

Toward a Theology of Pilgrimage

BY JOHN GATTA

Drawing on personal experience, three writers insist that every Christian is called to travel the pilgrim's way—at least in the inward, metaphoric sense of pursuing a life-project extending toward eternity—and that most would benefit from pursuing some form of physical peregrination.

From the first, it seems, Christians were known as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2), an identification with the road to truth that likewise carries existential resonance in Taoism and other faith traditions. Arguably, then, the idea of wayfaring and pilgrimage lies at the very heart of Christian spirituality. By the sixteenth century, Luther and other Protestant reformers expressed scorn for all physical expressions of pilgrimage, which they had reason to associate with the abuses of medieval superstition and relic worship. Yet the practice of pilgrimage has since won renewed favor from Christians of diverse denominational stripes, as well as from largely secular seekers. Why so? When the World Wide Web enables us to be virtually anywhere or everywhere at once, why should anyone care to travel by foot to some distant site reputed to be sacred? Why, for that matter, should we regard any place as especially holy, following the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple in AD 70? Why should physical geography or place-oriented pilgrimage matter at all, in the face of Jesus' assurance that God's presence is no longer to be understood as localized but instead discovered in the believer's own heart and wherever two or three faithful are gathered?

Three fairly recent books devoted to this topic begin to tell us why. All three share a forceful, richly elaborated insistence that *every* Christian is called to travel the pilgrim's way—at least in the inward, metaphoric sense

of pursuing a life-project extending toward eternity – and that most Christians would also derive substantial benefit from pursuing some form of physical peregrination. That pilgrimage in Christian tradition has to do not merely or mainly with walking a spatial pathway but with a way of life had long been, of course, a prominent theme in literary works by writers such as Dante (1265-1321) and John Bunyan (1628-1688). But it is signaled explicitly in the title of Jim Forest's volume, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007, 190 pp., \$16.00) as well as in N. T. Wright's *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today*, new edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014 [1999], 127 pp., \$14.00). It is a pervasive supposition, too, throughout Charles Foster's musings in *The Sacred Journey*, The Ancient Practices Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010, 252 pp., \$12.99).

Extolling the potentially life-changing benefits of physical pilgrimage, all three of the writers in question draw heavily on their personal experience. For example, each reflects at length on his own visits to Israel – including his impression of holy sites in Jerusalem, the pre-eminent destination of Jewish pilgrimage past and present. Foster's account dwells especially on the peculiar challenges and assets of present-day encounters with that ancient city, which Wright describes as standing above all others by way of illustrating a "way into the presence of the living God" (56). Foster provides a colorful abundance of testimony from latter-day pilgrims not only to Jerusalem but to various other sites as well, while he invokes the guiding witness of noteworthy pilgrims from the past – including the nineteenth-century Russian author of *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Forest also calls to mind personal ties with celebrated companions of his along the way such as Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), and Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Forest's tour of pilgrim destinations takes us not only to inspiring "thin places" but also to revelatory "dark places" around the world, including the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and a purgative passage through his own state of chronic illness.

N. T. Wright's commentary is informed by his reputation as one of the world's leading biblical scholars and theologians. But in *The Way of the Lord* he wears this learning lightly, masterfully combining his knowledge of biblical themes and contexts with heartfelt reflection on the import of his own travels both in space and in spirit. So Wright's account of pilgrimage, like the other two accounts, is grounded in personal experience. He begins by pointing out that despite his having been born in central Northumberland, with a grandfather who had been Archdeacon of the legendary pilgrim's island of Lindisfarne, it took him some time to overcome the "non-consideration of pilgrimage" (2) enforced by his religious upbringing. Yet in his maturity, he came to regard "pilgrimage to holy places, though neither necessary nor sufficient for Christian living," as offering to many "a time of real growth and depth in discipleship," a "stimulus and an invitation to

prayer" (10). Rooted in the evangelical charge to seek encounter with God, the practice of pilgrimage, physically enacted, also qualifies for Wright "as a metaphor, even a sacrament, for and of the pilgrim's progress through the present life to the life that is to come" (11).

Of the three authors, Foster presents the most outspoken endorsement of physical rather than purely metaphoric journeying on the part of virtually everyone. Foster emphasizes, too, that pilgrimage may take the form of wandering, or wayward walking, rather than passage toward a fixed destination. For him, even loosely organized travel is potentially allied to the ideal of "wandering after God," to fellowship with "the God who walks," and amounts to "doing something with whatever faith you have" (16). Staying more-or-less perpetually on the move, then, is what the best of our Hebraic heritage and Christian faith impels us to do. "So traveling," Foster proposes, frees a person from bondage to places and possessions, "helps you to be good, to feel good, and to be alive" (57).

