

An introduction to pilgrimage, animism, and agency: putting humans in their place

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Abstract

In this collection of three articles that draw on ethnographic research and a more theoretical afterword, we seek to stimulate debate and substantive analysis by looking beyond the dominant approaches towards religion, state, and society through a focus on pilgrimage from a relational perspective. Rather than draw on explanations that concentrate on human actions, meanings, and interpretations, such as those informed by representational, interpretive, and hermeneutic approaches to human thought and practice, we explore the relationship between humans and those who could be defined as ‘other-than-humans’ or ‘non-humans’, such as animals, plants, and things, and who are seen as possessing their own being and immanent agency where they affect humans rather than just being the object of our affections or control. We begin by introducing the dominant approaches towards religion and pilgrimage and then outline the ways in which alternative avenues have been explored through a relational approach towards the links between people, places, and materialities. The four contributions are then introduced and the key points drawn out before discussing how this collection can encourage the exploration of avenues beyond the dominant approach, not only in pilgrimage research but also in the study of religion, state, and society more generally.

Keywords

Pilgrimage; religion; relational perspective; immanent agency; other-than-humans, animism,

At first sight this collection may appear strange to readers of a journal that focuses on religion, state, and society. We hope, however, that the contributions here will stimulate debate and substantive research by looking beyond the dominant approaches towards religion, state, and society through a focus on pilgrimage from a relational perspective.

We do not suggest that we leave behind the important issues raised by this journal's usual approaches and perspectives, especially with regard to political and religious institutions. Our collection here is designed to complement rather than supplant these dominant approaches by introducing alternative theoretical developments and ethnographic studies of pilgrimage that draw on those developments. We especially wish to go beyond explanations that focus solely on human actions, meanings, and interpretations, such as those informed by representational, interpretive, and hermeneutic approaches to human thought and practice. These approaches concentrate on how people create and reflect on meanings and symbols, how they interact with one another within social structures and contest ideas and beliefs in developing political and economic structures, especially global capitalism. The alternatives to these approaches are associated with the 'ontological turn', which does not restrict existence and immanence to human beings or confine the category of 'people' to humans. In other words, those who could be defined as 'other-than-humans' or 'non-humans,' such as animals, plants, and things, are viewed as possessing their own being and immanent agency where they affect humans rather than just being the object of our affections or control. Differences are understood, therefore, not in terms of different world views but as differences in worlds and all these worlds are of equal validity.

Dominant approaches towards religion and pilgrimage

From the 1960s onwards the movement away from structural-functionalism and structuralism towards post-structural models of society encouraged the widespread adoption of

representational and interpretive analyses of religious beliefs and practices in anthropology. The influential study of religion by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, encouraged us to see religion as a set of symbols which establish pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations through conceptions of a general order of existence (see Geertz 1973). These conceptions are given an aura of factuality so that people's moods and motivations appear to be uniquely realistic. Symbols are bearers of universal meanings, therefore; they are the concrete embodiment of ideas and attitudes that shape human reality. In this dominant perspective, religions play a key role in how people interpret the world, therefore, and represent it to others.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's analyses of knowledge, power, and resistance, Asad critiques Geertz's universalist approach towards religion. He contends that 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 1983, 238). Asad (1983, 238) claims that an examination of how Christianity in early modern Europe was constructed helps to:

problematize the idea of an anthropological definition of religion by assigning that endeavor to a particular history of knowledge and power (including a particular understanding of our legitimate past and future) out of which the modern world has been constructed.

This deconstruction of religious and other claims to universal truth was accompanied by the development of various 'turns' that focused on how gender, mobility, identity, ethnicity, visuality, materiality, and space, for instance, were constructed across time and around the world (see Lefebvre 1974; Butler 1990; de Certeau 1984; Soja 1989; Castells 1996; Bauman 2000; and Urry 2007).

These academic developments have informed the study of pilgrimage and encouraged its rapid expansion over the last thirty years where research has moved beyond a narrow focus on religious beliefs and practices and Western Christianity (see, for example, Reader and Walter 1993; Slavin 2003; Reader 2007; Albera and Eade 2017; Coleman and Eade 2018). During the 1970s and 1980s pilgrimage was mainly studied by historians and those working at Anglophone universities focused on Christian pilgrimage in medieval Europe (see Sumption 1977; Finucane 1984; Davies 1988). However, during that time contemporary pilgrimage began to attract the attention of social scientists, especially anthropologists (Turner and Turner 1978; Morinis 1984; Sallnow 1987; Nolan and Nolan 1989). Drawing on anthropological research of ritual in Central Africa, Victor Turner saw religion as the key to culture and sought to interpret religion in terms of believers' own meanings and understandings (see Turner 1970). In other words, to understand religion in general we need to understand people's beliefs about the cosmos, i.e. how humans interpret the world and the universe, more widely, as well as how these beliefs differ from modern science.

