

Essay

The Struggle to Define Pilgrimage

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Abstract: This essay arises from research carried out between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2020 among pilgrims who had participated in the Camino de Santiago in north-western Spain and St Patrick’s Purgatory, on Lough Derg in the northwest of Ireland. Research focused on embodied experience in relation to pilgrim motivation, groundedness and the enduring power of sacred travel as ritual. Convergent considerations about psychology, theology and pilgrimage studies clarified perspective on descriptions and definitions of pilgrimage in contemporary literature. Long-standing questions about journey vs. destination are subsumed into a description of pilgrimage which emphasizes larger process. Interconnected elements of this process are a most significant part of the enduring appeal of contemporary Western pilgrimage.

Keywords: pilgrimage; St. Patrick’s Purgatory; Lough Derg; Camino de Santiago; Turner; spirituality; postmodernity; theological perspectives

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century surge of interest in pilgrimage has been noted by a number of recent articles reflecting on the contrasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the practice (for example, Bailey 2022). This surge included interest in ancient forms of pilgrimage established during the first millennium of Christendom and boasting a continuous lifeline. The research upon which this essay is based explored two such pilgrimages among 2018 and 2019 pilgrims to either a small, remote island on Lough Derg in County Donegal in the North West of Ireland or along the routes of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain. The desire of these pilgrims for a strongly physical pilgrimage was a particular focus and therefore the experience of embodiment and how that experience was interpreted formed the substance of the research questions. The research approach was interdisciplinary and included psychology, (in particular of the body), theology (in particular theological anthropology), and the intersection of these older forms of knowledge with the newer genre of pilgrimage studies. A phenomenological analysis which included both psychological and theological hermeneutics was the research method adopted.

Pilgrims and pilgrimage scholars who are familiar with both pilgrimages will recognise immediately that the nature of these two pilgrimages is vastly different in terms of duration, focus and spirituality, albeit with a shared root of devotion to one of the early Christian saints—St. Patrick for Lough Derg and St. James for the Camino. The pilgrimage to Lough Derg, still considered one of the hardest Christian pilgrimages,¹ is a three day-event with a potent combination of fasting, sleep deprivation and multiple repetitions of a long series of sequenced prayers and ritual gestures, whilst walking barefoot around and among ancient stone structures called ‘penitential beds’. The pilgrimage along the Camino routes requires long days of walking all the while oriented towards a future arrival at the shrine of St. James in the cathedral city of Santiago de Compostela. Engagement in other spiritual rituals on route is at the pilgrim’s discretion as is the duration, depending on whether or not the pilgrim chooses to complete an entire route in one pilgrimage (four



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to six weeks) or over a number of years proceeding along sections of the route in multi-annual visits. Despite these not insignificant differences, the common factor, that of the willingness to pursue an intensely physical experience through ancient pilgrimage patterns, was sufficiently curious to warrant further exploration. The research findings required not only review of the contested definitions and descriptions of pilgrimage found in recent and contemporary literature but clarity about what remains essential to the enduring appeal of sacred travel. This movement between review and clarity about the nature of pilgrimage is the substance of the following discussion, beginning with the permeations of the contemporary context and concluding by offering a new description and definition of this ancient form of sacred travel.

