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God, pilgrimage, and acknowledgement of place

MARK WYNN

Department of Theology, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ

Abstract: **The paper seeks to address three objections to pilgrimage practices – they are tied to superstitious beliefs (except where they are seen as simply an aid to the imagination), imply a crude experiential or emotional understanding of the nature of faith, and rest upon a primitive conception of divine localizability. In responding to these objections, I argue that the religious significance of places is not reducible to their contribution to religious imagination, experience or understanding. In this sense, relationship to God is not just a matter of thought, but of location.**

Introduction

It is obvious enough that religious believers often take particular places to be especially favourable for worship, religious experience, or the founding and consolidation of religious identity. In this sense the activities of the faithful tend to be at least somewhat place-specific. Despite the obviousness of this truth from a sociological or anthropological point of view, it has not received much attention in the philosophy of religion literature.[1]

In this paper I want to consider pilgrimage as one example of this broader phenomenon. Pilgrimage practices have had a central part to play in all of the major faith traditions.[2] They have also proved to be an enduring source of theological controversy – a controversy which has embroiled even some of the founding figures of these traditions.[3] One familiar line of objection maintains that such practices are inevitably bound up with a primitive conception of God: it may be thought, for example, that they are implicated in a crude idea of divine localizability, or that they depend for their point upon superstitious beliefs concerning, for instance, miracles of healing. On the other side, and precisely in order to accommodate such concerns, proponents of pilgrimage have sometimes sought to understand its point in broadly naturalistic terms – thinking of pilgrimage as, for example, simply an aid to the religious imagination.[4]

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In this paper, I shall try to map out a kind of middle ground in this debate – one which supposes that pilgrimage practices do not depend for their point upon 'superstitious' beliefs but that, even so, their sense cannot be adequately specified in purely naturalistic terms. A unifying theme in the paper will be the idea that the religious significance of places is not to be characterized simply in epistemic or experiential terms[5] – so, negatively, I argue in turn that: (1) the religious importance of places is not just a matter of their ability to bring the believer to a more vivid imagining of biblical or other scenes; (2) nor is it a matter of their ability to bring the believer to a deeper or livelier experience of God; and (3) neither is the significance of place reducible to the contribution of certain events or people in revealing God with special clarity. Positively, I argue that pilgrimage is a matter of encountering certain meanings, by placing oneself in a relevant relationship of physical proximity, and is a matter of achieving an embodied reference to God (one which is not mediated simply by experience or description of God). For simplicity's sake, I am going to concentrate on the case of theistic religion, and the Christian faith in particular.

Some cases cognate with pilgrimage

Of course, the motivations of pilgrims are various, and sometimes rather unedifying. But part of what is involved in pilgrimage is, I take it, the idea that the relationship of physical proximity can be religiously important. It may be for example that the pilgrim wishes to touch some relic, or wishes to stand on the ground where a martyr perished, or where a body is interred, or where a vision took place. So we might begin by asking: how might a relationship of physical proximity be religiously significant? Rather than examining the religious case directly, I want to approach this question by starting with two other cases – which I shall argue are analogous to the religious case – where physical proximity or some kindred relationship seems important in providing access to or conserving a certain kind of meaning or significance.

It is, of course, common practice to visit the grave of deceased friends or relations. On one natural account, presence at the graveside provides an occasion to recall the deceased person, and to rehearse various thoughts about her. And no doubt this is part of what is involved: standing at the graveside, one's thoughts are naturally drawn to the person buried there; and accordingly, visiting the grave may serve as a stimulus to thought about her. But in many cases anyway, we find more significance in visiting a grave than this. After all, if the point of the practice were simply to stimulate thought about the person, then that end could be achieved as readily, in the normal case, by examining a photograph of her, or by some other means which does not require the labour of a journey to the grave. Rather, it matters, I suggest, that when we stand at the graveside we are in a relationship of physical proximity to the body of the deceased person.

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This practice seems to presuppose, therefore, that the significance we associate with persons can be transmitted in some degree to their bodies post-mortem. Of course, this is not to say that the post-mortem body bears the same significance as the living person, just that it has an importance which is broadly ethical – which derives from the fact that it was once the body of a living person, and which we might try to articulate by reference to notions such as 'dignity' and 'respect'. If that is so, then visiting the graveside is not entirely discontinuous from the practice of visiting the living person: in each case we place ourselves in the presence of a body, where that body sets a limit on our will (determines, for example, that certain ways of treating it are inadmissible), because of the dignity of the person whose body it is. So on this view, something of the respect that was owed to the living person is owed to their body post-mortem, and accordingly we may say that the significance of the person is in some degree stored up in their body post-mortem, and can continue to exercise an ethical claim upon us through the post-mortem body.

This account suggests that there are two relationships at stake here. First of all, because it stands in a relationship of physical continuity to the body of the living person, the post-mortem body can preserve something of the significance of the person. And secondly, by standing in a relationship of physical proximity to such a body, I can thereby encounter that significance: in other words, it's not just that the relationship of physical proximity helps me to grasp the significance of the person in thought (it's not just that I am led to entertain certain thoughts about the person when I stand at the graveside); rather, the person's significance is 'presented' to me, in so far as the post-mortem body requires of me, when I am in its presence, a certain kind of practical response (broadly, one of respect).

It is easy to imagine two contrasting reactions to this example, or my interpretation of it. In a naturalistic spirit, it may be said that this practice has to be about recollection of the deceased person, on pain of superstition. And on the other side, it may be said that the practice may, legitimately, involve more than recollection – and that to allow for this case we need to introduce some metaphysical hypothesis to explain how it is possible for the significance of the person to be conserved in some degree in the post-mortem body. Perhaps, it will be said, the spirit of the person lingers on in his body parts? Against these readings, we should say once more that the sense in which the significance of the person is conserved in the post-mortem body is ethical, and not 'metaphysical' or simply psychological (taking the body as an aid to recollection).

