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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have debated the potential results of pilgrimage, but few have tracked how pre-trip goals actually relate to post-trip outcomes. Based on research with US evangelicals, this article argues that, despite being confronted with the possibility of disrupted meaning, nearly every pilgrim comes to see the trip as a success. To understand why, I draw on studies that frame Christian rituals as processes that are partial and in flux. Firstly, I explore how gendered notions of relationality affect perceptions of efficacy and lead to multiple goal-setting. Secondly, I show how the journey is couched within broader epistemologies that define a Christian life as incremental improvements, where one ‘grows’ with God. Thus the meaning making associated with pilgrimage is never fully complete, but is compelled into a future where further interpretations and presumed successes are inchoate. Ultimately, the belief in *future meaning* is as important—perhaps more so—than immediate ritual success.

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Introduction

The ice in Bernadette’s lemonade is melting, leaving a watery ring on the coffee table. We have both forgotten our drinks, as we sit in her living-room two months after the Holy Land trip organized by her evangelical mega-church. Our chatty conversation has suddenly turned serious. Bernadette is telling me something I have heard only rarely over the course of five years’ work with American Christian pilgrims: upon return, she had lapsed into prolonged spiritual doubt. In effect, she viewed her trip as a failure.

Many anthropologists have written about the potential outcomes of pilgrimage. Victor and Edith Turner’s classic *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* contrasted the journey’s transformative aspects with those of ritual initiation. In the context of Western Christian pilgrimage, scholars have posited that, rather than transformation *per se*, we can identify multiple potential outcomes: it may make one a “better person” (Turner, “Death” 37), affirm salvation (Morinis 27), reconfirm identity (Bowman 98), provide a “ritualized break” from routine (Graburn 22), and result in renewal or healing (Dubisch and Winkelman).

While not incorrect, such conclusions have relied mainly on proscriptive theology or research conducted during the trip itself. With some notable exceptions (Frey), only a few studies of Western pilgrimage have tracked participants after return (e.g. Pieper and Van

Uden; Ozorak; Fedele). Fewer still have also worked with pilgrims before departure (e.g. Notermans).¹ While my larger project includes participation in the Holy Land, here, I explore pilgrimage in a way that may seem counter-intuitive at first: I focus on the before and after, rather than the trip itself. Doing so allows me to concentrate on how (pre-trip) intent relates to (post-trip) outcomes. More particularly, it foregrounds two primary questions: why have anthropologists and other scholars of contemporary pilgrimage so rarely chronicled failure? And why, although all pilgrims run the risk that hopes and goals remain unfulfilled, did nearly every person in my study still deem the trip a ‘success’? In short, why is Bernadette’s experience so rare?

My discussion is framed by Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson’s observation, consistent with Thomas Csordas’s earlier work on healing, that Christian rituals are processes that are incremental, partial, and in flux. I begin by describing two pilgrimage stories in more depth. I then parse the theoretical framework of pilgrimage studies and turn to the way American evangelicals view pilgrimage, specifically as it relates to gendered notions of relationality and to a teleology that views Christian life as an incremental spiritual progression.

Terri and Bernadette: Studies in Evangelical Pilgrimage

The Holy Land is the paradigmatic destination of Christian pilgrimage. Each year, about 250,000 United States Christians—60% of whom are evangelicals—visit the places where Jesus lived and died (Israel Ministry of Tourism 32). Most trips are organized by churches, like Newton Evangelical Church (NEC), the mega-church that Bernadette attends in Vermont. Housed in a large contemporary-style complex, NEC draws about 2,000 attendees for its multiple Sunday services. Worship is casual and upbeat, undergirded by a theology that is standard in many non-denominational US churches.² The NEC has a number of small group ministries, including head pastor Derek Jorek’s Israel tour ministry, which has been ongoing since the late 1980s. The trip he organized in 2012, which Bernadette accompanied, was typical of US Holy Land trips: a pre-paid package tour, nine days long, costing US\$3,900 per person. Participants’ average age was 60 and women made up 69% of the group. Most US Christian Holy Land pilgrims are female, middle-aged, lower or middle class, and committed church-goers.

While many scholars have documented evangelical trips to Israel, fewer have included them under the rubric of pilgrimage studies. Despite the broad title, the Turners’ *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* focused exclusively on Roman Catholics. By the 1990s, the field had expanded to include Orthodox, Latter-day Saints, Anglicans, New Agers, and ‘secular’ pilgrims at places like Graceland (Reader), yet most Protestants remained noticeably absent (Olsen and Timothy 275; cf. Tweed; Neville). At the same time, as interest in Christian Zionism grew, so did studies of mainly US evangelical tours to Israel–Palestine (e.g. Feldman, “Constructing”; Shapiro; Belhassen and Ebel). However, because of their strong political motivations and aversion to the material stuff of ritual, these Protestants seemed something other than pilgrims, especially when juxtaposed with traditional Catholic or Orthodox groups (Bowman; Coleman, “From England’s Nazareth”; Fleischer).