2. What Is Pilgrimage Now?

To ask, 'What is pilgrimage now?' is a recurringly critical question for pilgrimage scholars. It is one to which research authors have returned frequently, and indeed on occasion, in dedicated issues of research journals.² The contemporary context—the said 'now' of the question—is itself partly responsible for a much stretched range of answers for, as LeSueur observes, 'up until the middle of the last century, pilgrimage would have typically been understood in relation to religious practice' (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. 16). During the medieval period, for example, there was perhaps less room for nuance. The role of pilgrim was particularly visible, had an almost self-evidentiary purpose of piety and penitence and the pilgrim's personal and communal experiences, for all their colour, had remarkably similar themes, at least in how they have been preserved in literature, poetry, song and devotional texts from the period.³ By contrast, in the contemporary era, sometimes but not unanimously called 'post-modernity',⁴ no such clear pattern would seem to exist. Indeed, some suggest, as Greenia has, that today because 'everything is pilgrimage, nothing is pilgrimage' (Nickerson et al. 2018, p. 1). He contends, therefore, that a crucial first task when performing 'triage on definitional boundaries of pilgrimage', as he puts it, is to 'fess up to runaway metaphors'. With characteristic humour, he underscores his point with a memorable quip overheard from a journalist: 'it's hard to be a pilgrim in a latté world' (Ibid., p. 2). Haller makes a more acerbic assertion, in his exploration of whether pilgrimage can have any meaning in a scientific world, when he dismisses popular pilgrimage author Cousineau's recontextualising of pilgrimage (Cousineau 1998) for a post-modern readership as 'an understanding of pilgrimage' which 'opens the door to permit *almost any activity* being interpreted as pilgrimage' (Haller 2017, p. 27).

Novel descriptions leading to new definitions, followed by speedy critiques and contestations of such new definitions have become characteristic of much of the intellectual discourse of our post-modern era. In the wake of what some describe as the 'end of the grand narrative between different cultural and philosophical contexts' and any 'possibility of universal criteria to form a basis for all claims to truth' (Coakley 2013, p. 13), post-modernity has ensured that the 'taken for granted parameters around which pilgrimage was ensconced have come under scrutiny' (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. ix). It is possible to suggest perhaps, that postmodernity, with its deconstruction of any assumed uniformly applicable truths, has given birth to *Pilgrimage Studies* as an independent and distinct genre of study. Lest we imagine, however, that pilgrimage might therefore be now cleanly excised from its historical context and roots, Felski helpfully reminds us that any new context is 'a messy hopscotch and rich confusion, a spillage across period boundaries in which we are thoroughly implicated in the historical phenomena we describe', concluding aptly, 'pastness is part of who we are' (Felski 2011, pp. 579 and 578, respectively).

Literature which has become available through this relatively new genre of *Pilgrimage Studies* is largely of two broad categories. Personal accounts of doing pilgrimage or amalgamas of such stories is one such category. Historical accounts of this nature have been instrumental to pilgrimage historians endeavouring to assess the practice with fresh perspective. The distinct change in recent decades is the sheer volume of personal literature becoming published in both traditional and new ways. The *blog* medium, for example,

has become particularly popular among pilgrims of the Camino.⁵ A number of Confraternities of St. James⁶ also archive personal accounts.⁷ Spirituality and pilgrimage scholar, Bernadette Flanagan, in her study of pilgrimage (2019), has observed patterns in the subject matter and narrative style of such contemporary pilgrim accounts. In a virtual conference presentation of the same study in 2021,⁸ she offered a helpful thematic inventory of such literature from the mid-twentieth century to the present, converted here into tabulated form (see Table 1).

Table 1. An Inventory of themes in contemporary personal accounts of pilgrimage (After Flanagan 2019).

Timeframe	Patterns of Emphases and Themes
1960–1990	Pilgrimage as Religious tourism—distinctive visits to particular sites
1990–2000	Pilgrimage as ‘Spiritual Journey’—the inner world of the pilgrim their behavioural motivations in search of inspiration and awakening
2000–2010	Pilgrimage as Sacred Mobility—a way to gain deeper perspective on life; a distinct postmodern/Kafkaesque trend—the departure away from here; the emphasis more on what we are leaving behind than moving toward
2010–2020	Pilgrimage as a series of ‘experiential moments’—deep encounters with oneself (and includes a raft of autobiographies which are much less focused on rituals at a Sacred Centre and much more about how the experience is affecting one’s life and consciousness)