If asked why ethical significance attaches to the post-mortem body, we might say that there is an important distinction between the person's body and, say, a packet of spaghetti that was in his possession at the time of death. This is because the body is, to say no more, intimately connected to the person's possibilities for self-expression: the words and deeds of the person are realized in his bodily movements. And accordingly the body of a person bears a particularly intimate

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relation to the meaning that is displayed in his life (or may come to be displayed, to take the case of the children) – both the particular meaning that ensues from his particular life choices, and the more general meaning that attaches to any life insofar as it is a human life. Accordingly, the post-mortem body is entitled to a certain respect for the reason simply that it has been the site for the realization of this sort of meaning.

We have been considering the practice of visiting a graveside, but of course similar issues arise in many other cases. Think, for example, of the debate in the United States concerning the use to which the site of the 9/11 attacks should be put – and the question of what sort of building, for what sort of purpose, it would be fitting to place there. This example is rather different from the case of visiting a grave insofar as it does not involve any thought about the claim made upon us by the bodies of the victims of the events of 9/11. Here the thought is, rather, that what has happened in a place can set a constraint on how the place ought to be treated thereafter. So, as with our first example, it is implied, I suggest, that the significance we associate with a person can be communicated, in some degree, post-mortem; only here it is the place that is the bearer of that significance, rather than the body.

Of course, not any place can bear this sort of importance. To understand this particular example, we need to grasp that human beings were murdered in the attack on the World Trade Centre. And in general, we might suppose, a place can store up in some degree the significance of a person insofar as it had an important part to play in his or her life story – just as the significance of a person can be preserved in his or her body because of the body's importance as the locus of self-expression. So here too, as with the grave-visiting example, a certain meaning can be preserved by virtue of the relationship of physical continuity (it matters that 'Ground Zero' is physically continuous with the site once occupied by the World Trade Centre); and in turn, by virtue of the relationship of physical proximity, we can be claimed by that meaning in the present (since the history of the site sets constraints on how we are to behave towards it, when there in person, or when determining how it is to be treated by others who will in turn stand in a relationship of physical proximity to it). The example of the World Trade Centre is in some ways an unusual case, of course, but there are many more everyday examples where the same kinds of connection seem to be exemplified. Think, for instance, of the practice of placing flowers by the roadside at the scene of a fatal accident. Here too we seem to suppose that a site can acquire an ethical or existential significance by virtue of its history – and that this significance calls for acknowledgement in our dealings with the site in the present.

So these various examples all imply, I suggest, that certain kinds of existential or broadly ethical meaning may be vouchsafed by way of the relationships of physical continuity and physical proximity. In particular, I have proposed that bodies and places can be the bearers of this sort of meaning. Let's think

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now about whether these considerations can help to elucidate the nature of pilgrimage – for here too, of course, places and bodies are taken to have special importance.

Pilgrimage, naturalism, and supernaturalism

In the remainder of this paper, I want to examine three objections to pilgrimage practices, and to consider (especially in relation to the first of these objections) whether the non-religious cases of meaning-transmission which we have been discussing suggest a way of meeting these objections.[6]

I am going to begin with an objection which will sound familiar: it might be said that pilgrimage is perfectly licit where its object is to stimulate recollection, but that other kinds of motivation are liable to fall into superstition.[7] This sort of view seems to have been common among Anglican pilgrims visiting Palestine in the nineteenth century. As Thomas Hummel observes: 'The English Protestant pilgrim was for the most part an educated literate person who visited Jerusalem and the Holy Land in order to vivify the Bible as well as to have the adventure of visiting an exotic place.'[8] For these pilgrims, the religious point of pilgrimage to the Holy Land was as an aid to the imagination, to enable a more life-like recollection of scenes from the life of Jesus and other biblical figures. By contrast with the Russian pilgrims of the period whom Hummel also describes, pilgrims of this persuasion tended to view the Holy Sepulchre, and other such sites, with at least a degree of reserve. One comments:

> … though we cannot be affected by the Holy Sepulchre, as others may, yet when we think of the thousands who have made this spot the centre of their hopes, and in a spirit of piety though not untinctured by superstitious feeling of bygone ages, have endured danger, and toil, and fever, and want to kneel with bursting hearts upon the sacred rock; then, as regards the history of humanity, we feel that it is holy ground.[9]

Interestingly, in this passage, the significance of the Holy Sepulchre site is considered to be a matter of its history, but of its human history as a focus for piety, rather than its history in the scheme of salvation. But notwithstanding the sincerity and depth of feeling of earlier Christian pilgrims, the judgement of this writer is clearly that their practices were theologically flawed, and he goes on to comment: 'For ourselves, we would rather go forth, without the walls, and seek some solitary spot, and endeavour, with the page of the New Testament before us, in silence to image forth the awful scene.'[10] So here is a first objection to pilgrimage: holy places should be regarded fundamentally as an aid to recollection, as a help to 'imaging forth' various biblical scenes, and when considered in other terms are liable to involve a corruption of genuine faith. The view from which Anglicans of this persuasion were trying to distance themselves is, I suggest, the idea that places can be charged with a kind of 'presence', and can bear sacred

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significance for this reason. That view would have struck them as ineradicably superstitious.

