

A Sense of Place in the World

BY VICTORIA PRESTON

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In times of change or disruption, we often look for a means by which to clear our minds and focus on the road ahead. In normal times, pilgrimage offers a way to achieve this. Each year, many millions embark on such a journey. What distinguishes these voyages from everyday travel is the intention behind them. And while for each pilgrim the motive is different, for many the experience proves transformative.

I became intrigued by the phenomena of pilgrimage and set out with my old friend Constance to walk part of the Via Francigena, the road to Rome. Upon my return, and after many months spent between the silent stacks of the London Library and interviewing other pilgrims, my book [We are Pilgrims – Journeys in Search of Ourselves](#) was published by Hurst in April 2020.

Over the course of research for the book, I encountered scores of individuals whose lives had been shaped by pilgrimage, or at least the idea of it. One such example is Jawaharlal Nehru, an Indian independence activist and then, the country’s first Prime Minister. Nehru was born in Allahabad, now Prayagraj. Prayagraj is the locus of the world’s biggest pilgrim gathering, the Kumbh Mela, and often wrote about his love for the Ganges River, the ancient symbol of his nation. While politically a committed secularist, Nehru asked that on his death his ashes be scattered into the river which, in traditional Hindu belief, is believed to be the crossing place from this world into the next. On the face of it, Nehru’s quest to create

a secular state built on reason while maintaining his own private religious beliefs seems like a contradiction, but this complex relationship between our sense of place and sense of belonging is one of the keys to what makes pilgrimage so universal. Whether it is a river or a mountain, a city or a country, places are often where we invest much of our personal and collective identities. And physically gathering people together, in the same place and time and around one idea, is immensely powerful.

From the earliest times onwards, rare is the leader who has not sought to enlist this link between self and place to their cause. For many, this link has been the rallying cry for conflict. Pilgrimage features here too: Alexander the Great made a point of travelling to oracles in Delphi or Siwa before embarking on military campaigns. He was looking for endorsement for his own actions, but equally desired to instil common purpose and the prospect of success amongst the troops. Croesus, King of Lydia, also desired an indication that the gods would make him greater still: the Pythia at Delphi duly obliged, telling him that if he went to war, a great empire would fall. Sadly, for Croesus it turned out to be his own.

When great empires and faiths expand their territories, we need a little encouragement to wed our identity to a place not our home. Constantine recognized this as he set about imprinting his authority on important strategic locations. In Rome, he commissioned the construction of the Basilica of St Paul and the Basilica of St Peter over the tombs of these two Apostles. In Jerusalem, he unearthed important Christian sites long occluded by pagan temples. He then arranged for the mortal remains of the Magi of the Nativity to be transported to his eponymous capital on the Bosphorus. Through the creation of these shrines, he anchored his empire in a shared Christian faith and an identity wedded to place. Centuries later, the timely discovery of the remains of St James in a Spanish 'field of stars' quickly brought Christian soldiers to the aid of King Alfonso, at that time embattled with Muslim forces. 1200 years later, Santiago de Compostela remains one of the most important pilgrim sites in the Christian world. Built around the

same time, the shrine to Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran, became a centre for pilgrimage and teaching, and a spiritual locus for those unable to travel to the Hijaz.

The earliest known pilgrim sites date back to the Bronze age. The practice seems to have emerged from seasonal gatherings centred around the hunting of migrating herds and later the collective planting and reaping of crops. Many pilgrim festivals, including Passover, the Hajj and Easter remain scheduled according to solar and lunar calendars. Then, it was necessary to cooperate with and tolerate those outside our immediate family or band; even when at other times we were competing for scarce resources. Centuries before the advent of Islam, the annual Hajj enabled otherwise warring tribes to set their differences aside, albeit temporarily, to travel safely to the Kaaba, to give thanks, to trade and to share ideas. In the modern age, many accounts of the Hajj highlight this same sense of being a part of something bigger when so many come together in a place of shared significance. In the letter which Malcolm X, sent from Mecca to his people back home in New York he tells of how, at this great Hajj festival, he felt so good to be in a place where “unity prevails amongst people of all colours and nations”. The former extremist but tempered by his pilgrimage, the letter writer, renamed El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, soon returned home: to be assassinated as a result of his new-found moderation.

In Jerusalem, that most contested of sacred places, pilgrims come in their millions jostling through the crowded lanes to reach the piece of the Old City which holds most significance for their faith, their race, their beginning and their end. For Jews, the place where Jerusalem now sits was first promised by God to Abraham and then, the Jewish people. It is the spiritual capital of the Jewish people, and the site of the two Temples. For Muslims, it is the place where Mohammed made his night journey on *Buraq*, the white steed, to the ‘farthest mosque’ and from thence ascended the seven levels of heaven, meeting the prophets before returning to Mecca. For Christians, it is the place where Jesus of Nazareth rose as a prophet, died on the cross and was resurrected on the third day. There is no consensus on when the Abrahamic story

was first told, or in which era the events were set, or on the exact boundaries of this promised land or the terms on which it was promised. But the search for historical ‘truth’ is to miss the point. The sense of place and its ability to anchor identity for so many is what matters here. After all, rivalries between the different faith groups are almost matched in intensity by intra-faith factionalism. One notable example is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, for Christians the holiest of churches. By tradition, the keys to the Church are held by Muslims, with one family having the duty to unlock in the morning and a second to lock up at night. But the competition is not between Christians and Muslims, but amongst the various Christian sects and the competing claims between Orthodox, Armenian and Roman Catholic, Coptic, Syrian and Abyssinian sects. Many of these disputes have rumbled on for centuries. It really is complicated.

I observe this passion about place impassively, although my understanding grows with each passing year. A peripatetic childhood meant that I never did develop a strong sense of belonging and my pilgrim-companion Constance is much the same. That’s what binds us. We both spent our early years in Jamaica, before moving on, she to Birmingham, me to Berlin. Most of my adult life I have lived close to the Thames, that super-highway of hope and trade, ambition and ideas, and latterly have settled in its silt at Westminster, a part of the city which truly belongs to no one except tourists and commuters. From time to time, we get a whale in the river, lost and frantically confused as to why it’s here. Join the club, my friend! We are all just pilgrims passing through – living on the liminal edge between somewhere and nowhere, looking for a sense of place in the world.

*Victoria Preston,
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