes, friends and family. Please help them on their travels and make sure that they make the right decision”. In 2015, in all languages there were prayers for the refugees, and also for those dying in murder attempts — “Please watch over the victims and families and all those affected by the terrible events in Paris”.

Finally, the “Church” and those in charge are sometimes the object of prayers asking the Lord to support them. But there are also prayers said so that the legal authorities would not go against the ethical principles of the Church — “In order that Europe returns to its Judeo-Christian origin and offers a future of hope for our youth and the world”.

There are also aesthetical evaluations in the registers which are always full of praise for the Basilica and the city of Bruges. Exceptionally, there are a few critical reflections from tourists — “To what extent is it the blood of Christ” and “We respect your faith but there are no traces of saved blood-stained clothes of Jesus”. And there are a few reproaches concerning prayers that were not granted — “You did not save our son from death why would you save me”.

All this points out how strongly the prayers in the first place express requests for help, for support and for personal encouragement. The prayers seem to be a last resort against the precariousness of life in general and family life in particular and what is experienced as not absolutely controllable neither by men, nor by science. In fact the prayers express very exceptionally a request for a miraculous intervention, this reveals itself especially in cases of a desperate illness. One expects rather that prayer will bring comfort and reassurance in order to be able to proceed.

4.2. Banneux: “*The Virgin of the Poor*”

Banneux is a little Belgian village situated in a rural area about thirty kilometers south of the city of Liège. In 1933, a young inhabitant, Mariette Becco, said that she had seen the Virgin Mary on eight occasions who had told her that she was “the Virgin of the Poor”. The Virgin also asked her to make them build a chapel at the place of the apparitions and to invite people to go to the miraculous spring that she has caused to gush up. The Virgin had also repeated many times “Pray a lot”. After the usual investigations, the Church has recognized the veracity of the facts and Banneux has become a much frequented place of pilgrimage, mainly for Belgians, Germans and Dutch. Indeed, the village is situated in the East of Belgium, not very far from the German and Dutch borders. After the second world war, this localization caused it to become, for these three nationalities, a place of encounter with a mission of reconciliation between the former enemies. These three nationalities are not the only ones to come to Banneux. Once a year, there come also, specific groups among them the Tsiganes, the Syriaques (Christians from the Middle East) and the Vietnamese of the European Diaspora who made it their emblematic place. In this paper, as an illustration of what happens regularly at pilgrimage sites, we will study the internal organization of the place.

Since the original road, no longer accessible for cars, being henceforth an integrated part of the site, a new road was constructed to facilitate the coming of the pilgrims, who are particularly numerous in certain periods of the year, in particular from May till October. It is along this new road,

well equipped with great parking lots, that one finds many hotels and restaurants, as well as stores with “souvenirs”. As in Lourdes (France), these sell the visitors statues of the Virgin and divers other saints, in different sizes, medals, rosaries, pious images, candles ... as well as bottles from half a litre to five litres, to be filled with water of the sacred spring to take home.

Along the road running across the site, in front of the house of Mariette Becco, are situated many chapels but in particular the one, very small, named “of the apparitions”, built in response to the demand of the Virgin. A painting, representing the recipient on her knees in front of the Virgin, covers the wall at the back. On either side of this picture, hang crutches, sticks, prosthesis, shoes...and pictures, testifying to an obtained healing. On the floor, a marble stone indicates the precise place where the apparitions took place. Many pilgrims kneel down on this spot. The interior walls of the chapel, like numerous exterior walls of other buildings are covered with thousands of “exvotos”. These votive offerings are small white ornamental tiles, with inscriptions in blue. For the most part, these are “thanks for an obtained grace”: a recovery, the return of familial peace, a success at school, obtaining a job or even “the arrival of a child desired for a long time”. These inscriptions are written in numerous languages but most of all in French, Dutch and English. They carry sometimes a name or simply the initials and the date of the visit. This attests clearly that leaving an “exvoto” still continues. The fact that Banneux, unlike for example the Basilica of the Holly Blood in Bruges, is essentially a regional pilgrim place explains without doubt the frequency of these marks of thanks. The pilgrims, living for the most part not far from the site, go there regularly. In front of the chapel is an enclosure equipped with numerous chairs and closed on one side by racks destined to receive candles. The spring is located not far from the chapel and dominated by a statue of the Virgin. It is equipped with numerous taps which allow the pilgrims to perform their ablutions and also to fill their bottles with this reputed miraculous water. And the pilgrims are numerous, of all ages and social milieus, coming to get their supplies of this water. Once we met there a pair of young motorcyclists who splashed their motorcycle with this water in order, they said, to be protected from accidents.

