



Wild Pilgrimage: Reimagining the Sacred in a Secularizing World

Citation

Fromkin, Kimberly C. 2025. Wild Pilgrimage: Reimagining the Sacred in a Secularizing World. Masters Thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

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Wild Pilgrimage: Reimagining the Sacred in a Secularizing World

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2025

Abstract

This thesis seeks to expand the academic study of pilgrimage by exploring non-traditional, nature-based pilgrimage experiences and their transformative and rehabilitative effects. It explores how these experiences challenge and broaden historical depictions of pilgrimage, particularly in an increasingly secularizing world, and how they reshape our understanding of the sacred. Through case studies, including personal memoirs and blog posts, the project demonstrates that spiritual experiences in nature—especially those involving interactions with non-human entities—offer meaningful alternatives to traditional religious pilgrimages. This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing primarily from Anthropology and Religious Studies, with elements of History, Psychology, Philosophy, and other Social Sciences to contextualize the complexities of pilgrimage. The study emphasizes the role nature plays in the pilgrim's journey and how natural environments facilitate transformative experiences—an aspect that has been overlooked in existing scholarship. It argues that non-institutional spiritual practices such as hiking, camping, or retreating into natural settings should be recognized as legitimate pilgrimage processes. Thus, this work advocates for a more inclusive understanding of pilgrimage, one that embraces the spiritual significance of nature-based experiences and the relational dynamics between humans and non-humans.

Frontispiece

*The wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet
learned to ask*

—Nancy Newhall

Dedication

In loving memory of my dad, Ronnie, who found his spirituality in nature. Your wisdom and stories continue to inspire me.

Acknowledgments

The successful completion of this thesis is due to the steadfast support of my advisors, professors, tutors, friends, and family. Their dedication and guidance were instrumental to this work. I would like to specifically thank my friends Heidi and Leslie, as well as an anonymous donor, for their generous financial contributions in funding my first three courses. Their generosity allowed me to continue my academic journey and achieve a master's degree at Harvard University's Extension School. I am deeply appreciative of my husband, Mike, and our children for their enduring patience, moral support, and understanding during the countless hours of research, writing, and online classes necessary for earning this degree and completing this project. Mike and Heidi were my greatest supporters and provided me with the most encouragement throughout. I would also like to acknowledge Harvard Extension School's Writing Center, especially E.T. Stone for her editorial assistance, constructive feedback, and overall support in the writing process.

My time at Harvard Extension School has been an enriching and transformative experience. I am especially grateful to Dr. Kimberley Patton, who encouraged me to take her course on Birds in Religion. This class altered my academic trajectory and heightened my awareness of the often-overlooked dimensions of sacredness, particularly in relation to the natural environment. Dr. Patton was a key figure in expanding my understanding of the spiritual role that non-human beings play in our lives, emphasizing that animals, too, may have spiritual experiences. I owe much thanks to Dr. Nadine Weidman and to Dr.

Fred Downing, former professor at Valdosta State University, for their encouragement in pursuing pilgrimage as the central focus of my thesis. I am also thankful for Dr. David Carrasco for introducing me to Victor Turner's theories of liminality and *communitas*, which were invaluable in understanding the pilgrimage process.

Lastly, I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my advisory team. Trudi Goldberg Pires was quite helpful, providing ongoing support and addressing numerous questions concerning formatting issues. I am especially grateful to my research advisor, Dr. Collier Brown, who was instrumental in helping me narrow my study on pilgrimage, formulating central academic questions for my project, and developing my thesis proposal. He also provided a wealth of resources and materials to aid in the process. Most notably, I owe a great deal to Dr. Giovanna Parmigiani, whose contributions to this thesis are indispensable. As my professor, she introduced me to a wide range of alternative spiritualities, rituals, and important concepts, including neo-animism and Bron Taylor's *dark green religion*, which became central to my project. As my thesis director, Dr. Parmigiani offered insightful feedback, helping me to structure my thesis, supporting my development as a scholar, and assisting with my research on case studies. Her unwavering dedication to my academic progress, generosity with her time, and willingness to answer questions outside of office hours were invaluable. Both Dr. Brown and Dr. Parmigiani demonstrated exceptional patience and understanding, offering emotional support after the loss of my father to brain cancer at the beginning of my thesis process. The completion of this thesis reflects the collective efforts and support of many individuals. Their continued encouragement, guidance, and generosity have been integral to my academic and personal growth throughout this journey.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

*I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in
order*

—John Burroughs

In 2008, Josh, a twenty-eight-year-old massage therapist living in the United States, had a life-changing encounter while camping in the woods.¹ Faced with the challenges of an unhealthy marriage and the inability to find clarity due to the constant distractions of everyday life, Josh sought solace in nature by traveling several hours from his home in Tallahassee, Florida to a remote area in a national park, where he set up camp. After a week of solitude, free from technology, Josh found that his anxieties and emotional turmoil gradually dissipated. The more he surrendered to the forest, the calmer he felt, and the more he sensed a deep oneness, which was instrumental in his transformative journey. Through this immersion, Josh became attuned to the forest's power, observing how it communicated through the birds, trees, squirrels, and the rustling of leaves in the wind. There was one particularly memorable night when, gazing out over a pond, he felt an intense connection to his surroundings, to nature, and the universe. In that moment, the clouds parted, and the boundary between the pond and sky disappeared, evoking a sensation of numbness, where the distinction between his body, skin, and

¹ To protect the individual's privacy, the pseudonym "Josh" is used in this introduction. This individual's information was shared with me during a personal conversation. I was given permission to publish the content of this individual's personal experience in this thesis.

clothing ceased to exist, as if he were floating in space amidst a vast awe-inspiring cosmic panorama. He then noticed that his mahogany, vine-entwined walking stick, which he had planted vertically in the sand, began to spiral, while remaining perfectly upright. Josh was not under the influence of hallucinogens or any other substance that could account for such an occurrence. Yet, his experience was altogether “magical,” even “spiritually orgasmic.” Feeling as though his existence were a beam of light, connected to raw consciousness, he began to receive profound insights about the true meaning of life—namely, that life is meant to be lived and experienced to the fullest, without being weighed down with the burdens imposed by a socio-cultural world dominated by humans.

Reflecting on his journey and encounter with nature, Josh characterizes it as a “spiritual quest” and a returning home—a primal connection to the natural world that humanity has distanced itself from over time. This experience profoundly uprooted and reshaped his life, serving as the catalyst for a series of positive changes. Prior to this encounter, his decisions were primarily driven by the need for survival and societal expectations. He was merely existing in the world without any clear guidance. However, upon reconnecting to the forest, Josh was reawakened by the inherent community within nature, its sacredness, and a deeper realization of his own self.

In speaking with Josh in 2024, I asked him whether he identified with any particular religious tradition, including nature-centered spiritualities like New Age or Paganism, either before or after his memorable experience in the forest in 2008. His response was, “No, absolutely not. I don’t identify as anything.” He then elaborated that he did not adhere to a specific belief system but rather sought truth from various religious

perspectives, mainly Christianity, Taoism, and Buddhism, the philosophical and spiritual teachings of Kung Fu, and, most notably, from nature itself. As he put it, “I find that the thing that connects me the most is nature. Because nothing is more honest. Everything else has an agenda. The honest truth of the forest is that...you can live peacefully,” and in that space “nothing is more sacred—it’s absolutely holy,” it’s about “just being.” He expanded on this idea by stating that “we are not separate from nature,” and as such, during a time of great personal hardship, he sensed nature calling to him.

Josh’s personal journey of finding spiritual truth and healing in nature illustrates a broader cultural shift away from conventional religious frameworks. His rejection of organized religious affiliations, along with his preference for a more fluid, nature-based spirituality, aligns with both the global rise of secularization and the increasing emergence of “spiritual but not religious” identities, which often prioritize personal experiences, openness, and a connection to the natural world. This cultural transformation is further evidenced in the growing popularity of secular pilgrimages where individuals seek meaning, healing, or clarity by visiting natural or man-made sites not necessarily tied to institutional religion. These contemporary forms of pilgrimage exemplify a movement away from religious orthodoxy toward new and diverse ways of experiencing the sacred.

Between 2007 and 2020, 42 countries containing 60 percent of the world’s population show signs of a major decrease in religion with the U.S. moving at a more rapid pace than others.² As part of this secularizing shift and according to reports from the Pew Research Center, there has been a steady rise in people identifying as either

² Ronald Inglehart, *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197547045.001.0001>.

“spiritual but not religious” or no religion at all. In the last ten years, the religious composition, mainly Christianity, within American society has dropped by 10 points and this number is continually dwindling downward. In 2021, approximately 29 percent of U.S. adults classified themselves as religious “nones,” referring to those who identify as atheists, agnostics, or report no specific religious affiliation, compared to 16 percent in 2007.³ As of 2023, 64 percent of Americans self-identified as spiritual, and 53 percent characterized themselves as religious.⁴ The idea of being “spiritual but not religious” encompasses a wide range of beliefs from those grounded in organized religion to those centered on the supernatural, self-discovery, or a sense of interconnectedness with other people, animals, or nature. However, unaffiliated spiritual individuals, in comparison to those who identify with a specific religious tradition, tend to place greater importance on the significance of open-mindedness (70%) and a connection to nature (63%) as core aspects of their spirituality.⁵

Despite the steady decline in religious affiliation worldwide, there has been significant growth in pilgrimages, both connected to and independent from traditional religious modalities. From 1989 to 2011, the Amarnath pilgrimage in India has risen in its number of pilgrims from an estimated 12,000 to 630,000.⁶ Pilgrims bathing at the Kumbh

³ Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>; Stephanie Kramer et al., “How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

⁴ Becca A. Alper et al., “Measuring Spirituality,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/measuring-spirituality/>.

⁵ See note 4 above.

⁶ Ian Reader, “Pilgrimage Around the World,” in *Pilgrimage: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198718222.003.0001>.

Mela at Allahabad (the convergence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Sarasvati rivers) have increased from 15 million to almost 100 million.⁷ The number of pilgrims at the European Catholic pilgrimage site, Santiago de Compostela, has dramatically increased from 2,491 in 1986 to 438,589 in 2022.⁸ This surge in pilgrimage activity does not suggest a revival of religious zeal.⁹ Rather, it reflects the influence of political, societal, and economic factors, alongside the development of a spiritual culture and the growth of secularization, which have paved the way for alternative pilgrimage experiences.¹⁰ Research has also revealed a growing secular shift, marking a transition from historical depictions of pilgrimage tied to organized religion to more novel and diverse ways of relating to and experiencing the sacred. Contemporary forms of pilgrimage include touristic visits to sites like the Vietnam Memorial, Elvis' Graceland, Henry David Thoreau's home, Jim Morrison's grave, the Beatles' Abbey Road crosswalk, and individual journeys taken by those seeking restorative experiences through a deeper connection to nature.¹¹ The pursuit for healing in some fashion remains a central motivation for undertaking pilgrimage, both in historical and contemporary contexts, even as detachment from institutionalized religion increases.

⁷ Reader, 4.

⁸ Ian Reader, "Pilgrimage Growth in the Modern World: Meanings and Implications," *Religion* 37, no. 3 (2007): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2007.06.009>; "Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago 2023: Number of Pilgrims Who Traveled to Santiago de Compostela, Spain from 2011 to 2023," *Statista Ltd.*, 2024.

⁹ Reader, 226.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹¹ Reader, 213; Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 57-58; Peter Jan Margry, "The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison's Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery: The Social Construction of Sacred Space," in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 143-72; Kevin McCarron, "Pilgrims or Tourists?: Rock Music and 'shrines' in England," *Critical Survey* 7, no. 2 (1995): 165-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41555911>; John Hanson Mitchell, *Walking Towards Walden: A Pilgrimage in Search of Place* (London: University Press of New England, 2015).

The objective of this thesis is to expand the academic study of pilgrimage by analyzing emerging, non-conventional forms of pilgrimage. A key question guiding this exploration is how transformative and rehabilitative experiences associated with the natural environment redefine and extend historical depictions of pilgrimage. Furthermore, it considers how these experiences might influence scholarly approaches concerning the sacred in a world increasingly shaped by secularization. My project engages with these questions aiming to broaden the conceptual boundaries of what a pilgrimage can mean in the twenty-first century and beyond. Given the significant decline in religious affiliation worldwide, especially in the United States, and the rise of those identifying as spiritual rather than religious or nonreligious, alongside a surge in alternative pilgrimage practices, there is a pressing need to reconsider both the boundaries of pilgrimage and the conceptualization of the sacred. Such a rethinking is particularly important for gaining deeper insight into the lived experiences of individuals, like Josh, who engage or connect with the sacred beyond traditional religious norms, often within marginalized, natural, or wild spaces that fall outside the boundaries of religious geographies.

By exploring transformative and rehabilitative journeys connected to nature, this project broadens historical and scholarly understandings of pilgrimage, with a focus on the cultural and secular shifts influencing this evolving phenomenon. Given the complexity of the subject, pilgrimage requires a multi-disciplinary approach. To contextualize these complexities, I primarily utilize secondary sources from Anthropology and Religious Studies, while also incorporating elements of History, Philosophy, Psychology, and other Social Sciences. The second chapter is dedicated to the anthropology of pilgrimage, offering a chronological overview of the development of

Pilgrimage Studies, with particular attention to the contributions of anthropological research by scholars such as Victor and Edith Turner, Alan Morinis, Michael Sallnow, John Eade, Eric Cohen, Nelson Graburn, and others. This chapter provides a foundational framework for examining what constitutes a pilgrimage, its defining characteristics, and the various actors involved, including non-human entities.

Chapter three examines relational epistemologies and ontologies that address the relationships between human and other-than-human beings. It focuses on the significance of the natural environment in shaping human life, particularly in the context of the pilgrim's journey, and the ongoing reciprocity and interspecies relationships that permeate human existence. This chapter engages with the ontological turn within Western Anthropology, drawing heavily on the work of anthropologists Martin Holbraad, Morten Pederson, Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Additionally, it considers the theoretical perspectives on neo-animism, as discussed by Religious Studies scholar Graham Harvey, ecologist David Abram, and environmental philosopher Bron Taylor's concept of *Dark Green Religion* (referring to Taylor's book and definition) to illuminate the intrinsic connections between human and non-human worlds in Indigenous cultures, alternative spiritualities, and beyond. The ontological turn and neo-animistic discourses are both necessary viewpoints for this project, as they not only chart the evolution of Pilgrimage Studies but also form the basis for the central argument in chapter four. This argument contends that the sacred must be reimagined to foster greater inclusivity within the pilgrimage process and that narratives of rehabilitation emerge from the interconnectedness of interspecies subjects when humans detach from the demands of everyday society and engage with the solemnity of nature in

a pilgrimage-like manner. To support this claim, chapter four investigates primary sources, including personal memoirs and blog posts, to establish a thematic framework that positions activities such as hiking, backpacking, camping, and walking in the woods as secular yet spiritually meaningful practices that mirror the pilgrimage archetype. Moreover, the chapter continues to build upon Taylor's notion of neo-animism through dark green religion and integrates the work of Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe, offering a framework to understand how spiritual experiences can arise in places not traditionally considered sacred, contributing to broader pilgrimage narratives.

Transformative experiences and the healing potential of the natural environment play a pivotal role in shaping pilgrimage journeys, addressing a gap in existing scholarship and necessitating further inquiry. Specifically, rehabilitative processes that take place in marginalized spaces, outside traditional or popular sacred sites, have remained largely underexplored. This thesis argues that non-institutionalized spiritual experiences, including engagements with the sacred through recreational activities and the act of retreating into nature to disconnect from daily life, should be recognized as valid forms of pilgrimage in a religious context. Specifically, those experiences involving interactions with more-than-human entities warrant further academic attention. It also contends that these non-traditional pilgrimage experiences, particularly those focused on healing within nature, offer meaningful alternatives to conventional religious pilgrimages. Thus, this work offers a nuanced explanation of why pilgrimage holds significance in contexts beyond its traditional associations.

Chapter II.

Defining Pilgrimage in the Postmodern World

*The pilgrim is not someone who has arrived, but someone who is
always in the process of becoming*

–David Steindl-Rast

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of pilgrimage drew scholarly attention, especially among Western anthropologists who sought to understand and define the phenomenon. While these scholars provide an understanding of both traditional and contemporary forms of pilgrimage, they confine the practice to visiting dedicated sacred sites or shrines and scarcely consider spaces that have not been deemed sacred by historical or societal narratives, like random places in nature or the wild. Victor and Edith Turner pioneered the way in pilgrimage studies with their 1978 publication of *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Within this work they employ Victor Turner's theory of liminality and *communitas*, from his previously published book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.¹² They define pilgrimage as a universal human phenomenon, using liminality to describe the ritual process of individuals coming away from societal structures into a transitory state of being.¹³ *Communitas*, on the other hand, is presented as a relational dynamic between like-minded individuals from varying socio-cultural backgrounds.¹⁴ These individuals

¹² Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹³ Turner and Turner, 3, 11, 30-35.