A second category of pilgrimage literature is that of pilgrimage scholarship based on primary and secondary research. Dyas believes that the ‘wide-openness of current pilgrimage research’ has been both helpful and unhelpful; helpful in the way that it has shaken assumptions and asked new questions and unhelpful, ‘when every journey from wine tastings to making patchwork quilts can be daubed ‘a pilgrimage’ she concludes somewhat impatiently (Dyas 2020b). More hopefully, McIntosh suggests that the great diversity in the work of contemporary scholars is ‘driving the dialogue on pilgrimage by contesting its definitions and challenging its paradigms’, ensuring, he continues that ‘pilgrimage studies will remain visible for many years to come’ (McIntosh et al. 2018, p. xi). He, Greenia and Quinn took further lead by adding to the list of diverse attempts at definitions in the 2017 William and Mary Symposium centred on the apparently straightforward question: *What is Pilgrimage?* (Nickerson et al. 2018, pp. 1–6). Quinn began with a pithy, universal view that wherever human beings are in the world they move and, because we are meaning-making creatures, she insists, humans imbue their movements with symbolic importance (ibid., p. 5). McIntosh suggests that pilgrimage is comprised of three interlocking journeys, the first, the quintessential ‘setting out’ of the pilgrim; the second is the level and significance of ‘the presence of other pilgrims’ met along the way and the third is what he calls ‘the journey of place’, the shifting socio-political-cultural context of the pilgrimage destination in and of itself (ibid., pp. 3–4). Finally, Greenia’s definition, (ibid., p. 7; Harman 2014, p. 9), which he supplements in a further presentation to the same symposium, (Greenia 2018, pp. 7–15) detailing six premises of the pilgrim and seven complementary aspects pertaining to the experience of being a pilgrim, reads as follows:

Sacred Travel may be viewed as a ritualized sequence of leave-taking from one’s normal life and social network, then during the trip an immersion in an altered state of ‘liminality’ or threshold, living usually with a unique polity of strangers which forms its own society or *communitas*. Eventually there is a reincorporation as someone transformed and endowed with holy experience and gifts that enrich the imagined community that was left behind.

Dyas too sought to include explicit reference to the spiritual dimension of pilgrimage so as to distinguish it from more tourist-like visits to sacred places, although she is resolutely open to the possibility of pilgrimage ‘occurring’ for a visitor who had initially set out simply

on such a secular tour (Dyas 2021). Like Quinn, she situates pilgrimage in a broad universal human practice, one she calls, ‘mapping meaning onto place’, which she observes has ‘massively revived’ in recent decades (Dyas 2018). Dyas also seems keen to expand in a direction away from the ubiquitous image of trail pilgrims such as the Camino walker, by stating strongly that the mode of travel is peripheral to the core pilgrimage experience which she describes as:

... a state of openness to spiritual engagement, through place and journey, whether planned or spontaneous, limited neither by mode of transport nor distance travelled. This encapsulates those who travel with clear intent and those who might find themselves unexpectedly ambushed by, and responsive to, the power of place (Dyas 2020a).

3. The ‘Turnerian Paradigm’ and Its Contests

Perhaps the most well-known ‘scholarly spat’ regarding definitions of pilgrimage arose when Eade and Sallnow challenged what they considered was the uncritically positive reception of Victor and Edith Turner’s work on pilgrimage in the latter half of the twentieth century (1991). The Turners were anthropologists whose field work in Africa was heavily influenced by the perspective of ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, in his *Rites of Passage* (1908/1960). They began to see correlations between the rituals of the tribal cultures they were studying and pilgrimage practices within their own faith tradition, Catholicism. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978) soon became, and for many still remains, a seminal text in pilgrimage literature. Alongside related articles credited to Victor Turner, their work has continued to sound somewhat of a discordant ‘rattle and hum’ in that same discourse. In part, the discord queries the level of influence that theories about traditional religious pilgrimage, have had or should continue to have upon our understanding of global studies of pilgrimage in contemporary discourse. And, in part there is a genuinely, critical examination of the detail of the Turners’ theory and its formative influence on interpretations of pilgrimage since then. Before speaking to these contests, let me describe the ‘emblematic core’ of the Turners’ contribution to pilgrimage studies.