These dichotomies derive from Reformed theology itself. Early Calvinists eschewed physical pilgrimage in favor of the soul’s interiorized journey, as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) so memorably illustrates. Somewhat ironically, it is scholars’ familiarity with this theology and with the politics of Christian Zionism that has obscured how most

US evangelicals actually view the trip. Although pastoral leaders may have definite theological agendas, few participants identify as Christian Zionists (Feldman, “Abraham”). They understandably associate the journey with Jesus and thus connect it to the vital center of their faith. As a result, their perspective contrasts with what some scholars have found at Lourdes, for example, where Catholic pilgrims may travel in order to nurture a devotion to Mary that is marginalized or even suppressed at home (Notermans 184). Most importantly perhaps, with the growth of vacation tourism, by and large, US evangelicals now view religious travel in a positive light, quite unrelated to the fear of religious ‘works’ that so plagued their Reformist forebears.

Yet this complicated theological legacy does hold continued relevance. While all Christian pilgrimage is voluntary and may therefore have fewer explicit norms related to reincorporation than, for example, the Muslim *hajj*, US evangelicals are faced with a particular dearth of recognized antecedents and consensual interpretations of doctrinal efficacy (Hüsken 351). Few pastors hold pre- or post-trip meetings with much theological content, leaving participants to formulate their own goals, which they typically connect to ongoing prayer requests.³ These goals are almost always personal and even private; however, this does not mean that the pilgrimage is inherently individualistic, “undertaken collectively mainly when there is no alternative” (Margry 22). Generally, Americans who choose a Holy Land trip view participation in a Christian group as essential to the experience (Kaell 57–60), although their primary goals remain personal. On that note, I turn to Terri and Bernadette, two women on the NEC trip who each faced a disjuncture between goals and results. Terri—as is typical—did not regard the trip as failed. Bernadette, however, faced a situation significantly more unsettling.

Terri and her husband Luke are in their mid-50s and live in a farm-style suburban house with their dog Bo. The family is comfortably middle-class. Luke is an engineer. Terri works part-time in a jewellery store and maintains close ties with their three children, who attend colleges nearby. When Terri described the impetus to go to the Holy Land, she couched it in a series of events that radically altered their faith life. Five years ago, their marriage was in crisis. One Sunday, Terri did not accompany Luke to church. Although they were stalwart members of their liberal United Church of Christ (UCC) congregation—Luke had just been elected president—she felt called to NEC:

I didn’t know what I wanted, I just knew when I came here that I was just so drawn to the church service, the worship and I just cried for weeks just listening to the music and just being in the church.

Three months later, she “came to the Lord” and was baptized anew. She began to bring her two younger children, teens at the time, with her and, after seven difficult months, Luke followed suit. They joined the NEC Couples Ministry, which holds marriage-counseling workshops. Today they are group leaders, telling their story and ministering to others.

Yet there were two crucial issues that Terri still felt required resolution: firstly, her oldest son, 22-year-old Josh, had not had a personal conversion experience; secondly, Luke had refused to undergo baptism. In fact, the transition to NEC was not the first time Terri had directed the couple’s faith. Luke grew up Catholic, but Terri wanted to raise their children in her UCC church. Luke followed her wholeheartedly but balked at adult baptism. Catholics baptize their children as infants and Luke was concerned that “My family, their faith is very strong in the Catholic Church. And so I always thought ... here am I insulting my parents by getting re-baptized.” Luke is also shy and the NEC baptism service is a “very big party

celebration” with hundreds of spectators. His reticence posed few problems at their liberal UCC church, but at NEC, as the party atmosphere suggests, this ordinance is seen as the ultimate commitment to a new life in Jesus. For Terri, her husband’s continued refusal also seemed like the last barrier to renewing their marriage.

Before the trip, Terri enumerated three major prayers upon which she expected to focus: on behalf of Josh, Luke, and a couple in the NEC marriage ministry considering divorce. Sitting next to her, Luke responded with a clear goal: being baptized in the Jordan River. It seemed to fulfill Terri’s expectations (though he did not put it so bluntly) while lessening his feelings of betrayal by framing the experience as unique:

When this trip came up to Israel and there’s the opportunity to get baptized I thought, what can my parents be upset about being baptized in the Jordan? I mean, how often in your life do you get the chance to do *that*?

Terri nodded and added that she had actually foreseen his response. All summer, she had prayed about his baptism until God made it clear to her that it would be resolved. When the trip was announced in November, she already knew what Luke’s answer would be.

Two months after their return, we sat down again. For Terri, a highlight was the communion service in Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before his crucifixion. She said:

My reverence for God’s ability to do just about anything is greater. So an outcome is that I see it that way *even more*. I guess it may have been from being in the garden where [Jesus] was praying when he was captured, just the sense of reverence for prayer, too, and how much prayer—prayers *get answered*.

The Gospels describe how Jesus prayed for strength to acquiesce to God’s will before he was condemned to die. Terri prays for strength in adversity, too, but fundamentally she believes that prayers result in progressive improvement, a point I return to below. For Terri, this trajectory is epitomized by Luke’s baptism: she waited patiently, prayed, received God’s assurance, and got results. It was the highlight of the pilgrimage and the story she told repeatedly upon return. Of all the photos she planned to print, those were the only ones she wanted to frame. “I was just so overwhelmed by Luke’s baptism”, she said, and

That was what I was most focused on. I remember we were sobbing afterwards. It was really just very, very meaningful. It was very exciting to e-mail our kids that night and tell them... Josh even sent a note to Luke saying, “You’re my hero!” So that was really cool. And I don’t think Josh gets it. But he will some day. He did go to my baptism [at NEC] and ... so I just think he sees. It’s the seeds being planted. Good seeds that will some day germinate.