¹⁴ Turner and Turner, 32.

share an intimate bond with others who leave their homes and journey towards a designated sacred center, where the sacred is experienced, thereby deepening the individual's spirituality.¹⁵ Their theory not only laid the foundation for understanding historical religious pilgrimages and contemporary postmodern sacred travel, but it also prompted alternating viewpoints from Alan Morinis, John Eade, Michael Sallnow, Nelson Graburn, and Erik Cohen who all formulated their own definitions. Morinis, in *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* and the introduction to *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, defines pilgrimage as a culturally specific spiritual quest to a sacred location imbued with valued ideals, rituals, legends, symbols, and patterns steeped in older cultural traditions.¹⁶ In the introduction to their edited volume *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Culture*, Eade and Sallnow define pilgrimage as a deluge of discourses involving a sacred journey to a particular sacred destination created and enshrined by human ideals, their rituals and practices, which carry different meanings for different people.¹⁷ Both Graburn, in "The Anthropology of Tourism," and Cohen, in "Pilgrimage and Tourism," explore the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism by incorporating tourism to the concept of pilgrimage. They define this secular mobility as a discourse shaped by systematic processes, rituals, values, meaning, and direct experiences associated with established sacred spaces, yet it is often unaffiliated with the institutional religious traditions of the past.¹⁸

¹⁵ Turner and Turner, 31, 33-34.

¹⁶ Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 5; Alan Morinis, introduction to *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁷ John Eade and Michael Sallnow, introduction to *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Culture*, ed. John Eade and Michael Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), 10.

¹⁸ Nelson H. H. Graburn, "The Anthropology of Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, no. 1

Nearing the turn of the century and into the following years, pilgrimage studies exploded, attracting considerable academic interests. Scholars across many disciplines expanded the definition of the phenomenon. Initially, pilgrimage was understood in more religiously conservative or traditional forms of sacred travel. This view was articulated by anthropologists such as Turner and Turner, Morinis, Eade, Sallnow, and others. Over time, the definition broadened to include more touristic discourses, healing journeys, and even non-religious practices like wine-tasting or patchwork quilt-making.¹⁹ In this vein, any activity could be understood as a form of pilgrimage. Even though these interdisciplinary approaches have expanded the definition of pilgrimage to include spaces outside of designated sacred centers and more of a secular human quest suffused with meaning, their concept of pilgrimage is over generalized and ubiquitous which blurs the boundaries of what it means to go on pilgrimage. Religious Studies scholar Ian Reader and sociologist Tony Walter, in their 1993 publication *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, redefine pilgrimage.²⁰ They describe it as a multifaceted phenomenon, having many layers.²¹ They suggest that pilgrimage is a human quest for meaning and identity.²² This quest extends toward both religious sacred sites and the profane world. They argue that any space can be considered sacred yet simultaneously remain disconnected from divine

(1983): 13-15, [https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1016/0160-7383\(83\)90113-5](https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1016/0160-7383(83)90113-5); Erik Cohen, "Pilgrimage and Tourism," in *Sacred Journey: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), 56.

¹⁹ Donatella Cinelli Colombini, "Wine Tourism in Italy," *International Journal of Wine Research* 7, (2015): 29-35, <https://doi.org/10.2147/IJWR.S82688>; Amy L. Montz, "The Personal Is Pilgrimage: Literary Tourism through and with Ms. Austen and Mrs. Gaskell," *The Gaskell Journal* 30, (2016): 57-78; Nina Vollenbröcker, "Sacred Rootedness—Settling into Mobility in the Nineteenth Century American West," in *Sacred Mobilities*, 1st ed. Avril Maddrell et al. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2015), 147-64, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315607344-12>.

²⁰ Ian Reader and Tony Walter, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993).

²¹ Reader and Walter, 22.

²² Reader and Walter, 9.

powers or organized religious entities.²³ Examples include amusement parks, the homes or graves of famous individuals, or sports arenas.²⁴ Other disciplinary approaches from scholars Chris Devereaux, Elizabeth Carnegie, and sociologist Stephen Haller define pilgrimage as a meaning-making psychological process and associate the practice with healing journeys of self-renewal, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, a kind of spiritual quest, and/or a road to recovery.²⁵ Anthropologists Ian McIntosh and E. Moore Quinn, in a panel discussion, define pilgrimage as any human movement imbued with symbolic importance and transformative processes and visualize pilgrimage as a series of journeys, for example the journey of life.²⁶ Theologian Judith King and anthropologists Michael A. Di Giovine and Jaeyeon Choe define pilgrimage as diversified means of travel that are nevertheless hyper-meaningful and involve direct personal experiences centered around individually important or sacred places, whether religious or secular.²⁷

Considering the myriad definitions of pilgrimage, what exactly determines a pilgrimage in today's world? Who can be considered a pilgrim? What are the motivations for pilgrimage? What common ground can be shared between the tensions of limiting pilgrimage to established sacred centers to over-generalizing pilgrimage to include travel to any random place? Because the phenomenon of pilgrimage crosses many disciplines

²³ Reader and Walter, 16, 22.

²⁴ Reader and Walter, 1, 16, 22.

²⁵ Chris Devereaux and Elizabeth Carnegie, "Pilgrimage: Journeying Beyond Self," *Tourism Management Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2006): 48-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2006.11081246>; Stephen F. Haller, "The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 5, no. 3, Article 5, (2018): 2-3, 5.

²⁶ Robert C. Nickerson et al., "What is Pilgrimage? A Report of the Panel at the 2017 Symposium on Pilgrimage Studies, William & Mary, October 7, 2017," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 6, no. 2, Article 2, (2018): 1-6.

²⁷ Judith King, "The Struggle to Define Pilgrimage," *Religions* 14, no. 1, Article 79 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010079>; Michael A. Di Giovine and Jaeyeon Choe, "Geographies of Religion and Spirituality: Pilgrimage Beyond the Officially Sacred," *Tourism Geographies* 21, no. 3, (2019): 362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2019.1625072>.

and is ingrained in many cultural histories, past and present, it is difficult to define. The topic may be complex, but this chapter argues that there is one crucial factor embedded in the phenomenon that bridges the tensions that Turner and Turner, Morinis, Eade, Sallnow, Graburn, Cohen and other scholars across multiple disciplines have briefly mentioned but mostly overlooked. That factor is the inseparable environments surrounding pilgrimage destinations, particularly natural environments versus socio-religious or cultural environments. In this chapter, I will draw from these scholars who have prioritized the more socio-cultural, religious, political, and economic aspects. They have emphasized ritualistic patterns, mobility, identity, existentialism, valued ideals, meaning-making, and psychological and transformative processes. This includes both religious and secular contexts, as well as conventional and unconventional practices, often steeped in older religious traditions. I argue that there is another critical layer to defining and understanding pilgrimage. This layer should include the natural environment and how it influences the individual's journey. I propose that pilgrimage today should be understood as: 1) a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional practice that involves travel from a usual environment to an unusual environment, 2) a mental and physical process, including but not limited to spirituality, that is very much connected to unknown, unaccustomed, strange, or out of the ordinary settings, 3) an exploration, a quest of sorts, that touches many realms, yet is deeply connected to the natural environment in which it occurs. I contend that nature, therefore, serves as a sacred space, with the interactions between people and the environment playing a vital role in creating the pilgrim's experience, which then shapes the pilgrim's journey. To defend this argument, I bring to the fore the weight of the environments alluded to within these scholarly discussions.

Given that these scholars find that a unifying factor in the paradigm of pilgrimage and tourism—its parallels to older religious models and cultural traditions—I draw attention to ancient aspects of pilgrimage, primarily through the works of anthropologists Simon Coleman and John Elsner and Religious Studies scholar Ian Reader and others. From reading their works on older traditional pilgrimages, it is my understanding that environmental factors have not only been present but have played a significant role within these institutional structures. By highlighting these factors, I seek to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion to better understand postmodern sacred travel.

Turnerian Model of Pilgrimage: Compliments and Critiques

Anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner made a ground-breaking contribution to the study of pilgrimage with their 1978 publication *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. Their work presents a nuanced method for viewing pilgrimage, which was a direct nullification of earlier Marxist and Durkheimian approaches (structuralist and functionalist) that prioritized socio-religious cults.²⁸ Instead, drawing from Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner introduces the idea of *communitas* and liminality²⁹ that he and Edith Turner advocate are ingrained in the pilgrimage process. The Turners claim that a pilgrimage begins when an individual or group temporarily separates from their cultural environment, their everyday profane world, and moves towards a sacred center, where they engage with like-minded individuals from other socio-cultures outside of their cultural norms.³⁰ Incorporating Victor Turner's previous work, they describe this

²⁸ Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*, 3-5.

²⁹ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 2, 17, 35; Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

³⁰ Turner, 95-97; Turner and Turner, 13, 31.

initiatory stage as the liminal phase, a “betwixt and between” transitional state, a “threshold,” as the ritual and ambiguous subject “passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,” comparing the process to being in the womb, death, or the wilderness.³¹ They posit that in this stage, and as individuals progress onward in their quest, subjects experience *communitas*, “a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances.”³² The pilgrimage process, according to the Turners, is an ambiguous journey towards a dedicated holy shrine or sacred geographical location as the center point. Whether visualized as sacred or secular, the Turnerian model of pilgrimage emphasizes commonness, camaraderie, and interrelatedness. In this model, a bond is formed and shared with others outside of the individual’s normal society, and their social position changes as they are no longer bound to their prior societal, religious, political, or economic status, restrictions, or limitations. The individual or group is often reduced to a lowly state of being, and a heightened sense of the supernatural or connectedness to the sacred is experienced, leading the pilgrim to return to their mundane life with a deeper sense of spirituality than before.³³

Together, the Turners saw *communitas* as an impactful way of understanding the role of pilgrimages historically, cross-culturally, and in modernity. They assert that pilgrimage is initiated with an individual but becomes a social dimension as those individuals commune and form relationships with others amid the pilgrimage journey.³⁴

³¹ Turner, 95; Turner and Turner, 2, 14, 249.

³² Turner and Turner, 250.

³³ Turner, 96, 97; Turner and Turner, 7.

³⁴ Turner and Turner, 32, 34.

Through *communitas*, the Turners place a strong emphasis on egalitarianism, universality, commonalities, and a unity among pilgrims from all different cultures and societies as the pilgrimage process cuts across many boundaries. Some of these commonalities and boundary breakers include healing narratives associated with an environment of sorts. The Turners point out that “all sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again” and that “pilgrims go out to be cured . . . and voyage far to their font of healing” which implies that the environment (or myths about the environment) surrounding each specific site is a significant factor in traveling to sacred centers.³⁵ From this statement, it is suggested that the miraculous healing powers associated with these environments are what attract pilgrims from diverse cultures. They also give attention to the idea that the pilgrimage process can be understood as an exteriorization of an interior salvific journey that is often synchronized with older religious traditions and rituals. Such journeys are described by the Turners as “a subsystem of beliefs and symbols derived from its historical origins,” even though some alternative religious pilgrimages are distinguished from the traditional model, like those associated with nature-based paganistic or occultic practices.³⁶ The process of separation and *communitas*, according to the Turners, breeds secularization since individuals become liberated from socio-political, economic, and religious restrictions and obligations within everyday life which redefines the activity as being more anti-structural, anti-clerical, anti-institutional, touristic, and counter-cultural.³⁷ They suggest that in the modern era pilgrimage does not

³⁵ Turner and Turner, 6, 13.

³⁶ Turner and Turner, 6-7, 13-14, 18-21.

³⁷ Turner and Turner, 9-11, 21, 26, 34-35.

have to necessarily mirror the historical model connected to institutionalized religious traditions to be an actual pilgrimage.

Despite much of their work being centered on established sacred spaces, and mostly Christian, the Turners do acknowledge that the natural environment plays a role in contemporary types of pilgrimage. Some of these natural excursions they hint at include walking on beaches or finding solitude in nature, as these activities are “seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of *communitas*.”³⁸ However, this idea is merely mentioned, not emphasized, and it raises questions about who the participants of *communitas* are within these natural settings. Is it solely symbolic, or can the beach, nature itself, the inhabitants of nature also be considered literal subjects within the notion of *communitas*, especially as it relates to the environmental features of the pilgrimage journey? Although Turner and Turner’s theory contributed greatly to the study of pilgrimage, inciting new ways to understand the phenomenon, it also sparked concerns and ideas which accelerated future scholarly debates and discussions regarding both conventional and unconventional pilgrimages, especially among anthropologists.

Soon after the Turners’ publication, anthropologists both adopted and critiqued their theory on pilgrimage. One critique of the Turnerian approach to pilgrimage was from Alan Morinis who rejected their model of anti-structure and uniformity. He argues that their work demonstrates a typology of sacred spaces more than a typology of pilgrimage.³⁹ Whereas the Turners prioritize the liminal state and *communitas* created by the pilgrim leaving their home and forming new relationships with others outside their cultural community, Morinis finds this theory insufficient. He argues that the Turners do

³⁸ Turner and Turner, 20.

³⁹ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 8.

not provide enough information concerning the individual's experience, their motivation for undergoing the journey, the meaning behind it, or the fact that pilgrims typically travel together in small groups with family and/or friends.⁴⁰ Morinis postulates that the meaning of pilgrimage varies from culture to culture, is dependent upon cultural practices and patterns, historicity, rituals, symbols, legends, and ideas centered around established sacred sites most often associated with a deity that occupies that space. At the same time, he recognizes that whether religious or secular, pilgrimage can take many unique forms, but nevertheless ideals are the core of the pilgrimage center.⁴¹ Morinis asserts that the term "pilgrimage" itself is a label used to describe an individual's exploration to a sacred location usually over many miles and rough terrain.⁴² He defines pilgrimage as "a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal."⁴³ He uses the word dualistically to refer to a "structured institution" and an individual's thoughts and behavior as they move towards these sacred destinations.⁴⁴ Through examining pilgrimages, mainly in the Hindu tradition, Morinis characterizes the activity as more of a socio-cultural institution sustained by its cultural values, one that is culturally specific, hence the cause for dedicated sacred spaces being different from other places in the world. From this perspective, Morinis implies that the environment is an actor in the pilgrim's life, especially within the Hindu religion where much of the Indian landscape is envisaged as being a manifestation of divine entities or other forces that provide a sense of meaning and identity to human beings.

⁴⁰ Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, 219.

⁴¹ Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, 10; Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 5.

⁴² Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, 2; Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 7.

⁴³ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 4.

⁴⁴ Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, 5.

Even though Morinis opposed Turner and Turner's model of anti-structure and homogeneity within *communitas*, he supported and accentuated their point that pilgrimage can involve a direct individual experience. Morinis not only highlights this point but sees it as a critical factor for understanding the phenomenon. By way of a cross-cultural and sociological comparative analysis, Morinis stresses the personal nature of pilgrimage as being a spiritual quest embodied with valued ideals, and therefore concludes that direct experience and structure are inseparable features of sacred traveling.⁴⁵ Even the more secular means of travel, such as tourism, according to Morinis, "share in many of the older, deeper cultural paradigms and processes of pilgrimage."⁴⁶ He posits that secular pilgrimage spots like Lenin's tomb, Mao's Mausoleum, or the Washington Monument, became enshrined due to human ideals and imaginations that conceptualized these environments or landscapes to possess great power.⁴⁷ However, he contends that if the intention of the journey is simply a visit or recreation/leisure and does not involve "a quest for an ideal" it cannot be considered a pilgrimage.⁴⁸

Anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow also found limitations in Turner and Turner's approach and offered a new theory to understand the phenomenon of pilgrimage and sacred travel. Like Morinis, they too identify the particularities of pilgrimage and thought Morinis reinforced the social boundaries involved versus the generalizations made by the Turners that favored "transcultural universalism."⁴⁹ While Eade and Sallnow did not reject the concept of *communitas* entirely, they perceived the

⁴⁵ Morinis, 236-238.

⁴⁶ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 5.

⁴⁷ Morinis, 5, 6.

⁴⁸ Morinis, 7.

⁴⁹ Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*, 4.

universalistic undertones within *communitas* as being problematic because they thought it suppressed the heterogeneity of the pilgrimage process. For Eade and Sallnow, pilgrimage is more diversified than it is unified. They then proposed a different model, that pilgrimage can best be understood as “competing religious and secular discourses” imbued with a myriad of meanings and interpretations from a wide variety of pilgrims.⁵⁰ Their investigation involved the practice of pilgrimage, mostly associated with Christianity, and the significance of how sacred forces surrounding shrines are constructed, 1) “emanating directly from the matrix of an animate landscape” and the “chthonic powers of the terrain” stemming from “mountain lords and the other spirit owners of nature,” 2) narratives of mythic divinities, consecrations of apparitions, and/or “petrified bodies of wandering gods.”⁵¹ They claim that for a vast majority of pilgrims healing is one of many discourses involved in the pilgrimage process where the journey is initiated by a community of individuals suffering physically in their bodies or as a means of redemption.⁵² Bathing in waters along the pilgrimage path or at the center of specific sites is prominent, as these shrines are conceptualized as possessing miraculous curative powers. This frame of reference points to the effects of the natural environment surrounding the pilgrim’s journey, even if narratives are erected from human beliefs and ideals. Nonetheless, nature still plays a part in individuals’ spiritual experiences.

