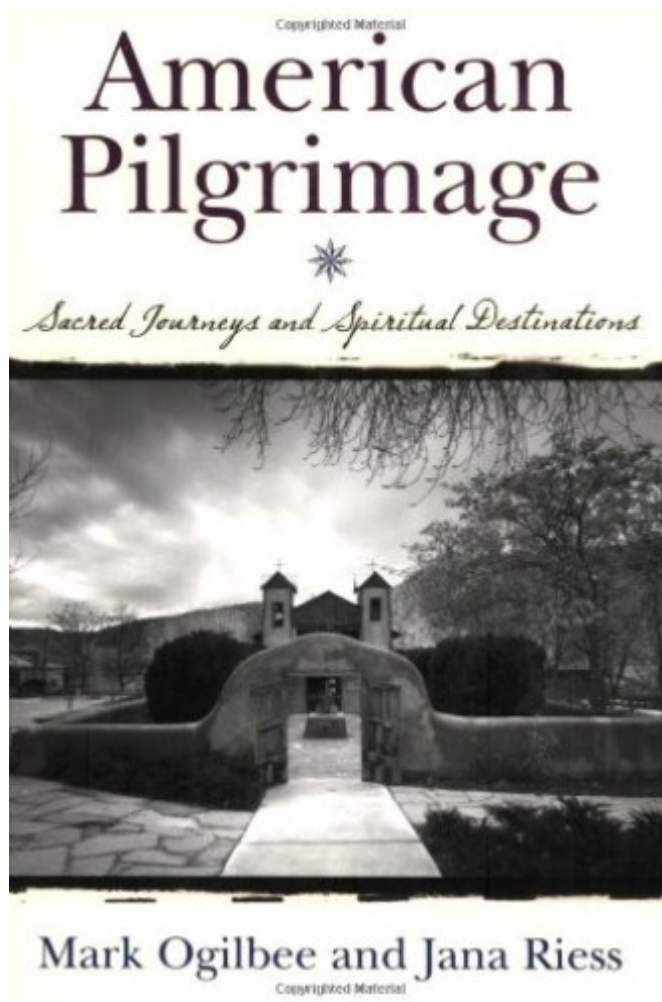


Walking lessons

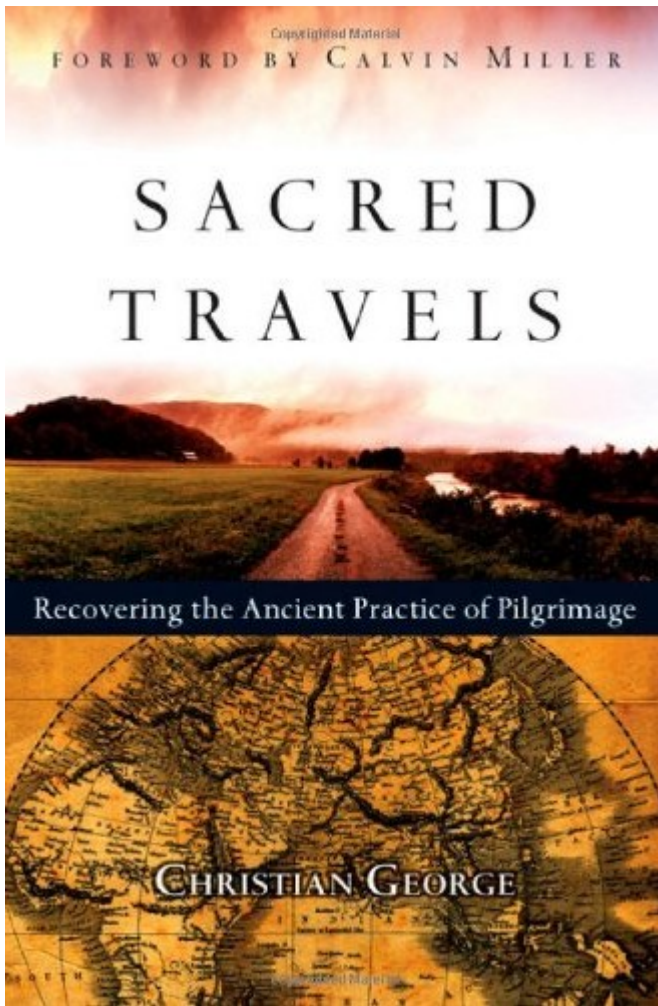
by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