What should we make of this objection? Our earlier discussion suggests, I think, that the view which Hummel attributes to various nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims, or more generally, the view of pilgrimage which we might associate with a certain kind of 'liberal Protestantism', is excessively 'naturalistic'. Our two examples, of the graveside and the site of the 9/11 attacks, suggest in turn the case where a pilgrim visits a site because a saintly relic is stored there, and the case where a site is visited because of some event with which it is associated (where the event has left no trace in terms of body parts, for example). And just as it is true that there is more involved, potentially, in the practice of visiting a graveside than simply recalling the deceased person, without any metaphysical impropriety thereby being implied, so it is true that there can be more to the practice of visiting a holy site than simply providing an occasion to rehearse various thoughts about a saintly person, without the need to have recourse to dubious metaphysical assumptions.[11] And in the same way, just as there can be more to the thought that the 9/11 site demands a certain kind of respect than simply the idea that by visiting the site we can 'revivify' or recall more vividly various events from the past, so 'revivification' need not exhaust the meaning of the actions of a pilgrim who visits a site on account of its association with various events of religious significance (even if those events have left no trace in the form of body parts, for example).

This is to say, then, that at least one naturalistically inspired account of pilgrimage practice is too crude. Of course, the practice of the Anglicans who are described in Hummel's text is itself recognizably a pilgrimage practice; but it is one that has, arguably, been distorted by false, naturalizing theory, and accordingly their conception of pilgrimage does not cover the full range of legitimate possibilities.

We could represent the error of these Anglican pilgrims as a matter of failing to recognize the possibility of a middle ground between their own position and that of the Russian pilgrims. In expecting a taper to light miraculously in the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre on Easter morning, so confirming Jesus' resurrection, the Russian pilgrims did, arguably, have a 'superstitious' or crudely supernaturalist view of the significance of this site.[12] By contrast, Anglican pilgrims seem to have thought that if the holy sites in Jerusalem were not to be treated superstitiously, then it would be necessary to 'interiorize' or psychologize their meaning, and in this way to make their significance relative to the kinds of reflection that they might inspire. But our examples suggest another possibility.

When I visit the graveside of a loved one, I gain access to a certain meaning by placing myself in physical proximity to their body. This is not a purely mentalistic relation: if, unknown to me, the body of my beloved is not interred there, then while my presence at this place may still count as an act of paying respect, it will

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not bear the same meaning, because the significance of that person will not be 'presented' to me via the post-mortem body.[13] Drawing on this sort of perspective, we can allow that pilgrimage may involve more than simple recollection, and we can even suppose that certain meanings may be 'presented' to us (where this 'presentation' is not reducible to our rehearsing relevant thoughts) by virtue of our location at a place, without thereby endorsing the understanding of pilgrimage that is implied in the practice of the Russian pilgrims – whose devotion seems to have had as its focus allegedly miraculous (in the sense of natural-law-suspending) events.[14]

Can this middle ground be adequately characterized in naturalistic terms? That will depend of course on what kind of 'naturalism' is under consideration. The practice of visiting graves, when interpreted in the way I have suggested, is consistent with what Willem Drees has called the 'constitutive reductionist' strand of naturalism.[15] For example, it does not require us, not without further argument anyway, to suppose that some non-material entity is resident in the body parts, enabling those parts to store up in some fashion the significance of the person. And analogously, we might suppose that the practices of a pilgrim, insofar as she seeks simply to encounter something of the significance of a holy figure, or of a certain event, do not require the postulation of anything over and above the bits of matter which are involved. To put the point in the terms used earlier, this kind of meaning is mediated by way of the relationships of physical continuity and physical proximity – and those relationships have to do with the organization of parts of the physical world. However, it is also true, of course, that the kind of meaning that is under discussion here is not going to show up in any scientific examination of the world (of the kind conducted in physics, chemistry, and biology, for example). And accordingly we should oppose any form of naturalism which takes the concepts which are required for an understanding of pilgrimage to be reducible to those which are current in the sciences.

In the concluding phase of this paper, I would like to take note of two further objections to pilgrimage. These objections, like the first, proceed from the thought that pilgrimage practices are of dubious rationality – though now the idea will be that pilgrimage involves an excess of emotion, or that it is implicated in a primitive conception of God, which fails to reckon with the notion of divine omnipresence. Again, in discussing these issues, my aim will be to identify a 'middle ground' which takes pilgrimage practices to be licit, but not to be wholly characterizable in (crudely) naturalistic terms, or to be dependent upon (crudely) supernaturalist claims.

Pilgrimage and referring to a transcendent God

Denys Turner has objected to at least some pilgrimage practices on the grounds that they are associated with outpourings of emotion,

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and a hankering after a kind of immediate encounter with God. He comments:

> We think of personal experience as unmediated by anything so impersonal and distanced as doctrine. It is the assumption which is contained in that lingering moment of wishful-thinking which lurks in the thought of how decisive it would have been to meet the person of the historical Jesus, of how immediately convincing that would have been by comparison with the historically distanced figure we find in the Scriptures, or in the doctrinally and theologically mediated reality of the Eucharist or service of prayer. It is that same wishful-thinking which leads some to be more excited by the witness of the Shroud of Turin, or the experience of the Holy Places, than by their own, often uninspiring experience of Christian worship.[16]

As with the first objection we examined, here the perceived difficulty with pilgrimage practices is in part their association with states of emotional arousal, and more generally, for Turner, their association with 'experience' (compare again the reserve of nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims towards the outpouring of emotion in the Holy Places) – only on Turner's account, it is liturgy and doctrine, rather than a revivified reading of the Bible, that is taken to provide the proper corrective to such sentimentalism. Turner's comments elsewhere in this text, and in his other writings, reveal that his stance on this point is bound up with his apophaticism, which in turn implies a reluctance to see God as capturable, or 'localizable', whether in experience or thought or place.[17] So we might summarize this second objection to pilgrimage in these terms: to say no more, certain pilgrimage practices imply an attachment to 'experience' (especially an attachment to emotionally charged experience) and they fail therefore to recognize that God cannot be encountered as an object of experience, and that the life of faith is not fundamentally a matter of 'experience'.[18]

No doubt pilgrimage practices are sometimes motivated by a desire for emotional arousal. And in that case they will invite a reductive kind of naturalistic explanation – for instance, we might see them as generated by a desire for reassurance (if such experiences are taken to signify divine favour) or by a desire for the pleasant or thrilling phenomenological feel of certain kinds of exalted experience.[19] But on another reading, I shall now argue, and precisely contrary to Turner's proposal, we could take pilgrimage practices to be a way of making good deficiencies in our experience of God, or deficiencies in our theoretical account of God.

