Ian Reader


In this examination of the multidimensional and complex dynamics of pilgrimage, Ian Reader addresses the intricacies of pilgrimage as it evolves—and, as he aptly shows, has long evolved—alongside forces and currents not deemed intrinsically religious. Indeed, Reader takes a deep plunge into the relationships between pilgrimage, the economy in the form of consumerism, the media industry in the form of advertising and entertainment, and tourism in the form of sightseeing.

Thus, Reader defends the thesis 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’), but crucial to its successful functioning, development, appeal and nature” (p. 15). In many respects, the study of Japanese pilgrimage provides the author a fresh look at the dynamics between religion and economy. In a culture where “market” and “holy day” are both represented by the word *ennichi*, in which the supposedly sacred may manifest at any time and any place (however mundane) in the form of *kami*, and where there is a long history of pilgrimage routes and accounts (some of which have become internationally famous, e.g., Shikoku), one may find insights into the intricacies of pilgrimage as it has evolved and is developing at the interfaces of social spheres such as religion, economy, politics and the media. By generalizing his anthropological observations regarding the dynamics of Japanese pilgrimage, Reader offers the academic literature (which is mostly concerned with Western form of pilgrimage and Western concepts and categories) a solid ground on which new approaches and theories of pilgrimage may be built.

The study of Japanese religious and pilgrimage phenomena plays an important role in Reader’s assessment of the validity and usefulness of well-established paradigms in the study of religions and of pilgrimage. He stresses time and again that the academic and popular conception of pilgrimage as an essentially religious practice rooted in the sacred realm, strictly removed from anything mundane, ought to be reviewed. New analyses that show that pilgrimage, in some of its premodern and in most of its modern forms, is woven into the dynamics of merchandising, advertising, and commodification. The core problem that lies at the patterns of rise and decline of pilgrimage in the modern world rests not on pilgrims’ motivations alone, but rather on the competitive nature of the pilgrimage marketplace. Pilgrimage routes and destinations
abound in more and more places worldwide. Reader states that although there might not be a “growth” of pilgrimage in the twenty-first century per se, pilgrimage sites that have become popular and well known have benefited from the activities and interests of people, associations and organizations that are not necessarily religious, but commercial in aim and scope.

The book focuses on “how pilgrimages are embedded in a context of markets, consumer activity, publicity and promotion, and how they operate not just in the marketplace but through it” (p. 8). Reader opposes his argument against the sacred/profane binary widely used by scholars to depict pilgrimage as a “special” activity. Inspired by the seminal work of Victor and Edith Turner (1978), academics, popular media, travel agents, guidebook authors and website creators have constructed pilgrimage as a religious performance whose sacred nature supposedly lies beyond the mundane. Academic and popular media often criticize the corrupting impacts of mass travel and consumerism on the authenticity and purity of pilgrimage destinations. However, as Reader shows, not only modern but also premodern pilgrimages have been the target of commercial interests, sometimes very early in their history. Reader therefore argues that beyond the widely used categories of sacred/profane, pilgrim, and place, we should take a clear look at the “commercial and the promotional activities of pilgrimage authorities and of external and secular agents” (p. 14).

Reader criticizes the view (held by scholars such as Eliade, Durkheim, Weber, and pilgrims alike) according to which pilgrimage sites owe their “special” nature to sacred manifestations not influenced by this-world contingencies, let alone the mundane interests of merchants and religious leaders. The issue at stake in Chapter 2 is the idea that places deemed “sacred” are usually accorded such value through their own self-evident nature, and are usually thought to be “magnetic.”1 The study of pilgrimage locations in India and Japan, however, shows that pilgrimage, as we now know them, are common and modern reinventions of practices and beliefs that have sometimes long, sometimes short, historical record. The agency of people vested in non-religious interests is one of pilgrimage’s most important aspects. Indeed, historical analyses show that pilgrims and pilgrimages exist not in a vacuum, but in webs of inter-related interests and expectations. As Reader writes: “a crucial reason why pilgrims go to pilgrimage sites is because they are there and hence offer the (potential) pilgrim the opportunity of somewhere conducive to go” (p. 59). The contingency of pilgrimage, as opposed to their innate sacredness, also means that these may

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1 Reader refers to J. Preston’s “spiritual magnetism” (Preston 1992).