In Review



American Pilgrimage: Sacred Journeys and Spiritual Destinations

Mark Ogilbee and Jana Riess
Paraclete



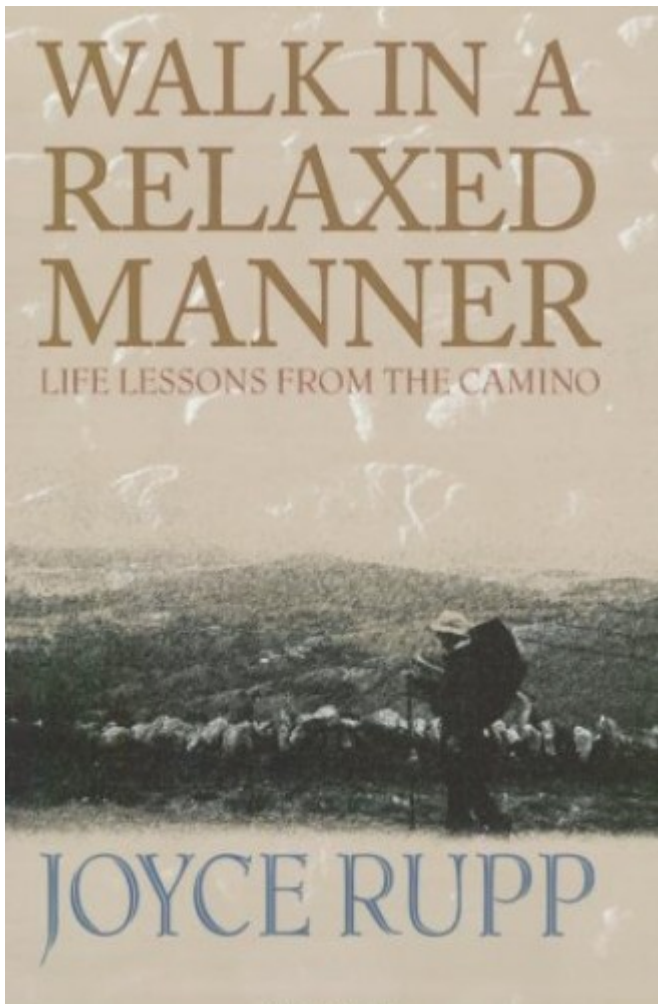
Sacred Travels: Recovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage

Christian George
InterVarsity



In Search of Sacred Places: Looking for Wisdom on Celtic Holy Islands

Daniel Taylor
Bog Walk



Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino

Joyce Rupp
Orbis

School of the Pilgrim: An Alternative Path to Christian Growth

Brett Webb-Mitchell
Westminster John Knox

When I first heard about the Camino de Santiago, my response was unequivocally disbelieving: “Why would anyone want to do that?” I was doing research in Europe and fancied that my journey—by air, rented car and first-class train, no less—was a pilgrimage, so I began reading the history of Christian pilgrimage. I kept encountering information about the Camino, a Spanish pilgrim path that was one of the three most prominent pilgrimage destinations in medieval times (competing with

Rome and the Holy Land). The Camino is experiencing renewal once more, with tens of thousands annually electing to go hundreds of miles on it, often by foot. I could fathom neither the arduousness of the travel nor the pilgrims' fascination with St. James, the route's patron. Yet within five years, I had walked 500 miles of the classic path. I was a caught-off-guard convert to pilgrimage. And I was not the only one.

For a long while, pilgrimage was metaphorical. When it was nearly universally rejected by Protestant Reformers, the concept became inward: think of the allegorical *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is true, after all, that we are all on a journey of some sort. But now the original sense of pilgrimage as a concretely physical spiritual practice is being recovered by broad sections of the Christian community and by people beyond the church's walls as well. This is one area in which Christendom's traditional dividing lines are breaking down and ecumenical connections are being strengthened.

Some scholars argue that involvement in pilgrimage increases as churchgoing diminishes. Six thousand shrines and sites in Western Europe now draw as many as 100 million pilgrims annually. Colleagues at foundations that fund pastor sabbaticals comment with bemusement on the popularity of Iona and Taizé as project destinations. But in *God's Continent*, Philip Jenkins observes that the "continuing popularity of pilgrimages . . . refutes simple claims that European Christianity is dead," and he suggests that pilgrimage may reinvent and reinvigorate European Christianity.

This interest is part of a wider movement of reclaiming practices that cultivate the habits of heart, mind and body that form faithful Christians, build Christian character and enrich church life. Concretely physical, the ancient practice of pilgrimage pushes beyond the usual crop of spiritual disciplines that are only for the introverted, contemplative or intuitive.

Critics of pilgrimage rightly observe that one need not travel far to seek or find God. Indeed, all of life can be—and ought to be—pilgrimage. Every time we venture to church, we make a small pilgrimage. Each day's activities and all our encounters can lead us in searching for God and keeping company with God.

It is true that we should go about our weekly worship and daily life in a pilgrim spirit. Nevertheless, there is merit in deliberately engaging in more demanding journeys from time to time, just as there are good reasons to set aside times for prayer,

worship, fasting and retreat.