Let us suppose (with Turner, but contrary to a broad swathe of recent literature in the philosophy of religion) that we do not encounter God as a particular object of experience, and that our understanding of the divine nature is at best partial, if not flatly mistaken on many points. These assumptions are likely to appeal not only to those of Turner's persuasion but also to religious naturalists – naturalists are of course inclined to locate divine agency in relation to the general structure of the cosmos, rather than seeing God as directly manifest to believers on

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particular occasions of experience; and in turn, therefore, naturalists may well doubt whether our mode of access to God is of the kind that would permit a detailed description of the divine nature.[20] Granted these assumptions, common to Turner and at least some religious naturalists, we might wonder: how are Christians (for example) to succeed in picking out the Christian God?

One answer would proceed by noting the ways in which, in mundane contexts, we can refer to things independently of any direct encounter with them, or any detailed knowledge of their nature. We might recall, for instance, Saul Kripke's suggestion that what matters in securing the reference of a name is that the present user of the name should have received it from earlier speakers, who in turn will have received it from still earlier speakers – so generating a chain of transmission which reaches its terminus in some initial moment of dubbing, when the name was first fixed to a particular individual.[21] Or we might note the thought that earlier and later generations of scientists are able to refer to the same entities (viruses, atoms, or whatever) not because they associate the same descriptions with those entities (on the contrary, most likely, their theories will be in conflict), nor because they have direct experiential encounter with these entities, but because the same thing is the implied referent of their material practices: that is, because the bits of matter which scientists of different periods manipulate, and the ways in which they manipulate those bits of matter, imply (together with certain minimal descriptions) that they are investigating one and the same kind of thing.[22]

Earlier in the paper, we were concerned with cases where existential meaning is transmitted by means of our practical engagement with the world, rather than in some purely 'mentalistic' fashion (because the 'presentation' of the significance of a person at a given place is not a matter simply of what we believe about the place). In these discussions in the philosophy of language, something similar seems to be in view, insofar as the reference of a name is taken to be established not (entirely) by way of the beliefs which the speaker holds about the referent, but by way of the causal connectedness of the speaker to other speakers, or to relevant bits of matter in an experimental setting.

How might the sort of reference-securing activity described by Kripke, or implied in scientific practice, be achieved in religious contexts? To find a parallel, we need of course to find ways in which the believer can insert themselves within a tradition which traces back to some initial moment of dubbing of the Christian God (the Kripke model), or ways in which by manipulation of various bits of matter they can pick out the ultimate referent of their believing. Naturally, I do not think that pilgrimage practices are indispensable for these purposes, but it is easy to read them as having a contribution to make on both counts.

By identifying herself physically with figures of exemplary sanctity (that is, not simply in thought, but by physical proximity to relevant relics or artefacts or, in general, places), the pilgrim is able to locate herself, tangibly, within the

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Christian tradition. Similarly, David Hunt has commented of early Christian pilgrims that their practice 'was an assertion of identity which transplanted them … temporally backwards into the history of their community – actually, so it was firmly held, into the presence of the sainted martyr'.[23] Here Hunt picks up a theme we have noted already: that by placing ourselves in the presence of the post-mortem body, we can in a sense encounter the significance of the historical person.[24] And he connects this theme, I take it, with the idea that pilgrimage can function as 'an assertion of identity'. To put the point in other terms, we might say that by identifying herself, practically or tangibly, with an individual of paradigmatic Christian status, the pilgrim is thereby able to denominate herself as a Christian. So by placing herself in the 'presence' of the saint, the pilgrim locates herself within the wider Christian community. And thereby she achieves an indirect connection to the event of naming that stands at the source of that community – in rather the way, we might suppose, that the speaker in Kripke's analysis picks out the referent of a name by locating themselves within the community which has handed on that name.[25]

Turning to the second of our models of reference (deriving from the case of reference in science), we might suppose similarly that by engaging with bits of matter in the ways that are characteristic of pilgrimage (by placing herself in proximity to relics, or handling sacred artefacts, or just standing at the site of certain events), the pilgrim can succeed in picking out the ultimate object of her believing, insofar as it is God who was manifest in the life of the saint whose bones are preserved here, or who was at work in certain events of religious significance that occurred here – and it is therefore to God that the pilgrim ultimately directs herself when she performs these various gestures. Analogously, an early investigator of viruses, who has a thoroughly imperfect notion of their nature, may nonetheless succeed in referring to viruses in so far as his practical activities contextually imply that it is viruses that are the focus of his enquiries – since it is viruses, rather than some other entity, which are manifest in the phenomena to which he is attending.