In the Preface to the 1978 edition, Editor Turner likens the pilgrim to one ‘embarking on an adventure, ... like a spiritual work of archaeology, she is delving in the ancient past for the renewal of the original experience, ... not a fusty, dead past, [but] a journey to an actual place, where pilgrims touch the sacred object and then touch themselves’. This, she continues, is the ‘archaeology of experience, the anthropology of actual effectiveness and of the body’ (1978, p. xv). She cites Charles Laughlin’s conviction that ‘the full impact of the religious material of pilgrimage cannot be understood without some kind of plunge into the experience of it’ (ibid., p. xix). In such remarks Edith Turner captures the particular quality of her and her husband’s observations on pilgrimage—stepping into the pilgrim shoes with a kind of contemplative seeing of their world and worldview, documenting what was felt, observed and witnessed, yet all the while with an anthropologist’s eye. With an authoritative play on Mircea Eliade’s signature idea of the *axis mundi*, (the absolute Centre), in his various studies on the nature of religion (Eliade 1961, p. 21), the Turners emphasise an alternate pattern in pilgrimage-making of journeying to the periphery and finding the Centre ‘out there’ (Turner 1973). They adopted and adapted the ‘separation-liminality’ and ‘re-incorporation’ triad of tribal initiation ritual. They were particularly struck by the way, *communitas* spontaneously grows and becomes sustained among pilgrims (1978, p. 13). At first they defined this *communitas* as that ‘commonness of feeling’ that can be observed among pilgrims journeying together. It was to become perhaps the most contested conclusion from their research, some dismissing this ‘utopian kind of harmony’, (which a small number of other pilgrimage scholars subsequently concluded the Turners were insinuating here), as a particular bone of contention. For their part, in fact the Turners were quite precise in their use of the term *communitas* and even introduced qualifiers, such as ‘normative/ideological and existential to elaborate on particular types of *communitas*, which they believed they had observed arising among pilgrims. *Normative communitas*, they say,

describes the way in which pilgrims ‘mobilize and organise resources to keep one another alive and thriving’ on the pilgrim journey and ‘constitutes the characteristic social bond among pilgrims and between those who offer them help and hospitality’ along the way (Turner 1973, p. 194). They were always clear such *communitas* had a temporary nature.

However, ‘the Turnerian paradigm’, as it came to be called, was soon to be challenged as ‘deterministic’ and insufficiently heterogeneous. Such conclusions, certainly within pilgrimage scholarship, were most strongly articulated by Eade and Sallnow, as referenced above. They challenged the idea of pilgrimage as a universalism, particularly ‘a universalism of discourse’, and they argue that the only characteristic universal to pilgrimage is ‘the capacity of a cult to entertain and respond to a plurality’ (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 15). ‘There is no such thing as ‘pilgrimage’, they argue succinctly, only ‘pilgrimages’ (ibid., p. 3). In fact, it could be said that the Turners would concur, for they stressed how each ‘pilgrimage has its own entelechy, its own immanent force controlling and directing development’ (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 25). Eade and Sallnow also challenge what they perceive as the Turners’ insistence on ‘harmonious communitas’ (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 5). Instead, they contend that most pilgrimages, are, on the contrary, contested sacred spaces in some shape or form, and they argue that what is notable is not that pilgrimage ‘removes the sting of divisiveness’ (Turner 1973, p. 221), but rather the omnipresence of ‘conflicting perceptions and doctrinal schisms’ (1991, pp. 13–14). Post et al., argue that Eade and Sallnow were being provocative in that typical ‘postmodernist way’, by ‘dismissing all prevailing paradigms’. They also wonder how truly ‘new’ their own agenda was and they question whether Eade and Sallnow managed to distance themselves from the Turners paradigm as much as they would like to think (Post et al. 1998, pp. 54–55). It is worth noting that Post et al. themselves declare the Turners’ work as ‘too rigid’ or ‘one-dimensional’ (Ibid., pp. 56,64, respectively). Their take is similar to Coleman’s view, who while appreciating the new directions that pilgrimage scholarship was to take on foot of this ‘turn on the Turners’, suggests also that there not be as much difference between Eade and Sallnow’s ideas of pilgrimage as contestation of sacred space (and contested discourse), and what the Turners offer with *communitas*, (outlining several concrete examples), and concludes, rather witheringly:

In my terms, contestation can be seen as parasitic on the communitas paradigm, reinterpreting its analytical and ethnographic significance while also, ironically, keeping the shape and salience of its approach’ (Coleman 2014, pp. 285–86 and more extensively throughout Coleman 2002).