Behind the spring, a large domain stretches out disappearing into a pine forest. First of all, there is a large esplanade where, if weather permits, religious services are celebrated in the open air. To the left, a long building accommodating two chapels as well as confessionals. To the right of the esplanade is the “Hospitality” guesthouse. Groups of sick or handicapped persons, accompanied by nursing personnel and volunteers, stay there several days in order to take part in the “path of prayers” and the daily processions and to receive the benediction for the sick. Behind the esplanade, is a big church, called the “Church of the Virgin of the Poor”. This church was built on the occasion of the visit of Pope John-Paul II in 1985 and has seating for up to 3000 pilgrims.

Behind all this are several paths in the pine forest which lead towards many little chapels, statues of saints and memorials. Many of these were erected on the initiative of groups of pilgrims. Among about fifteen chapels one encounters along these paths, many were dedicated to the events which marked the life of Mary or to the power which is attributed to her, such as those of the Message, the Annunciation, the Seven Sorrows, the Mother of God, the Lady of Mercy or Mary Mediatrix. Another is consecrated to a Vietnamese Virgin Mary and yet another to an Irish one. Other chapels are dedicated to Saints: Ann, Francis, Michael, Ignatius and Damien. The latter is a Belgian saint who cared for lepers in Hawaii. His statue stands in the United States Capitol. As far as statues are concerned, the following stand between the chapels: Bernadette Soubirous (Lourdes, France), Thérèse of Lisieux, Alphonsus de’Liguori and Padre Pio. The latter is a recent Saint of South East Italy who in the region of Puglia attracts more than two million pilgrims a year. The paths in the pine forest are also punctuated by some memorials, among them

one erected as a homage to the bishop who led the inquest for the recognition of the authenticity of the apparitions, the Memorial “Brotherhood Liège-China” and the Armenian Cross. Then comes the Stations of the Cross with its fourteen stations set along a path winding in the undergrowth.

In the proximity of the site strictly speaking, were built numerous “welcome homes”. They receive pilgrims, persons convalescing or needing to rest, or persons wanting to take a “retreat”, i.e. to withdraw themselves for some days from daily life in order to meditate, to reflect upon their life without having other preoccupations. One meets there many young people. They come there either in an organized group, for example, to prepare their profession of faith (on the initiative of the parish), or to mark an important turning point in their studies, like at the end of their secondary education (on the initiative of the school). However they come also on their own initiative, often in a small group of friends, for example to prepare for their examinations (the motivation being first of all to find a silent environment, away from external “temptations”) or, more “religiously”, to reflect upon their life and their future. In recent times, these practices are multiplied in numerous sites like Banneux, or also in abbeys and monasteries.

This description of a place of pilgrimage like Banneux shows the complexity of such sites. A spatial as well as a motivational complexity, in fact these two concur. Indeed, the route allows the pilgrims, besides their first objective — the veneration of the Virgin Mary and one or other request addressed to her — to increase those to whom they address their prayers and petitions according to their sensibilities, their history (pilgrims of Italian origin go especially to salute Padre Pio, for example) or even their specific problem, each Saint having his or her speciality. The large choice of chapels, statues and memorials the site is offering allows them to stroll from one to another and to stop where they choose. Besides, this way permits them to see the international dimension of their religion through the references made to very diverse countries, including some far away like China and Vietnam.

