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Places of Healing

Assignment 2

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The Flexible Consistency of Pilgrimage: The Example of Lourdes

Religious pilgrimages, while carried out for varied motivations, share certain characteristics. Sites of pilgrimage almost always have some connection to the divine, whether through an apparition, a miraculous healing or other miracle, or a central religious figure living or experiencing a significant event at the site (Turner & Turner 1978: 6; Weibel 2005: 115-6). Such sites are “considered to be the manifestation of the supernatural – a place where it is easier to obtain divine help” (Tomasi 2002: 3). For many religions, pilgrimage is a voluntary rite, undertaken by individuals hoping for a more concentrated divine encounter, or seeking spiritual or physical healing (Turner & Turner 1978: 8, 16). The physical journey – in the past often perilous and physically taxing – possesses near equal importance as the site itself, with Christian theology equating a dolorous journey with Christ’s passion. The difficulties endured during pilgrimage serve as purifying acts of penance (Tomasi 2002: 5-6; Turner & Turner 1978: 6-7).

The Grotto and the surrounding “Marian Domain” of Lourdes, France, is one of the most well-known sites of healing pilgrimage, “founded” in February 1858 with Bernadette Soubirous’ vision of the Virgin Mary. Uncertainty and mystery characterized Bernadette’s visions; she called what she saw *Aquéro* – an indefinable being, not human, but not necessarily divine. Despite her family’s efforts to keep the story to themselves, it soon spread throughout Lourdes and the surrounding villages. Eight hundred people gathered to witness the tenth apparition two weeks after the first, despite the figure’s yet unconfirmed legitimacy in the eyes of the Catholic Church (Harris 1999: 3-7, 67). As one of ten other sites in the “Marian Terrain” at the base of the Pyrenees, Bernadette’s vision could have easily remained a site of local significance (Gesler 2003: 67; Harris 1999: 289-290). What happened instead, however, was shaped by the social and political mood of the time, as well as a cultivated process of advertisement and organization by the church fathers, who sought to realign and strengthen embattled French Catholics in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Lourdes, which at the time of the apparition had “little sense of being French,” grew into a site of national and international pilgrimage that continues to draw millions of visitors – both believers and tourists – each year (Harris 1999: 29; Kaufman 2001: 65-70).

Just as the Lourdais lacked nationalistic identification with France, so did they lack cohesive Catholic conviction. The peasants there retained and sometimes combined traditional animistic beliefs with Christianity. Natural places like the Grotto already figured prominently in local lore, with magical and spiritual connotations connected to it long before Bernadette’s visions (Harris 1999: 33, 53). When Bernadette reported that the *Aquéro* identified herself with the phrase, “I am the Immaculate Conception,” the apparition’s classification as the Virgin Mary was confirmed, and the site’s legitimacy almost assured (Harris 1999: 5-8). Marian apparitions have remained particularly attractive to Catholic pilgrims, who view Mary as a familial maternal presence, who serves as a powerful and influential intercessor between humanity and her son, Jesus (Gesler 2003: 76). The vision of Mary implored Bernadette to tell the faithful to pray, conduct processions to the Grotto, and build a chapel. She hoped for the repentance of sinners and a renewal of the faith. As Gesler observes, the requests were not unusual; rather they “[were] the kinds of things a priest of pastor says to a congregation, but obviously they carr[ied] much greater force [coming] from Mary.” (2003: 77)

An early problem that the church fathers ran into in the course of Lourdes development, however, was the dissimilarity of Bernadette’s description of what she had seen and canonical representations of Mary. Bernadette’s youthful, child-sized Virgin did not fit the church’s standard maternal figure. When the church expunged the disparate details and circulated images of the Lourdes apparition as an adult woman crushing a snake, the familiar representation served to convince many priests and believers of Bernadette’s legitimacy (Harris 1999: 74-77, 81-82). Photographic representations of Bernadette also shaped the narrative in alignment with the pastoral qualities of other contemporary Marian apparitions. Bernadette entered a convent at Nevers in 1866, where she died in 1879. Her absence from Lourdes in the formative years of pilgrimage allowed the church to further romanticize and idealize her innocence and faith as a part of their vision for the site (Harris 1999: 9, 38, 146-48, 169; Gesler 2003: 77).

The site initially grew in ways analogous to Turner & Turner’s description of the standard evolution of a pilgrimage: “The first pilgrims [at Lourdes, those observing the Bernadette’s apparitions themselves] arrive haphazardly, individually, and intermittently, though in great numbers…their devotion is fresh and spontaneous” (1978: 25). Early stages of pilgrimage remain flexible to accommodate individuals’ needs and motivations, but as the process continues and popularity increases, routinization and increased control of the site and its rituals become more necessary. At Lourdes, the increase and routinization occurred nearly simultaneously, intentionally facilitated by the Assumptionists and the Grotto fathers. This type of crowd-control management often creates bureaucracy around a holy site, and consequently runs the risk of political or other kinds of manipulation of the faithful or commercialization of the site (Winkelmann & Dubisch 2005: ix; Turner & Turner 1978: 8, 26).