Despite this critique from Coleman, he began to collaborate with one of the authors, John Eade, soon afterwards to good effect, in continued, and it must be stressed, genuine efforts, to reframe pilgrimage for the contemporary era (Coleman and Eade 2004, 2018; Coleman et al. 2016, 2020). With Sallnow in the aforementioned text (Eade and Sallnow 1991), Eade had also challenged what they perceived as the Turners narrow focus on the place-centred element of pilgrimages, the destinations, the shrines etc. Instead, they suggested that pilgrimage can be better understood by observing it as various combinations of ‘people, places and texts’. In the 2004 collaboration with Coleman, which begins with an exhaustive account of the shifting emphases of pilgrimage definition, they add ‘movement’ as a fourth essential ingredient to their elemental combination of peregrination, in a bid to widen the analytic lens still further (ibid., pp. 22–24). Their addition of this fourth ingredient had particular relevance for my own research.

Sánchez y Sánchez and Hesp (2015) also welcome the way the debate about the Turnerian paradigm. Noting particularly how it supported the emergence of the genre of pilgrimage studies. They agree that it is challenging to escape the influence of *communitas* because, as they confess, ‘this communal experience is such a constitutive part of the (Camino pilgrimage) trail’ (ibid., p. 2) in particular. Perhaps, for similar reasons, the various contests inspired by these and similar debates (See, for example Pechilis 1992, 2017) have done little to dissuade scores of pilgrimage scholars from using the Turners’ pilgrimage paradigm, particularly the ideas of ‘liminoid phenomenon’ (Turner and Turner

1978, pp. 1–39) and the *separation-communitas-reincorporation* triad, as solid foundation for their interpretation of pilgrimage research (See for example Hill 2004; Greenia 2018; Kaell 2016; Warfield 2013).

4. The Theological Perspective

Another strong voice in this lively debate about the parameters of the definition of pilgrimage has been that of Peter Margry. His views also guide us into a brief exploration of some of the theological views on the contemporary experience of and discourse about pilgrimage, a perspective incorporated into this interdisciplinary study. In the opening chapter of his edited collection on *Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Modern World* (Margry 2008), Margry acknowledges that it can often be difficult to distinguish today between the nature of the many sacred journeys made as memorial visits *and* sacred journeys as pilgrimage. However, with considerable candour and clarity, he declares that ‘it is contra productive to use the concept of pilgrimage as a combination term for both secular and religious phenomena, thereby turning it into much too broad a concept’ (ibid., p. 14). He goes even further by adding that ‘secular pilgrimage’ is not only a term ‘so bandied about today’, but also one that is ‘oxymoronic’ (ibid.). Margry proceeds to describe pilgrimage as ‘a complex of behaviours and rituals in the domain of the sacred and the transcendent, a global phenomenon, in which religion and *a fortiori* religious people often manifest themselves in the most powerful, collective and performative way’ (ibid.). He acknowledges that apart from the fascination of researchers the more important factor in the surge of academic interest in pilgrimage is, ‘the great socio-cultural and politico-strategic significance of this religious phenomenon’ (ibid.). Multiple challenges notwithstanding, Margry offers his own definition of pilgrimage to companion his earlier description stressing that pilgrimage is ‘a journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physical healing or benefit’ (ibid., p. 17).

Roszak, pilgrimage scholar and theologian of the Catholic tradition, offers a critical appraisal of his home tradition but is also concerned that contemporary pilgrimage not lose some of the core formal content that distinguishes it from other forms of meaningful journey-making (Roszak 2019, 2022). He suggests that, ‘a theology of pilgrimage defines what makes pilgrimage valuable from a theological point of view, what justifies it, and what elements it has to contain in order to be classified as such’ (2022, p. 8).