Within this new framework of competing discourses, Eade and Sallnow also highlight a shift from sacred sites once being place-centered to being more people-centered, carrying different meanings for different people, as a result of secularization as

⁵⁰ Eade and Sallnow, 2, 5.

⁵¹ Eade and Sallnow, 6, 7.

⁵² Eade and Sallnow, 10, 11, 17.

well as political and/or socio-religious transformations over time. In this vein, and whether secular or religious, they draw attention to the direct experience of the individual pilgrim, much like Morinis, positing that sacredness then moves away from the center and encapsulates the journey itself rather than located specifically at the shrine or pilgrimage center.⁵³ One of their main arguments is that pilgrims themselves define and contest the boundaries of pilgrimage causing a deluge of discourses concerning the environments surrounding shrines. Eade and Sallnow identify these environments as “religious voids,” meaning that sacred spaces are empty vessels that become fully sacred by the ethos that individual or groups of pilgrims pour into them—“their hopes, prayers, and aspirations.”⁵⁴ According to Eade and Sallnow, human beings wield the power of pilgrimage being a sacred journey; they build the boundaries, they contest the boundaries, they distinguish between secular and sacred space, and their diverse interpretations, meanings, rituals, and practices are what gives a shrine its power, including the ability to heal individuals from infirmities and physical and mental suffering. Nevertheless, Eade and Sallnow indicate that the environment surrounding sacred shrines is an inseparable feature of the pilgrimage process, regardless of what humans pour into it.

Forasmuch as Turner and Turner’s publication opened new and alternative ways of envisioning the phenomenon of pilgrimage, both traditional and non-traditional, and despite the varying critiques, other anthropologists like Nelson Graburn and Erik Cohen adopted the Turnerian methodology and applied it to understanding tourism as a secular form of pilgrimage. Graburn was a proponent of the notion of *communitas* and liminality which supported his idea that tourism converges with religious pilgrimages, even though

⁵³ Eade and Sallnow, 7-11.

⁵⁴ Eade and Sallnow, 15.

tourism is a secular discourse and often one of pleasure and leisure. He emphasized the Turners' statement that "a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist."⁵⁵ From this perspective and utilizing the Turnerian approach, Graburn argues that both tourism and pilgrimage involve a separation from ordinary day-to-day life and societal restrictions, the starting point, to the entry of an altered state of being, a middle or liminal phase where *communitas* transpires, to a change or reversal of behavior upon returning home, the end of the journey. By this observation, Graburn suggests that there isn't much of a distinction between tourism and pilgrimage. Graburn defines tourism as "a break from life," involving "re-creation—the renewal of life, the recharging of run-down elements," which he claims is necessary for mental and bodily well-being, as well as overall health.⁵⁶ He also gives attention to middle class and educated societies who, in his point of view, engage in tourism as a means to search for new experiences, to understand the world, to seek authenticity "out there," and the "impulse to 'conquer' the Other, whether it be space, the wilderness, foreignness, the past, and so on."⁵⁷

With the help of Turner and Turner's theory, Graburn adds tourism to the possibilities of pilgrimage, providing an alternative understanding to the global changes of travel that continuously expand into the postmodern era. Drawing from Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Meyerhoff's *Secular Ritual*, Graburn asserts that both rituals and the sacred associated with pilgrimage and tourism are not limited to religion or the supernatural. However, they are still important, as they can arouse strong emotions in

⁵⁵ Graburn, "The Anthropology of Tourism," 17; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 20.

⁵⁶ Graburn, 11.

⁵⁷ Graburn, 18.

individuals, which reflects the pilgrimage process.⁵⁸ Not only does Graburn apply the Turnerian model of *communitas* and liminality, but he also agrees with Morinis, Eade, and Sallnow, who emphasize direct experiences and the power of human values within the pilgrimage process. Furthermore, Graburn contends that sacred spaces and centers are dependent upon the ideals of individuals and certain societies. He points out that while some pilgrims or tourists may visit sites steeped in tradition or religion, others may travel to exotic places, expensive resorts, attend athletic games, charter a yacht, visit iconographic gravesites like Lenin's tomb, and others may be more low key and connected to the natural environment—all of which, he argues, have the markings of pilgrimage. According to Graburn, these sacred journeys are ritualistic and are created from individuals' "deeply held values about health, freedom, nature, and self-improvement."⁵⁹ In this regard, Graburn implicitly recognizes that the natural environment plays a part in the pilgrim's journey.

While Graburn places tourism analogously alongside pilgrimage, applying the Turnerian model as a foundation to support his claim, Cohen used the approach to highlight the convergences and divergences in both tourism and pilgrimage that, in his view, should not be ignored. One important distinction Cohen makes between tourism and pilgrimage is the mobility to a sacred destination. Stemming from an analytical study of youth tourism in Thailand, Cohen argues, like his forerunners Morinis, Eade, and Sallnow, that pilgrimage is an institutional system, a semi-obligatory, meritorious journey imbued with culturally specific rituals, meanings, and values. Cohen asserts that

⁵⁸ Graburn, 13; Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Meyerhoff, "Introduction: Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Meyerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 3-24.

⁵⁹ Graburn, "The Anthropology of Tourism," 15.

pilgrimage travel involves movement towards a sacred Center, the pilgrim's goal, associated with divine forces, an "indescribable," "incomprehensible," phenomenological "Wholly Other," "traditionally expected to provoke religious 'rapture' or 'exaltation,'" which he claims are socially constructed ideals.⁶⁰ Tourism, on the other hand, according to Cohen, is more secular, more "open," and not as institutionalized or culturally meaningful as pilgrimages, and is a non-obligatory recreational activity, "expected to give mere pleasure and enjoyment," that requires movement in the opposite direction toward the Other, the traveler's goal, beyond the boundaries of a Center powered by a divine agency or a hallowed cosmos.⁶¹

In conversation with Turner and Turner's theory, Cohen finds that liminality is deeply ingrained in tourism and pilgrimage as both modes of travel are not devoid of patterns and order and involve the idea of "getting out" or "getting to," abandoning daily habits and routines.⁶² Yet at the same time, Cohen finds that the idea of liminality within tourism stops there and posits that the liminal state is part of the institutional structure of the pilgrimage process that brings about a "restructuring" of the pilgrim upon their returning home and does not continue in some touristic mobilities such as "marginal paradises" or exotic places.⁶³ *Communitas* within the pilgrimage paradigm, according to Cohen, is not anti-structural nor anarchical like that of tourism, meaning that the pilgrim's disposition, traditionally speaking, is ritually structured, disciplined, strictly systematized, and "culturally prescribed" to where the touristic traveler simply is not.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Cohen, "Pilgrimage and Tourism," 50. In this description of the sacred Center, Cohen draws from Rudolf Otto's "Wholly Other" definition in Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁶¹ Cohen, 53, 56.

⁶² Cohen, 57.

⁶³ Cohen, 58.

⁶⁴ Cohen, 57.

Unlike the pilgrim's journey, Cohen maintains that the tourist has more liberty and is free from socio-religious and obligatory discourses. Cohen suggests that over time, as the postmodern world has become more secularized and moved away from institutional religious discourses, leisure travel has increased. As a result, mystical connotations associated with traditional pilgrimage centers have undergone a sense of "disenchantment," causing sacred centers to become more of a tourist attraction—all the while there is still a desire for individuals to travel to various natural environments in search of experiencing the Other.⁶⁵

Even remote 'paradises' became gradually disenchanted. But the strange, wild, and pristine world beyond the boundaries of civilization preserved some of its attractiveness; with the modern legitimation of a generalized interest in, and appreciation of, things strange and novel for their own sake, it became a culturally accepted motive for travel.⁶⁶

Stemming from this transformation and evolution, Cohen asserts that new centers are being created, re-created, and redefined by what he identifies as the "pilgrim-tourist."⁶⁷ By making this claim, Cohen implies that there is also a re-enchantment of natural environments, which are, in some ways, captivating and appealing to the pilgrim-tourist. In turn, he draws attention to the fact that conventional pilgrimage sites are becoming more touristic, while modern tourist destinations are evolving into a new kind of pilgrimage.

⁶⁵ Cohen, 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 52.

Postmodern Pilgrimage: Interdisciplinary Approaches

The theories posited by the Turners, Morinis, Eade, Sallnow, Graburn, and Cohen expanded the ways by which to understand the social and religious dynamics of pilgrimage in the latter part of the twentieth century, not only in a more traditional context but also the secularizing shifts that were taking place globally. In the 1990s, scholars within other fields of study considered these anthropological viewpoints and too began to discuss the determining factors of pilgrimage—what a pilgrimage looks like and how sacred travel can be interpreted, especially in the postmodern world. In *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Religious Studies scholar Ian Reader and sociologist Tony Walter contribute to Pilgrimage Studies with their edited volume of cross-cultural analyses and conversations with scholars from various disciplines, as it validates pilgrims' journeys that deviate from institutional religious centers. Within this work, Reader and Walter embrace the Turnerian model, arguing that their theory of liminality and *communitas* broadened the overarching understanding of pilgrimage. However, they found much of the previous academic research, including the assumptions made by Morinis, Eade, and Sallnow, to be more limited, focusing primarily on organized religion and sacred centers established by these structures. They assert that Morinis places so much emphasis on the particulars of pilgrimage within specific socio-cultural and religious traditions that he disregards the secular settings also within these systems.⁶⁸ Reader and Walter continue that Eade and Sallnow more so stress the social structures and processes in their approach that they dedicate little attention to individual experiences.⁶⁹ Thus, agreeing with

⁶⁸ Reader and Walter, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, 14.

⁶⁹ Reader and Walter, 14.

Graburn's analysis, Reader and Walter too find that pilgrimage and tourism are similar and offer new insights reflecting a more secular nature.

Through examining both historical and religious pilgrimages, their settings, landscapes, and geographies, and sacred sites unaffiliated with institutional religion, Reader and Walter (and others within the publication) find unifying factors and commonalities amid these processes. They argue that the concept of pilgrimage “runs far beyond the boundaries of visitors to shrines and holy sites connected with official religious traditions into areas far more concerned with the secular world” reaching into “profane arenas.”⁷⁰ With this in mind, they propose that the term pilgrimage in today's world can be used to describe various types of travel and visits to different places, such as homes or graves of famous people, monumental places where tragic accidents occurred (for example Anfield Stadium in Liverpool, England), as well as entertainment centers like Disneyland, sporting events, and many more. They claim that the word “pilgrimage” can also be used metaphorically to describe an individual's spiritual journey.⁷¹ From their analysis, they conclude that, whether traditionally religious or modernly secular, pilgrimage has many layers, is multi-dimensional, and is an existential phenomenon. It spans boundaries across a wide range of disciplines and can be understood as a quest for mobility imbued with meaning and identity processes. Most importantly, they argue that religious objects, sacred shrines, churches, temples, and divine forces are not necessary factors in defining pilgrimage.⁷² This implies that in our ever-changing world and especially as it becomes more secularized, any space or environment can be considered

⁷⁰ Reader and Walter, 5.

⁷¹ Reader and Walter, 4.

⁷² Reader and Walter, 22.

sacred. Therefore, unorthodox places, like being in nature can be one's church and further can develop into a pilgrimage destination for individuals or groups.

From the 2000s and into the present, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, drawing from some of the forerunners in Pilgrimage Studies, have broadened the boundaries of the concept of pilgrimage to understand the human experience altogether. In this expansion, some scholars insist that there is no single or simple definition for the term. Scholars Chris Devereaux and Elizabeth Carnegie consider the connections between pilgrimages and tourism in the context of wellness and restoration. They conjecture that pilgrimage in the postmodern world can be defined as a spiritual journey, a means for individuals to find themselves, that the sacred center is at the center of themselves, and that removing oneself from their unnatural urbanized life into a more leisurely activity, like tourism or spending time in the wilderness, is a key component for individuals to renew themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, even if it is religiously unaffiliated.⁷³ From his research on pilgrimage and tourism, sociologist Alex Norman finds that these mobilities are deeply spiritual, charged with meaning-making, self-discovery, healing, well-being, and that excursions like backpacking in nature is a kind of retreat from the everyday mundane life that very much has some of the same underlying characteristics of traditional pilgrimage processes.⁷⁴ In a 2017 panel discussion entitled, "What is Pilgrimage?" the idea of what determines a pilgrimage or who can be identified as a pilgrim was debated between anthropologists Ian S. McIntosh and E. Moore Quinn and Pilgrimage Studies scholar George D. Greenia. McIntosh claims

⁷³ Devereaux and Carnegie, "Pilgrimage: Journeying Beyond Self," 47-56.

⁷⁴ Alex Norman, "The Varieties of the Spiritual Experience," *Literature and Aesthetics* 22, no. 1 (2012): 20-37.

that traditional definitions of pilgrimage leave out its transformative nature that is profoundly ingrained and personal within the process.⁷⁵ He, therefore, argues that “we can define the phenomenon as a journey within a journey within a journey” and that this journey “continues in ways that we cannot yet begin to imagine.”⁷⁶ Quinn implies that, because “pilgrimage holds different meanings for different pilgrims” and because human movement is universal and imbued with symbolic importance, determining whether an individual’s travel constitutes a sacred journey boils down to the eye of the beholder—the pilgrim themselves.⁷⁷ Greenia opposes these ideas asserting that “when everything is ‘pilgrimage,’ nothing is pilgrimage” and that the term has become a “runaway metaphor” to describe everyone and everything as one being on a journey of some kind.⁷⁸

Other scholars see pilgrimage as a modern continuum of the traditional past. Sociologist Stephen F. Haller considers the possibilities of pilgrimage and claims that whether religious or secular, traditional or not, all pilgrims embark upon a journey to “seek to connect with a larger reality,” providing a “sense of belonging” by which they describe their experiences on a personal level.⁷⁹ Anthropologist Michael A. Di Giovine and researcher Jaeyeon Choe analyze the variabilities and malleability of sacred locations claiming that perceiving the sacred is a matter of context, “inside and outside the realm of religious or temporal authority,” and that pilgrimage is “beyond the officially sacred” but is nevertheless a hyper-meaningful journey to a hyper-meaningful site.⁸⁰ Theologian Judith King asks the question, “What is pilgrimage now?” in her 2023 article “The

⁷⁵ Nickerson et al., “What is Pilgrimage?,” 1.

⁷⁶ Nickerson et al., 3.

⁷⁷ Nickerson et al., 4, 5.

⁷⁸ Nickerson et al., 1, 2.

⁷⁹ Haller, “The Possibility of Pilgrimage in a Scientific World,” 5.

⁸⁰ Di Giovine and Choe, “Geographies of Religion and Spirituality,” 362, 363.

Struggle to Define Pilgrimage.” From her analysis of historical religious and contemporary pilgrimages, King concludes that pilgrimage has been and still is diverse, and that “we can no longer take for granted a uniform definition of the phenomenon of pilgrimage.”⁸¹

Pilgrimage and The Natural Environment

Over the last few decades, Western anthropologists and scholars across multiple disciplines have characterized the phenomenon of pilgrimage as being deep-rooted in rituals, embodiment, mobility, identity, and having psychological and transformative effects on individuals, societies, and cultures. They have also highlighted the cultural shifts away from the historically specific, organized religious journeys toward secularization, particularly touristic travel and visits to other secular yet nonetheless sacred landscapes for some individuals, such as amusement parks, stadiums, the homes or graves of famous people, and more. These scholarly approaches, however, prioritize the sacrality of pilgrimage centers established by socio-cultural, political, religious, and economic contexts, even those that blur the boundaries between tourist attractions and contemporary travel. However, they have given little attention to the natural environments dissociated from designated sacred sites and tourist/pilgrimage destinations, nor to the role that nature has played and continues to play in the pilgrim-tourist’s journey. Because these alternating approaches find a commonality in sacred travel, both pilgrimage and tourism, sharing ground with ancient patterns of pilgrimage and steeped in older cultural traditions, it is important to consider how the natural

⁸¹ King, “The Struggle to Define Pilgrimage,” 9.

environments within these institutional and structural processes have shaped the pilgrim's experience throughout the ages to better understand postmodern pilgrimages.

