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Pilgrimage: The Co-production of Ritual between Jews, Christians, and Muslims from Antiquity until Today



The Tomb of Daniel in the city of Susa (Iran) — (wikimedia commons)

The project proposes to study pilgrimage as a co-production between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, since the current definition of pilgrimage is the result of multiple interactions between those three religious traditions. Using co-production as a hermeneutic tool to envision the theological and ritual longue durée evolution of pilgrimage enables us to go beyond the scholarly debate on its origins, alternatively attributed to Jews or to Christians during either the Hellenistic or the Early Roman period. It is also a fruitful way to circumvent the various problems posed by the current state of documentation, largely made up of entangled sources and of exogenous testimonies.

Approaching synchronically Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources on pilgrimage helps us decipher each religion's contribution to this shared feature, and to reconstruct how it progressively became dependent on a series of theological notions commonly known as intercession, martyrdom, sainthood, (spatial) holiness and miracle. In addition, co-production was sometimes a conscious process, with theologians and pilgrims noting that religious Others were performing pilgrimages as they themselves did, sometimes visiting the same site and praying to the same entity. This knowledge has been used as an argument against pilgrimage, defined as a foreign and deviant practice by religious

authorities who do not sanction it. Many branches of Islam do not recognize the validity of any pilgrimage outside Mecca, while Protestants consider it devoid of any theological base. Alternatively, inscribing pilgrimage into a long-standing tradition and pointing to its universality has also been used as a rhetorical legitimizing strategy.

Pilgrimage is resilient: disapprobation from religious authorities is not enough to make it disappear. Many anthropological studies have pointed out its endurance even in the dire conditions. Jerome of Strido as well as rabbis from Late Antiquity ended up begrudgingly accepting it, even though they were often personally opposed to it. The reasons for the never-ending success of pilgrimage are many, from the need for their often-therapeutic function and the way they give agency to people who have historically been kept away from it, especially women.

Pilgrimage is a privileged topic to study patterns of social interactions between people of different religious affiliations, with various degrees of togetherness being degrees of co-production. It is also a way to shed some light on the interplay between various identities, on both the personal and collective level: some pilgrimage sites have become an integral part of a local or national identity, to appease religious tensions and breach religious divide by appealing to a common reference.

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