Mindful of the significant heritage within his tradition, particularly pilgrimages linked to ‘places of apparition’, Roszak is nonetheless cautious about the ‘magical approach’ that some pilgrims may have had at times in their desires for change or benefits from making their pilgrimage (2019, p. 35). By contrast, he seeks to shift emphasis away from the magic and towards the power of physical presence in pilgrimage as, ‘a work of grace in incarnational embodied form’ and leading to ‘a recovery of relationship’. Additionally, he stresses that pilgrimage provides for a very important need in a ‘post-religious secular society, to see the world in the sacred manner, i.e., *sub ratione Dei*’. The point, he emphasises is not to ‘escape’ from the world but to ‘experience it more deeply, abandoning superficial life and turning to the profound understanding of it’ (ibid., p. 39).

In his most recent exploration on pilgrimage, Roszak traces the lineage of the religious dimension through the main historical epochs up to and including the contemporary. He believes that the theological dimension can often be missed, or eclipsed in the broad phenomenological perspective of much contemporary pilgrimage literature as, ‘it does not ask about the core issues’ (2022, p. 117). He offers the following Table 2 summarising some of the emphases of the various periods although aware that the brevity of description risks a measure of simplification (2022, p. 120).

Table 2. Main Themes of Different Theologies of Pilgrimage.

Patristic period	Place-centered
Middle Ages	God-centered
Modernity	Self-centered
Post-modernity	Problem-centered
Post-Secularism	Process-centered

Roszak then outlines eight contemporary definitions of pilgrimage, which include a theological dimension, before he offers a more exhaustive list of what he believes are those ‘formal’ theological aspects of pilgrimage that contemporary researchers, including many of those listed, often eclipse (2022, pp. 122–25).

5. A Working Description and Definition of Pilgrimage

The various pilgrimage scholars referenced above, even in this brief sketch, indicate how fertile the discourse on pilgrimage has become and how the various contestations therein have added to that growth and expanse. Having personally conducted research in the field it is hard to resist the temptation to enter the fray and offer yet another perspective on both description and definition of contemporary pilgrimage.

In the case of the two pilgrimages under the lens of this research, and particularly as I analysed the data, I became increasingly mindful of what I perceived as a “givenness” in pilgrimage, a multiplicity of possibility, as it were, which pre-exists the contemporary pilgrim in that the pilgrimage experience offers itself anew as a ‘living-world’ to each new and intending pilgrim in turn. Lawrence Taylor offers an insightful analysis of contemporary pilgrimage, when he says:

The plasticity and relative malleability of pilgrimage, the space it often leaves for individual and collective agency, and its ambiguous character as religious or secular activity all contribute to making it a uniquely potent way of maintaining or asserting a moral geography that reconfigures the world for personal and collective purposes (Taylor 2012, pp. 209–10).

There is much worthy of ‘unpacking’ in this analysis, but for the moment let me note the nuance Taylor expresses in asserting that pilgrimage offers something unique and particular to the contemporary pilgrim. This ‘something offered’, which I began to name as a ‘givenness’, encourages me to offer the following description of contemporary pilgrimage:

The living world of pilgrimage as process, is complex and potent, an ever evolving interconnectedness of many elements, including–place/s, (often but not exclusively peripheral, in what some call a ‘therapeutic landscape’⁹ Maddrell 2013, p. 64), particular locations, engendering story/stories (including often that of a revered or saintly person/event or both), performative ritual/s, (personal and communal both), the promise/possibility of a glimpse of the transcendent, history, hagiography, politics (past and present, local and international), a stewarding community/communities and, finally, a facilitative infrastructure.

This term ‘givenness’ initially had helped me describe more accurately how the internal rigour of the pilgrimage on Lough Derg and along the routes of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, require the pilgrim to become more body-focused. The research data suggested strongly that paying attention to the body in a mindful, deliberate way quickly became a non-negotiable aspect of both these pilgrimages. Kay, one of my Camino pilgrim research respondents, for example, reflects on it like this:

That whole thing of just walking and thinking- the rhythm of it; and the landscape is so varied and beautiful; you are walking through the vineyards and the fields, you know that kind of thing. I loved it. I just loved the Pyrenees, out of this world. Again, it’s the

rhythm and the discipline of the walking, there is just something about it, a whole kind of other awareness comes with it.