It may be objected that there is a crucial difference between the scientific and religious case which this account has overlooked.[26] The scientist and the pilgrim alike, it may be said, require some minimal (and truthful) account of the reality to which their gestures or enquiries are directed. (For example, if the scientist takes the focus of his enquiries to be not some minute material entity but a variety of blue cheese, then it is difficult to see how we could intelligibly suppose that really it is viruses which are the object of his enquiries.) But while it is easy enough to allow that the scientist may have some minimal description of the nature of viruses which is not of itself sufficient to secure reference to viruses (so leaving a reference-enabling role to be played by the scientist's practices), it is not so easy to suppose that the pilgrim's minimal description of the object of her devotion is not of itself sufficient to pick out God. After all, if the pilgrim thinks of God as

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'the creator', for example, then this is already (assuming the truth of Christianity) enough to pick out the Christian God. And in that case, why think that the pilgrim's practices have any part to play in securing the reference of her talk of God? (And perhaps a similar objection can be raised in relation to the religious analogue of the Kripke model. Why not suppose, for example, that the believer can insert themselves into the relevant community by purely verbal means, as when one says: 'I intend to refer to whatever was the ultimate object of such-and-such a saint's religious practice?' And in that case, how might visiting the saint's body play a reference-enabling role?)

I suggest that two responses may be made to this objection. First of all, while the pilgrim may take her practices to be directed to the creator, she may also hold various false beliefs about the creator, and if these false beliefs are sufficiently pervasive, then a question may arise after all about whether she will succeed in referring to God by description alone. A more interesting line of response might allow that the pilgrim can achieve reference to God by description alone, but suggest that pilgrimage offers a more religiously satisfying mode of reference. There is perhaps an analogy here, once more, with the scientific case – an enthusiast for science may have an adequate theoretical account of the nature of viruses, but may still think it worthwhile to place themselves in an experimental context where they can identify viruses by observing them or their effects with the aid of relevant scientific apparatus. Analogously, the believer may take herself to be able to refer to God abstractly, but may also wish to identify God in some more concrete fashion, by placing herself in proximity to artefacts, relics or places that in some special way bear the marks of divine activity. In this case, the point of pilgrimage is not just reference to God (that can be achieved otherwise) but reference that is achieved by tangible means. The believer may intelligibly take this sort of reference to God to be religiously more profound because it is mediated by way of an encounter with the significance of the saint, and thereby brings the believer into physical contact (rather than simply mental or description-relative contact) with the power of God. Given the objection which I attributed to Turner at the outset of this section, it is worth noting again that achieving this kind of reference is not fundamentally a matter of having certain conscious experiences, or of 'seeing' God, but depends rather upon standing in the requisite relationship of physical proximity.

It would take some further work to develop these thoughts into a fully articulated theory, but I hope I have said enough to suggest how pilgrimage practices, far from implying an attachment to exalted experience (as Turner implies), and far from being in tension with an apophatic understanding of God, can be read as ways in which the believer's thought and feeling are anchored in the Christian God, precisely in the face of the idea that God is not immediately accessible in experience, and the idea that our limited powers of description make reference to God by thought alone a hazardous matter. Insofar as pilgrimage is defined both

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by the desire to stand in the 'presence' of figures of paradigmatic sanctity (rather than 'seeing' God directly), and by the desire to achieve physical contact with certain places or things (rather than simply to 'think'), then it seems to lend itself quite readily to some such reading.[27]

This account may also provide a further response to the first of our objections to pilgrimage. For if pilgrimage can be understood in these terms, then far from serving simply as an aid to recollection (where the object of recollection could in principle be thought about anywhere), the pilgrim's location at a particular site, or in proximity to certain artefacts, may help to define the ultimate, divine content of their thinking – because a thought may depend for its reference upon the thinker's engagement with relevant artefacts (assuming here, once again, that the Kripkean or scientific analogies that we have been exploring can be sustained).

Pilgrimage and omnipresence

So far we have reviewed two objections to pilgrimage practice. Perhaps such practices (when they are not conceived simply as an aid to the imagination) are rooted in a superstitious conception of divine activity – because they imply a belief in law-suspending events of the kind postulated by orthodox pilgrims to Jerusalem, or by Catholic pilgrims to sites such as Lourdes? Or, secondly, perhaps pilgrimage practices imply that God can be encountered as a particular object of experience, and perhaps therefore they are wedded to an experientialist and sentimentalist account of the religious life?

I want now to consider one further objection, one to which I alluded at the outset of this discussion. Perhaps, it will be said, pilgrimage practices are caught up in a primitive, sub-Christian conception of God, because they are committed to the idea of divine localizability?[28] Of course, the idea of God as a particular object of experience (the focus of the second of our objections) also involves a notion of divine localizability (insofar as God is taken to be more directly present to the believer in such experiences); but this kind of localizability need not imply that God is tied especially to certain places (since such experiences may occur anywhere, in principle), and it is this further issue that I want to examine here.

An objection rather like this one is implied in these lines of R. S. Thomas, where he is reflecting upon his decision not to visit Kierkegaard's grave.

> What is it that drives a people
> To the rejection of a great
> Spirit, and after to think it returns
> Reconciled to the shroud
> Prepared for it? It is Luke's Gospel
> Warns us of the danger
> Of scavenging among the dead
> For the living – so I go
> Up and down with him in his books,

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Hand and hand like a child
With its father, pausing to stare
As he did once at the mind's country.[29]

Of course, there is a particular irony in supposing that Kierkegaard's 'spirit' might be preserved under a monument of 'solid marble' that expresses 'the heaviness of a nation's respectability' (as Thomas puts it). But a more general point is made here: Jesus is alive, and in his resurrected state no longer has a particular, localized body.[30] And if that is so, then is it not pointless, if not sacrilegious, to seek him out in particular places in Palestine? It is also implied here that to encounter Jesus now is not least to enter 'the mind's country', and to think the thoughts that the gospels invite us to think.

This perspective is reminiscent of the attitude displayed by Hummel's nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims – here again we find a desire to root our connectedness to God in thought or the imagination, and a tendency to see the religious significance of places as derivative from whatever importance they have for thought. But there is another, more particular concern which we could take to be expressed in the passage: surely Christians must think of God, and the ascended Christ, as present equally in all places?[31] And isn't the kind of localization of divine presence that is implied in pilgrimage therefore a deformation of Christian understanding? Let me attempt a response to this proposal.