Official control began at Lourdes with the church’s official sanction of Bernadette’s vision in 1862. Ten years later, the first National Pilgrimage was organized by the Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception (also called the Grotto fathers). They subsequently passed authority over the pilgrimage to the Augustinian Fathers of the Assumption, who utilized modern techniques like mass press and newly installed railway lines to advertise the site and facilitate easy access to Lourdes from more distant regions of France. By the 1880s, numbers of pilgrims participating in the National Pilgrimage had increased from less than 1000 to 20,000 (Gesler 2003: 74; Kaufman 2001: 65-66).

As the National Pilgrimage gained momentum, the church hoped that Lourdes could acquire political significance. Historically, association with a site of pilgrimage can serve to establish or strengthen a government’s authority, or conversely, can be utilized as a mode of resistance to state power (McCorriston 2011: 22; Winkelmann & Dubisch 2005: xvi-xvii). Mass pilgrimage could also reflect political and social conditions, and could be manipulated insofar as the motivations for pilgrimage “reflect localized concerns and [are] associated with new or resurgent forms of nationalism or religious identity” (Winkelmann & Dubisch 2005: x). The church at various times implemented all of these approaches in the “mood of national soul-searching” of late-19th-Century France. Prussia’s victory over France in 1871 decimated national pride, and subsequent civil unrest and the failed Paris Commune only exacerbated the discontent. The 1872 National Pilgrimage to Lourdes provided Catholics a way to recognize their place within the larger French Catholic identity and tradition (Harris 1999: 210-11, 222). Seeking to deter this national identification with religion, the newly formed Republican government became an adversary of the church. They broke the church’s monopoly on education by funding secular public schools. Furthermore, the government sought to delegitimize church authority by accusing it of being anti-modernist and irrational (Kaufman 2001: 86-87). The church’s insecure position within Republican France bolstered anti-republicanism in church ideology, which spilled over onto Lourdes and was also circulated through the Catholic press. The church’s failure to effect a return to a position of power (i.e. a Catholic monarchy) shifted their position to a defensive one. The Assumptionists dedicated themselves to fighting the de-Christianization of France, using the Lourdes pilgrimage as “a symbol for those who supported the Catholic Church against its detractors” (Gesler 2003: 70; Kaufman 2001: 85-86).

Antecedent to political goals of the Lourdes pilgrimage was the physical development of the site itself. In a fashion similar to the modification of Bernadette’s description of the Virgin, the church shaped the natural and built landscape of Lourdes to its purposes. “The only place that Bernadette would recognize…is the grotto, but its pastoral setting and charm are long gone” (Gesler 2003: 68). Government reports from the turn of the century record that the goal of the construction projects was to strike arriving pilgrims with awe at the natural landscape and its religious context (Kaufman 2001: 67). Central to this was the construction of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, whose completion in 1872 satisfied multiple purposes. It fulfilled Mary’s request for a chapel; it centralized the Grotto as the holy site, distancing it from the secular parts of town; and “by placing the massive basilica on top of [the grotto], the Church ensured the symbolic imposition of orthodoxy” as dominant over the animistic, naturalistic beliefs of the region (Harris 1999: 171-172). Although the Grotto fathers’ intentional ideological and physical shift away from the town initially frustrated the Lourdais, who feared they would lose pilgrim traffic and thus their business,[[1]](#footnote-1) infrastructure improvements – electricity, new streets, hotels, trams and a funicular – ultimately brought economic prosperity to the region, mirroring other pilgrimage sites the world over (Kaufman 2001: 66, 85; McCorriston 2011: 28-29).

As rail lines made transportation to Lourdes increasingly affordable, a larger societal shift toward consumerism in the late-19th century was also integral to maintaining the site’s popularity with pilgrims and tourists alike (Harris 1999: 175; Kaufman 2001: 64). Guidebooks from the 1800s delineated tourists and pilgrims, providing general information for all and details for each respective group (Tomasi 2002: 20). This secular/sacred divide persists into the present: Wilbert Gesler described his own experiences at Lourdes as vacillating between varied environments and purposes. The sacred and secular realms of shrine and city are distinguished not only physically by gates, but also aurally through the contrasting raucous daily life of a tourist locale and the solemn silence of the shrine (Gesler 2003: 68, 74).

Church officials themselves sometimes blurred this distinction, however, peddling items in the Domain and the town ranging from obligatory candles to lozenges made from the spring’s waters. In response to pilgrims’ complaints about the illegitimacy of some “relics”, the church tried to monopolize the market for religious goods to prevent profiteering and deception, but it was never able to fully stem the entrepreneurial spirit that sought to capitalize on the site’s popularity. While the faithful feared that over-commercialization would sully the site’s spirituality, the French state was also wary of the consumerism. They likened the merchants to medieval sellers of indulgences, and worried that the conflation of consumerism and Catholicism threatened the progressive nature of capitalism and the rational modernity the Republic represented (Kaufman 2001: 64-65, 71-77).