And Fiachra, one of the Lough Derg research respondents similarly reflects:

But it's something, like, sure such a pilgrimage is good for your faith like but the other thing is, I think it is good for your brain and body too. There's no mobile phone and there's no one getting at you. This is three days. You have time to relax, time to take in, and it definitely cleans the slate and it cleans the mind too. It's the whole thing you know.

Reluctant or willing, practiced or novice, the pilgrims testify to the requirement of, and soon enough the benefits of, becoming more consciously embodied. My literature trawls introduced me to the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Marion and his emblematic themes of 'gift and givenness'. Marion, (also a committed phenomenologist), speaks about what he called 'saturated phenomena'. Expanding on such an idea, he sought to communicate that the 'surplus' in phenomena means that 'neither concept, signification nor intention can foresee, organise nor contain it' and in that sense it remains necessarily open to 'an ever-emergent complexity of perspectives and meanings' (Robinette 2007, p. 91). In suggesting that pilgrimage is the kind of 'brimming-over, living-world', as I described above, ideas of 'surplus' and 'saturation' seemed fitting. Another of the Camino pilgrims, Brigid, who participated in my research describes it thus:

From that moment on the Camino became mine. I would no longer choose to do the Camino with anyone, I just do it for itself now, it's different, it's a path. I cannot imagine a year when I would not put my toe in the water and step out and get going. And I like the whole...(pauses), unexpected—what might happen—and you never know who you will meet or what you will be told or what you might share with a pilgrim stranger. It's just amazing. In one way it has become routine but then something fabulous to touch, to be involved in, the unexpected. It is like a great seed.

Marion's sense of 'givenness' allows for the 'ever-emerging complexity and new perspectives' which this brief review of some of the salient pilgrimage discourse on definitions undoubtedly reveals. In Marion's view, the most essential thing is, 'to live the meaning of it' (Marion 2002, p. 46). That said, at some point, the phenomenological researcher must work with the "spilling forward" from their data and make an attempt at least to 'distil wisdom'—to articulate meaning, to risk interpretation and to shape definition. Let me then offer such a shaping—a definition of contemporary pilgrimage as both a personal and relational process, mindful as Marion noted that 'no concept is adequate to the phenomena at which it aims' (Robinette 2007, p. 91). Coleman, also helpfully reminds that, while it is important that we continue to define what we mean by pilgrimage, we also need to remember that no single definition 'matters too much'. He believes we must resist an assumption that we will 'ever achieve a more precise, universally applicable set of criteria and finally pin down the activity of pilgrimage' (Coleman 2002, p. 362). In fact, he goes even further to say that it would be better to frame our studies with the sense that what we are doing is learning more about human behaviour through the prism of pilgrimage as 'case study', rather than focusing on pilgrimage as some kind of solid, unchanging institution, making for a most interesting proposition (ibid., p. 363).

Mindful of these caveats, I offer the definition below informed by my 'living with' the meaning and import of my research respondents' reflections on their experience, alongside my immersion into pilgrimage literature, theoretical reading on body psychology, theological anthropology as well as my own personal experience of both pilgrimages. The sense of 'saturated phenomenon', referred to above, is hopefully retained by contextualising this definition of pilgrimage as personal and relation experience within the pilgrimage world *as larger process*, as articulated in the description above. This new attempt at definition is resonant with many previous attempts.

'Contemporary pilgrimage, as a personal but relational process, involves an intentional setting out on a journey to very particular places, deemed sacred, special or holy; and while there, or on route there, or both, embodying significant

physical endurance and participating in a spectrum of non-ordinary, bodily gestures. In such places, this combination of movement and ritual, for many pilgrims, and including explicitly religious ritual for some, alone and with others, facilitates the pilgrim to become more attuned in their bodily selves, more rooted to the ground beneath their feet, yet simultaneously more alive to others and to the firmament of transcendence’.