In some of the most ancient religious cultures in the world, pilgrimage has been deeply connected to nature which has influenced, motivated, and created pilgrims' experiences. Since 1500 BCE, people from Tibet, Mongolia, China, and other neighboring countries have engaged in pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline, erasing negative karma, seeking enlightenment, and various kinds of miracles from deities that inhabit sacred shrines, temples, and stupas. In India, according to anthropologists Simon Coleman and John Elsner, gods inhabit much of the land, mountains, stones, trees, and water systems.⁸² They assert that the soil itself is considered the body of the divine feminine, while the Ganges River, often viewed as a "flowing ladder to heaven," embodies the goddess Ganga, a companion of Shiva.⁸³ Ritual bathing in this river, as well as others in the region, is a form of self-purification signifying that water in the Indian landscape is sacred, having rehabilitative powers to heal pilgrims who come in contact with it. Almost all Indian pilgrims bathe in Lake Manasarovar in Tibet for spiritual and healing purposes, as these waters, and others within the Tibetan landscape, are known to embody salvific, magical, supernatural, medicinal energies that heal—so much so that oftentimes pilgrims will harvest the water in small containers and carry them to sick loved ones back home.⁸⁴

⁸² Coleman and Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present*, 136.

⁸³ Coleman and Elsner, 140, 141.

⁸⁴ K. T. S. Sarao and Jeffery D. Long, "Pilgrimage (Buddhism)" in *Buddhism and Jainism*, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2017), 906, 907, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0852-2_308; Toni Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage & the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 61.

The natural environment, its restorative properties mostly conjoined with the embodiment of a divine agency, is an essential actor within pilgrimages associated with Abrahamic religious traditions. Before the Second Temple period (500 BCE), Jews went on pilgrimage three times per year during Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot to celebrate new agricultural seasons and to honor their cultural history. Within this tradition, pilgrimage originated in the wilderness of the Sinai desert, where the Hebrew God first manifested Himself to Moses on a mountain and upon tablets of stone. These tablets were carried back to the Israelites and placed inside a wooden box known as the Ark of the Covenant, which held great miraculous powers. At the turn of the Common Era, Muslim pilgrims took the journey known as the Hajj to the holy city of Mecca to pray and fast in obedience to Allah, to atone for sins, and to strengthen unity within Muslim culture. Like the Jewish tradition, pilgrimage in the Islamic culture began as an arduous journey over arid lands, stony plains, and persevering through torrential downpours, sandstorms, and mirages. Many Muslim pilgrims conceptualized the open plains of the Meccan region as a sacred space where God's spirit draws closer to the Earth. Along the way, it was common for convoys of camels, donkeys, mules, and horses to assist pilgrims on their journeys, which suggests that animals, too, made the pilgrimage to Mecca and can be considered participants within Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*.⁸⁵ Coleman and Elsner highlight that the sacred rock at the Meccan pilgrimage site, known as the Kaaba, is a manifestation and embodiment of the Divine, resembling the Ark of the Covenant.⁸⁶ Yet, this shrine remains stationary. In both traditions, according to Coleman and Elsner,

⁸⁵ Claudine Dauphin, Mohamed Ben Jeddou, and Jean-Marie Castex, "To Mecca on Pilgrimage on Foot and Camel-Back: The Jordanian Darb Al-Hajj," *Bulletin of the Council for British Research in the Levant* 10, no. 1 (2015): 23, 24, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1752726015Z.00000000029>.

⁸⁶ Coleman and Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present*, 60.

these cultural groups wandered nomadically over desert terrain and much of the motivation for pilgrimage throughout the ages was centered on returning to a place of origin after years of exile and/or cultural displacement. They imply that performing pilgrimage within these cultures was redemptive, serving as a recovery process that restored individuals, families, communities, and a nation back to their God, to each other, and to the land.⁸⁷ It also acted as a medium for relieving mental and physical afflictions caused by the oppression brought about by diaspora—all of which is deeply connected to nature in some fashion.⁸⁸

Shikoku, an Island in Japan and one of the oldest pilgrimage destinations in the world, is known for its mystical and spiritual qualities. These qualities are connected to its natural environmental features, including rugged mountainous coastlines, lavish forests, ancient trees, river valleys, seashores, and more. Religious Studies scholars John Shults and Ian Reader claim that the historical origins of this pilgrimage is closely linked to societal narratives about the legend of a Japanese Buddhist monk and wandering ascetic, Kobo Daishi, whose presence occupies the land serving as protector, guardian, and guide, “bestowing benefits and miraculous cures” to pilgrims.⁸⁹ For over twelve-hundred years, the Shikoku pilgrimage route has been centered on walking on foot through nature, circling the island and visiting eighty-eight temples as a means of experiencing a journey towards spiritual awakening, self-actualization, self-development, self-realization, obtaining mental and physical health, success, and liberation. In this

⁸⁷ Coleman and Elsner, *Jewish tradition* 35, 36 and *Islamic tradition*, 64, 65, 70.

⁸⁸ See note 87 above.

⁸⁹ John Shultz and Ian Reader, “The Shikoku Pilgrimage,” in *Pilgrims Until We Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197573587.003.0002>.

sense, nature holds great powers and embodies the presence of the past by which that presence plays a role in shaping the pilgrim's experience.

In Western Christendom, the rehabilitative powers of the environments surrounding pilgrimage sites embodied the presence of God himself or of saints and prophets. Early Christian pilgrims around the fourth century CE visited Palestine, the Holy Land, to see where Jesus and other biblical figures once dwelled. Coleman and Elsner assert that the Palestinian landscape was visualized by some of these early Christians as a physical expression of the Bible itself and that many pilgrims' journeys to the Holy Land was in hopes of experiencing a divine manifestation as it was understood by some that such sacred space had an "extraordinarily powerful pull—almost a physical force."⁹⁰ As a result, many pilgrims immersed themselves into the Dead Sea and sacred pools for healing and medicinal purposes. Later, in the medieval period, burial sites of saints, like Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, and Saint James' venerated tomb at Santiago de Compostela, became prominent venues for pilgrims. Coleman and Elsner claim that these pilgrimage centers were in some ways a duplication of the shrines of the Holy Land and were primary locations for pilgrims being cured of diseases and experiencing miracles.⁹¹ Around the ninth century CE, Christians began walking the two-hundred-mile trek to Santiago de Compostela to devote themselves to and encounter God, deepening their faith, for the forgiveness of sin, and to experience miracles of healing. This pilgrimage route consists of many pilgrims walking on foot, crossing forests, fields, flatlands, seacoasts, dunes, and various landscapes over several countries including

⁹⁰ Coleman and Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present*, 82, 83.

⁹¹ Coleman and Elsner, 104.

France, Spain, Germany, Poland, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula by which these natural environments have been known to induce well-being and happiness among pilgrims.⁹²

While these attributes of pilgrimage may come across as generalizations and overlap with other cultures, even those not mentioned, it is important to consider the effects of the natural environments deeply embedded in the cultures surrounding these traditional religious modalities to better understand the cultural and secular shifts in future types of sacred travel including that of tourism. Morinis, Eade, Sallnow, Graburn, Cohen, and the interdisciplinary scholars of Pilgrimage Studies mentioned in this chapter all emphasize that human ideals, their rituals and practices, are what define and determine a pilgrimage and further empower a specific location with its sacredness. According to these scholars, it is these valued ideals, most often steeped in historical narratives, myths, legends, and/or cultural patterns, which motivate individuals or groups to go on pilgrimage or visit new alternative sites, landscapes, and geographies that are more secularized and unaffiliated with organized religion. However, this presents a problem because it gives human beings great power, all-powerful to be exact, and does not consider forces, divine or not, within natural environments by which human beings are part of, share and participate in, along with other members of these environments. Turner and Turner's theory of *communitas* within the pilgrimage process may have been geared towards human engagements with others outside of their normal day-to-day societies, but their definition of *communitas*, "a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises

⁹² Augusto Lemos et al., "The Route–Santiago de Compostela: Walking the Landscape Towards One's Own Identity," in *Cultural Tourism and Heritage in Northern Portugal*, ed. Clara Sarmiento and Sara Cerqueira Pascoal (New Castle: Cambridge Publishing Company, 2020), 205-225.

spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances,”⁹³ makes room to rethink the subjects within *communitas* that move, communicate, and assist in the pilgrim’s journey. These ideas will be explored and defended further in the chapters to come.

Rituals, mobility, embodiment, valued ideals, meaning-making, identity and existential factors, and psychological and transformative processes as well as socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious aspects do in part define and determine a pilgrimage, even if in the postmodern world it looks different than pilgrimages of the past. But these characteristics are not the only signifiers to what motivates an individual to leave their ordinary usual environments and embark upon an exploration of sorts to an unknown, unaccustomed, strange, or out of the ordinary place. A proper definition of pilgrimage cannot be determined without considering other deeper-rooted elements, by which I argue is found in nature. These elements play a crucial role in the pilgrim’s experience, often having rehabilitative effects, and further shape, define, and give substance to the pilgrim’s journey.

⁹³ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 250. Also see note 32 above.

Chapter III.

Relational Epistemologies and Ontologies: Exploring Human-Nature Connections

*Every being exists in intimate relation with other beings and in a
constant exchange of gifts to each other.*

—Thomas Berry

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing inclination among people around the globe, particularly in Western societies, to turn to nature for its restorative benefits. This tendency is often fueled by religious motivations, such as the quest for a connection to the sacred and the search for spiritual meaning. People also turn to nature to experience mental and physical healing or to explore ways of knowing and being that exist outside of traditional religious frameworks. Integral to this holistic perspective is the yearning to step away from the busyness of daily life and experience a more sublime connection with natural environments. For many Western nature-seekers, the idea of returning to nature is at the heart of this practice, as they associate it with providing significant advantages for both human well-being and the broader ecosystem.

In the previous chapter, I added a layer to the definition of pilgrimage, drawing mostly from Victor and Edith Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas*,⁹⁴ that emphasizes the transformative process of individuals leaving their everyday mundane environments and moving towards an out of the ordinary environment where they then

⁹⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 249-250. Also see notes 31 and 32 above.

encounter and form relationships with other persons and/or cultures outside of their normal social spheres. I also argued that the environment plays a critical role in the pilgrim's journey. Given the timeframe of Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* (1960s and 70s) and how he presented the idea, it can be assumed that his theoretical framework was influenced by a rationalist and Cartesian philosophy where humans are separate and are ranked as superior to other species within the natural environment. As such, this framework limits the concept of *communitas* to human subjects only. In contrast, relational epistemologies and ontologies between humans and the environment, particularly in Indigenous cultures and various nature religions globally, both past and present, offer important insights. In light of this, a critical question emerges regarding how *communitas* might be reconceptualized, especially since these perspectives gained prominence in postmodern academic discourses, notably through the ontological turn in Western Anthropology and the integration of neo-animism across various disciplines. From these perspectives, who are the social actors in *communitas* when thinking about humans as one of many living organisms within a larger living organism—the environment? How can social relations between human and non-human beings be reimagined? Moreover, how can the environment itself be understood as an active participant that engages, communicates, reciprocates, influences, and plays an essential role in shaping human life?

This chapter employs the ontological turn within Western Anthropology and a new take on animism that supports relationality, consciousness, and sacredness concerning nature and all its living subjects, human and non-human, to provide a framework to re-think the role the environment plays in everyday life. I argue that the

influence of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that transformed Western academic discourses alongside contemporary alternative spiritualities of the postmodern era that are more nature-based offer an understanding for a new kind of *communitas*, one that does not exclude other living beings such as animals, trees, plants, stones, soil, and others within our shared world. This framework sets a foundation for grasping how nature is central and participates when thinking about postmodern pilgrimage journeys in a secularizing world, which I will expound upon further in the next chapter.

Beginning with the ontological turn, the first section of this chapter draws heavily on anthropologists Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen's *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. In doing so, attention is given to the contributions of key anthropologists, including Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, whose work helped facilitate the anthropological shift in the West toward a conceptual unification of humans and nature. The following section focuses on neo-animistic discourses that emerged during this turn, incorporating theoretical frameworks from Religious Studies scholar Graham Harvey (*Animism: Respecting the Living World*), ecologist David Abram (*The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*), and environmental philosopher Bron Taylor (*Dark Green Religion: Nature Spiritualities and the Planetary Future*), all of which emphasize the inherent relationship between human and non-human worlds in Indigenous cultures, alternative spiritualities, and beyond. I conclude this chapter by arguing that, in the context of the changes in Western Anthropology, Religious Studies, and other scholarly disciplines, the effort to connect human beings to the natural environment warrants a new and

reimagined *communitas* that includes other non-human entities that participate in and make up the natural world.

The Ontological Turn in Western Anthropology

Throughout history and into the present day, Indigenous cultures have expressed epistemological and ontological pedagogies that highlight the intrinsic connection and reciprocal nature of the human-environment relationship. This relationship, characterized by mutual interdependence, is not necessarily tied to a specific religious framework. Among many Indigenous cultures, non-human species, like trees and plants, are considered some of the greatest teachers, guiding humans and imparting knowledge and wisdom to them, since they have inhabited the earth much longer than our kind.⁹⁵ Such philosophies hold that the natural environment has never ceased to be an active participant in the cosmos. In various degrees, an aspect of it is always moving, communicating, giving, receiving, and making itself known. Because human beings are one of the many living organisms within the environment, together all living subjects, human and non-human alike, are intertwined and interdependent. Separation between these organisms simply does not exist. However, due to Cartesian dualism, the rise of knowledge and scientific discovery within the Enlightenment Period, and colonization in the Modern Era, the worlds of nature and culture were torn apart. Anthropocentrism pervaded Western thought, with humans being conceptualized as sovereign beings—a

⁹⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2013); Cyndy Margarita Garcia-Weyandt, “Urban Wixárika and More-than-Human Beings: The Case of Tatéi Niwetsika (‘Our Mother Corn’) in Western Mexico,” in *Relating with More-than-Humans: Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*, ed. Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 41-64.

hierarchical species that rules over nature. This, in turn, created a great divide between humanity and the environmental world in which they live and exist.

In the 1970s, anthropological discourses in the West began to shift. Ethnographic fieldwork among diverse cultures, particularly nature-based religious practices of Indigenous peoples and New Age and Paganistic spiritualities, greatly influenced Western anthropologists. As a result, scholars began reassessing both ways of knowing and being in the world and the relational dynamics between nature and culture. This became known as the “ontological turn” within Anthropology. Branching out from this shift came a reimagined animism that moves beyond Edward. B. Tylor’s initial use of the term, which was also influenced by Cartesian dualism. Tylor’s concept suggested that the non-human living world was possessed by spirits.⁹⁶ The new animism, however, reconsiders the world as being full of persons, some human and some other-than-human, where reciprocity and interspecies relationships are continuously shared.

This paradigm shift challenged both pre-modern and modern anthropological schools of thought in the West, which had been grounded in Cartesian idealism and rationalism, driving a wedge between humans and nature.⁹⁷ In contrast, ethnographers began to focus on non-Western ways of being and knowing rooted in animistic perspectives, mythologies, rituals, and cosmologies among varying Indigenous cultures worldwide. Through their fieldwork, they observed that among these cultures, human beings and the natural environment by which they live were not divided. Rather, they

⁹⁶ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871).

⁹⁷ “Cartesianism Summary,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<https://www.britannica.com/summary/Cartesianism#:~:text=article%2C%20see%20Cartesianism.-,Ren%C3%A9%20Descartes,is%20extension%20in%20three%20dimensions.>

were inherently relational, sharing a “natural unity,” meaning that the natural and social worlds are one.⁹⁸ Such ethnographies opened new doors in academic settings, presenting a nuanced methodology that overturned the distinctions between nature and culture and challenged the continued influence of Cartesian dualism.

Anthropologists Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen in their 2017 publication *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* attribute the ontological turn within Western Anthropology to several postmodern scholars, emphasizing the work of anthropologists Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern, Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Holbraad and Pedersen mark their contributions as a “methodological intervention,”⁹⁹ one that reconceptualizes the shared relationships between people and things disassociated from social, cultural, and political spheres. Such intervention, according to Holbraad and Pedersen, created conditions where researchers began to see different things instead of seeing things differently, “what things are,” “what they could be,” and what may be different from what may have been imagined previously including how personhood is defined as well as kinship.¹⁰⁰ They claim that this new methodology allows for alternative conceptualizations in Anthropology, refiguring the scientific study as a means to explain and interpret “*why* people do what they do” and “*what* these people are doing.”¹⁰¹ In sum, they argue that this shift in Western Anthropology is a “basic reversal from striving to grasp the ‘native’s point of view,’ to

⁹⁸ Paolo Heywood, “Ontological Turn, The,” in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, 2017, facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 2, 3, online: <http://doi.org/10.29164/17ontology>.

⁹⁹ Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Holbraad and Pedersen, 5, 6.