Terri views the triumph of Luke’s baptism in the light of her ongoing prayers for Josh. If the baptism photo is a concrete reminder of her prayerful success, Terri’s choice of souvenir gifts are material metaphors of the work still ahead: she brought her two younger children hand-carved crosses, but gave Josh a humorous T-shirt with a cartoon camel. She has a cross for him, too, but is waiting until she can present it to him as a Christian. “And I know that I will”, she ended firmly, “at some point. I want him to be with us in heaven. Things don’t always look the way I want it to look, but [the Lord] *does* answer prayers.”

Sixty-two year-old Bernadette experienced the same trip very differently. Like Luke, Bernadette was raised Catholic. She was born-again almost 25 years ago after her divorce. From age 19, she worked full-time as a secretary and her income, along with help from her family, kept her afloat as she raised her two children. In 2002, she was laid off after 33 years. Burdened with loans from her children’s college education, she accepted a position as an insurance agent, which she hated. In 2008, she quit:

I am living on a lot less. I'm willing to give up having someone to pick up my garbage. I don't get the newspaper. I made my choices [and] I can do Bible studies during the day now instead of going in the evenings and so I stand by my decision.

Today she lives alone in a bright little house in a quiet cul-de-sac. She provides full-time care for her elderly mother and leads Bible studies, an activity that takes up much of her spare time. Before leaving for the Holy Land, Bernadette reflected:

You know, I don't have any expectations... I am going hopefully with the right attitude and whatever I come out of it hopefully it will deepen my faith and then I can be a witness to other people... It'll be nice to get to know [Pastor Derek] better, too, because I really enjoy him. But mainly this is to just continue having the Lord direct me on where am I supposed to be going.

Crucial to Bernadette's sense of self is her belief that she has a special calling to witness (spread the Gospel). From a pragmatic standpoint, she expected that the pilgrimage would provide an effective tool to spur discussions about faith. When I accompanied her on a pre-trip shoe shopping excursion, for example, Bernadette dropped hints about the trip until the saleswomen finally asked directly: "So, where are you going?" The question opened the way for her to explain Israel's importance in the light of Jesus' sacrifice. Although the saleswomen quickly packed up the sandals and excused herself, Bernadette was pleased with the interaction. She planned to return after the trip to follow up.

Bernadette also described a number of pre-trip goals related to her ongoing prayers for family members, including her son who is not yet saved and her cousin Steve who is dying of Leukemia. Bernadette is very close to Steve and his wife. She helps them with housework, prays with them (although they are Catholic), and posts inspirational scripture on Steve's blog. In Israel, she expected to pray "especially hard" for Steve, as she does "on a very daily basis, putting it as a very high priority", asking God to keep his faith strong during the trial ahead. She also hoped that being in Israel would enhance her own faith, so that she could be a better support for him. More existentially, his illness has reinforced the fragility of life and impelled her to seize opportunities like this one to bolster her faith. She ended our conversation on a high note: "I'm just open to where the Lord is leading me."

Two months after her return, we sat down in her living room to chat, as described above. Bernadette was showing me photos of the scenery when the conversation took a turn so surprising I had trouble following at first:

B: What did happen, which is—which is really bothering me—is I came back, you're on a [spiritual] high, I'm sending out all my e-mails and everything. OK. Then ... suddenly I'm being spiritually attacked and doubting everything. *Does God even exist?* I lived the trip over there, Jesus was there, Jesus walked there, and all of a sudden I came back and it might be, you know, my cousin's not getting better from Leukemia.

H: You're still living that now or—?

B: I'm trying to force it out. But I'm really, really struggling. And this is—this is so *not me*. I mean, my faith is a big part of who I am. I've *never* [had this before]. The days and the weeks are going by [and Steve] isn't getting any better. It just gets worse. And I've prayed so hard with many, with many, many people.

H: In the Holy Land?

B: Yes. So it just made the doubt come in maybe even stronger. [I was saying], "OK, God. We're praying—we're praying for Steve, I know it's going to be Your will, but in the Bible it *does say*, 'When two or three are gathered together in Your Name [you answer

their prayers]...” So I am just feeling so down. And this is after a spiritual high. It’s just something I didn’t expect. It’s very, very hard right now.

Bernadette had kept her debilitating doubt private, omitting any mention of it in her post-trip conversations, mass e-mails, and slideshow presentations. She told only one close friend and me, a relative stranger. “It’s just something I can’t share because it is so *not me*”, she said a number of times. She worried that doing so would undermine the evangelical identity she worked hard to assert with her Catholic family. More upsettingly, it could jeopardize the faith of those for whom she is the main spiritual support. She compromised by recounting touristic highlights and speaking only in general terms about the trip’s spiritual impact.⁴ She did not return to the shoe saleswoman or to anyone else in order to witness.