Victor and Edith Turner drew on this approach towards ritual and religion in their collaborative study of pilgrimage – *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978). For them pilgrimage in Christianity and other world religions provided people with a liminal experience of freedom from everyday structural constraints. This anti-structural phase of travel to and from a sacred place, as well as ritual performance at the destination, was distinguished by 'communitas' where pilgrims celebrated their universal solidarity as human beings. This model has proved immensely popular not only among anthropologists studying pilgrimage but with those working in other disciplines, such as history, religious studies, geography, and tourism studies, and has encouraged the rapid development of pilgrimage research over the last thirty years.

The development of pilgrimage studies was also encouraged by the emergence of an alternative model proffered by John Eade and Michael Sallnow in their edited volume, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (1991). As the book's title indicates, pilgrimage was seen as a 'realm of competing discourses' (Eade and Sallnow 1991, 5), and analysis directed towards exploring 'how the practice of pilgrimage and the sacred powers of a shrine are constructed as varied and possible conflicting representations by the different sectors of the cultic constituency, and indeed by those outside it as well' (1991, 5).

Looking beyond interpretive and representational approaches

Although the 'communitas' and 'contestation' models have played a key role in stimulating research on contemporary pilgrimage, they both relied on interpretive and representational approaches and a human-centred view. Since the late 1980s, however, anthropologists and geographers, in particular, have sought to move beyond these approaches through a relational approach towards the links between people, places, and materialities. While the focus of interpretive and representational approaches was on humans and human agency, the relational perspective saw agency as the property of more than just people – animals, streams, plants, rocks, and earth, for instance, are seen as agents too.

The British anthropologist Tim Ingold has explored in various studies the relationship between humans and others and 'the material conditions of social life' (Ingold 1987, 1). He has developed a critique of anthropomorphic projections of human attributes onto others, proposing instead an animism that acknowledges the 'dynamic transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence' (Ingold 2011, 68). In one of the first relational interpretations of pilgrimage – *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* (2013) – Lynn Ross-Bryant draws on Ingold's

approach to understand the ‘problematic relationship between subject and object, environment and culture’ (2013, 13) and quotes his 1995 article where he claims that ‘[h]uman beings like other organisms are enmeshed within webs of environmental relations’ (2013, 13). She also refers to the description by a geographer, Adrian Ivakhiv, of human and other-than-human relations as ‘a tangled web within which the world is ever being created – shaped and constituted through the imaginative discursive, spatial and material practices of humans reflectively immersed within an active and animate, more-than-human world’ ([2013], cited in Ross-Bryant 2013, 14).

Another geographer, Avril Maddrell, also drew on this relational approach towards the environment through her study of pilgrimage walks around the Isle of Man. She seeks to demonstrate that landscape and its landforms ‘are not mere blank canvasses passively imprinted with meanings, but complex textures “speaking back” to the beholder [...] It is through this two-way dialogue, between the land and the subject, between matter and meaning, that geographical imaginations are articulated’ (2015, 7). In her view the walks were ‘mobile practices’ that ‘help construct apparently sacredly charged places’ and enable us to appreciate the ‘power of place’ and the ‘role of landscape aesthetics in the “spiritual magnetism” of pilgrimage sites’ (Maddrell et al. 2015).

Tim Ingold’s approach towards animism can be linked to the increasing interest shown in ‘new animism’ and here we will focus particularly on the approach developed by Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. In his book *Nature and Society* (1996) Philippe Descola seeks to transcend the traditional dualism between nature and society and proposes a new approach to understanding the relationship between humans and non-humans. He advances a structural concept of ontology, understood as a classification system for the qualities of living beings and a systematic approach to the relationships that unite them. He identifies four modes of interaction between humans and the natural world around them:

animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. He sees animism as a system that ‘endows natural beings with human dispositions and social attributes’ (Descola 1996, 82–102), while totemic systems can be defined as ‘the differential relations between natural species that confer a conceptual order on society’ (Descola 1996, 87–88).

According to these definitions, animic systems ‘use the elementary categories structuring social life to organize, in conceptual terms, the relations between human beings and natural species’ (Descola 1996, 87–88). Descola further explains that while in ‘totemic systems non-humans are treated as signs, in animic systems they are treated as the term of a relation’ (Descola 1996, 87–88). Animism involves a ‘continuity of souls and discontinuity of bodies’, where ‘people endow plants, animals and other elements of their physical environment with a subjectivity and establish with these entities all sorts of personal relations, whether of friendship, exchange, seduction, or hostility’ (Descola 2013, 79). Through his concept of ‘naturalism’ Descola critiques what he sees as a western perspective where nature is distinguished from and opposed to culture and ‘what distinguishes humans from non-humans is the mind, the soul, subjectivity, a moral conscience, language and so forth’ (Descola 2013, 84).