In the paper so far, I have tried to rebut two ways of understanding the significance of pilgrimage practices in purely epistemic or experiential terms – their significance is not, I have argued, simply a matter of the contribution that they may make to enabling a livelier recollection of biblical or other scenes; nor is their significance to be understood simply, if at all, in terms of their role in enabling an experience of divine encounter (nor, of course, is their significance given by some combination of these accounts). One response to the objection we are currently considering would appeal to the epistemic significance of particular places or people: if God is made known with particular clarity in the lives of the saints (this is a commonplace of the Christian tradition, I take it), then those lives have a special significance, insofar as they have served as a vehicle of divine disclosure; and something of that significance can then be communicated, in the ways we have explored, to the post-mortem body of the saint; and in turn therefore that significance can be 'presented' to the believer in relevant places in the present. (Or analogously, to take the other case we have considered, we could argue that certain events have a special revelatory significance, and the place which is the site of those events will thereby acquire a special importance, which it can store up over time.)

Our earlier analysis suggests that this sort of account should work well enough. And this will provide one way of spelling out the idea of a differentiated divine relationship to place: it is not that God is located more fully, or causally more

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present, in one place rather than another (so on this point, the objection we are considering is accommodated); rather, the significance of certain people or events which speak with special clarity of God can be 'presented' more fully in certain places rather than others. This account is rooted in the idea that ultimately the idea of differentiated divine relationship to place rests upon epistemic distinctions (the fact that some people or events communicate God more clearly) – although if our earlier analysis holds, it is also true that pilgrimage practices provide a mode of access to the relevant meanings which is not simply a matter of the pilgrim imagining things they were otherwise unable to imagine, or enjoying a special or elevated state of consciousness.

A more ambitious response to the objection we are considering would suppose that God's relationship to place is (also) differentiated because God is more directly active, or at any rate active in ways which imply a different mode of causality, in certain places. I want now to explore, rather briefly, one way of developing this idea. This discussion will provide us with further opportunity to think about bodies and their significance in this context, and once again my approach will be free of any dependence upon the idea of law-suspending events.

I noted just now the idea that the ascended Christ does not have a localizable body (or at any rate not a body that is localizable within our universe). But of course, Christians have supposed that the members of the Church now make up, in part, the body of Christ – and following this thought it may be supposed that the saints in particular 'embody' Christ, in so far as they are directly responsive to the will of God. To put the point in Richard Swinburne's terms, the Church may be said to be the body of Christ in 'a far fuller sense than that in which the inanimate world is God's body' because 'not merely our bodies, but our wills and feelings, are the vehicle of Christ, of his interaction with the world'.[32] On this account, then, God's causal relationship to particular regions of space is differentiated, in so far as only some regions of space can be counted as parts of Christ's body. If we can think of the significance of the saint in these terms, by supposing that God's causal relationship to the saint is of a different, and more intimate, kind than his relationship to other pieces of matter (by analogy with the kind of causal relationship that we enjoy with our bodies), then we could perhaps suppose that the kind of significance that is the focus of pilgrimage practices may in some cases flow from this truth concerning differences in the mode of divine activity – without having to suppose that this distinctive kind of activity involves any suspension of the laws of nature (or at any rate any more of a suspension than is implied in the normal operation of human free choice).

There is a further traditional Christian belief that is perhaps of some importance here: namely the idea that at the general resurrection, a person's body will be comprised, at least in part, of the very matter that made up their body at the time of death. If that is so, then we might suppose that there is a close analogy between the post-mortem body of the saint and the body of the sleeping saint – in

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each case, the body is not currently active in the world, but in each case, we can expect it to be active again.[33] In so far as this analogy holds, then we might suppose that God's causal relationship to the body of the saint continues to be distinctive even after the saint's death – just as, by analogy, my causal relationship to my body remains distinctive even while I am asleep, insofar as my body remains, even during sleep, that portion of the world which I can act on with particular directness. If this is so, then we can make further sense of Hunt's observation that early Christian pilgrims supposed that their practices 'transplanted them … temporally backwards … into the presence of the sainted martyr'[34] – rather as we can be present to another person even while they are asleep.

In responding to the first two of our objections, we considered the thought that pilgrimage practices need not be understood simply in imagination- or experience-relative terms. And by reference to the idea of the Church as the body of Christ, we might suppose that pilgrimage practices do not have to be grounded in the idea that God bears a special relationship to certain places only insofar as certain people and events serve to reveal God with special clarity (so here is a further respect in which they do not have to be grounded in purely epistemic considerations) – rather, the meanings which are presupposed in pilgrimage may reflect the fact that God stands in a different, and more intimate, causal relationship to certain regions of the world.[35] Finally, by reference to the idea that the bodies of the saints at the general resurrection will be at least in part identical to their bodies at the time of death, we have been considering the idea that the meanings which the pilgrim seeks to encounter when in the presence of the post-mortem body need not rest simply upon a differentiated mode of divine activity which obtained at some time in the past – even now, God's causal relationship to the saint's body may be different, in so far as even now that body can be considered part of the body of Christ.

Of course, this approach rests upon specifically Christian metaphysical assumptions concerning the body of Christ, and the nature of the resurrection body. Even so, the account fits with the general perspective that we have been developing elsewhere in this essay, in so far as it does not ground the religious significance of places by reference to law-suspending events (of the kind that predate the eschaton). And again, these reflections provide a further reason for supposing that the significance of pilgrimage practices cannot be understood simply in experiential or epistemic terms.