Pilgrim’s Process: Uncertainty and Failure in Studies of Pilgrimage

In taxonomic terms, pilgrimage is generally viewed as an extended ‘ritual-like’ experience that contains more cohesive rituals within (Bell x, 102, 248). It has taken its place in the canon of ritual studies largely thanks to Victor Turner, a major theorist in early studies of both pilgrimage and ritual. The two sub-fields developed coterminously and share a number of key themes, including performativity, embodiment, and healing. Most pertinent here, Turner’s theory of pilgrimage built directly on Arnold Van Gennep’s tripartite model of *rites de passage* (separation/liminality/re-aggregation), which Turner had earlier expanded into a general theory of ritual. He posited that a ritual’s main action occurs during the liminal stage when participants are ‘betwixt and between’ normal states: both the tribal initiand and the pilgrim “cease to be members of a perduring system of social relations (family, lineage, village...) and become members of a transient class of initiands and pilgrims” (Turner, “Death” 30). During Western pilgrimage, this anti-structural experience might, the Turners suggested, result in individual and even societal transformation, albeit perhaps only briefly (Turner and Turner 15).

This model steered pilgrimage studies toward what has been understood as the crux of the event: the liminoid stage when pilgrims are ‘out there’ (Turner, “Center”). This is true whether pilgrimage is defined primarily as place-making/shrine site (Margry 23–8) or as movement/journey (Morinis 10, 15; Coleman and Eade).⁵ Over the last decade, however, anthropologists have more widely recognized that meanings are continually (re)shaped before and after the trip; the dearth of corresponding studies is due, at least in part, to the pragmatics of conventional fieldwork (Coleman, “Pilgrimage” 358). Pilgrimage poses a challenge because participants coalesce for short periods and are often difficult to track, especially if they sign up online. After the trip, they may refuse continued contact with other pilgrims (and anthropologists) for various reasons, including a fear of attenuating the experience (Frey, *Pilgrim Stories* 191; Kaell 174).

Turner also bequeathed to pilgrimage studies an abiding interest in the performative and experiential. Even early critics of Turnerian theory acknowledged that it was Turner’s insistence on people’s own expressive resources that inspired their approach (Morinis 8; see also Eickelman; Sallnow) and ritual creativity has become a central theme in recent studies (Fedele 19). In this vein, and especially pertinent to the ‘before/after’ that interests me here, is Csordas’s formative work on charismatic Catholic healing. Ritual studies, he argues, failed sufficiently to distinguish between prototypical examples, such as *rites de passage*, and the actual experience of healing. Turner’s ‘ritual process’ in other words was mainly procedural

(how religious specialists perform actions). Opting for a more phenomenological approach grounded in a series of interviews starting even before healing began, Csordas redefined ‘process’ to include how individuals make sense of their experiences over time, in ways that may be “partial, incremental, and inconclusive” (122).

This view is perfectly congruous with recent trends in pilgrimage studies, which deconstruct scholars’ centripetal tendency to search for a “ritual core” (Coleman, “Ritual Remains” 297). Taking these kinds of approaches together with Csordas, I use ‘process’ to signal how, for participants, home is intimately connected to the ‘center out there’ and vice versa (Frey, *Pilgrim Stories* 224, 232). Csordas’s emphasis on the incremental also points to what is beyond the important, but obvious association of pilgrimage with movement through space to the unbounded nature of time, where pre- and post-trip experiences (including the circulation of prayers, narratives, texts, and objects) are contiguous with the journey (Badone and Roseman 11). When Terry, for example, talks about *the* pilgrimage, she means both the physical trip and also the rituals it contains and compels: her pre-trip prayers on behalf of Luke, the Gethsemane worship service and River Jordan baptism, gifting souvenirs, and renewing her wedding vows upon return. To view pilgrimage this way is to highlight its emergent properties, refusing to pinpoint a universally recognized start or finish. American Christians often trace its beginnings to a distant past (‘Even as a child I knew I would go’) and propel its echo into a limitless future (‘My grandkids will remember it long after I’m gone’).

Given that these multiple rituals-within-rituals can be, as Csordas alerts us, partial and inconclusive, one might well ask about failure. Unlike more instrumental healing rituals that can visibly fail to produce intended results, Christian pilgrims (and evangelicals especially) rarely have clear, measurable goals. Yet the question of ‘failure’ takes on a particular cast in the context of Protestant theology, where, as scholars note, there is a strong compulsion to find meaning: the world is an ordered place where the Christian God, although inscrutable, is never capricious (Robbins, “Afterword” 212). In this cosmology, human meaning-making is also linked to intent: a person *means* to do something or *means* what they say (Engelke and Tomlinson 13, 14). Anthropologists of Christianity largely concur that Protestantism’s ideal is the ‘sincere’ subject whose words clearly articulate spiritual intent (Keane; Robbins, “Continuity” 15).

