

## Religious Pilgrimage-A Path to Spiritual Renewal?

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Religious pilgrims were some of the first mass tourists in history.

According to textual scholars, the earliest reference to **Hindu pilgrimage** is in a sacred text written three thousand five hundred years ago in which the “wanderer” is praised. Today Hindus have hundreds of pilgrimage sites. One example is Pushkar Lake in India. It is surrounded by steps leading to the lake, where pilgrims throng in large numbers to take a sacred bath. A dip in the sacred lake is believed to cleanse sins and cure skin diseases. Traditionally pilgrims who visit the lake stay in tents. However, these days that does not necessarily mean discomfort. Those that can afford it can stay at a luxurious boutique eco resort in a deluxe tent, furnished with a large four-poster bed, a luxurious bathroom and a lovely porch to sit on and enjoy the beautifully landscaped grounds of the resort.

According to **Buddhist** tradition, just before the Buddha died about two thousand four hundred years ago, he spoke to his chief disciple about the making of his life story into a sacred geography. Those who wanted to follow the Buddha's way should visit four places, the places of his birth, his enlightenment, his first sermon, and his death.

Today the traditional place of the Buddha's birth is Lumbini, in Nepal; it is a world heritage site. Being declared a “World Heritage Site” is like winning an Olympic gold medal of religious pilgrimage locations. At the site is a tree, twisted and tired with age, with streams of faded prayer flags tied to its branches. It is like the tree under which the Buddha was born two and a half thousand years ago. The Buddha's mother, it is said, bathed in the pool at the foot of the tree, before delivering him and watching him take seven steps in each direction. There is a pool, its waters brown and unmoving between the damp brick steps which have been built to contain it.

**The Hajj is the yearly Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.** It is the biggest single annual tourist event in the world. To control the numbers during the five-day Hajj, the king of Saudi Arabia limits the visas to three million. In the center of Mecca, real estate developers have replaced historical structures and archaeological sites with a cluster of new luxury hotels and a shopping mall. Opened in 2012, The Royal Clock Tower Hotel is the world's third tallest building. Pilgrims describe their trip to Mecca as a religious reawakening. During the Hajj, to show the equality of all Muslims, everyone wears only white cloth. Pilgrims are prohibited from arguing, or even speaking an angry word. One American Muslim wrote, “Elsewhere, except at the best of times, every person is looking out for himself. During the Hajj, people looked out for each other. The Hajj is a shared rite of passage . . . In that way it was like an act of love . . . it offered a climax to a religious life.”

**In the Jewish tradition** more than two thousand years ago three holy days were set aside for men to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Today many Jews make an effort to emulate the ancient pilgrimages by visiting the Western Wall, the only remains of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. It is a place of prayer and pilgrimage sacred to the Jewish people. During Passover Jews make pilgrimages to homes of friends and family for a ritual meal.

**Christians follow three great pilgrimage routes. One is to a cathedral in Spain that is reputed to be the burial-place of Saint James the Great, an apostle of Jesus. Another is to Rome to see the Vatican. A third is to Jerusalem.** Each year thousands make a pilgrimage to spend Palm Sunday and Easter in Jerusalem. They walk the Stations of the Cross. This is the traditional walk Jesus took carrying a cross to his execution. On both sides of this ancient path they pass merchants selling souvenirs such as stuffed toy camels.

Hindu, Buddhist, Muslims, Jews, Christians – This year about two hundred million people will go on a religious pilgrimage. **But what about Unitarian Universalists?**

In the United States Unitarian Universalists can visit several wonderful sites. In Boston I encourage you to visit King's Chapel, which became Unitarian in 1785. In Gloucester I encourage you to visit the first Universalist church in America. In Concord, Massachusetts I encourage you to visit the home of Unitarian Louisa May Alcott and the home of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the Midwest I encourage you to visit The Unitarian Universalist Church in Oak Park, Illinois and the Unitarian Universalist Church in Madison, Wisconsin. They were both designed by Unitarian Frank Lloyd Wright.

However, the deeper roots of the Unitarian side of our faith are in Europe. Eighteen years ago, in the summer of 1996, I made my first pilgrimage to visit the birthplace of the Unitarian Church. The Cold War had ended in December 1989, making it much easier to travel to Romania.

My visit was a spiritual experience. The dictionaries say the word spirit has a common Latin ancestry with the word breath. This etymological root invites a comparison between the experience of breathing and the experience of spirituality. We breathe in the spiritual; it fills our bodies and gives us new energy for living, just as a breath of clean fresh air fills our lungs.