There is doubtless some wisdom in this prescription. But I think that Foster's rather single-minded championing of movement and nomadism over rootedness (especially in his third chapter, "Bias to the Wanderer") needs qualification, especially in our present-day, almost obsessively mobile and restless society. Commitment to place, after all, and to the welfare of one's fellow community members, also has *its* place in one's practice of the Christian faith. And while travelling without regard to one's destination

may signify a theology of self-abandonment to God's will, as it did for those Celtic monks of old who set themselves adrift on rudderless coracles in the open sea, it may also reflect a self-indulgent evasion of adult responsibility. In sum, not all wandering or traveling is spiritually equivalent to the pilgrim's way. Granted, the process of going, rather than the getting there, matters most in classic formulations of Christian pilgrimage.

Granted, too, something of tourism is always apt to color pilgrim initiatives. Yet the essential motive and spirit of one's travel, rather than movement *per se*, is what seems to matter most.

I believe the peripatetic impulse, expressed physically in the pilgrim's way, thus stands for Christians in a complementary rather than oppositional relation to our elemental "homing instinct" — that is, our willingness to set

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down roots somewhere on earth, to acknowledge our place in a particular community, to honor the ideal of finding ultimately our true rest and home in God. Following Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), author and farmer-prophet Wendell Berry thus extols the enduring contributions to American society of settler-migrants he calls “stickers,” those willing to stay somewhere long enough to put down roots among the place’s people and land, in contrast to “boomers,” those individualist opportunists who remain always on the move. And while it is true that Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), as cited by Foster, was an inveterate walker who “saw movement as inextricably connected to the business of being human” (57), Thoreau did most of his walking within the bounds of his natal village of Concord, Massachusetts. “I have travelled much in Concord,” he famously declared. In the same vein, contemporary author Annie Dillard titled her celebrated account of homebound journeying and spiritual exploration *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

By virtue of recognizing the paradoxical character of pilgrimage, N. T. Wright’s treatment of the matter strikes me as particularly discerning. Wright affirms that physical journeying and the veneration of holy sites can indeed nurture our faith—so long as we understand such practices to be signposts or icons of the deeper reality we seek. Otherwise they are apt to become distractions or delusions. He reminds us that “pilgrimage, therefore, remains ambiguous for the Christian,” so that “those who imagine that going on a geographical pilgrimage will automatically make them holy, or bring them closer to God, are doomed to disappointment or worse” (15). Moreover, “it is not we, ultimately, who are on a journey for God in the face of Jesus. It is God who is on a journey looking for us” (16).

This aptly nuanced perspective on pilgrimage is reflected throughout the course of Wright’s treatment, which weaves together personal narrative and meditation with historicized commentary so as to illuminate unseen dimensions of the biblically-charged landscapes this book traverses. Thus recalling that “Pilgrimage is a way of prayer,” Wright leads the reader in progressive chapters from Paul’s Damascus through other pathways running to the Jordan, the Wilderness, Galilee, Jerusalem, the Mount of Transfiguration—and finally with Christ to the Cross and from the Tomb. Even those of us who have yet to set foot in the Holy Land, along with those of us never privileged to have been there in the company of the historical Jesus—which is to say, all of us—can gain invaluable understanding of such pilgrimage from Wright’s book.

In diverse but substantial ways, Forest’s *The Road to Emmaus* and Foster’s *The Sacred Journey* also enlarge the reader’s sense of what journeying through biblical lands might mean for Christians—both inwardly, as problematically disentangled from tourism, and solidly on the ground. Foster also provides a brief but useful chapter devoted to the question of negotiating the pilgrim’s “Arrival and Return.”

But a jet-assisted excursion to Israel is scarcely the only “way” by which present-day pilgrims might seek bodily expression of their journeying in faith. Where else to walk, then, and for what purpose? The volumes by Forest and Forster suggest a wealth of possibilities. The Road to Santiago in Spain, traversed by pilgrims for centuries, remains a classic option, one that has lately attracted renewed attention from young people around the world. Hiking the Appalachian Trail, despite its lack of a geographic *telos* with sacred repute, is understood to be a life-changing spiritual (if not always religious) *praxis* for many in present-day America. Jim Forest’s book is noteworthy for the range of sites he identifies and describes as pilgrim destinations – not all of them picturesque, rural, or steeped in either biblical or saintly memory. So his list includes a number of unconventional sites – not just Emmaus, Iona, and Canterbury, but also Memphis, Louisville, Amsterdam, and a former synagogue in Alkmaar, Netherlands. In an especially moving chapter titled “The Pilgrimage of Illness,” Forest describes his own anguishing journey toward accepting and praying through a health crisis that required him to begin kidney dialysis.

And given our nature and evolutionary history, we still need on occasion to make our way in the world mindfully by foot. For the health of both soul and body we must still walk, must walk often and with gratitude, even or especially in this age of supersonic transport and instantaneous communication. Such a call to the pedestrian is sounded repeatedly in all three books. Buddhists, too, have long appreciated the spiritual benefits of “walking meditation”; and for most of us, if we are reasonably able-bodied, attentive walking remains the least costly and most accessible form of physical pilgrimage available. Ours is indeed a “God who walks,” as Foster reminds us. Extending the principle metaphorically, we might envision our life-project as a long sojourn not only *toward* God but *with* this God who walks. Walking that way, we have reason to welcome every new and surprising turn in the path, to perceive all that surrounds our trail illumined by grace.



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