Pilgrimage is faith-motivated travel to experience God in ways that can shape and change us; it focuses explicitly on growth in discipleship. Such journeying sometimes involves extraordinary expense and exertion, and it often means going to particular places associated with important events or persons in faith history.

Pilgrimage and tourism have much in common. They both involve movement or travel. They constitute a break from everyday life and realities. They often involve some kind of expense. Taking either kind of journey is a privilege. So what is the difference between pilgrimage and tourism? A recent crop of books help us ponder the distinction.

In *American Pilgrimage: Sacred Journeys and Spiritual Destinations*, Mark Ogilbee and Jana Riess show that pilgrimage need not be only about the distant and exotic. The U.S. has no shrines comparable to Santiago, Taizé, Iona or Lourdes. Nor does it have sacred, well-worn paths similar to Spain's Camino de Santiago or Britain's Pilgrim Ways. But the U.S. does have landscapes and places that inspire devotion, including El Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico (the "Lourdes of America"), the National Shrine of St. Jude in Chicago, the Community of Jesus in Cape Cod and the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

Ogilbee and Riess provide vivid details about each location, report on conversations with pilgrims, offer reflections on the history and give hints of lessons that might be learned. Appendices provide practical counsel on getting to the sites. Writing in deceptively simple prose, Ogilbee and Riess evoke awe and curiosity as they explore numerous themes common to pilgrimage literature: prayer, healing, sacred landscapes and communion of saints.

The authors observe that while tourism is often about destinations, a pilgrim values the journey itself and is "more like a participant observer, pausing on the path to take stock of where she has been and where she is going." But the tone of the book is dispassionate at times, and one wonders whether the writers are themselves pilgrims. Also, their criteria for choosing locations are unclear. They include chapters on a popular New Age destination—Sedona, Arizona, and its "vortexes"—and on Disney World and Elvis's Graceland. *American* is in the book's title, and Graceland and Disney World are certainly American pilgrimage destinations; I confess to having journeyed to both. Yet while we can meet omnipresent God anywhere, Graceland

and Disney World have more to do with consumerism than with God's reign. Readers might also question why this volume lumps together Billy Graham and Thich Nhat Hanh as "modern 'saints'" worthy of pilgrims' attention. The book informs about worthwhile destinations, but is not particularly challenging or inspiring.

Christian George, who writes from a more explicit faith commitment, did not set out to be a pilgrim. As a young evangelical he journeyed to a score of countries and learned that travel can be spiritually significant. Gradually he felt transformed from tourist to pilgrim. He reflects on a dozen locations, including Canterbury, Luther's Wittenberg, Assisi, Iona, Nagasaki, Rome and Taizé.

There is much to commend in George's *Sacred Travels*. He includes sacred places of interest to Catholics, evangelicals, Anabaptists, Lutherans and Baptists. He also displays a passion for social justice (which he explores in reflections on Birmingham, Alabama) and a deep respect for the wide sweep of Christian history and traditions.

George convincingly recommends pilgrimage, saying that it

benefits the believer in many ways, but above all it gives us perspective on God, faith and how we encounter both. . . . I have found that the process of pilgrimage is more transformative than simply reaching a destination. Each step of the journey involves deeper communion with God, and by the end of it, we discover that we have encountered him thousands of times along the way.

Ultimately, he says, authentic pilgrimage bears fruit when we return home, "spiritually seasoned and refreshed for service in the kingdom of God."

However, George himself spent only a day at Assisi and two hours at Skellig Michael in Ireland—hardly enough time for serious reflection. The brevity of the visits undercuts his charming insight that pilgrimage is a "marinating process" and opens him to charges of been-there-done-that voyeurism.

Annoyingly jumping from one subject to another, he sometimes short-circuits his masterful descriptions by moving too quickly to devotional conclusions that occasionally feel hackneyed or clichéd. Some of George's facts are simply wrong: he says that 5,000 people visit Taizé annually; that is the average attendance each summer week. Pilgrimage often involves effort and endurance—that is why it has

the potential to change the sojourner—but one wonders whether George ever broke a sweat. He apparently had endless funds to travel conveniently without demand or sacrifice. His travels seem more like tourism—comfortable, objective, detached and observational—than pilgrimage.

A similar book by a more mature hand is Daniel Taylor's *In Search of Sacred Places*. Late in life Taylor went on academic sabbatical to Great Britain. Previously he had neither considered making pilgrimages nor paid much attention to emerging interest in Celtic Christianity, but he decided almost on a whim to go on quick visits, usually in a large rented van, to Iona, St. David's in Wales, Glendalough in Ireland and Lindisfarne in England. Though pilgrimage was a part of neither the Baptist fundamentalism of his early years nor the evangelicalism of his adulthood, Taylor sensed a spiritual challenge as he encountered these sites.