In similar vein, Viveiros de Castro draws on his Amazonian research to propose the concept of ‘multinaturalism’. According to him, modern western ‘multiculturalist’ cosmologies are founded on a distinction between the unity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures. Nature is seen as united through the objective universality of body and substance, while culture is generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning. Amerindian conceptions, in contrast, assume a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity where nature is transformed rather than created and culture is not a matter of invention but of transference (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 58).

The contributions to this special section

As we mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, relational analyses do not reject interpretive and representational perspectives, but they seek to open up new avenues for understanding the world around us. Consequently, the contributors here encourage us to explore these avenues by thinking differently about nature and culture, tradition and modernity, space and place through their grounded analyses of animism, sensory experience, sacredness, material agency, animistic cultures, magic, pilgrimage, and pilgrims.

This collection has emerged from a workshop held at the University of Roehampton during September 2019. We wanted to look beyond dominant paradigms, disciplinary boundaries, and the European region and draw on the expertise of those who have contributed to the relational turn outside the field of pilgrimage studies. The collection reflects the general aim of the workshop since the papers engage with the relational turn in various ways by building on ethnographic research undertaken in Java, Guatemala, and England as well as a more general, provocative discussion from the perspective of religious studies.

In the first article Jörgen Hellman draws on his ethnographic research in West Java and research on animism in Southeast Asia more generally to explore people's sensory experience of pilgrimage to a sacred pool and other local sites, and the power of water. He focuses on the role played by Abah, 'a local pilgrim guide and teacher in morals and ethics', who draws on his relationship with a Hindu king from the past to criticise Indonesia's contemporary Muslim representatives, 'such as local religious teachers' and the nation's political leadership. Hellman joins Abah in a pilgrimage to the pool where the water renders 'borders between the living and the dead, humans and spirits, between past, present and future fluid and porous'. Hence, the agency of water is crucial to understanding how this

sensory experience established relations between people's knowledge and experience, including his own as an 'outsider' and 'researcher'.

An engagement with agency in the context of the relationship between humans and other-than-humans also informs Gabriele Shenar's analysis of the affective power of pilgrimage passport stamps and pictures, which have been introduced by those reviving pilgrimage routes across south-east England. Rather than analyse institutional religious beliefs and practices and associated socioeconomic and political structures and processes, she focuses on the 'complex assemblages of people, things, places, and immaterial thought' involved in three pilgrimage activities – walks, events, and entrepreneurship. For her the revival of pilgrimage routes challenges the ways in which the Weberian thesis of a modern, disenchanted, and increasingly secular world has been received and interpreted. This challenge is demonstrated by the enchantment generated through the relationship between human and non-human agency where material items, such as pilgrimage passports and stamps, influence the actions, thinking, and narratives of those using them.

In the third substantive contribution we move away from the European region to Mesoamerica where Jan Kapusta has undertaken intensive fieldwork among the Maya in the mountains of Guatemala. Like the other contributors, he rejects binary distinctions between culture and nature, object and subject, and body and spirit. In his view, the local New Year pilgrimage and sacrifice ritual expresses a relationship between pilgrims and the mountains where the latter are believed to possess their own body-like as well as soul-like characteristics and are involved as active agents in generating with humans a 'shared world.' Community is constructed through the pilgrimage journey but it is a community of humans and other-than-humans located 'within the-world-in-formation, rather than the-world-in-representation of some pre-existent cultural and political contents'.

Among the wide range of scholars Jan Kapusta refers to we encounter Tim Ingold once more. Jan Kapusta draws on his ‘dwelling perspective’ and approves Ingold’s contention that ‘religion is not about representation of the world, but an existential commitment to the world in which we find ourselves and on which we depend’ (Ingold (2016, 23). In rejecting the focus on meaning that informs the highly influential Turnerian perspective within pilgrimage studies, Jan Kapusta also utilises the approach adopted by Michael Jackson (2017). Jackson, according to Kapusta, sees religion as involved in ‘the quest for life that is common to all cultures (2017, 189)’ rather than any search for the meaning of life.

The final contribution consists of an afterword by Graham Harvey who has made a major contribution to the relational turn from the perspective of religious studies (see Harvey 2013, 2014, 2017). Reflecting on the three other papers he poses two key questions:

‘How might we envisage pilgrimage journeys and rituals within and among a larger-than-human-community?’ and

‘How might we recognise religion as an aspect of communion between humans and other species (including animals, plants, birds, made-things, and paths)?’