Approaching intent from another angle, however, raises a different question: do Christians view their intentions (however sincere) as producing *expected* outcomes and meanings? Engelke and Tomlinson have pointed out—echoing Csordas—that in order to fully appreciate the Christian propensity for meaning making, we cannot view it “as function or product to be uncovered, but as process and potential fraught with uncertainty and contestation” (2). Here, we tread into familiar waters for scholars of ritual, who note that intent is often complicated by shifts from human to non-human agency, clearly evident, for example, in rituals of possession where spirits are understood to be in control (Hüsken 351). For evangelicals, such as Terri and Luke, personal intentions are always triangulated with free will (Josh must choose his path) and unforeseen outcomes revealed by God. The latter are easily incorporated if they correspond to definite theo-cultural typologies (e.g. the shock of seeing Holy Land poverty moves a pilgrim to give charity). Recognizing the myriad ways to define efficacy and failure, I thus rely on the emic way: for US evangelicals, the trip ‘fails’ if it seems unconnected to original intentions and, *moreover*, if unforeseen results cannot be assimilated into understood patterns of divine action.

Relationality and the Extension of Intent

I now turn to two key ways that most evangelical pilgrims successfully thwart failures of meaning. The first has to do with the way perceptions of ritual efficacy are embedded in moralized notions of gender. Nearly all US evangelicals go to the Holy Land to enhance their relationship with Jesus, but women also foreground spiritual healing for themselves and others, a pattern that Alana Harris has also noted among British Catholic pilgrims to Lourdes (30). However, as Harris points out, this fact should not simply reify a feminization thesis; at Lourdes, men retain status as group leaders and in emerging spaces of male healing and sociality (37). In the context of the Holy Land, nearly all US pilgrims—men and women—regard themselves as ‘spiritual experts’ among their families and friends at home. For married men, this idea fits with the male headship model that is widespread in US evangelicalism (Gallagher 56, 104). Although their wives usually initiate the trip, men like Luke view their own participation as essential to being ‘godly’ fathers who, with their wives, create a united spiritual front to encourage their children in faith.

Nevertheless, important gender differences persist. For example, men rarely undertake the trip without a female relative (primarily a wife) and, especially pertinent here, women are much more likely to view the trip in relational terms. Undoubtedly, this pattern speaks to a broader culture where, since the nineteenth century, American women have been persistently viewed as responsible for their families’ faith (Braude). US evangelical women, like Catholic and Orthodox pilgrims elsewhere, are thus significantly more likely than men to view the trip as an opportunity to pray on behalf of others, including people beyond their immediate families (Dubisch and Winkelman xxiii; Gemzoe 29).

In this context, it seems intuitive to say that relationality plays a major role in evangelical pilgrimage. It bears noting, however, since pilgrimage studies often emphasize the inward-looking, individualistic Western self. For Turner, the primary distinction between tribal initiation and Christian pilgrimage is that the former (like all tribal social relations) is borne of obligation, whereas the latter (like many features of ‘complex’ societies) is rooted in optation. Thus Catholic “pilgrimage is part of a lifelong drama of salvation and damnation hinging on individual choice, which itself involves the individual’s acceptance or rejection of ‘graces’ ... from God” (Turner, “Death” 36). Later anthropologists have linked this theology, and thus Christian individualism, to evangelical Protestantism in particular. Writing of Papua New Guinea, for example, Joel Robbins contends that Christians’ major strategy for keeping meaninglessness at bay is to avoid personal sin, reordering their conception of life away from this world and on to the individual soul’s trajectory to the next one (“Anthropology” 168–9).

Of course, pilgrims like Terri would never deny that one’s sins are one’s own. However, the reality is messier because (even) US evangelicalism is *also* relational. This dialectic produces important outcomes with regard to pilgrimage: it is why Americans initially sign up as individuals (whose prayers are directed to God) and yet conceive pre-trip goals to be consistent with their many prayers on behalf of others. This process results in setting multiple goals, which is essential to mitigating ritual risk. Within two to three months of the trip, most pilgrims stabilize their memory selection (what is remembered and forgotten) around a small sub-set of their pre-trip goals, focusing on those that are most significant and most closely accomplished. What Terri recalled the trip after her return, she focused squarely on Luke’s baptism and Josh’s positive response. The couple in the marriage ministry

considering divorce disappeared from her narrative—perhaps because its importance paled in comparison to her more personal objectives or perhaps because, as Terri later noted, their marriage did indeed fall apart.

Relationality also bears upon the question of personal transformation, which scholars of pilgrimage have parsed in some depth. Studies argue that recently returned pilgrims are more likely to attribute the causes of events to religion (Pieper and Van Uden). Others show that, while cognitive-emotional change does subside, it can lead to long-term choices such as switching jobs (Ozorak 73) or a more permanent sense of well-being (Dubisch). In her book on the Camino de Santiago, anthropologist Nancy Frey catalogues the broadest range of post-trip responses, ranging from isolation to elation. At no point, however, is the trip itself put into question; even feelings of discontent testify to its success because ‘normal life’ seems hollow by comparison. One of Frey’s major theoretical points redresses the tendency to imply that change flows *sui generis* from the journey itself, rather than from the process by which participants interact with what the trip has to offer (*Pilgrim Stories* 194). The example Frey gives—a doctor who wants to learn humility and then feels that she does so during the trip—overlaps with the kind of focused, long-term goal-setting I also found among Holy Land pilgrims.