¹⁰¹ Holbraad and Pedersen, 16.

finding ways to overcome what one already grasps in order to better be grasped by it.”¹⁰²

In this vein, it is implied that nature (the environment) and culture (human beings) are inseparable, and that Anthropology in the West must rethink how these worlds interact.

New developments that contributed to shifts in Western Anthropology that favored amalgamation between nature and culture, according to Holbraad and Pedersen, began to unfold with Wagner in the 1970s and Strathern in the 1980s. They highlight that Wagner immersed himself among the Daribi, a group of people from the Papua New Guinea region, and studied their theory of kinship. They suggest that Wagner’s take away from his fieldwork was that “culture is an invention” constituted by many conventions as humans engage with a world made up of many unpredictable forces and circumstances.¹⁰³ From this perspective, Holbraad and Pedersen claim that Wagner becomes a founding contributor to the ontological turn, though not explicitly, because what he brings to the fore is that “human beings do not stand apart from their world, bringing it under control with their conventions, but rather partake in the world’s inherent capacity to transform itself.”¹⁰⁴ This presumes that humans are participants in the environment in which they live, but are not the only active participants, implying that non-humans also partake in the world. Holbraad and Pedersen point out that like Wagner, Strathern too, from her fieldwork among Melanesian cultures, observes that relations are everywhere.¹⁰⁵ They assert that Strathern was another implicit influence of the ontological turn in the West, as

¹⁰² Holbraad and Pedersen, 7.

¹⁰³ Holbraad and Pedersen, 80; Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, revised and expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁴ Holbraad and Pedersen, 80; Roy Wagner, *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

¹⁰⁵ Holbraad and Pedersen, 114; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Marilyn Strathern, “Reading Relations Backwards,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 20 (2014): 3–19.

she argued that social relations are not limited to one or two groups of actors nor to the visible connections “*between*” persons.¹⁰⁶ Rather, such relations also include past and future connections that are invisibly present “*within*” a myriad of persons or actors.¹⁰⁷ For Holbraad and Pedersen, both Wagner’s and Strathern’s ethnography presents a way of understanding the world as a relational system; “relations are conceptualized as ‘internal’ in the sense that there is nothing that is *not* relational,” and that multiple relations are shared “between different kinds of relations.”¹⁰⁸

In the 1990s and into the 2000s, research among hunter-gatherer societies in different parts of the world continued to give rise to changes in how scholars in the West viewed cultures and societies, human behavior, how humans make sense of and engage with their worlds, how they understand it, and how they exist. Through their ethnographic fieldwork, scholars found that in various Indigenous societies worldwide, humans were neither alienated from their environments nor held a hierarchical view of nature. These perspectives, however, had already been documented in Indigenous writings long before this time. The more scholars investigated these cultural viewpoints, the more they began to rethink personhood. Pre-modern and modern knowledge that deemed nature and culture as two separate unrelated worlds began to collapse and alternative ways of knowing and being began to flood anthropological discourses. According to Holbraad and Pedersen, Ingold, Descola, and Viveros de Castro are three among many others that explicitly played a role in deconstructing modern epistemologies and ontologies and reconciled more shared and relational tendencies between humans and nature. Drawing

¹⁰⁶ Holbraad and Pedersen, 115.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 115.

¹⁰⁸ Holbraad and Pedersen, 115; Roy Wagner, “Analogic Kinship: A Daribi Example,” *American Ethnologist* 4, no. 4 (1977): 623–42; Strathern “Reading Relations.”

on ecological perspectives from James Gibson and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, Ingold, from his “dwelling perspective,” argues that humans are “brought into existence as organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both human and non-human,” and that social human relations are a “subset of ecological relations.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, what Ingold stresses is that humans are a single organism within a host of other living organisms, with which they are deeply connected and evolutionarily related. Because humans are organisms among other organisms, they interact with and are dependent upon those outside their own species, rather than rulers over them. Neither organism is more nor less than any other. Stemming from his research among Amazonian cultures and comparing them to other Indigenous groups across the globe, Descola conjectures that these societies regard themselves as “simple components of a vast whole within which no real discrimination” exists between humans and non-humans.¹¹⁰ He asserts that all aspects of the natural environment make up social systems, and some of these aspects are recognized as persons with cognitive abilities and moral qualities.¹¹¹ Each class of beings interacts and communicates, including plants and trees, for example.¹¹² For Descola, separating nature and culture, as the modern West did, is no different than separating diverse people from each other in both past and present worlds.¹¹³ His research, therefore, aimed to move beyond these separations and bring a not-so-distant past back into the

¹⁰⁹ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, [2000] 2022), 6.

¹¹⁰ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 17.

¹¹¹ Descola, 17.

¹¹² Descola, 17.

¹¹³ Descola, 31.

present, where human and non-human beings share skills and modes of reasoning equally, where they reign together, and where all of nature is one.¹¹⁴

One of the greatest contributors to changes in Western Anthropology that explicitly destabilized the distinctions made between human social and cultural worlds from the natural environment is Viveiros de Castro. Holbraad and Pedersen call him the father of the ontological turn, positing that his work among Amerindian cultures not only forced a reversal of Cartesian dualism but, through his “theory of perspectivism,” also offered new insights into relational epistemologies and ontologies.¹¹⁵ They claim that Viveiros de Castro’s theory is steeped with animistic undertones, an ontology that postulates nature and culture as a social network that is interrelated, and is described as a cosmology that “imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, humans as well as non-human, each endowed with the same generic type of soul,” and having its own perspectives.¹¹⁶ Through his fieldwork, as noted by Holbraad and Pedersen, Viveiros de Castro observed a phenomenological spiritual unity between human and non-human subjects and objects. He conceptualized this unity as “one culture” with “many natures,” a “multinaturalism,” where all subjects are naturally relational.¹¹⁷

The ontologies and epistemologies put forth by Ingold, Descola, Viveiros de Castro and other key contributors to the ontological turn in Western Anthropology provide a framework to rethink the environment’s role in everyday human life. This

¹¹⁴ Descola, xv.

¹¹⁵ Holbraad and Pedersen, *Ontological Turn*, 157, 160-161.

¹¹⁶ Holbraad and Pedersen, 161, 162; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 473.

¹¹⁷ Holbraad and Pedersen, 163; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 6.

approach also facilitates a reconceptualization of Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*. As discussed in the previous chapter, *communitas* is presented as a relational quality that emerges spontaneously among groups (presumptuously human) when they gather outside social norms and share meaning. Turner's model assumes that such relational ties are exclusive to humans of various cultures, whereas scholars that advocate for a more inclusive anthropology recognize relational dynamics that not only include humans but also non-humans. These subjects are viewed as active participants who interact, reciprocate, and influence one another, thus shaping each other's worlds. As Eduardo Kohn's work on Amazonian cultures demonstrates, particularly concerning the nature of dogs, "humans are not the only knowers, and knowing exists in the world as an other than human, embodied phenomenon that has tangible effects."¹¹⁸

Ontological Perspectives of Neo-Animism, Gaianism, and Dark Green Religion

Building on the ontological turn within Western Anthropology, which advocated for nondualism between humans and the environment, a new, reimagined version of animism emerged. Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor introduced animism in the 1870s, derived from the Latin word *anima*, meaning soul, life, or breath. He described it as a religion among primitive and/or hunter-gatherer societies that perceives all of nature as being inspirited—trees, rocks, animals, waterways—the entire universe as an ensouled or spiritual being.¹¹⁹ Tylor's work defined and identified such ontologies from a colonialist and Cartesian dualist viewpoint, furthering the divide between nature's subjects, humans

¹¹⁸ Eduardo Kohn, "How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Trans-species Engagement," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2008): 17.

¹¹⁹ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*; Tiddy Smith, "Animism," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (Otago University), <https://iep.utm.edu/animism/>.

and non-humans, and calling any relations between them a “primitive superstition” or “childish category errors.”¹²⁰ In the 1960s and from his ethnographic research among the Ojibwe people, anthropologist Irving Hallowell reintroduced animism in a new light, as a relational ontology, claiming that the world is made up of human and “other-than-human persons” (not referring to spirits, deities, or other supernatural entities).¹²¹ Hallowell’s “new animism” impacted scholars across many disciplines, and in my understanding went hand in hand with the ontological shifts that were taking place in Western Anthropology, especially Ingold’s, Descola’s, and Viveiros de Castro’s theoretical models that are replete with animistic undertones.

Contributing to a reimagined animism and its broader implications, Religious Studies scholar Graham Harvey advocates for a relational ontology that recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings, both human and non-human in a living, dynamic world. Harvey was greatly influenced by Hallowell’s take on animism, and focused his research on the Ojibwe community, while also studying earth-centered contemporary spiritualities. From his observations, he contests Tylor’s ideologies, realizing “that ‘relationality’ is not merely theoretical but strongly pervades...many indigenous cultures (and not only them).”¹²² Harvey’s take away was that the concept of personhood must be thought out more carefully, emphasizing that “persons always live in relation with others.” He argues

¹²⁰ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 29.

¹²¹ Harvey, xviii; Graham Harvey, *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2; A. Irving Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View,” in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond, 19-52 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

¹²² Harvey, *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, 3.

that these relations must be respected from a pragmatic and practical perspective, rather than a transcendental or esoteric one.¹²³

In addition to Hallowell's influence, Harvey engages with James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which posits that the Earth is living and conscious; it breathes, is sacred, and is a single self-regulating organism, with all its inhabitants in harmony with one another.¹²⁴ In his 2006 publication, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, Harvey reanimates the concept of animism, redefining it as a "contemporary other-than-modern" way of being human in a world where subjects, human and non-human alike, share space and communicate with one another.¹²⁵ Harvey draws from a variety of scholarly disciplines, ranging from literature and poetry to the sciences, to illustrate cultural, religious, and secular shifts in contemporary societies, including Paganism, New Age spiritualities, and beyond. Harvey asserts that Western culture has been changing its view of its relationship with the living world, recognizing nature religion not as exclusive to Indigenous or eco-paganistic perspectives, but as integral to the American religious landscape. Throughout his work, Harvey reiterates that animism appears universally, from myths and folktales to sacred texts and modern cultural expressions, showing that it is not merely a religious practice but a way of being, knowing, and living. Harvey suggests that the more individuals immerse themselves in the sensuous earth, the more they come to know, understand, and find themselves, which in turn alters their relationship with the natural environment.¹²⁶ He concludes that human beings have never

¹²³ Harvey, 3.

¹²⁴ James E. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹²⁵ Harvey, *Animism*, xxi.

¹²⁶ Harvey, 93.

been “separate, unique, or alone” in the world, but are surrounded by “a world full of cacophonous agents.”¹²⁷

Consciousness is another natural phenomena and relational component that arises within neo-animistic discourses, including Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, as such ontologies and epistemologies point to the idea of the natural world as a self-conscious organism. In this vein, humans are conscious of the natural world and the natural world is also conscious of humans along with all other living organisms within itself. Harvey dedicates an entire chapter to this idea in *Animism* drawing attention to scientific evidence that supports consciousness within non-humans, including animals, trees, stones, and more.¹²⁸ His main focus in the chapter is that we humans must understand that “consciousness is embedded in the nature of all things” and that we live in a “participatory, relational universe.”¹²⁹ In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, forester Peter Wohlleben writes about the relational aspects of the forest, mainly how every part of it is a network that communicates to itself and every other surrounding organism. Although many of Wohlleben’s concepts within the book have been debunked by scientists, who claim that his work aligns more with pseudo-science, there is empirical evidence supporting the fact that trees emit chemical signals and slow-moving electrical impulses.¹³⁰ These signals resemble the nervous system of animals and include sounds

¹²⁷ Harvey, 212.

¹²⁸ Harvey, 189. Harvey discusses that consciousness within non-humans is different from human consciousness but that non-humans still have a form of consciousness that is relational and that communicates in some fashion. See pages 187-194.

¹²⁹ Harvey, 193.

¹³⁰ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate, Discoveries from a Secret World* (Vancouver, GreyStone Books, 2015), 8, 12-13; Richard Grant, “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?,” *Science*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>; Valentina Lagomarsino and Hannah Zucker, “Exploring the Underground Network of Trees—The Nervous System of the Forest,” *Science in the News*, *Harvard Graduate School of the Arts and Sciences* (blog), May 06, 2019,

with a known frequency of 220 hertz, which is inaudible to humans.¹³¹ Electrical signals emanating from trees have also been linked to plant consciousness, suggesting that intelligence within their structure can alter a human's state of mind by transmitting energy to them.¹³² If trees, plants, and other parts of nature are sending out electrical impulses and chemical responses that affect the natural environment, what effects do they have on the human mind and body? Recently, scientific studies have shown that humans spending time in nature reduces diabetes, depression, anxiety, better the immune system, sharpens cognition, and much more.¹³³ Considering these new scientific findings integrated with neo-animism, the natural environment can be conceptualized as a living organism that participates, communicates, gives, receives, heals, and plays a significant role in everyday human life, whether understood in a spiritual or religious context or completely secular.

While conducting ethnographic research, some scholars have had personal encounters with the natural environment that align with their interlocutors' accounts. During these encounters, elements of nature interacted with or even spoke to the researcher, and, to some degree, it was a life-changing experience, thus resembling a kind

<https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2019/exploring-the-underground-network-of-trees-the-nervous-system-of-the-forest/>; Kasha Patel, "How Plants Communicate With Each Other When in Danger," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/10/21/plants-talk-warning-danger/>; Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows : A Field Guide to the Senses*, 1st ed. (New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

¹³¹ See note 130 above.

¹³² Garcia-Weyandt, "Urban Wixárica and More-than-Human Beings," 53.

¹³³ Nevin Harper and Will W. Dobud, *Outdoor Therapies: An Introduction to Practices, Possibilities, and Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Jim Robbins, "Ecopsychology: How Immersion in Nature Benefits Your Health," *Yale Environment 360. Yale School of the Environment*, January 9, 2020, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health>; Kirsten Weir, "Nurtured By Nature," *Monitor on Psychology, American Psychological Association* 51, no. 3 (2020), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>; Rob Jordan, "Stanford Researchers Find Mental Health Prescription: Nature," *Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, Stanford News*, June 30, 2015, <https://news.stanford.edu/2015/06/30/hiking-mental-health-063015/>.

of pilgrimage. Ecologist and anthropologist David Abram spent much time with villagers in rural parts of Indonesia while studying magic, medicine, and the animate world of nature. One afternoon he ventured out from a Balian village into a lush river valley area lined with volcanic cliffs, tall grasses, and a deep green mossy landscape. He stayed the night in a dark cave that he stumbled upon. Along his journey, Abram recalls coming face-to-face with several different animals where a shared communication occurred, but not only with animals.

I found myself caught in a nonverbal conversation with this Other, a gestural duet with which my conscious awareness had very little to do. It was as if my body in its actions was suddenly being motivated by a wisdom older than my thinking mind, as though it was held and moved by a logos, deeper than words, spoken by the Other's body, the trees, and the stony ground on which we stood.¹³⁴

Drawing on his personal experiences and ethnographic research, Abram ratifies the animistic qualities, embodiment, and intersubjectivity that he argues has been inherent within the living world all along. He questions how our species has drifted so far from, and become deaf and blind to, the existence of other integral parts of the natural world by which we live, exist, and depend upon. According to Abram, nature is a sensory organism, one that offers guidance, and speaks a language of its own that we humans at one time understood before the evolution of our human spoken language.¹³⁵ He posits that the natural environment “is an ambiguous realm that responds” to human emotions, “calls forth feelings” from us in return, and that together we enter into a “silent conversation” with nature that is far beyond our human verbal awareness.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, [1996], 2017), 21.

¹³⁵ Abram, 103

¹³⁶ Abram, 33, 52-53.

Abram's ethnography among Indonesians and his venture outside of the villages where he was conducting his research can be conceptualized as a kind of pilgrimage. He left his ordinary environment and immersed himself among people of different social cultures and relations that were unaccustomed to him, mainly to study magic and medicine at first. While in that environment, he then experienced another layer to that environment, one in nature, in the wild, where he engaged in social relations with a non-human world of subjects–*communitas*. From his experience within these environments, Abram underwent a personal transformation, which was reflected in his work. His focus then shifted towards appreciating the animistic qualities deeply ingrained in nature. Abram soon recognized that when human beings step into the natural environment, muting their technologies, and quieting their minds, individuals are made aware of an overlooked living, breathing, and conscious landscape that has been actively participating with us all along.¹³⁷

Like Abram, Susan Greenwood, an anthropologist and practitioner of magic, recalls her experience with the natural world. Alongside a group of friends, Greenwood had visited Mount Snowdon in the northern part of Wales. During her journey she claims, “I felt connected to the place—the wild mountain had become part of me: ‘external nature’ had become internalized, and a change had occurred in my consciousness,” implying that, in some way, the mountain had communicated with and connected to her innermost being–*communitas*.¹³⁸ From her own experiences and ethnographic research among practitioners of nature religions or spiritualities, Greenwood develops the concept of “magical consciousness” describing it as “a dimension of human thought and action,” “a

¹³⁷ Abram, 63.