When I visited Unitarians in Transylvania I took in a deep breath of fresh air, a deep renewal of my spirit that was so refreshing the feeling of renewal has stayed with me and still gives me energy today.

Transylvania is a small land located between Hungary and Romania. Today it is politically part of Romania. Christian Unitarian Churches first developed in Transylvania starting in 1568. Estimates of the number of Unitarians in Transylvania today range from 67,000 to 100,000. Whatever the number, Transylvania has the largest number of Unitarians anywhere in the world outside North America. The belief that separated Unitarians from other Christians was their belief that Jesus was a human being, not God. In the Hungarian Unitarian Catechism it says:

We know that Jesus was a real man from the Gospels, where he first called himself a man, and the son of man. But his real humanity is verified by his whole life as well: He was born, grew up in body and spirit, was happy, sorrowful, hungry, thirsty, suffered and died. Jesus was considered to be a man by his disciples and his contemporaries as well.

These churches came to be called Unitarian as opposed to Trinitarian because the trinity is based on the belief that Jesus is God.

Starting in 1990, American churches have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to partner churches in Transylvania to help build new churches, feed seminary students and aid retired ministers. Thousands of American Unitarian Universalists have made the pilgrimage to Transylvania.

After Koloszvar we drove south through the hilly countryside, through green farm land, past many farmers with horse-drawn carts harvesting hay, and through small villages to a village called Dicsöszentmárton. The church had been assigned as the partner of the church I was serving in Bethesda, Maryland. There are no hotels, no restaurants in most of the village where Unitarian Churches are located. If you want to visit Europe and get away from mass tourism, Transylvania is a good choice.

Sunday morning I spoke in the church. Originally, Roman Catholic, the simple church building is estimated to be one thousand years old. A bell rang at ten and then again, a few minutes before eleven. We walked from the parsonage to the church, arriving just as the bells stopped ringing. The building was packed with members of the congregation. Rev. Fazakas gave me his seat in the church. The men were on my left in pews below the organ. Women sat on my right. Younger children were in the center directly in front of the pulpit. Teenagers sat in the balcony. I spoke and a translator gave a Hungarian version of my words.

Allowing me to enter the center of their religious space, the people welcomed me and shared their worship with me. All they knew about me was that I said I was a Unitarian minister from America. I felt that warm feeling that comes from being trusted and respected by strangers. I felt gratitude and humility.

After the service we ate a big meal at the parsonage. Our hosts supplied us with food and we drank Pálinka, a distilled fruit drink like vodka. Our hosts offered water or coffee as alternatives to alcoholic beverages. As we drank and ate, our hosts smoked and talked and smoked.

For two days after the Sunday experience we drove through the countryside of Transylvania, visiting villages, farms and churches. In many smaller villages, populated entirely by Hungarians, the Unitarian church is the heart of the town. The long rides through the countryside heightened the impact of entering the Unitarian Churches in these villages. We drove past homes hundreds of years old, and through miles of farm land. Riding along roads sprinkled with potholes we passed horse-drawn carts, and horse-drawn hay wagons. We saw strong but primitive rakes made locally of tree branches. When we entered small Unitarian churches, the beauty inside the church contrasted with the austerity of the farm land through which we had driven. Colorful paintings covered the ceilings. Red and white needlepoint cloth hung from pulpits and the pews. Hand-carved wood was on doors. The art work gave the churches a feeling of warmth and vitality. The art gave the space a sense of holiness and a feeling of joy.

My trip to the birthplace of Unitarianism was a religious pilgrimage, a spiritual experience. The deeper feelings I experience on such a journey are beyond words.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week in the Western Christian tradition. Some of our Christian friends are making a pilgrimage to spend Palm Sunday and Easter in Jerusalem.

Passover begins Monday evening, April 14. Some of our Jewish friends are making the pilgrimage to visit friends and family for a ritual meal.

Jews and Christians, along with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims have traditions of religious pilgrimage—and so do Unitarians. I have made the pilgrimage to Transylvania three more times. The last Sunday in May I will make a fourth visit, this time to our new Partner Church in the village of Korond. They need to know that they are not alone--Unitarian Universalists in America care about them, especially now as Russian forces are posed to invade the Ukraine. Our partner Church in Korond is only 185 miles south of the Ukraine border.

After the visit in May I will be glad to return to Sarasota. After seeing again the roots of Unitarianism, I will feel a renewed emotional connection with our religious faith, here in this community. My pride in serving as a Unitarian Universalist minister will be renewed.

We are part of a faith that is equal to any other in intellectual depth, spiritual understanding and courageous leaders. I hope you feel the same pride as members of this great congregation here in Sarasota.