

Sacred Journeys weds new pilgrims to old paths

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

December 16, 2014

c. 2014 Religion News Service

(RNS) At a time when membership in organized religion is shrinking, the number of spiritual or religious pilgrims has never been larger—more than 200 million per year.

Why?

That's the main question behind *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler*, a six-part television series that premieres on PBS today (December 16). In it, Feiler, 50, follows pilgrims to sacred sites in Israel, Japan, France, Nigeria, India, and Saudi Arabia.

“Working on this series made me realize that organized religion may be threatened, but the desire people have for personal journeys, for seeking answers and asking the simplest question of ‘What do I believe?’ is as strong as ever,” Feiler said from his home in Brooklyn, N.Y. “And pilgrimage is that—an expression of people trying to figure out what they believe.”

Feiler is a longtime pilgrim himself. His 2001 book, *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, was a *New York Times* best-seller and the subject of its own PBS miniseries. But in *Sacred Journeys*, he explores six of the world's most popular pilgrimages—the Marian shrine in Lourdes, France; Jerusalem; Mecca; the Kumbh Mela along the Ganges River; the Japanese Buddhist festival Shikoku; and the Osun-Osogbo fertility festival in West Africa—not on his own, but through the eyes and footsteps of others.

Most are first-time pilgrims who find themselves out of their spiritual and physical comfort zones. They're afflicted with blisters, sore backs, sunburn, travel sickness and very little sleep. On the hajj—Islam's compulsory once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca—one woman winds up in a wheelchair with a twisted knee and a man gets a black eye in the crush around the Ka'aba, the black cube Muslims consider the earthly “House of God.”

One of the pilgrims, a Muslim chaplain from Boston, is shocked to discover that because she is a woman, she cannot enter the Prophet Muhammad's home. Dissolving into tears, she says: "It feels like the prophet is very far away."

While the series' pilgrims are new to pilgrimage, their journeys are as old as religion itself. Jews have made pilgrimages for at least 3,000 years, and the first Christian pilgrim was Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine, who ventured to Jerusalem in the 4th century. Her Church of the Holy Sepulchre—one of the sites Feiler's pilgrims visit—was built where she is said to have discovered the "true cross."

Muslims have made their way to Mecca since the 600s, and in increasing strength. A century ago, Feiler reports, about 50,000 "hajjis" gathered each year; that number is now 5 million.

Indeed, pilgrimage — both sacred and secular — has never been more popular. Pop culture has tapped into the trend with movies like "Wild," television documentaries like HBO's *The Last Patrol* and best-selling books like *Eat, Pray, Love*. All feature protagonists who go on long, transformational journeys of both feet and faith. It is that transformational nature that separates pilgrimage from travel—it's a vocation, not a vacation.

"The road itself has power," Feiler says in the series. Embark on it and "you enter the story" of faith.

But Feiler's contemporary pilgrims don't have much in common with their historical counterparts—at least on the surface. Modern travel has eased the way for many pilgrims, with tour guides, packaged travel excursions and technology like GPS devices and downloadable maps.

Brett Webb-Mitchell, a Presbyterian pastor who leads pilgrimages through his North Carolina-based School of the Pilgrim, warns of the "Disneyfication" of some sites like Spain's Camino de Santiago, where tourist conveniences like taxi and baggage services abound.

"The holy meets us in the unexpected," Webb-Mitchell said. "Every step you take is a sacred step and we are opening ourselves with each and every step to the holy, and in the pre-packaged tours you are not given much opportunity for the holy to break in."

That has also been the experience of Robert Sibley, whose book *The Way of the 88 Temples* is about his own journey to Shikoku, Japan. Some pilgrims, he said, regard their pilgrimages as “little more than an adventure with cheap accommodations and plenty of alcohol.”

But, he continued, the modern pilgrimage is open to more people of different economic backgrounds and education levels than ever before. And the addition of modern comforts does not necessarily mean a loss of the ascetic and religious nature of the journey.

“I would argue that what remains the same now as then is the desire of some individuals to transcend, even if only temporarily, their everyday lives, to seek out new meanings and to reaffirm a sense of spiritual identity,” Sibley said.

Feiler says the real difference between his contemporary pilgrims and those from the age of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is more about impulse than intention. They set out for reasons their historical counterparts might not recognize—to investigate a newly adopted faith, to find their ethnic roots, to become better parents or spouses, to find a new home.

“In the past, if you were Catholic and you went on a pilgrimage, you were going to come back Catholic,” he said. “But we get to pick our own faith now. We are more spiritually and physically mobile than we were in the past. We can go on pilgrimage and ask, ‘Do I still want to be Christian or not?’”

The suffering they endure is different, too—more emotional and psychological than physical. “You are not suffering to serve God, you are suffering because you question and you doubt,” Feiler said. “The suffering is inside you, and you have to get over that to determine what you believe.”