Ian Reader


Ian Reader is a well-known specialist of religion in modern Japan and of pilgrimage in particular. His latest opus is a significant contribution not only to the study of pilgrimage, but also to contemporary religion in general. The book opens with a description of the 1000th anniversary of the important Saikoku pilgrimage route that was celebrated and publicised by the means of a travelling exhibition in department stores in Western Japan in 1987. It allowed, among other things, that ‘pilgrims’ complete a microcosmic version of the pilgrimage by standing on slabs filled with earth extracted from the various sites and praying to an icon.

This example introduces the book’s core argument, which is to challenge the opposition between pure, sacred, austere, and solemn “real religion,” and base, noisy, tacky, and degrading consumption and market activities. Rather than being a welcomed rupture with the marketplace, pilgrimages are inextricably tied to it:

A key aim of this book is to challenge the tendency in pilgrimage studies to portray the dynamics of the marketplace as disjunctions from pilgrimage’s ‘true’ and sacred nature. By contrast, I argue that [...] the dynamics of the marketplace, with its themes of pilgrimages being promoted, reshaped, invented and exhibited to increase their custom, along with issues of consumerism and the acquisition of material goods and souvenirs, are not antithetical to pilgrimage (or to ‘religion’). [pp. 14–15]

While most definitions of ‘pilgrimage’ revolve around the idea of a pre-given sacredness and of journeys, times, and places that are set apart from “everyday routines and the mundane world” (p. 14), Reader provides significant data to support the idea that sacredness is constructed and continuously re-legitimated, namely through market engagements and the pragmatic exigencies of comfort, accessibility, and proximity to services. Comparing Japanese material with an array of other pilgrimage sites, such as Knock (Ireland), Lourdes, Mecca, and Santiago de Compostella, Reader argues that consumerism and commercialism are not corrosive forces undermining true and authentic sacred experiences, but rather that they are constitutive of the rise, success, and maintenance of pilgrimages. A merit of this book is to show how the opposition between a supposedly authentic expression of religiosity and the griminess of the mundane and the economic relies on normative underpinnings. While Reader is
not the first to make these arguments, his book is important in that he links relevant sources to his own findings and formulates a general argument that has implications well beyond the study of pilgrimages.

As the title of one section states, “pilgrims are not ascetics as a rule,” nor are they “seekers of solace and respite from the hubbub and noise of the world” (p. 125). On the contrary, crowds attract crowds and create a buzz that proves and feeds a site’s sacrality. Such dynamics are not recent, modern characteristics of pilgrimage routes and sites. Through various plunges into history, going back, namely, to the Middle Ages, Reader shows how pilgrimages wax, wane, and are made to transform and reinvent themselves across the ages, with worldly factors coming heavily into play and pragmatism winning out over idealism, orthopraxis, orthodoxy, and ideologies. Fun, tourism (travel), and entertainment practices such as brothels, sumo wrestling contests, hot springs, and bar frequentations were part of pilgrim motivations in Medieval Europe as in Tokugawa-era (1603–1868) Japan.

Reader’s treatment of tacky souvenirs is equally noteworthy. Rather than dismissing “singing toilet roll holders,” mugs, and key chains as insignificant rubbish or irrelevant “noise” opposed to authentic “relics,” the author takes a material anthropology stance and refuses such categorizations. This book is a brilliant testimony as to how souvenir shops are and have been integral to, and not parasitic of, pilgrimage sites.

While developing the argument that economic and mundane aspects are integral to pilgrimages and sacred spaces in general, Reader importantly restrains from slipping into a utilitarian anthropology in which actors would only be self-interested and motivated by maximizing economic, social, or cultural “capital” (p. 90). Similarly, although worldly benefits, accumulation of merit, and status acquisition are more part of pilgrim motivations than hopes of miracles, they also engage in consumption of souvenirs—for example in order to bring back gifts to friends and family, thereby relating the “extraordinary” experience of pilgrimage to “ordinary” life and its set of values and meaningful social bonds.

The eight chapters that form this book do not cut up the issues and themes in neat sub-ensembles, but rather thread the main arguments mentioned above from slightly different perspectives and angles. Yet, this lack of a systematic analytical treatment does not hinder the richness of the whole. The book does, unfortunately, lack in depth as pertains to theoretical issues. For example, Reader continuously critiques a sharp and absolute distinction between “the sacred” and “the profane,” arguing, for instance, that souvenirs bought outside a temple are considered the same as those bought within the vicinity. On many occasions, Reader criticises the concept of “the sacred” and questions whether