¹³⁸ Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), vii.

participatory and holistic way of thinking,” an “awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world,” and “a consciousness that is aware of connections between phenomena.”¹³⁹ She presents the idea as a shared consciousness between both seen and unseen beings in the environment that participate with one another.¹⁴⁰ Greenwood’s magical consciousness has its roots in animism and draws attention to the contemporary spiritualities among New Agers, Neo-Pagans, and others that are nature-based to highlight “the multiplicity of consciousness,” the plurality and intrinsic qualities of a much larger universe.¹⁴¹

The idea of sacredness, integral to neo-animistic discourses, complements the focus on relationality and consciousness, offering a deeper epistemological and ontological understanding of the interconnection between nature and humans. Stemming from his research on nature and religion, environmental philosopher and Religious Studies scholar Bron Taylor investigates the postmodern shifts taking place in the West that are conducive to secularization while also being deeply connected to the natural world. In his 2010 publication *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, Taylor draws attention to the rekindling of a reverence for nature through nature-based religions, the abandoning of institutionalized religion, and the broadening of religious boundaries to include a spirituality that can be more secular and not necessarily adjoined to any religious body. He claims that the word “spirituality” today is more associated with earth-centered ideals rather than organized religion, yet it can also be understood as a quest for seeking deeper realities within traditional religious

¹³⁹ Greenwood, 7, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Greenwood, 7.

¹⁴¹ Greenwood, 5, 6.

frameworks.¹⁴² Taylor states that in the postmodern world, the idea of getting back to the land has been an essential factor and that “by going ‘back to the land’ people can rediscover their affective connections to nature.”¹⁴³ Like Harvey, Taylor accentuates throughout his work the intersubjectivity of humans and the natural environment, found not only in myth, folklore, sacred texts, literature, and poetry but also in popular culture through media, the arts, and sciences, as well as through recreational activities such as surfing. He asserts that animistic and pantheistic undercurrents are part of this dynamic as nature is conceptualized as a world full of spiritual intelligences or life forces, whether divine, inspirited, or not. He identifies this paradigm as “dark green religion,” implementing Lovelock’s Gaia theory, and defines it as “a system where nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care.”¹⁴⁴ Taylor makes it clear that dark green religion can be associated with religious or spiritual practices, but it is not limited to these standards as the phenomena is deeply ingrained in our everyday world, globally. Whether secular, spiritual, or religious, from the perspective of dark green religion, Taylor postulates that nature is perceived as sacred, alive, and imbued with healing powers, deeming it a natural healer. It is deeply connected to all its living subjects, with continuous relations shared between humans and intelligent beings or lifeforces.¹⁴⁵ Taylor asserts that for this reason, historically, cross-culturally, and especially in ancient societies, pilgrimage was and still is a pathway to connect to, understand, and revere the Earth as a living body in which all living beings, including non-humans, belong.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 3.

¹⁴³ Taylor, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Taylor, 4, 10.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, 40.

To illustrate the concept of dark green religion further, that nature is sacred and has its effects on human beings, Taylor points to primatologist Jane Goodall who bridged the gap between science and spirituality through her research. He says that Goodall turned to nature to find “healing and strength in the ancient forest” after her husband’s death—an act of pilgrimage.¹⁴⁷ She returned some years later to Tanzania where she recalls a time when she was deep in the forest and had a “profound experience, which she considered truly mystical: ‘Lost in awe at the beauty around me, I must have slipped into a state of heightened awareness [when] ...that self was utterly absent: *I and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of life itself.*’”¹⁴⁸ In this sense, the chimpanzees, the soil of the earth, the trees, all aspects of the forest, including the air itself serve as active participants that make up a social milieu, which can be conceptualized as persons within the framework of *communitas*. Additionally, the spirit power of life that Goodall describes is presented as a sacred entity implying that nature’s inhabitants are not only interconnected but are sacred.

A Reimagined *Communitas*

In a 2023 publication entitled *Relating with More-than-Humans: Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*, scholars across multiple disciplines accentuate the role the environment has played and continues to play in everyday human life throughout history. This includes cultures from different parts of the world, not just Indigenous cultures, but

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, 29.

¹⁴⁸ Taylor, 29; Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1999), 161, 172.

also nature-centered spiritualities among New Agers, Neo-Pagans, and beyond.¹⁴⁹ The scope of the work ranges from relations with animals to corn, plants, trees, crystals and stones, the soil, and many others. In several of the chapters, Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* is employed to offer new insights into the various kinds of subjects that make up *communitas*, and from these perspectives, non-human persons can be included. Much of Turner's *communitas* deals with human beings departing from their mundane lives, their daily rituals and social roles—what he describes as liminality. Individuals then move toward a new, different, yet temporary world where they meet, engage with, and form relationships with people from diverse cultures, where new rituals are performed and experienced, thus creating *communitas*. At first glance, it may seem that some non-human beings within the natural environment do not have social roles, experience liminality, or perform rituals, for example trees, plants, or stones. As contributors to the volume Ed Lord and Henrik Ohlsson argue, examining nature-based therapies like forest bathing, “nature is a refuge,” a shared space “with other beings that are full of life whose presence is not a burden but an injection of energy,” and “is experienced as a community of beings,” except “nature is...without social roles.”¹⁵⁰ However, by examining the relational epistemologies and ontologies among Indigenous groups, both past and present, as well as contemporary alternative spiritualities across the globe, scholars of the ontological turn and neo-animistic discourses offer a reconceptualization of nature. Nature can be seen as being a social, relational, conscious, participatory, and sacred

¹⁴⁹ Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac, *Relating with More-than-Humans: Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*, ed. Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac (Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹⁵⁰ Ed Lord and Henrik Ohlsson, “Escaping the Modern Predicament: Nature as Refuge and Community in Contemporary Health Practices in Wales, Sweden, and Finland” in *Relating with More-than-Humans: Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*, ed. Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 166, 179.

entity that should not only be respected but is also an essential actor in everyday human life—whether in a human’s mundane world or in their temporal worlds, where they are undergoing new experiences, encounters, or rituals.

As scientific interests and discovery grow, I imagine that we will begin to see the social roles, rituals, and liminal phases that non-human beings undergo, much like humans. As it stands, animals engage in all sorts of rituals, social functions, and liminal stages: mourning, courting, territorial behaviors, and sometimes trance-like states of consciousness that could be considered transformative. All of these have greatly influenced human rituals and religious, spiritual, and even secular realms.¹⁵¹ Trees go through the ritual process of shedding leaves and bark among many other examples. The ritual and liminal processes of the natural environment may not mirror human transformative processes, just like plant consciousness is different from human consciousness. Nevertheless, many scientists and scholars within the social sciences, especially in postmodernism, understand that consciousness is in every part of our universe and that all its living organisms participate with one another. The closer we examine nature, our environmental world, the more we will begin to see. If humans are an organism of organisms that communicate, reciprocate, and interact with one another, how can non-human subjects not fit within the *communitas* paradigm?

Through the ontological turn in Western Anthropology and neo-animistic discourses, including Gaianism and dark green religion, it becomes clear that the natural environment *does* in fact play a critical role in the everyday life of human beings, shaping our worlds, giving us meaning, teaching us how to be better humans, and showing us how

¹⁵¹ Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

to respect all living beings that make up the natural world. Being that nature is a key participant in human life, how much more amid the pilgrimage journey, when individuals step away from busy schedules, the dependency of modern technologies, constant chatter or noise from overcrowded and polluted cities, and more? The next chapter will explore this idea further and engage with new and alternative ways of reimagining pilgrimage in light of nature's role in the pilgrimage process.

Chapter IV.

Pilgrimage in the Wild: Transcending Secular and Religious Boundaries

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks

—John Muir

In recent years, there has been a shift in how individuals conceptualize the sacred and understand pilgrimage, with many redefining these concepts through personal experiences. These reinterpretations vary, encompassing both profound spiritual elements and more secular perspectives. As outlined in chapter two, contemporary pilgrimages can include long journeys on traditional routes, such as the Camino de Santiago, as well as visits to iconic sites, including memorials, gravesites, amusement parks, retreat centers, and natural environments that have become spiritually energized, like Sedona, Arizona. Travel to these well-known sacred sites, and others, has continuously attracted a wide range of pilgrim-tourists. Considering the central role that natural landscapes and their non-human inhabitants play in shaping human life, as emphasized in chapter three, alongside the more nuanced forms of pilgrimage from chapter two, what can be said of visits to places that have not been popularized, those that are not generally perceived as religious or spiritual, but nonetheless appeal to secular visitors, such as places in the wild? How do nature excursions like hiking, visiting national parks, backpacking, camping, or walking in the woods contribute to the understanding of pilgrimage? Furthermore, how do naturally occurring sites that remain relatively unexplored or are not designated as sacred fit into this discussion? What factors render marginalized natural landscapes any less sacred than more prominent and widely recognized spaces?

Building on the various forms of contemporary pilgrimages and considering the dynamics of interspecies relationships within the natural environment that influence the pilgrim's journey—whether it be traditional, nontraditional, religious, or secular as outlined in the preceding chapters—this chapter delves into the possibility of pilgrimages occurring in natural, wild spaces. As more and more people disassociate from religious affiliations and turn to nature for its rehabilitative qualities, alongside the evolving meaning of pilgrimage itself, it is imperative to rethink the boundaries of pilgrimage. In this historical moment, it is necessary for Religious Studies scholars to expand the frameworks used to define and approach the sacred in a world that is becoming more secularized.

This chapter argues for a reimagining of the sacred to better accommodate a broader range of experiences, participants, and landscapes within the pilgrimage paradigm. I propose that rehabilitative narratives emerge from the interconnected relationships between humans and other-than-human entities, particularly when individuals disengage from the demands of contemporary life and immerse themselves in nature, whether that natural space has been deemed sacred or not. Such experiences can be framed as a secular pilgrimage enriched with spiritual dimensions. To substantiate this claim, I draw on Bron Taylor's work within *Dark Green Religion*, which suggests that an individual's spirituality can be deeply connected to nature and can exist independently of conventional religious views or ideals.¹⁵² Additionally, I reference the work of Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, in their introduction to *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves?: The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*, who posit that individual

¹⁵² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 40

spirituality extends beyond the boundaries of both the secular and religious.¹⁵³ This overlap, despite the remaining tensions, provides a useful framework for understanding how spiritual experiences can emerge in places not typically considered sacred, aligning with the broader processes of pilgrimage.

In this chapter, I also engage with primary sources, including memoirs and blog posts, to reconceptualize sacred travel in ways that move beyond established pilgrimage archetypes. In doing so, I offer a thematic framework that recognizes activities such as hiking, backpacking, camping, and walking in nature as secular yet spiritually meaningful practices. These activities can be understood as transformative and rehabilitative, mirroring traditional pilgrimage processes. Through this approach, I am to broaden the scholarly literature on pilgrimage, highlighting the relevance of these practices for individuals and societies today and moving forward, especially as religious affiliation continues to wane.

Spirituality in Nature: Sedona Pilgrimages

Upon seeing a photo in a Los Angeles newspaper in 1996, Ilchi Lee was so profoundly moved by the energy he felt emitting from the photo that he immediately got in his car and drove to Sedona, Arizona. When Ilchi arrived that night, he felt an even more powerful energy that he describes as sacred. The next morning, he went on a guided tour that provided an overview of the land and taught him about Sedona's vortexes, powerful energy fields that facilitate self-awareness and physical and mental healing.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, "Introduction: Spirituality, the Third Category in a Gendered Triangle," in *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves?: The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*, ed. Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (New York: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁵⁴ Ilchi Lee, *The Call of Sedona: Journey of the Heart* (Sedona: BEST Life Media, 2011), 16.

The idea of vortexes resonated with Ilchi's own spirituality rooted in Korean Taoism, specifically ki energy, a universal life force that flows through everything. But for Ilchi, Sedona's energy was different, it was massive. This was the first of his many visits to the red rock region.

Each time Ilchi visited Sedona, he had a different experience that was nonetheless transformative—experiences that would keep him coming back. During one of his trips, he claims that the canyons told him stories, not in a human language, but through its environmental features: the fragrance of the forest, the uniqueness of the juniper trees, the decorative stones, and robust streams. It was through these picturesque narratives that Ilchi reflected on his own life, identity, and purpose. On another visit to Sedona's Bell Rock, Ilchi recalls the distinct sound of a bird singing while he meditated. Between his awareness of the bird's song and being in a deep meditative state, Ilchi began to have one vision after another. He then received a message in his innermost being that he was to move to Sedona and open a retreat center where people from all over the world could come and experience healing, well-being, solitude, and oneness with nature. For Ilchi, Sedona's rich landscape was a *seu-seung* (a spiritual guide)¹⁵⁵ and a sacred space that inspired him, answered him, gave him messages, dreams, and visions about his future, which was the catalyst for Sedona Mago Center and his memoir, *The Call of Sedona: Journey of the Heart*.

* * *

Jen, an internet blogger, writes about the transformative and empowering effects of traveling on her website. Seeking healing and a renewal of her faith after losing a close

¹⁵⁵ Lee, 95.

friend to cancer in 2018, Jen set out to Sedona for the day. During her one-day trip, she made an appointment with an energy healer at a retreat center. There, she learned about the healing powers of the earth, including the idea that walking barefoot is essential for reconnecting with the earth's energy and its electrical signals. Through psychic readings, she also received insight into past issues that were affecting her health. Before heading home, Jen hiked 4.2 miles to Devil's Bridge. While she doesn't pinpoint a specific moment of her journey that was particularly healing or life-changing, she does share that she felt lighter after her visit and more encouraged to believe that she is "on a pathway designed by some sort of greater power, instead of lost in the desert alone."¹⁵⁶

Narratives of Sedona being a hub of vortexes and healing frequencies emitting from the earth surfaced in the 1980s. Page Bryant, a psychic medium and spiritual guide, identified and wrote about certain spots in Sedona as giving off excessive amounts of energy.¹⁵⁷ This concept exploded. Sedona's geography was characterized as a "spiritually magnetized" place, attracting New Agers, mystics, esoteric and holistic thinkers, and alternative spiritualities that are more earth-based.¹⁵⁸ It also drew traditional religious communities, including Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and others. Some that have moved to Sedona or often visit have no ties with religion, even New Age, but a spirituality that intersects science and religion. Their reason for coming to Sedona is to align themselves with the universe's energy and to raise the vibrations in their bodies, which they claim

¹⁵⁶ Jen, "Spiritual Awakening in Sedona," *jenontherun.com*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.jenontherun.com/spiritual-awakening-in-sedona>.

¹⁵⁷ Page Bryant, *The Earth Changes Survival Handbook* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe Books, 1983); Page Bryant, "Sacred Sedona," in *Sedona Vortex Guidebook*, ed. Robert Shapiro and Janet McClure (Flagstaff: Light Technology Publishing, 1991), 3-15.

¹⁵⁸ Curtis Coats, "Sedona, Arizona: New Age Pilgrim-Tourist Destination," *Cross Currents* 59, no. 3 (2009): 384, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00086.x>; James Preston, "Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1992), 31-46.

induce positive emotions and overall health.¹⁵⁹ Between the popularization of Sedona's vortexes and its beautiful rich landscape, it has become a focal point for pilgrim-tourists.

Adrian Ivakhiv, an ecophilosopher, finds that Sedona's vortexes fall in line with "earth mysteries," hypotheses where particular sites around the globe discharge electromagnetic waves that affect the human brain.¹⁶⁰ Whether pseudo-scientific or lacking sufficient evidence to validate such theories, Ivakhiv asserts that within New Age and eco-spiritual movements, "there is the widespread belief that premodern, ancient, or indigenous cultures have been more attuned and sensitive to, and more knowledgeable about, the energies and 'mysteries' of the Earth, mysteries which our modern culture has denied or forgotten but which are being rediscovered today."¹⁶¹ These ancient cultures, according to Ivakhiv, revered nature, and mountains, canyons, lakes, rock formations, hot springs, and others were considered power spots where the Earth speaks.¹⁶² Within this context, Ivakhiv argues that pilgrimage provides access to these ever-present powers, the spiritual secrets they tell, and the re-enchantment of human and non-human relationships that were prominent attributes of everyday life in older societies and among Indigenous people—all of which has been the basis for erecting healing and retreat centers at some of these contemporary pilgrimage sites.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Susannah Crockford, *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021), 14.

¹⁶⁰ Adrian Ivakhiv, "Earth Mysteries," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2005), 525, 527.

¹⁶¹ Adrian Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 18, 19. Although Ivakhiv does not appear to endorse the idea that the connection to earth's mysteries originates from older societies or Indigenous cultures, he does highlight the complexities surrounding the ideologies that shape Sedona's sacred history.