4.3. *St James of Compostela*

St James of Compostela is a city in the province of Galicia situated at the extreme North Western point of Spain. The pilgrimage has existed since the 9th century and started with the belief in the evangelisation of the country by St James after his tomb with relics was discovered here. Now one no longer makes reference to the ‘relics’ of James, e.g. the recent popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI said that the Cathedral of Compostela is linked to the memory of Saint James without using the word ‘relics’ [12]. This pilgrimage increased in scale in the 11th and 12th century when Spain was threatened to be absorbed by Islam. St James is furthermore called “the Matamore”, the one who kills the Moors, since he was considered to be at the head of the Christian troops against them. To protect Spain from this menace, the goal was to link the country to Christian Western Europe by roads crossing this part of the continent ending at the place called “finistère”, meaning situated “at the end of earth” bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. These roads followed itineraries punctuated by religious centres considered important since they possessed remarkable relics. The presence of such centres brought along hospitals, hospices and hotels, frequented not only by pilgrims but also by the military and merchants. Moreover the roads were responsible for important works of development, among others the creation of numerous bridges. The roads and bridges were built by monks who resided in existing abbeys but mostly in abbeys and monasteries created by the local sovereigns in order to organise a network of control over their territory [13]. They thus became the main roads taken by people, ideas, wealth and forms of art.

In the Middle Ages, pilgrimage to the supposed tomb of the apostle James in Santiago de Compostela was the third largest of Christianity after those to Jerusalem and Rome. Pilgrims came from across Western Europe all joining the French roads [14]. Several traditional roads are still marked with the Shell of St. James. In France they had the choice between four major roads, which join together at Puente la Reina on Spanish soil. Apart from a multitude of other churches, each one of the four major roads has a big sanctuary with relics (Sainte Foy in Conques, Saint Sernin in Toulouse, Saint Martin in Tours and Saint Martial in Limoges) reproducing all the essential architectural features of the Cathedral of St James. It is the triumph of Roman art arrived at its maturity.

In all these churches, one is first of all struck by the scale of the transept, destined to welcome the mass of pilgrims and the deployment of the liturgical ceremonies. The transept is framed by ambulatories with chapels of secondary sanctuaries, receptacles of relics. They prompt the pilgrims “to walk along”. An important feature, also common to all these churches, is the big entry portal whose sculptures are distributed according to a comprehensive iconographic program with its monumental tympanum. This is decorated with sculptures interpreting sacred history and dogmas which, until then, had habitually been painted inside the sanctuaries. These architectural similarities shared by churches so distant from one another are due to the men who conceived, financed, directed and executed these constructions. These were the bishops, the abbots or priors who, in agreement with their chapter, delegated their authority to the administrators. These then engaged an architect. This occupation was very rare at this era and the architect could therefore come from far away. He went also from one building site to another, of which one has testimonies. He then set up his team of stone-cutters, masons and sculptors, who were a mobile labor force most of the time. These working conditions unquestionably favored the diffusion of the techniques and the modes of construction as well as the architectural models along the road to St James [15]. In this way, besides its other dimensions, the pilgrimage to St James has played an important role in the elaboration and the diffusion of architectural and artistic forms which, apart from literature and music, marked profoundly the history of European art.

After its disappearance in the 19th century, the pilgrimage had a revival from 1982 [16]. There were 10.000 pilgrims in 1992, 50.000 in 2000 and as many as 200.000 in 2013. This revival in numbers may be partly explained by the fact that today many persons consider that they are free and autonomous and do not have to follow rules given by others (family, church...), but, that they themselves have to build their own way of thinking and living. Thus, the pilgrimage appears as a concretization of their internal development. The growing stress on the personal responsibility for one’s health care and the need to move physically by walking and jogging may also play a role in this increase. The “Oficina de Acogida al Peregrinos” counted a total number of 262.515 registered hikers-pilgrims in 2015. To be registered they had to travel at least 100 km by foot or 200 km on bike or horse. According to this source, the reasons the registered persons give to explain their travel were religious (38%), spiritual (54%) and others (8%); 55 % were men and 45% females; the mode of doing it was 90% walking, 9.5% cycling and 0.5% on horse; and the hikers-pilgrims came from 180 different countries, of whom 47% were from Spain, 30% from the neighboring countries and 7 % from Canada and the USA [17].

The study by Oviedo et al. interestingly offers a more in depth analysis of the motivations of the hikers-pilgrims [16]. Their study is based on 470 questionnaires collected in 2009–2010 at refuges and hotels along the *Camino Frances* in Spain of which 66% declared themselves to be Christian and 23% to be atheists. On the basis of the registered traditional religious indicators, the authors concluded that the *Camino* “does not draw a specific type of person from the general

population — the most religious, for example — but rather a representative subset of the general population; no more, and no less, religious than the average” [16].