However, whether scholars describe Western pilgrims who experience difficulties reintegrating (Frey, *Pilgrim Stories* 182–3) or an easy transition into their regular spiritual practices (Fedele 243–63), it is personal outcomes that form the basis of inquiry. If we take seriously the pre-trip identities of evangelical Holy Land pilgrims—regular churchgoers who, as noted, are spiritual experts among family and friends—it is logical that they often talk about major change in the context of others.⁶ The trip, as Terri put it, confirms “even more” what they already know. Thus, while pilgrims may expect a spiritual pick-me-up, their prayers for *transformation* focus squarely on those they leave behind, often husbands and grown children like Josh. At this level, the trip is always a success since it provides a tangible sign for others (a witness) of the pilgrim’s spiritual commitment and belief in the power of prayer. The actual outcome of those prayers is propelled into a futurity characterized by “true hope” (Crapanzano) where they trust God to act on others in his ‘own time’.

True Hope and Incremental Progress

Evangelical pilgrimage is couched within a teleology of progress. Given the context, ‘progress’ naturally raises associations with the allegorical *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), which offers a window into early modern Puritan beliefs about humankind’s continual (often agonizing) cycle of sin and repentance. At a basic level, many other Christian theologies concur regarding the human struggle to choose the right path. For this reason, in his later work Turner observed that Western Christian pilgrimage may make one ‘a better person,’ but only until the inevitable backslide into sin, meaning that no single Christian ritual can ever produce definitive, lasting transformation (“Death” 37–8).

While theologically this remains true, most US evangelicals view this process somewhat differently: life is a series of progressive improvements where one ‘grows’ with God (Luhmann 101). This optimistic theology relies in part on what anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano called ‘true hope’ in his work on US Christian fundamentalism: the expectation that God always fulfills his promise of redemption (8).⁷ Ideally, this trusting hope extends to all events, big and small, understood to fit within an ordered whole. Pilgrims characterize

this idea using aphorisms and Bible verses: ‘God acts in his own time,’ ‘When God closes a door, he opens a window’ or “Trust in the Lord with all your heart” (Prov. 3:5).

In two well-known studies of conservative US Protestants, Susan Harding and Tanya Luhrmann approach the question of trust by arguing that failure actually reinforces belief. They do so in slightly different ways. Harding posits that each time Rev. Jerry Falwell is caught in a lie, his followers fill in the ‘gaps’ by making ‘leaps of faith’ that continually renew their commitment to his ministry. It works, says Harding, because it reflects how they read the Bible, making sense of its inconsistencies and thereby drawing closer to it. Extending this observation, Engelke and Tomlinson contend that Christian meaning-making is continually reinforced by the “*suggestion* of future meaning” (20, emphasis in original). They illustrate with a well-known example from Harding’s work: Rev. Melvin Campbell tells Harding that he accidentally killed his own son. Sunk in despair, he heard God’s response: “Melvin, you know maybe you don’t understand what I’ve done at this particular time, but, can you accept it?” From then on, says Campbell, “[God] gave me a peace in my soul. And I have not questioned it since.” With the words ‘at this particular time,’ note Engelke and Tomlinson, comes the suggestion (or ‘true hope’) of future meaning. Although not equal to the loss of a child, there is something analogous in the partiality that may result after pilgrimage: despite Terri’s prayers, Josh still does not believe. At these moments, participants most clearly describe pilgrimage as an incremental process where meaning making is compelled into the future. “It’s just baby steps with Josh”, says Terri. “Things don’t always look the way I want it to look, but [the Lord] *does* answer prayers.”

In her more recent study of US charismatics, Luhrmann offers a complementary analysis, arguing that unanswered prayers—‘failures’ by any account—are crucial conduits not only for (re)iterating trust in God, but also for creating intimacy: believers learn to view small failures as opportunities to rely even more on the Lord, to sink deeper into his love (272). Unfulfilled outcomes following pilgrimage often work this way, too. The emotional intimacy with God is further reinforced by the physical closeness that pilgrims feel after touching the places where they believe Jesus walked. It creates a ‘Holy Land high’, as some of my interlocutors put it. Yet, as Luhrmann notes, failure succeeds only when it can be assimilated in these terms. Gaps must not yawn too wide or future progress seems impossible.

Returning now to Bernadette, we can better pinpoint how a pilgrimage might ‘fail’. In his influential definition of religion, Clifford Geertz averred that

the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make physical pain, personal loss ... or the helpless contemplation of others’ agony something bearable, supportable (104).

By now this idea has been widely debated. Anthropologist Don Seeman, for example, relies on Jewish responses during the Holocaust to argue that human beings engage in rituals not just to endure suffering, but because they hope to end it (57). Most Christians frame ritual in ways that accord with Geertz’s approach, while also evincing an expectation of at least some practical effect in Seeman’s sense. In the context of pilgrimage, Catholics have an especially well-established tradition of visiting shrines to attain both emotional fortitude and physical cures.