In the post presentation discussions following my presentation of this new definition of pilgrimage at *Sacred Journeys 9* in Slovenia (July 2022), a fellow scholar wondered if it was too ‘all-encompassing’ to be particularly helpful. Whilst I understand the critique and acknowledge the number of sub-clauses I have included here, I continue to maintain that contemporary pilgrimage along ancient pathways must be viewed as a many-sided prism of persons, place, journey, ritual, movement, gesture, shot through with engendering stories and the imprint of aeons of footfall, experience and tradition. As well as the imperative to maintain the complexity of contemporary pilgrimage, the research strongly suggests that the multi-layered nature of the experience is intrinsic to its enduring appeal.

6. Conclusions

This essay arose out of a desire to locate findings from my pilgrimage research in the context of adequate descriptions and definitions of pilgrimage. It traced some of the fertile, sometimes discordant discourse under the lens of postmodernity. The relatively new genre of *Pilgrimage Studies* accepts that we ‘can no longer take for granted the meaning of pilgrimage for its participants, nor can we take for granted a uniform definition of the phenomenon of ‘pilgrimage’ either (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 3). I challenge the view that the Turners’ paradigm was decidedly ‘deterministic and problematic’ (ibid., pp. 2–3). I indicate how a contemporary theological perspective, a perspective considered sparsely present in more recent pilgrimage research analysis (Roszak 2022, p. 2) can inform our horizons. I present both a description and definition of pilgrimage which are reflective of the findings from my research and resonant with the definitions of others. I acknowledge that for all pilgrimage scholars, personal experience and worldview as well as the rigour of our research methodologies, shape our perceptions of and discourse about pilgrimage. All of these factors, amplified by the surge of interest in both making and studying pilgrimage, are part of the struggle to define it. Not all struggles are limiting. Conversely, this one enlivens pilgrimage discourse, includes welcome diversity and awakens all pilgrimage scholars out of the complacency of old presuppositions.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/aug/15/-sp-toughest-pilgrimage-st-patrick-purgatory> (accessed on 1 March 2019).

² See for example, IJRTP Volume 6 Issue 2 here: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss2/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

³ Examples of such literature include Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1951); A. B. Scott’s ‘*Latin learning and literature in Ireland 1169–1500*’ in *NHI Pre-historic and early Ireland*, Oxford 2005; ‘*Our Lady’s Dowry*’ A Ballad of Medieval England and associated with pilgrimages to shrines dedicated to Mary, Mother of God; *Codex Calixtinus* manuscript.

- ⁴ A defining mark of our times in academic and journalistic discourse is the tendency to critically pull apart all unacknowledged and even acknowledged assumptions and presuppositions, and so even the nomenclature given to epochs of time, for example, ‘post-modern’ can be subject to that same scrutiny.
- ⁵ 1 July 2021 Google search reveals a 59,900,000 count in response to ‘a Camino Blogs’ query, and is an indication of the veritable explosion in personal account literature. There are now websites dedicated to categorizing the blogs of others, see <https://www.caminoadventures.com/blog/best-camino-de-santiago-blogs/> (accessed on 1 July 2021).
- ⁶ Confraternities is the name given to groups of lay people who gather regularly to pray and reflect in devotion to particular saints. Although they are a less popular form of spiritual devotion today, many such groups remain active in the global Catholic Church. Confraternities of St James have a particularly strong affiliation with the Camino de Santiago.
- ⁷ For example, the Confraternity of St James in London, England have a rich archival account of personal stories.
- ⁸ Co-founder and Co-Director of the M Applied Spirituality with the Waterford Institute of Technology, (WIT), staff offered a number of spirituality research seminars in recent months as part of the inauguration of their new research hub, *SpirSop*. The hub is supporting a number of pilgrimage research scholars. This presentation on pilgrimage literature themes was offered virtually on 19 February 2021 and was based on the 2019 article cited in the references below.
- ⁹ Therapeutic landscapes are those where ‘the promise and possibility of more restful psychosocial states are experienced’, (citing Conradson 2007) and (Maddrell 2013, p. 64).

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