The authors have extracted six factors from a list of 48 possible motivations: *religious growth* (i.e. be closer to God, grow in faith,...), *spiritual growth* (i.e. find myself, expand my consciousness,...), *sensation seeking* (i.e. see interesting sites, search for adventure,...), *seeking life direction* (i.e. coming to terms with a decision, seek guidance for the future,...); *community* (doing something on behalf of someone, being with my community...); and *religious devotion* (fulfilling a religious duty or a promise, repentance). “Religious growth” and religious practice are positively correlated with age “showing that the older pilgrims tend to be more traditionally religious ... (and) less interested in seeking new experiences and looking for life direction”. The low score of “Religious devotion” based on traditional pilgrimage motivations “indicates that what moves modern pilgrims to the *Camino* is quite different from their pre-modern ancestors”, which differentiates them also clearly from the actual traditional pilgrims we found in Banneux.. “Life direction” is highly correlated with “spiritual growth” and less with “religious growth” which indicates that the actual ‘pilgrim’ is more interested in secular than in religious spirituality. Finally, we want to point out that “sensation seeking”, which has the second highest overall score, is negatively correlated with age and “religious growth”, reflecting, in the terms of the authors, “a clearly secularized pattern” [16]. All in all, this study clearly indicates that the recent revival of the pilgrimage to *Compostela* is not an indication of a “religious revival”, and attests the complexity of the motivations of the hikers-pilgrims.

However, it appears that motivations may vary along the *Camino* as became evident from speaking with persons who recently went to Compostela. They told us about the changes they felt in their motivations along the road. For instance, while at the start they considered it a sports event or a sanitary matter, they began to think about life and death, about nature and creation, sometimes also about transcendence, be it God or something else. A recent book by Christophe Rufin is an important testimony of this.

Rufin, a medical doctor holding also a degree from the “Institute d’études politiques de Paris”, had world wide engagement in humanitarian actions. He published essays on international issues and a first novel in 1997. Since 2008, he has been an elected member of the Académie Française. In 2013, he published a book on his journey to St James of Compostela. Originally, he had simply decided that he wanted to make a long solitary march. He “considered it a sportive challenge, a means to loose some kilos, a way to prepare for the season of the mountains, an intellectual purge before starting writing a new book, a return to a necessary humility after a period marked by official functions and received honours...” At first he had not precisely considered taking the road to Compostela, it was one of numerous options, which were bit by bit restricted to two: the “Haute Route pyrénéenne” and the road to Compostela by the north. External circumstances, the road of the high Pyrenees being impracticable so early in the season, made him finally opt for the Northern Road to Compostela, eight hundred kilometres long [18]. It is clear that he wanted to hike and did not intend to make a spiritual or religious journey.

According to him, “the road is at first excluding the soul, the submission to the body, to its miseries, to the satisfaction of the thousand needs” are the priorities until a physical transformation takes place and then a spiritual metamorphosis occurs: the introspection. A period in which delicate subjects present themselves: “postponed decisions, projects to which one has not devoted enough time, metaphysical questions to which one has never had the courage to respond”. But even if one forces oneself to take them up and come to a conclusion, events on the road may suddenly catch one’s attention and make one forget the arguments and the conclusion one had reached, or even that

one lacks the courage to recall them. And he continues his arguments by stating “It is at this moment, at the meaninglessness of the suffering, that it becomes most tempting to look for comfort in the religious dimension of the pilgrimage”. In such a context, the importance of the environment for the stimulation of the religious dimension is very important, in particular, the religious references punctuating the road: abbeys, chapels, cathedrals, Stations of the Cross and hermitages. And during this pilgrim-phase of the road, one visits *ermita* taking part in the evening services in the chapels and churches. However, this phase may cease due to circumstances like being discouraged under the impact of priests skipping through the religious services or hearing a rather “politically” tinted sermon [18].

This testimony indicates clearly that it is important not only to take into account the declarations given by pilgrims at a particular moment of their “pilgrimage” but also to consider the transformations they experience along the *Camino*. They may be temporary and short-lived but they nevertheless reveal that a process like a pilgrimage may become a kind of “mental” therapy as was the confession in the past. The complexity of the motivations with their possible transformations shows also the impact of secularization. Indeed, religious practices may be used as “resources” for profane aims and the Church is no more able to define the sense given to practices which before it defined and controlled.