Conclusion

Of course, there have been many objections to pilgrimage practices. Famously, the Reformers were exercised by the association of pilgrimage with the granting of indulgences, and more generally with the thought that divine favour can in some fashion be earned. However, the idea of indulgences is likely to strike

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a modern audience as obviously muddle-headed or worse (not least when it involves the idea that a precise exchange rate obtains between the benefits which derive from visits to different places – as when it was supposed, for example, that one visit to Rome was spiritually equivalent to two visits to Saint David's in Pembrokeshire.)[36] In this paper, I have tried instead to pick out objections that still have a degree of currency. Thinking of pilgrimage to Lourdes, for example, it is not difficult to imagine someone objecting (as Richard Dawkins did in his recent UK television series on religion) that this sort of activity rests upon a superstitious belief in miracles of healing, or that it involves a kind of collective loss of rationality, on account of the intense emotionality of such gatherings.[37] And it is easy to imagine a Christian who supposes that God is encountered most deeply in a person's private experience of prayer concluding that pilgrimage involves a sub-Christian notion of divine localizability (since such experiences can occur in principle anywhere). So the objections I have taken are all, I think, live in the context of current debate.

In this paper, I have not wanted to address directly the presuppositions of these objections (I have ventured no view, for example, on whether accounts of miraculous healings at Lourdes are to be believed). But I have tried to sketch an account of pilgrimage which shows how such practices can have a point quite apart from any belief in natural-law-suspending events, and quite apart from any tendency they may have to engender especially intense forms of religious experience, and how they need not depend upon the idea that God is, from a causal point of view, more directly and enduringly present in certain places than others – although on this last point, I have also argued, of course, that on a Christian perspective, there is some reason to think that God's causal relationship to places is differentiated (quite apart from any commitment to the idea that God works 'miraculously'), and that this differentiation may help to underpin the point of certain pilgrimage practices.

Overall, the case I have been making seeks to show, with particular reference to the case of pilgrimage, how we can make sense of the idea that certain places may be of special importance religiously, and how this differentiation of place need not be mediated simply by way of our imagination or experience, or even by reference to the contribution of certain people or events in revealing God with special clarity. In place of these accounts, I have been considering (first) how bodies and places may store up significance over time – a significance that may (but need not) derive from a differentiated mode of divine causality – and how religious meanings may thereby be 'presented' to the pilgrim via the relationship of physical proximity; and (second) how by handling religious artefacts, or in general by standing in a relationship of physical proximity to certain places, the believer can locate themselves physically within the Christian tradition, and thereby achieve an embodied reference to the Christian God. In both of these respects, then, we have been considering how relationship to God may be

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mediated not simply by thought (or by imagination, experience and description), but by location. Naturally, I do not want to say that these two perspectives exhaust the range of licit meanings of pilgrimage. But I do hope to have shown that pilgrimage is a richer and more suggestive phenomenon than one might suppose from reading standard accounts – whether those accounts derive from would-be friends of the practice or from its detractors.[38]

Notes

1. In recent years, there has however been a spate of theological literature dealing broadly with these questions. See, for example, John Inge *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); David Brown *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Philip Sheldrake *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 1991).
2. Compare Victor and Edith Turner's reference to pilgrimage's 'importance in the actual functioning of [Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam], both quantitatively and qualitatively'; Victor & Edith Turner *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 1.
3. For instance, as David Brown notes, both the Buddha and Guru Nanak were critical of pilgrimage. Even so pilgrimage practices have emerged in the traditions which they founded; David Brown *God and Enchantment of Place*, 216–217.
4. These perspectives will be expounded more fully below.
5. I am grateful to Peter Byrne for encouraging me to think about the unifying theme of the paper in these terms.
6. Of course, there are other objections to pilgrimage in addition to those I shall consider. For a summary of such objections, see for example Brown *God and Enchantment of Place*, 154–163, and Inge *A Christian Theology of Place*, 98–101.
7. Recollection is assigned a central role in the account of pilgrimage given in the Vatican document 'The shrine: memory, presence and prophecy of the living God' (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 1999, available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents) (accessed 1 August 2005). The three fundamental dimensions of the significance of shrines distinguished here all point to a role for memory. The account I develop here, while compatible with the idea that shrines are important as a stimulus to memory, will be concerned with the possibility of other kinds of meaning which are not to be reduced to the shrine's role as an aid to recollection.
8. Thomas Hummel 'The sacramentality of the Holy Land: two contrasting approaches', in David Brown and Ann Loades (eds) *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London: SPCK, 1995), 79.
9. *Ibid*., 83.
10. *Ibid*., 82–83.
11. Although we are considering here the case of physical proximity to deceased persons, similar reflections are relevant, I suggest, to the tradition of visiting holy figures during their lifetime – compare for instance the *starets* tradition in Russian Orthodoxy. Often enough, these figures are sought out, it seems, not because of their theological learning, nor simply because of their capacity to dispense practical advice, but because of their recognized sanctity – and to this extent, the idea seems to be that the holy person's enacted witness to the Christian faith is in some fashion stored up in their body, and can be encountered by others when they place themselves in proximity to that body. See Kallistos Ware's comment that the wisdom of such men was typically associated with a period of withdrawal in silence, rather than formal education; Timothy Ware *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 47–48.
12. See Hummel's description of the ceremony of the Sacred Fire in 'The sacramentality of the Holy Land', 89–90. This is a ceremony which continues to the present day, of course. A recent study of the self-understanding of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem from various denominational backgrounds suggests

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that some of the differences of attitude that applied in the nineteenth century persist to this day; see Glenn Bowman 'Christian ideology and the image of a Holy Land: the place of Jerusalem in the various Christianities', in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (eds) *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991), 98–121.

