Sacred place have exercised a magnetism in all cultures and eras of human religious history. Despite this fact, pilgrimage centres and activities have been a relatively neglected area of scholarly investigation. While in the last fifteen years there have been occasional forays into the field from a number of disciplines, for the most part, each researcher has developed his own tools and perspectives and each has laboured in isolation, without the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration. “Pilgrimage: The Human Quest” had as its prime objective the breaching of the barriers between scholars sharing an interest in journeys to sacred centres. The seventy-five participants in the meetings (May 14-17, 1981), which were jointly sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh and Simon Fraser University, represented the disciplines of religious studies, history, geography, anthropology, sociology and literature, as well as all of the great and some of the smaller world religious traditions. Throughout the course of three days of sessions, this diversity was the spark for lively and fruitful interchange and debate. The conference recorded the current state of knowledge about pilgrimage in the various disciplines and charted some directions for future research and analysis.

Each of the three days of sessions approached pilgrimage from a specific point of departure. Day One was given over to keynote addresses and discussion concerning the study of pilgrimage within the disciplines. The second day brought together people with an interest in specific pilgrimage traditions. These were interdisciplinary sessions in which current research data was presented on the pilgrimage patterns of North India/Himalayan states, South India/Sri Lanka, Europe, the Americas, the Islamic world, Japan/Southeast Asia, Israel and other traditions. On the final day, keynote speakers addressed central problems in the analysis of pilgrimage and focused the group’s thinking on general issues con-
cerning journeys to sacred places, beyond the disciplinary or geocultural boundaries of the previous two days.

The exchange of information and ideas was spirited. It is not possible in the space of this brief report to do justice to all the carefully considered and thought-provoking addresses which consolidated present knowledge and charted future courses. Several themes which ran through many discussions can be identified, however.

One recurrent problem was the basic question of defining pilgrimage. The general consensus by the end of the meetings seemed to be that no satisfactory definition could ever be established. Journeying to the sacred is a physical but also a symbolic, literary and spiritual image. Pilgrimage as event and pilgrimage as metaphor cannot be clearly distinguished. The essence of questing for the sacred would be dessicated by any definition which excluded phenomena which have often been called ‘pilgrimage’, e.g. the journey of life itself. As Professor Richard Niebuhr of Harvard University put it, “The limits of pilgrimage are the limits of the human imagination.”

This issue was clearly focused in the discussions on the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism. Pilgrims can behave as tourists, and tourists as pilgrims; pilgrimage places can be sites of tourism, and tourist centres visited reverentially. It was generally concluded that these two different sorts of phenomena shared certain features, but were nevertheless still distinguishable.

One of the most important aspects of pilgrimage that was brought up repeatedly is its relationship to more ordinary dimensions of life. Pilgrimage is the special going out which contrasts to the habitual staying home. It embodies the opposition of movement and stasis, of inner and outer, of centre and periphery. No single set of oppositions of this sort can be expected to cover all instances and traditions of pilgrimage, but there was an implicit (and at times explicit) understanding that a significant feature lending form and content to pilgrimage is its counterpointing everyday life as Other. By its nature, the sacred place is somewhere else, where one can encounter something else, for special purposes accomplished in special ways. The relationship between the two sides of these oppositions is a dynamic dialogue, as each informs the other, and con-