As she articulated before the trip, Bernadette’s original goal regarding Steve was Geertzian: an opportunity to strengthen her faith to bear the trial at hand. Indeed, very few US Christians—Protestant or Catholic—associate the Holy Land with healing related to physical ailments; compared to Lourdes, for example, there are few pre-trip conversations

that ‘articulate pain’ through descriptions of medical histories and traumas (Notermans 191). Further, like most pilgrims, Bernadette also identified multiple other motivations for the trip, including enhancing her biblical expertise, becoming a better witness, strengthening her relationship with Jesus, and getting to know Pastor Derek. The reason that Bernadette’s trip failed is thus not because she expected the impossible. It failed because she did not ‘select’ (as psychologists say) the right goals to remember. Instead, she fixated on one goal that was utterly unfulfilled and, worse, shifted her expectation of ritual efficacy from a flexible, meaning-oriented approach to a practical one: she wanted Steve *cured*.

It is hard to know why this occurred. “The first thing to say about failure of meaning is that it registers only where the compulsion to find meaning is strong”, Robbins has remarked (“Afterword” 217). Perhaps it was the intensity of Bernadette’s drive to find meaning in Steve’s illness that distorted her original intentions. It is also tempting to speculate that before leaving she did in fact expect a cure, a wish perhaps colored by her Catholic upbringing, although she explicitly rejected this idea and instead framed her hope in biblical terms:

The [blind man] said, ‘I was blind and now I see.’ For some people that says, you know, your faith... But he meant, no I can *see*. He couldn’t and then Jesus touched him and he could. He was *healed*.

Bernadette acknowledged the metaphoric reading of this passage (John 9:25), for example, in the hymn *Amazing Grace*, but then espoused a classic fundamentalist/evangelical view that sees biblical miracles as literally true. To this she added a Pentecostal approach which is now widely popular in US evangelicalism, though not without controversy: if Jesus healed people then, he can do the same today (Balmer 232). Lastly, and in keeping with my argument here, her expectation of a measurable outcome may have been heightened (even produced) by the fact that, unlike Terri with her son Josh, Bernadette felt that she could not compel meaning into the future, where pilgrimage is one ritual action along a trajectory of progressive improvement. The urgency and helplessness she felt reflected the dire situation at hand. Steve’s life was about to be cut short.

This failure was compounded, in Bernadette’s mind, by another equally severe problem: she plunged into a prolonged period of spiritual darkness. Although evangelicals go through regular periods of doubt (Bielo; Luhrmann xiii), for Bernadette, this level of anxiety was unprecedented. Her worry and confusion were augmented by the very teleology of progress that for most pilgrims buffers against failures of meaning; she saw her faith as steadily increasing until it reached a high point just before and during the trip. Jesus was really real and then suddenly she could not feel him at all. “This is so not *me*”, she repeated as she struggled to describe it. While she never settled on a sure explanation for this traumatic loss of a coherent sense of self, she did suggest one seemingly logical idea: the doubt did not come from within *her* at all, but was one of Satan’s ‘attacks’ on God’s faithful. Like many US Christians, Bernadette supplemented her church’s teachings with a mixed bag of (mainly Pentecostal) televangelists who preach that meaninglessness is “the work of evil in the world” (Robbins, “Afterword” 214). Satan was part of her everyday cosmological framework where intangible beings, like God and angels, operate independently of humans and through them. “We’re not alone”, she told me at one point, “and if you’re a Christian you feel that very strongly.”

I end by underlining the role of ritual action in the pilgrimage ‘process’—an important point to note since evangelical meaning-making is so often associated with words (e.g. Harding; Keane; Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal). For Terri, the journey was part of the

continuum of the interrelated rituals (formal and less so) that followed: she and Luke renewed their wedding vows; she gave her children souvenir crosses; she presented a slideshow in her Bible study group, and they prayed over the trip. The mirror inverse is true for Bernadette, for whom rituals and other religious actions now amplified failure. She persevered in leading Bible studies, attending worship, and participating in prayer groups in order to maintain what Seeman calls “ritual fidelity *in spite of* meaninglessness” (67, emphasis in original). This emphasis on ‘doing’ is in keeping with the orthopraxic Judaism that Seeman studied (Bell 192). Reformed theology, by contrast, bequeathed to evangelicalism a deep suspicion about resting in ‘works’—actions that mask the true state of one’s soul. Nevertheless, maintaining ritual fidelity may feel like the (only) adequate response for Christians who live relationally. Otherwise, Bernadette risked undermining the religious identity she had worked to assert with her Catholic family and, worse, jeopardizing the faith of those who depended on her spiritual encouragement, such as Steve and his wife, her daughter, and the new Christians she mentored.

Bernadette did retain a certain confidence in the ‘suggestion of future meaning,’ as demonstrated in her attempt to offer adequate explanations (Satan was testing her) and in her determination to maintain ritual fidelity long enough eventually to ‘force out’ the doubt, as she put it. Without minimizing how she viewed the trip as failed, we are reminded that repositioning pilgrimage as an unbounded, emergent process opens up the possibility that even the deepest failures may one day be re-remembered as success.