13. And conversely if, unknown to me, the body of my beloved is interred at a certain place, then my actions at that place may carry a significance that they would not otherwise have had (consider for example the case where I disturb the grave). I take it that if the significance of a person is to be 'presented' to me at a given site, then the person needs to be associated with the site in relevant ways, and I need to know of that association. But as this further example indicates, even if the significance of a person is not 'presented' to me (because I do not know of their connection with a site), it does not follow that the site has no bearing on the meaning which attaches to my activities.
14. The understanding of pilgrimage that I am sketching here seems to fit with early Christian pilgrimage practice. For instance, David Hunt rejects the idea that such practice can be understood simply as 'travel helpful for making Scripture vivid': David Hunt 'Space and time transcended: the beginnings of Christian pilgrimage', in Brown & Loades *The Sense of the Sacramental*, 64. Instead, Hunt prefers to characterize the practice of early Christian pilgrims in these terms: 'It was an assertion of identity which transplanted them … temporally backwards into the history of their community – actually, so it was firmly held, into the presence of the sainted martyr' (63). Compare also the comments of Gregory of Nyssa on the tradition of honouring the relics of the martyr Theodore: 'those who behold them [i.e. the remains] embrace them as though the actual body … and bring forward their supplications to the martyr as though he were present' (cited in Hunt 'Space and time transcended', 63).
15. Willem B. Drees *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 14.
16. Denys Turner *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 119.
17. For his apophaticism see for example *idem The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The same association of ideas appears in Philip Sheldrake's exposition of Gregory of Nyssa's comment that: 'A change of place does not effect any drawing nearer to God.' Sheldrake comments: St Gregory 'was defending the apophatic pole of Eastern theology – that God is not only beyond human language but is essentially inaccessible'; Sheldrake *Spaces for the Sacred*, 49.
18. Compare Turner's comment on the eucharist: 'For the Word made flesh in Jesus becomes the flesh made Word in us. That is our resurrection, a mystery of faith, beyond all experience'; Turner *Faith Seeking*, 120.
19. Compare the dramaturgical and narcissistic sources of emotional experience distinguished by David Pugmire in *Rediscovering Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 119.
20. Both assumptions are endorsed, I think, by Drees in *Religion, Science and Naturalism*. And despite his suggestion that there are precedents for the divine nature in the created order, Peter Forrest wishes to uphold the idea of divine ineffability: Peter Forrest *God Without the Supernatural: A Defense of Scientific Theism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24.
21. See Saul Kripke *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 96–97.
22. I am indebted here to Peter Byrne, who has applied this account of reference in science to the question of reference in religion. See his *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), ch. 2.
23. Hunt 'Space and time transcended', 63.
24. Perhaps Hunt intends to attribute to these Christians a rather stronger belief – a matter to which I return on 159 below.
25. This way of putting the matter assumes that, in the case of the Christian God, the crucial event of naming occurs at the time of Jesus (or perhaps earlier). Another analysis would suppose that the saint themselves achieves some kind of direct reference to God, which can be mediated to the pilgrim in the ways we are considering – though perhaps this account would not sit so well with the assumptions of Turner and others that we are trying to accommodate.
26. I am grateful to Brian Leftow for encouraging me to address this issue.
27. And to this extent the account we have been considering should be of some interest to religious naturalists – because it sits comfortably with their supposition that God is not encountered directly, and that religious thought (and religious reference in particular) is broadly intelligible by analogy with the way in which our thinking operates in secular contexts.

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28. Luco van den Brom helpfully articulates the concerns implied in this approach when he notes that 'the localizability of a divine being poses a constant threat to his worthiness to receive worship'; Luco van den Brom *Divine Presence in the World* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 83.
29. R. S. Thomas, 'A grave unvisited', in *idem Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 183.
30. Compare these remarks of Alexander Schmemann on the early Church: 'Christians had no concern for any sacred geography, no temples, no cult that could be recognized as such by the generations fed with the solemnities of the mystery cults. There was no specific interest in the places where Jesus had lived. There were no pilgrimages. … There was no need for temples to be built of stone: Christ's Body, the Church itself, the new people gathered in Him, was the only real temple'; Alexander Schmemann *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 20.
31. Noting that Christians 'have had an ambiguous relationship to place', Michael Northcott comments: 'Christians believe that … in the light of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ within creaturely space and time, all space, and all time, are … in continuous relationship with the Creator'; Michael Northcott 'The Word in space: the body of Christ as the true urban form which overcomes exclusion', in John Vincent (ed.) *Faithfulness in the City* (Hawarden: Monad Press, 2003), 247.
32. See Richard Swinburne's essay 'What is so good about having a body?', in T. W. Bartel (ed.) *Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward* (London: SPCK, 2003), 141. I am grateful to Richard Swinburne for drawing my attention to these issues at a meeting of the Joseph Butler Society.
33. Compare David Brown's comment: 'Speaking of a ''cemetery'' rather than of a ''necropolis'' indicates the new emphasis within Christianity. It was not a place for corpses of the ''dead'', but for those who were ''asleep'''; Brown *God and Enchantment of Place,* 216.
34. Hunt 'Space and time transcended', 63.
35. Of course, epistemic considerations will continue to be important here, to the extent that the revelatory quality of a person's life gives us reason to think that their body is part of the body of Christ. Nonetheless, the saint's body is to be venerated not just because of the revelatory quality of the saintly life (an epistemic truth), but for the further reason that this body is part of the body of Christ (a metaphysical truth).
36. See Douglas Davies 'Christianity', in Holm and Bowker *Sacred Place,* 45.
37. The programme was entitled: 'The root of all evil?' and shown on Monday 9 January and Monday 16 January 2006, on Channel 4 in the UK.
38. I am very grateful to Peter Byrne, Brian Leftow, and Richard Swinburne, as well as to members of the Joseph Butler Society, for various observations which have made for a number of significant improvements in the paper.

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