¹⁶² Ivakhiv, 49.

¹⁶³ Ivakhiv, 4, 49, 51.

A quick Google search of Sedona leads to a stream of blog entries describing individual spiritual journeys, the rush of energy from hiking ventures, or ads for spiritual retreats and guided tours to explore Sedona's vortexes. Whether it's an electromagnetic pull emitting from the earth, as some have claimed, the commercialization of New Age therapies and services, or it's simply the majestic landscape itself, Sedona attracts a wide and diverse audience. It has become a spiritual hub, a pilgrimage center, that draws people from all over the world, for both spiritual and secular reasons.

In both Ilchi's and Jen's accounts, they ventured beyond their usual environments to the spiritual, sacred setting of Sedona, where they interacted with human and non-human persons. While there, they engaged in rituals and practices that involved the earthen landscape. From this involvement a sense of identity, mobility, embodiment, transformation, and healing was experienced. Whereas Ilchi's experience was highly spiritual, Jen's was more secularized with a spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, in both narratives Sedona was conceptualized as a sacred site, one where the natural landscape was calling out to them in some fashion inviting them to come. Thus, the protagonists' experiences align with conventional pilgrimage processes as outlined in chapter two while also having neo-animistic undertones as illustrated in chapter three.

Pilgrimage as a Socio-Spiritual Intersection: Bridging Secular and Religious Domains

In their introduction to *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves?: The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*, anthropologists Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe contend that spirituality functions as a conceptual bridge between the religious and secular realms, challenging the binary divide established during the

Enlightenment.¹⁶⁴ They imply that the secular and religious domains are interdependent with spirituality providing an alternative to both, thus easing the tensions between them.¹⁶⁵ This blurring of boundaries, according to Fedele and Knibbe, allows for the creation of new social practices, cultural artefacts, and lifestyles—including pilgrimage—that cannot be defined as strictly religious or secular.¹⁶⁶ In this context, pilgrimage becomes a socio-spiritual space in which individuals from both secular and religious backgrounds can have a spiritual experience without having to limit themselves to a specific religious tradition.

Through his concept of dark green religion, Bron Taylor addresses the continued emergence of earth-centered spirituality, emphasizing its deep connection to nature and its expansion beyond conventional religious boundaries.¹⁶⁷ He suggests that the idea of a sacred earth and universe is ingrained in worldviews and narratives that harmonize with scientific thought, while also drawing from esoteric or intuitive knowledge, and that it has been essential to the epistemologies and ontologies of ancient and Indigenous societies.¹⁶⁸ Taylor further differentiates between spiritualities within the dark green religion framework, focusing on the contrast between natural and supernatural animism. Taylor contrasts naturalistic animism, which tends to be agnostic and focuses on human interaction with nature's life forces, with supernaturalistic animism, which involves engagement with spiritual or divine intelligences. He argues that belief in "nonmaterial divine beings" is not a fundamental requirement for religious experience.¹⁶⁹ Instead, he

¹⁶⁴ Fedele and Knibbe, "Introduction," 10.

¹⁶⁵ Fedele and Knibbe, 5, 7. This implication is drawn from Monique Sheer, Birgitte Schepelehn Johansen, and Nadia Fadil in "Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emergent Field" (2019).

¹⁶⁶ Fedele and Knibbe, 6.

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 13, 188.

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, 14.

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, 40.

emphasizes that a shared sense of “dependence, connection, and belonging to nature” is often experienced, regardless of religious affiliation and need not necessarily be associated with spirituality.¹⁷⁰ Nonetheless, these shared experiences can indeed be interpreted as spiritual.

In the context of dark green religion, Taylor also underscores the interconnectedness and reverence for nature as a sacred entity through James Lovelock’s Gaia theory. This theory posits that the earth is a living breathing biosphere that functions as a self-maintaining organism, as discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁷¹ Taylor references Lovelock’s essay, “Gaian Pilgrimage,” where Lovelock contends that pilgrimage is an ideal means of reconnecting with the ancient sensation of bonding with the earth.¹⁷² This suggests that pilgrimage has long been, and continues to be, a spiritual pathway to engage with, understand, and respect the Earth as a living entity in which all beings, human and non-human alike, are part of a greater whole, even when such practices are not tied to traditional religious structures. In this way, the distinction between secular and religious worlds collapses, positioning nature as a key component of an individual’s spiritual experiences. Perhaps it is for this reason that nature is regarded as sacred by many cultures across the globe and why individuals often sense a deep inner calling to return to a natural, primordial state of existence—a homecoming to nature.

¹⁷⁰ Taylor, 40.

¹⁷¹ Taylor, 35.

¹⁷² Taylor, 45.

Long-Distance Hiking: A Wild Pilgrimage

In 1903, Jack London published his first novel, *The Call of the Wild*, telling of a dog's journey from domesticated life to a reinvented life in the wild. Although the story is fictional, it is based on London's personal experiences with his dog in the Alaskan Yukon and speaks to the shared relationships between humans and other-than-humans.¹⁷³ The story symbolizes real-life situations of survival, instinct, ancestral roots, transformation, and reciprocity between humans and nature. It also represents a force that summons one to immerse themselves in a wild and natural world, a sense of coming home, and a pilgrimage back to one's true self. There are countless narratives where individuals claim that their inspiration for embarking upon wilderness adventures is due to nature calling out to them, drawing them to the unknown, the mysterious. Many who have braved the wild share of spiritual experiences and life-changing outcomes, particularly after traumatic events, where religion or religious beliefs played no part, yet their journeys into the unknown bear the hallmarks of a pilgrimage.

Cheryl Strayed's 2012 memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* is one of many narratives in which religion is absent. However, the young woman's experience in the wilderness can be interpreted as a spiritual quest that meets the criteria of a pilgrimage, with the environment playing a crucial role in her transformation. Cheryl was a senior in college when her mom suddenly died a month after being diagnosed with lung cancer. Losing her mom was so shocking and painstaking that Cheryl's world fell apart. She began engaging in extramarital affairs which led to divorce and drug abuse. Confronted by Minnesota's fierce winter snows, she ended up at an REI store to buy a

¹⁷³ Jack London, *The Call of the Wild, And Other Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

shovel (REI stands for Recreational Equipment, Inc. and functions like a one-stop shop, offering everything needed for outdoor ventures). While standing in the checkout line, Cheryl's attention was drawn to a book about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. Although she didn't buy it right away, she claims the book seemed to have some kind of magnetic pull, tugging at her and constantly occupying her thoughts until she gave in. Naive and inexperienced, and viewing religion as superstition, Cheryl heeded the call to the wild.

Leaving her familiar world behind and carrying her life's possessions in an oversized backpack that she named "Monster," Cheryl embarked upon an 1100-mile trek hiking from Tehachapi Pass in California to The Bridge of the Gods in Oregon. Shortly into her journey, weighed down by physical and mental strain, and struck by the thought that her once-complicated life had become so simple, Cheryl realizes that her suffering and material existence are bleeding into an emotional and spiritual realm. With each step, Cheryl grows more aware of a "strange intimacy" between herself and nature, sensing that the trail is both ancient and wise.¹⁷⁴ The flora and fauna, the streams, the rugged terrain, and all its wildness became increasingly "familiar and known" to her.¹⁷⁵ Both Monster and the non-human entities within nature became her closest friends. Cheryl writes about how the trail guided her, gave her clues and instructions, and made her more attuned to her own senses. The untamed landscape seemed to speak to her innermost being, and she realized that "the wilderness had a clarity" that was all-encompassing and included her.¹⁷⁶ As she reached the end of her journey, Cheryl thanked the trail repeatedly for all it had taught her.

¹⁷⁴ Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 62, 120.

¹⁷⁵ Strayed, 120.

¹⁷⁶ Strayed, 143.

To believe that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. To know that seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. It was my life—like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me.¹⁷⁷

Cheryl's hiking journey was one of profound reflection, one of ritual, embodiment, meaning-making, mobility, identity, transformative processes, and infused with neo-animistic undertones—all the markings of a pilgrimage. Whereas most pilgrimages, even the more contemporary forms, involve travel to popularized sacred shrines, highly spiritual places, iconographic locations and landscapes, and tend to be associated with religion or spirituality to some degree, Cheryl's pilgrimage was completely secular, yet rich with spiritual experiences. Victor Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas* amid the pilgrimage process can be applied to Cheryl's wilderness experience. From the beginning of her journey to the end, nature served as a liminal space—a “betwixt and between”¹⁷⁸ transitional place that shattered and sheltered Cheryl. It was a space where she straddled the threshold of who she was in the past and who she was becoming, all while engaging in new daily rituals and forming new relationships with nature's non-human organisms, thus creating *communitas*. It was through her experience and relationship with the natural world that brought about her transformation.

In Cheryl's experience the natural environment was a sacred space, a space where she sensed her mother's presence, a space where she found refuge and healing from the wounds of her past, a space that she became so deeply connected to that once she re-entered civilization, she felt completely out of place. Avril Maddrell, a cultural

¹⁷⁷ Strayed, 311.

¹⁷⁸ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 249.

geographer, highlights the importance of landscapes in the pilgrim's journey. She says, "landscapes and its landforms are therefore not blank canvasses [sic] passively imprinted with meanings but complex textures 'speaking back' to the beholder staring at or traversing it."¹⁷⁹ The land was instrumental in Cheryl's inner healing, helping her reconnect with and redefine herself, as well as offering her newfound hope for the future. It had such a profound impact that she thanked the wild for the gifts it bestowed upon her. Monster, her oversized backpack, was also visualized as sacred. Religious Studies scholar Graham Harvey approaches pilgrimage through a neo-animistic perspective, arguing that scholars should consider the relational significance of material objects like boots, bottles, staffs, and, in Cheryl's instance, her backpack Monster.¹⁸⁰ He stresses that these examples warrant greater attention, as they are not merely symbols but are integral to the pilgrimage experience. The bonds that are formed between human and non-human subjects, objects, places, and the natural world itself, according to Harvey, are central to the pilgrim's journey, as was the case with Cheryl.¹⁸¹

In recent years, scholars across multiple disciplines have been expanding the idea of pilgrimage to include thru-hiking. Through an ethnographic study of hiking blogs linked to the John Muir Trail in California, researchers Sarah Hitchner et al. explore the connection between wilderness journeys and pilgrimage. Their research shows that long hiking trips are transformative undertakings for emotional or spiritual enrichment along distinct paths that are viewed as more sacred than the mundane environment of daily

¹⁷⁹ Avril Maddrell et al., *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage: Journeying to the Sacred* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), 7.

¹⁸⁰ Graham Harvey, "Afterword: What Staffs and Paths Do—A New Animist Contribution to Studying Pilgrimage," *Religion, State & Society* 50, no. 2 (2022): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2052541>.

¹⁸¹ Harvey, 205.

life.¹⁸² They point out that among hikers there is less of a focus on mainstream organized religion and more emphasis on individual spirituality.¹⁸³ Several bloggers they analyzed described nature as their church, “worshipping in the green temple,” and landscapes like the Grand Canyon and the Sierra Nevada mountain range as “America’s great cathedrals.”¹⁸⁴

The Appalachian Trail is another space that stands as a contemporary pilgrimage route, offering much more than just a walk through the woods, as nearly three thousand hikers walk the trail every year.¹⁸⁵ Kate Marx, a scholar in anthrozoology, analyzes hiking blogs associated with the Appalachian Trail. From her research, she finds that the natural environment along the trail fosters social interactions between humans and non-humans and a deep sense of connection to the place that enriches hikers’ experiences.¹⁸⁶ She observes that the vast majority of blog posts recount human encounters with non-human animals, and that for many hikers on the AT, their experiences in nature resemble a spiritual quest similar to a religious pilgrimage. This implies that the trail serves as a unique and sacred space, where the relationships between humans, animals, and the landscape capture the essence of a wild, yet natural pilgrimage.

Hiking has become a cultural phenomenon, echoing patterns and elements of long-standing pilgrimage traditions, yet at the same time, it appeals to a more secular

¹⁸² Sarah Hitchner et al., “Thru-hiking the John Muir Trail as Modern Pilgrimage: Implications for Natural Resource Management,” *Journal of Ecotourism* 18, no. 1 (2019): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2018.1434184>.

¹⁸³ Sarah Hitchner et al., 89.

¹⁸⁴ Sarah Hitchner et al., 92.

¹⁸⁵ Baylor University, “Hitting the Trail: Baylor Environmental Scientist Examines the Spiritual Side of Hiking a Footpath through The Appalachians,” *Baylor University Media and Public Relations*, September 24, 2012, <https://news.web.baylor.edu/news/story/2012/hitting-trail-baylor-environmental-scientist-examines-spiritual-side-hiking>.

¹⁸⁶ Kate Marx, *Blogging Wildlife: The Perception of Animals by Hikers on the Appalachian Trail* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 6.

audience. Kip Redick, a scholar in Philosophy and Religion, describes thru-hiking as “spiritual rambling” and a “phenomenological exploration” that resembles monastic’s journeys through the wilderness, hence how sacred shrines and temples were established in older religious traditions.¹⁸⁷ Redick argues that long-distance hiking is a quest for meaning, a journey that involves transcending the ego, emptying the self, and dismantling dualism, creating a deep interconnected relationship between the hiker and nature. For the hiker, according to Redick, the trail itself becomes a “sacred text” and an “embodied commitment,” as the sojourner engages in a dialogue through self-reflection and also communicates with non-human inhabitants.¹⁸⁸ While Redick draws a parallel between pilgrimage and long-distance hiking, he maintains that short or day hikes are not the equivalent as they do not facilitate deep contemplation or liberate individuals from the socio-cultural pressures of everyday life.¹⁸⁹ However, there is a wealth of narratives that recount shorter hikes or day trips in nature, away from ordinary life, that catalyze transformative and spiritual experiences fitting within the framework of pilgrimage.

Nature Walks and Camping: A Wild Pilgrimage

In his essay *Walking*, Henry David Thoreau famously wrote, “How near to good is what is WILD! Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.”¹⁹⁰ Walden Pond stood as a wild pilgrimage site for Thoreau, functioning as his church, a place where he encountered nature’s

¹⁸⁷ Kip Redick, “Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 41.

¹⁸⁸ Redick, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Redick, 44.

¹⁹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Cricket House Books, 2010), 19.

sacredness. He often sought refuge in this place as he retreated there from societal pressures and embarked on a non-religious journey, but one of spiritual renewal. His profound experiences there not only shaped his life but also became a source of inspiration for his literary works. Nature speaks through Thoreau's poetic voice and remains as relevant as ever. Today, individuals moved by his writings make a pilgrimage to his farm and other places he lived and traveled, with many contemporary pilgrims regarding Thoreau as a saint.¹⁹¹

Like Thoreau, people often turn to nature for a quick getaway to clear their minds, find rest, reflect, pause and breathe, and/or to connect with the sacred disassociated with religious frameworks. Still, these short walks or visits into the wild and natural world are often imbued with qualities that align with the concept of pilgrimage and are deeply animistic. The wilderness serves as a sanctuary for exploring the spiritual dimension of human experience, seen as a realm free from daily obligations and societal constraints, and sometimes as a sacred space.¹⁹²

Gary recounts his experience at Redwoods National Park in 2021. In his blog post he states that being in natural spaces devoid of human interference helps him to feel closer to something more spiritual than man-made structures.¹⁹³ He considers it a privilege to experience the spiritual purification that comes from immersing himself in the untamed wilderness of the forest, implying that non-human organisms within the natural environment are responsible for inducing such effects.

¹⁹¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 57-60.

¹⁹² L. Allison Stringer and Leo H. McAvoy, "The Need for Something Different: Spirituality and Wilderness Adventures," *The Journal of Experiential Education* 15, no. 1 (1992): 13-20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382599201500103>, 13, 17.

¹⁹³ Gary Varner, "Spiritual Cleansing: A Visit to Redwoods National Park," *garyvarner.com*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.garyvarner.com/p/spiritual-cleansing-a-visit-to-redwoods>.

* * *

Lori frequently visits Badlands National Park to watch the sunrise or sunset. She recalls a particular day in 2024, which she describes in her blog post, that stood out from her other visits, when the landscape around her seemed all-encompassing and began to fill a deep void inside her. The experience was so profound that she characterized the place as a holy site, a sacred space—one where each time she visited, it took her into “a new layer of experience,” allowing her to “sink a little deeper into the mystery of the place.”¹⁹⁴

* * *

Awestruck by the beauty and splendor of the landscape, Jordan, another internet blogger, also had a transformative experience while camping in Yosemite National Park in 2015. In his blog, Jordan identifies as an agnostic mystic, not associating with any specific religion or spirituality, but rather having a deep reverence for nature. Like Lori, Jordan too refers to being emptied and filled by the wild natural environment and by something seemingly sacred.