5. Epilogue

If in many Western European countries, Catholicism and the official practices linked to it experience a steep decline [19,20], the practices of popular religion are quite stable and some even developing. This is particularly the case with pilgrimages. As we demonstrated, this practice, which is in a narrow relationship with space, has divers significations. Quantitatively, the most important is the demand for protection and health for oneself, close family and friends. This practice is intensified by the actual possibilities of mobility and, especially in certain cases, by the development of international tourism. But it is also favoured by a certain weakening of confidence in science, namely medical science, and by the multiplications of the uncertainties and the insecurities which characterise all domains of life today. Family rupture, the future of the children, frightening diseases like cancer, precariousness of work and unemployment, risks of accidents on the roads and henceforth also risks of murder attempts are many threats which weigh on the daily life of our contemporaries. Besides, if these menaces or others even more serious were not absent in the past, they have henceforth an increased effect through the accounts given by the media. On the other hand, the fact that henceforth humans want to be free and autonomous and refuse to be shaped by their parents, the school and the church, forces them to develop themselves and to find personally their own way. Certain pilgrimages will not only symbolize this quest but will sometimes also be an efficient instrument to discover oneself. This way different actual life conditions turn out to be favorable to the development of pilgrimages even in a time when, in Western Europe, the references and obedience to the ecclesiastical institution weaken.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest in this article.

References

1. Boyer M. (1996) *L'invention du Tourisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

2. Urry J. (1990) *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage Publications.
3. Bougine, B. (2011) La Promesse d'être Soi. *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 42: 3-34.
4. Voyé, L. (2002) Popular Religion and Pilgrimages in Europe. In Swatos, W. H. and Tomasi, L. (Eds) *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism*. Westport. Praeger Publishers, pp. 115-35.
5. Jousse, M. (1974) *Anthropologie du Geste*. Paris: Gallimard.
6. Leroi-Gourhan, A. (1965) *Le Geste et la Parole*. Paris: Albin-Michel.
7. Turner, V. and Turner, E. (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
8. Robertson, R. (1992) *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.
9. Durkheim, E. (1960) *Les formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*. Paris: PUF.
10. Van Wijnsberghe, B. (1991) *Approche Psychologique de la Religiosité Populaire. Expressions de la Prière dans un Lieu de Pèlerinage*. Louvain-la Neuve: Mémoire de fin d'études en psychologie.
11. Voyé, L., Dobbelaere, K., Abts, K. and Kerkhofs, J. (2012) Introduction. In Voyé, L., Dobbelaere, K. and Abts, K. (eds) *Autres Temps, Autres Mœurs. Travail, famille, éthique et politique: La vision des Belges*. Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, pp. 9-21.
12. Retrieved February 10, 2016. Available from https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pèlerinage_de_Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle.
13. Stopani R. (2004) *Abbayes, Monastères et Routes de Pèlerinage*. In Poupard, P. and Ardura, B. (eds) *Abbayes et Monastères aux Racines de l'Europe*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, pp. 57-70.
14. Oursel, R (1989) *Les Chemins de Compostelle*. Würzburg: Zodiaque.
15. Durliat, M, (1985) *Les chemins de Saint Jacques et l'art: l'architecture et la sculpture*. In *Santiago de Compostela: 1000 ans de pèlerinage européen*. Bruxelles: Publication du Crédit Communal de Belgique à l'occasion de l'exposition "Europalia 1985 Espana", pp. 155-64.
16. Oviedo, L., de Coucier, S. and Farias, M. (2014). Rise of Pilgrims on the *Camino* to Santiago: Sign of Change or Religious Revival? *Rev Relig Res* 56(3): 433-42.
17. Retrieved February 11, 2016. Available from https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pèlerinage_de_Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle.
18. Rufin, J. C. (2013) *Immortelle Randonnée. Compostelle malgré moi*. Paris: Gallimard.
19. Halman, L., Siebben, I. and van Zundert, M. (2012) *Atlas of European Values. Trends and Traditions at the Turn of the Century*. Leiden: Brill.
20. Brechon, P. and Gonthier, F. (2013) *Atlas des Européens. Valeurs Communes et Différences Nationales*. Paris: Armand Colin.



AIMS Press

© 2016 Voyé Liliane et al., licensee AIMS Press. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)