Yet amidst the large-scale maneuvering of the church, city, and state, the pilgrims to Lourdes retained the prototypical motivations for their journey: a closer interaction with the divine, a wish to strengthen their faith, an experience of *communitas,*[[2]](#footnote-2)or a hope for miraculous spiritual or physical healing (McCorriston 2011: 25-26; Weibel 2005: 118-119). As with the first impromptu groups that gathered at Lourdes, the collection of individuals that have embarked on the pilgrimage throughout history are diverse and represent the greater Catholic collective, unifying varied social classes under the banner of the church (Harris 1999: 67). Alongside the heightened sense of the divine in a place of pilgrimage, sharing a purpose and tradition with a large group reinforces individual faith and serves to validate religious identity. The traditional roots of pilgrimage and the associated sacred rituals practiced by the crowds allow believing pilgrims to connect with the faith and the site’s past and to relate both to their present and future lives. (Winkelmann & Dubisch 2005: xx, xxxii).

The Catholic Church in France sought to utilize pilgrimage to Lourdes to counter social and political trends of the time and to strengthen the overall Catholic role in France. In the face of Republican anti-clericalism and national defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Bernadette Soubirous’ vision and Lourdes were shaped and remade to fit Catholic traditions, allowing the site and the pilgrimage to be instrumentalized to serve the larger purposes of the church. “Thus the exigencies of ‘progress’ wiped out the older patterns of living; by the time the great national pilgrimages took on definitive shape in the late 1870s, Lourdes was changed almost beyond recognition” (Harris 1999: 175). Bernadette’s vision and the apparition’s wishes were also eventually eclipsed by the spring’s miraculous healing powers, reported soon after the initial apparition, and legitimized by the church in 1862 (Gesler 2003: 67; Harris 1999: 296-297). Only after the political goals of the church were discouraged by the stability of the Republic did Lourdes’ identity as a place of healing blossom. Still, despite the continued appeal of the miraculous, the site administrators were and are encouraged to downplay healing, because of the ease of slippage from miracle into magic. “The suffering of Christ and the suffering of humanity is the ‘official’ symbolic intention underscored at the site” (Juschka 2003: 10). This further aligns with the pilgrim tradition that does not equate the journey with expectation of being healed, but rather as an act of penance or an exercise to learn to cope with illness or difficulty (Turner & Turner 1978: 6-7, 13-14; Tomasi 2002: 8). Thus at Lourdes, the “lure of the miraculous” remains, but what is paramount is “the individual encounter with the supernatural, a vision of community and of selfhood entirely at odds with secular creeds” (Harris 1999: 11).

The tradition of pilgrimage to Lourdes was forged in the context of political, religious, and intellectual struggles throughout mid- to late-19th century Europe (Gesler 2003: 81). In the aftermath of Bernadette’s vision and the early years of National Pilgrimage, the church administration sought to achieve structural and political goals through faithful believers’ journey to Lourdes. They modified the vision and altered the landscape in an effort to orchestrate the masses. Amidst the evolving physical and symbolic landscape, pilgrims continued to make the journey for the standard individual reasons. The strength of pilgrimage as a “ritual [that] is ‘ancient and unchanging,’ yet is dynamic and transposable as actors chose from a repertoire of forms to engage in present circumstances” is clearly illustrated at Lourdes (McCorriston 2011: 4). The church’s emphases and political goals evolved around the consistent Catholic devotion to the classical figure of Mary as intercessor and healer. A modicum of consistency and the power of tradition allowed Lourdes to prosper, even when nearly everything else surrounding the site transformed.

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1. Specifically, there were protests against a direct road to the grotto that would circumnavigate the town. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This central aspect of pilgrimage (theorized by Turner & Turner and criticized and extrapolated by other scholars) describes the relationships among individual pilgrims. The concept as it emerges in Lourdes is beyond the scope of this paper, but bears mentioning. The Turners define *communitas* as the positive, egalitarian environment and “commonness of feeling” among pilgrims. While this concept is essential to their writing on pilgrimage, they also emphasize the individuality of pilgrimage experiences. Even when the journey is conducted in a group, those traveling are “a throng of similars, not of structurally interdependent persons.” The unit of reference is the individual acting on behalf of his eternal afterlife (Turner & Turner 1978: 8, 13). Other scholars criticize the concept of *communitas*, citing, for example, Hindu pilgrimages where rigid caste structure is maintained throughout the process (McCorriston 2011: 25; Juschka 2003: 3). These authors maintain that the “egalitarian, temporary, undifferentiated social status” embodied in *communitas* rarely emerges fully, and could only exist within an ingrained social stratification (McCorriston 2011: 24-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)