Graham Harvey approaches these two questions by utilising animism as an ‘experimental lens to see what might be noticed about the acts and interactions of all pilgrims in a relational world’. He develops this approach through a discussion of world-making within contemporary modernity and new animism, before suggesting provocatively that we have always been animists and then proceeding to explore how new animism might contribute to the study of pilgrimage. He focuses on the agency of what many humans consider to be inert material objects, such as pilgrim flasks, staffs, and boots or ‘natural’ phenomena such as sun and rain. While pilgrims may start their journeys as singular individuals, Harvey suggests that

they become 'dividuals' (see Stathern 1988) through communing with other-than-humans and engaging with 'new possible worlds'.

Discussion

Post-structural analyses have demonstrated in a wide range of contexts how people interpret, explain, and perform pilgrimage but the agency of other-than-human actors has seldom been acknowledged despite people's evident engagement with these actors. This oversight may be understandable in the context of pilgrimage to Christian shrines where religious officials seek to eliminate what they regard as 'magical' beliefs and 'superstitious' practices (see, for example, the discussion of bathing practices and regulations at the Roman Catholic shrine of Lourdes by John Eade [1991, 2020]). However, the heterodox beliefs and practices associated with 'alternative' pilgrimages, especially those associated with sites of sacred energy (see Bowman 2005; Rountree 2006; Fedele 2012; Niedzwiedz 2018), encourage us to look beyond institutional strictures concerning human beliefs about the immanent power of other-than-human actors.

As the contributions here demonstrate, the search for alternatives to representational and interpretive approaches has emphasised relationality, mobility, fluidity, porosity, sensual experience, the immanent agency of other-than-human actors, and new interpretations of animism. This search has also challenged the deeply rooted tendency to operate within binary distinctions, such as culture/nature, subject/object, collective/individual, sacred/secular. Of course, an important binary distinction has been retained, i.e. between humans and other-than-humans, but emphasis has been placed on their mutually constitutive relationship and the dominant tendency to restrict agency to humans has been rejected.

These alternatives to representational and interpretive approaches appear to say little about politics, the state, and human institutions more generally. Although a number of references have been made to Tim Ingold's approach in particular, as Justin Kenrick has pointed out, Ingold's approach fails to 'examine the political consequences of the ... [non-representational] perspective: the way in which this dualistic ideology has fitted perfectly with the genocide and exploitation of supposedly lesser peoples and other species that has been central to earlier and contemporary colonial processes' (Kenrick 2011, 17). Furthermore, as Manuel Vasquez has pointed out, 'hydraulic models of flows', for instance, 'tend to overstate the pervasiveness of porous boundaries and movement' (Vasquez 2008, 151). While migrating religions, for example, may demonstrate 'flexibility, mobility, connectivity, and innovation', we still need to pay careful attention to the ways in which they are 'often implicated in the hard realities of exclusion, exploitation, and subjugation' (Vasquez 2008, 179).

In the ethnographic contributions by Jörgen Hellman, Jan Kapusta, and Gabriele Shenar the political and religious institutions involved in these 'hard realities' are not ignored, even if the focus is elsewhere. Although Jörgen Hellman takes us far away from the centres of nation-state and religious power, the relationship between Islam and nation-state institutions still forms the background to his West Java case study. Furthermore, while Jan Kapusta wants to explore an alternative, non-representational approach towards Maya pilgrimage, he does not dismiss the significance of the political dimension of ritual and (post)colonial interethnic power relations and state institutions. Gabriele Shenar's discussion of pilgrimage stamps in England also reveals the influence of emergent institutional structures involved in the development of pilgrimage, even if these are not directly associated with nation-state institutions. In other words, these analyses explore other 'realities' about our

world that are largely ignored by representational and interpretive preoccupations with human structures and processes.

The study of pilgrimage has been mainly concerned with interactions between humans, and has asked what kind of symbols people use, how they explain, interpret, and represent their practices, how information is transmitted between people when praying, singing, or talking, how people create and negotiate order or contest meanings, and how they use religion in political or territorial ways. The turn away from these kinds of questions provides an opportunity to place the agency of other-than-humans, such as stones, water, magical objects, roads, and food, at the centre of our theorisation and ethnographic investigations rather than seeing them as just part of the pilgrimage setting. We believe that this collection can encourage those working on pilgrimage and pilgrims to explore avenues that the dominant approach within the expanding field of pilgrimage studies has largely ignored. More broadly, it offers an ethnographic grounding to the relational turn's radical shift in perspective concerning which questions and which relationships matter in the study of religion, pilgrimage, state, and society.

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