Concluding Thoughts on Risk and Process

Surprisingly few studies of pilgrimage explore the ‘risky’ nature of setting goals that may be unfulfilled. Sometimes “new and powerful actions” do result from the trip (Notermans 192), but often the link between intentions and outcome is much more elusive (Engelke and Tomlinson 2). Bringing together the literature on pilgrimage with insights gleaned from work on Christian ritual, I suggest that by exploring potential disruptions we can most clearly see the trip as incremental, in flux, and unbounded. In theoretical and methodological terms, it pushes us to recognize pilgrimage as a process that unfolds over time rather than, or along with, the structuring paradigm of the bounded ritual ‘out there’ (Turner, “Center”).

Evangelicals provide a helpful case study, since for them pilgrimage is especially risky: Reformed theology rejected pilgrimage (it gave ‘countless occasions to commit sin and to despise God’s commandments,’ according to Martin Luther) and today there is comparatively little by way of recognized antecedents or norms for doctrinal efficacy. It is thus curious that there is in fact so *little* failure for contemporary US evangelicals. Why do nearly all pilgrims deem the trip a success? While broader theories recognize that rituals are contingent and emergent, with a myriad of ways to define risk and inefficacy, I base my discussion here on the central premise in evangelical theology that God’s universe is ordered: messages and promises are revealed through internally consistent, inerrant scripture (Bielo) and “time is meaningfully-forward moving” (Buckwalter) as Christian souls move towards Heaven and history moves towards an End Time when God will reign supreme (Robbins, “Afterword”).

Two concepts unite this theology with the ‘unbounded’ pilgrimage process: relationality and diachronic progress. In the first case, culturally embedded notions of gender feed into ritual efficacy. Most US Holy Land pilgrims are women whose pre-trip goals are consistent with their everyday prayers on behalf of others. The setting of multiple goals that results

from this leads to a process of redaction after the trip where pilgrims come to remember the goals that were most closely fulfilled and assimilate unforeseen results into God's ordered plan. At the same time, the trip is embedded within a teleology of incremental improvement where one 'grows' with God. Meaning making is thus never fully complete. It is compelled into the future where further interpretations, actions, and presumed successes are inchoate. Letting partiality exist thus becomes part of how evangelical pilgrims embody and renew their trust in God's power to make meaning in the world.

In studies of ritual, scholars have generally defined failure as a given procedure (a ritual) losing total creditability for the people who normally undertake it. Because this outcome is so rare—perhaps impossible—terms like 'infelicity' or 'imperfection' have seemed more adequately to encompass the robustness of ritual to retain authority (Schieffelin 17; Grimes 209). My choice to use 'failure' with respect to Bernadette is thus a considered one. Indeed, it is the extreme nature of her experience that makes it such a compelling contrast to Terri's more typical return. That the failure is both practical (Steve is not cured) and metaphysical (the loss of a coherent belief system) speaks to the capaciousness of evangelical pilgrimage, which is both material and spiritual, for self and for others. It also demonstrates how the very factors that make most pilgrimages a 'success'—relationality and a teleology of progress—may also result in the most profound kind of failures.

Notes

1. There are notable exceptions among anthropologists whose studies of pilgrimage grew out of village-based ethnography (e.g. Sallnow on 'syncretic' Catholicism).
2. I use pseudonyms throughout. 'Evangelical' is admittedly imprecise but usually refers to four core tenets, affirmed by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE): Conversionism (being 'born-again'), Biblical authority, Activism (missionary and reform work), Crucicentrism (Jesus' sacrifice for humanity).
3. I base my study on extensive archival work, pre-trip and post-trip interviews, participation on two Holy Land tours, and three months at Holy Land sites. In the period 2007–2012, I interviewed 131 pilgrims in 7 groups and 36 industry professionals. I conducted in-depth conversational interviews and tried to elicit a range of responses by spending time at pilgrims' homes, looking at photos and souvenirs, a method adapted from tourism studies. Unless otherwise stated, direct quotes included in this article are drawn from the transcribed interviews conducted in January/February and April/May 2012 with members of the NEC group.
4. Elsewhere I describe how former pilgrims often come to define disappointing experiences as merely 'touristic' (Kaell 122–5). Future work could profitably explore how perceptions of failure correlate with intensities of religious experience (differentials of affective feeling at pilgrimage sites) and how this, in turn, is a factor in the much debated tourism/pilgrimage divide. My thanks to one of the referees of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* for highlighting this connection.
5. My use of 'goal' to refer to an expected outcome is non-standard in pilgrimage studies, which usually defines 'goal' as the journey and/or sacred center (Morinis 17).
6. I do not mean to insinuate that either Frey or Anna Fedele failed to take identity into account (though neither conducted pre-trip research). The difference between my work and theirs may reflect their focus on 'seeker' or 'New Age' pilgrims. As more studies track post-trip outcomes, more accurate comparative work will be possible.
7. While beyond my scope, this current owes much to the nineteenth-century growth of Arminian theologies, primarily Methodism. It should also be noted that, while this future-looking optimism is characteristic of evangelicals, it resonates with Western Christians broadly. In her study of the Camino, Frey concludes that, unlike 'secular' travelers, believing Catholics viewed the pilgrimage as beginning an ongoing process ("Stories" 97–8, 101–3).

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