Taylor is the best writer in this bunch; one wonders why his book was not snapped up by a major publisher. I've been to most of the locations he discusses and was astonished by his compelling portraits, which enabled me to see the sites clearly again and filled me with longing to return. Taylor weaves reflections together with pertinent historical observations and compelling quotes of Christians who have gone before. His wry humor is winsome and self-deprecating. "I am not a good pilgrim," he writes, and then he sets out to prove why: he cannot sit still, he does not want to change, he is not purposeful in his journeys. Still he gently draws out the challenges he encounters—about simplicity, hospitality, contentment and self-assessment—without ever sounding preachy or self-righteous. Taylor may not be a good pilgrim, but he invites the reader to deeper faithfulness and to a vision of God's blazing presence and lively activity here on earth.

Like George's, some of Taylor's visits are short, one merely 30 minutes. Occasionally a dilettante, Taylor casually mentions how he and companions hastily "check off two holy spots along the way" to Dublin. He displays ambivalence about both the kitschy faddishness of some destinations and his own resistance to conversion. He wants to be a tourist, a "detached observer," but is affected nevertheless: "I am working my way toward seeing all of life as simply different manifestations of worship." In this book he exemplifies what he most admires about the saints he studies—they were "on the lookout for significance, for signs and rumors of transcendence." Pilgrimage is about encountering God, and Taylor certainly does—and we do too through this work.

Joyce Rupp, an American nun, is a popular spiritual and devotional writer. At age 60, Rupp decided to walk 500 miles of the Camino de Santiago with an older friend, a retired priest (though they often ended up taking a bus). *Walk in a Relaxed Manner* includes her reflections on the journey and numerous resources and practical tips for sojourning on the Camino.

Having walked this classic pilgrimage route myself, I was tempted to take issue with some of Rupp's claims and to quibble about details. She's wrong on some basic facts, such as names for various routes and details related to the traditional symbol of the scallop shell. The writing sometimes is wordy. Parts of the book have a New Age edge; Rupp writes of "pilgrim energy," is a little too affirming of Shirley MacLaine's bizarre Camino book and comments on "entering into union with our Divine Pilgrim." What is most odd is that Rupp offers almost no explicit reflection on Jesus, St. James or the saint's cathedral at the end of the path. Was this pilgrimage only about onerous travel and lessons learned? If so, she could have walked the Appalachian Trail. This was certainly a worthwhile endeavor, but was it Christian pilgrimage?

Rupp insists that in the spiritual life every journey changes us. As she hints in the title, a primary lesson for her involved examining how she deals with rush and hurry and learning how to let go of the need for control. Often, Rupp notes, we do not see the converting power of the sustained and sacrificial undertaking of pilgrimage until well afterward: "Only then do we recognize how a new attitude, a stronger dedication, and a fuller passion stretched us into the fullness of life."

No one is doing more to get the church to take pilgrimage seriously than Brett Webb-Mitchell. *School of the Pilgrim* is his second book on the subject. A Presbyterian pastor, he is founding director of a Christian formation organization also called School of the Pilgrim. Webb-Mitchell believes that pilgrimage is the richest paradigm for describing Christian growth: "The length and breadth of the Christian life is a pilgrimage and . . . it is through the actual practice of pilgrimage that we may best understand the experience of growth and change." He does not confine the meaning of *pilgrimage* to an internal process, and he writes frequently about sojourns that he's taken or led for others.

Webb-Mitchell has an agenda. In grad school, he grew suspicious of human development theories that charted growth in distinguishable steps or stages. He also concluded that too much Christian education is programmed: "There are no

guarantees that learning happens in intentional moments in preplanned places, like Sunday schools or adult Bible studies. Rather, God educates the Christian in spontaneous, nonsystematic, serendipitous moments.” So he began going on pilgrimages.

This author blends accounts of his journeys (to Chimayó, Lindisfarne, St. Patrick’s Purgatory in Ireland and El Cristo Negro in Guatemala) with biblical, historical and theological reflections. The result is a careful, systematic exploration of pilgrimage and its possibilities. He sees pilgrimage not as a single practice but as a collection of practices: community, hospitality, communion, friendship, worship, prayer and encountering strangers. Though a number of location descriptions overlap substantially with Webb-Mitchell’s previously published material—and it is unsettling that a major source he repeatedly cites to explain and define pilgrimage is a popular lightweight inspirational book—his is a voice that needs to be heard. Webb-Mitchell stresses the importance of place in Christian faith, shows that the honoring of place has ecological implications, and points the way to disciplines that integrate mind, body and spirit.

On the research trip to Europe during which I first heard about the Camino, I visited many cathedrals, monastic ruins, stone crosses and church cemeteries. I was on a meaning-seeking journey that was certainly character forming, but I was only fumbling toward pilgrimage. The authors here are not on the sort of idiosyncratic quest that my journey proved to be. Rather, they invite us into deeper and richer pursuits, the promise and potential of pilgrimage.