I was seeing the place through the eyes of non-identity, through the eyes of a child. My mind was empty. I was there. It was around me. And this place—when seen from the vantage point of one who has temporarily relinquished all perception, all memory, all notions of the world as something understood, measured, and defined—was somehow self-evidently sacred.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Lori Erickson, “Badlands National Park: Fierce Beauty,” *Spiritual Travels: Practical Advice for Soulful Journeys*, 2024, <https://www.spiritualtravels.info/spiritual-sites-around-the-world/north-america/badlands-national-park-fierce-beauty/>.

¹⁹⁵ Jordan Bates, “On Secular Spirituality: Experiencing the Sacred in Yosemite by Letting Go,” *Jordan Bates*, June 29, 2015, <https://jordanbates.life/secular-spirituality-sacred-in-yosemite/>.

In Jordan's perspective nature contributed to him letting go of everything that he felt kept him bound and gave him insights that he and Yosemite are one in the same, that everything is sacred.

* * *

In her 2019 blog post, Chris writes about the healing power of the desert. After a rough break-up, the loss of a family member, and the death of her dog, Chris found herself in the Nevada desert during a work trip in Las Vegas. Knowing that she needed to get away from societal obligations, she camped out in the desert in her car for several days. The landscape itself, the winds, the vast array of the desert's colors, the sounds, and the silence, according to Chris, all played a part in her healing. For Chris, the desert was a powerful presence and energy, one that forced her to come face to face with herself, reflecting on her life, and the things that were broken inside her. She says, "you don't spend extended time in the desert without having some kind of spiritual experience. The landscape changes you."¹⁹⁶

* * *

Erin shares her transformative experience in the desert in 2018, when she first visited the Sonora Borderlands. In her blog post, she recalls sitting in quiet solitude, immersed in the sounds of the desert—the songs of birds and insects and the whispering wind shuffling over the ground when she felt the earth begin to give her counsel. She says that it advised her to "observe, open up, take in, breathe, respond, and connect."¹⁹⁷ The more she listened, the more she sensed that everything in the desert was alive and

¹⁹⁶ Chris, "The Healing Power of the Desert Southwest," *Trail Chick*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.trailchick.com/the-healing-power-of-the-desert-southwest/>.

¹⁹⁷ Erin Blanding, "Falling in Love with the Land: A Desert Love Story," *Biophilia Foundation*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.biophiliafoundation.org/desert-love-story>.

communicating. She explains that the intensity of the desert was so powerful that it sparked a shift within her, altering her focus and inspiring a fresh vision and purpose that led her to become an advocate for restoring privately owned lands not protected by National Parks.

More recently, the U.S. National Parks have been included among prominent sacred destinations, attracting both spiritual and secular nature aficionados, and resembling pilgrimage sites. Religious Studies scholar Lynn Ross-Bryant applies Turner's ideas of *communitas* and liminality to the park experience. She contends that National Parks are "a place set apart from ordinary life to which the traveler comes leaving aside many of the structures of daily life."¹⁹⁸ Ross-Bryant emphasizes that a central aspect of the park experience is the connection between humans and nature; the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape allows for a transformative experience, fostering a deep and meaningful relationship with the natural world.¹⁹⁹ She argues that "the environment is not just the setting" for pilgrimage or for human activities, but rather is "a part of the drama itself."²⁰⁰ Ross-Bryant furthers the idea that Turner's *communitas* is more than human-to-human person relationships outside of an individual's daily environment and must include other-than-human persons within natural environments. Whether a one-day backpacking trip, a walk in nature, or weeks on end hiking the rugged wilderness of National Parks, the experience can be highly spiritual and transformative, even in the absence of religious beliefs or ideals. It is in these journeys that nature itself becomes a vital participant in the pilgrim's transformation.

¹⁹⁸ Lynn Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), 9.

¹⁹⁹ Ross-Bryant, 9.

²⁰⁰ Ross-Bryant, 13.

Each narrative presented in this section is documented as a secular discourse, yet one that prompts altered states of being, renewal, restructuring, and movement toward the Other—much like the pilgrimage process. This is illustrated by Nelson Graburn and Eric Cohen in the second chapter, who draw parallels between tourism and Turner and Turner’s concept of pilgrimage.²⁰¹ Nonetheless, these secular discourses have both spiritual and neo-animistic dimensions. These stories are personal, offering insights into an individual’s firsthand participation in the deeper, more ancient practices of pilgrimage. The animate landscape is regarded as sacred yet also secular, a secular sacred, arising from human experiences with the environment as well as their ideals and imaginations as Alan Morinis, John Eade, and Michael Sallnow contends (see chapter two).²⁰² However, these sacred landscapes are not empty spaces or “religious voids,” as Eade and Sallnow suggest, that only become sacred by way of an individual’s aspirations that they pour into the space, meaning that it is human ideals and imaginations that empower a space’s sacredness.²⁰³ On the contrary, in these narratives it is the person that is emptied and then filled by what nature gives them. As presented in chapter three, drawing from relational epistemologies and ontologies within Indigenous cultures, contemporary nature-based spiritualities, and recent scientific research, the earth is not dead. It is alive, it breathes, it moves, it speaks its own language, it has its own rituals, its living subjects communicate and relate with other species, it sends out electrical signals throughout its ecosystems, as well as energy that can alter a human’s mind and body. Because of the rehabilitative effects of nature and what nature produces throughout its entire organizational system, its

²⁰¹ Cohen, “Pilgrimage and Tourism; Graburn, “The Anthropology of Tourism.”

²⁰² Morinis, introduction to *Sacred Journeys*; Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*.

²⁰³ Eade and Sallnow, 15.

ecological and biological processes,²⁰⁴ humans envisage it as sacred. But it is far from empty.

Wild Pilgrimages in Marginalized Spaces

National Parks and popular trails can easily be compared to pilgrimage sites, seeing them as sacred, much like contemporary landmarks such as Thoreau's farm, Disneyland, or the Vietnam Memorial. But what about the unnoticed, lesser-known corners of nature—spaces that are remote or off the beaten path and are often marginalized? If the natural environment does indeed shape the pilgrim's journey, facilitating transformative and rehabilitative processes in the mind and body—whether through religious or secular discourses, short or long-term hikes, or traditional religious pilgrimage routes, all visualized as sacred—then it is important to consider the sacredness of nature in its entirety. Something as simple as walking in the woods or gazing at a body of water can evoke spiritual experiences that fit within the pilgrimage paradigm. It is equally important to emphasize the restorative power of spending time outdoors in open, natural spaces, where people can reconnect with the environment they share so deeply. Perhaps it is our disconnection from nature and its living ecosystems that leads to emotional, psychological, and physical illnesses. It is possible that earlier societies had a richer understanding of and respect for these concepts, which led them to embark upon pilgrimage journeys in the first place. Despite the global decline in religious affiliation, the growing popularity of pilgrimages may reflect nature's call urging us to return to our roots, to ourselves, to nature itself.

²⁰⁴ See note 133 above.

Kathleen Dean Moore, environmental advocate and moral philosopher, writes about a series of excursions in the wild and her relationship with nature as part of her healing journey after the death of several loved ones in her 2010 memoir *Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature*. Dealing with immense grief and sorrow, Kathleen turned to the one thing she knew could bring her comfort, gladness, and healing to her heart—and that was nature. She valued the importance of stepping away from her ordinary sometimes “complicated life”²⁰⁵ and immersing herself in the natural world. The sounds and scents alongside a myriad of species all worked in harmony bestowing wisdom, insight, and the power to console her. Throughout the book, Kathleen reflects on her experiences with nature’s rituals—snakes emerging from their winter holes, seabirds migrating, the shimmering of bioluminescent algae, cascading waterfalls, the ebb and flow of the sea, the moon’s monthly rounds, and much more. Some days Kathleen’s pilgrimages consisted of a daily walk in the woods, an evening under the stars in her kayak, or a camping trip. With each journey, regardless of its length, nature’s rhythms taught her something new. In her time of crisis, nature served as her therapist, her counselor, and the prescription and remedy she turned to in her time of need.

In Kathleen’s series of journeys into the wild, she made a ritual out of observing nature’s rituals. What she witnessed and experienced through these mini-pilgrimages was part of a larger pilgrimage, during which she underwent a transformation—one that was not only therapeutic but also led her out of the classroom at Oregon State University and into a new chapter in her life; becoming a nature writer who would advocate for environmental crises. She understood nature as a whole to be sacred: “Even if we don’t

²⁰⁵ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature* (Boulder: Trumpeter Books, 2010), 155.

believe in God, we walk out the door on a sacred morning and lift our eyes to the sacred rain and are called to remember our sacred obligations of care and celebration.”²⁰⁶

Kathleen’s insights and knowledge stemmed from her deep spiritual connection to the natural world, nurtured through her pilgrimages in the wild. Yet, this connection had nothing to do with any religious affiliation.

Immersing oneself in wild, marginalized natural environments—whether for extended or short periods—offers more than just a temporary escape from the routines, responsibilities, and societal limitations of everyday life. It cultivates connection with a community of non-human persons that either did not exist before or were previously unnoticed by individuals. The combination of nature’s rich beauty, the solitude it affords, and the sense of reciprocity and interconnection often leads to individuals having a spiritual and transformative experience—one that promotes healing and rehabilitation in some fashion, which are core aspects of pilgrimage.

By exploring the intersections of spirituality, secularization, and religion, as discussed by Taylor, Fedele, and Knibb, the case studies presented in this chapter provide a framework for reimagining the sacred by considering emerging forms of pilgrimage that transcend secular and religious boundaries. This invites readers to rethink experiences in the wild as a nuanced pilgrimage, where individuals embark upon journeys through nature, regardless of their duration, and undergo transformative experiences that can be conceptualized as spiritual but free from religious affiliation. These natural spaces are imbued with sacredness through the reciprocal relationships between humans and the non-human inhabitants of the wild. For this reason, it is

²⁰⁶ Moore, 151.

important for Religious Studies scholars to reconsider and redefine the sacred within a secularizing world, advocating for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges diverse experiences and persons to better grasp the cultural shifts and complexities that shape the pilgrimage experience.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom

–Gary Snyder

Throughout history, pilgrimage has evolved from a traditional religious practice centered on traveling to prominent sacred sites to a broader, more secular phenomenon. This shift is largely due to the rise in secularization and the growing desire for individuals to disengage from institutional religion. Despite these changes, pilgrimage has consistently involved ritual, embodiment, mobility, and has remained a transformative experience for individuals, societies, and cultures around the world. One important feature of pilgrimage that this thesis has explored is its inherent connection to the natural environment.

As secularization and alternative spiritualities, especially those focused on reconnecting with nature, continue to grow, the definition of pilgrimage should be broadened to include the natural environment and the shared human and non-human relationships within these natural settings. In recent years, some scholars have begun to integrate non-human subjects into the study of pilgrimage and have introduced neo-animism as a nuanced framework for understanding historical and contemporary pilgrimage practices. However, much of the existing scholarship on pilgrimage continues to focus on human-to-human relations surrounding established pilgrimage centers and well-known sacred landscapes. Although activities such as hiking, backpacking, camping, walking in the woods, or simply spending the day in nature are commonly

practiced, they have been largely overlooked as expressions of pilgrimage. To fully account for the relational dynamics between humans and non-humans within the pilgrimage process, it is necessary to expand our understandings of pilgrimage and sacredness beyond conventional norms.

Individuals who engage with the natural environment develop relationships with non-human others. It is through these interactive and intersubjective relationships in nature that healing, well-being, and other transformative processes occur. Today, individuals seeking restorative outcomes in nature are engaging in pilgrimage just as much as those who travel to popular sacred destinations, even if their pilgrimage unfolds in the wild. The natural environment and the relationships between humans and non-humans cultivated during these pilgrimages are vital, playing a pivotal role in shaping the pilgrim's experience and facilitating transformation for both human and non-human participants.

The objective of this thesis has been to explore the intersection of traditional and contemporary pilgrimage, where the boundaries defining pilgrimage have become increasingly blurred, by highlighting the presence and vital influence of the natural world. I have argued that frameworks of traditional pilgrimage processes can be applied to postmodern, non-traditional forms, though these boundaries are more fluid. The goal has been to expand the field of Pilgrimage Studies, especially as more and more people turn to nature for spiritual and healing purposes. It is not out of the ordinary for these pilgrimages to take place in marginalized spaces that are not recognized as religious or sacred sites, like remote areas in the wild. This investigation, therefore, has raised important questions regarding how sacredness can exist and be understood in secular

contexts—an underexplored topic that not only fills a gap in scholarly literature but also challenges Religious Studies scholars to rethink how they define and interpret pilgrimage and sacred space.

Potential Risks in the Pilgrimage Process

Although individuals may initially turn to nature for healing and comfort, their journey may also expose them to potential risks, including encounters with extremist groups that promote beliefs, practices, and ideals that can ultimately prove harmful. Bron Taylor was among the first scholars to address the potential dangers posed by nature-centered groups that adopt violent or destructive behaviors, such as some radical environmentalists, as discussed in *Dark Green Religion*. In conversation with Taylor, it would be interesting to consider some of the possible issues associated with individuals or communities who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” particularly those with a nature-based focus and in relation to the practice of pilgrimage. While unconventional pilgrimages in remote natural areas can offer personal freedom, growth, healing, creativity, and opportunities to experience the sacred outside of institutional religious frameworks, they also carry the risk of fostering radical and cult-like groups—the dark side of pilgrimage. Without structured oversight and accountability, such unorthodox pilgrimages can become breeding grounds for harmful behaviors. Pilgrims seeking meaning and purpose may become susceptible to overly charismatic leaders who position themselves as spiritual guides, assume undue authority over individuals, and impose extreme ideologies. This vulnerability can result in emotional and financial exploitation, as well as the adoption of beliefs and practices that may lead to abuse. Some of these extremist groups may endorse alternative healing methods, including restrictive diets, the

rejection of medical assistance, and engagement in rituals that are unscientific and potentially dangerous. Moreover, in these natural settings, new social bonds may develop that are more insular, causing individuals to become alienated from their loved ones.

Further avenues for research could focus on the potential ecological impacts of human activities associated with unconventional pilgrimage practices in remote natural environments. These risks may include pollution, environmental degradation, deforestation, all of which contribute to the broader climate crisis. Incorporating neo-animism as a framework to study pilgrimages in natural and wild settings can create more awareness of the intrinsic value of nature. This approach may lead to more effective conservation strategies and encourage ethical responsibilities and rights for non-human subjects. Nonetheless, it is important to examine new ways of experiencing pilgrimage, alongside the participants, that extend beyond conventional frameworks.

Integrating the Humanities and Sciences

As individuals and groups continue to distance themselves from institutional religion and seek spirituality, meaning, or purpose in nature, it becomes imperative for scholars to deepen their engagement with non-normative religious practices. This is especially relevant for understanding individuals who may reject religious labels but still have life-changing encounters in natural environments, which scholars of Religious Studies might typically interpret as spiritually charged. Moving forward, it could be beneficial to integrate research from both the Humanities and the Sciences, exploring nature through a neo-animistic lens while incorporating perspectives from Medical Anthropology and Biology. Medical Anthropology could provide a richer understanding of how the reciprocal relationships between humans and nature affect the health and well-

being of individuals, communities, and ecosystems. Moreover, it could illuminate the ways in which plants, animals, trees, water systems, natural forces, and other aspects of the environment shape health practices, especially in relation to their medicinal and spiritual significance. In considering Biology, biocentrism and biodiversity could offer a valuable framework for examining the role of ecosystems, the complexity of interspecies relationships, and the transformative effects of nature on the human body. This framework further emphasizes the need for Religious Studies scholars to rethink the definitions of sacredness, especially from the viewpoint that a relational network exists between Earth's living organisms, whose mutual influence contributes to the overall health of the environment and all its inhabitants.

Utilizing a neo-animistic framework could also deepen our understanding of the healing implications of pilgrimage, further expanding the scope of the field. In chapter three, I highlighted recent scientific findings indicating that time spent in nature reduces conditions such as diabetes, depression, and anxiety while also improving immune function, cardiovascular health, and cognitive abilities.²⁰⁷ Within this context, it may be relevant to expand the concept of pilgrimage as a nature-based, holistic approach to wellness and healing, grounded in neo-animistic principles that view nature as a living, breathing, interconnected organism. Rather than relying solely on traditional medical practices, pilgrimage through this framework can be studied as a therapeutic discourse that addresses spiritual, psychological, and physical needs. Pilgrimage offers more than an escape from daily stress and restrictions—it provides a space for mindfulness, emotional release, reflection, mourning, healing, and personal growth. Additionally, it

²⁰⁷ See note 133 above.

could be useful to include pilgrimage as a form of physical exercise with the potential to improve health and chronic illness. Exploring shared pilgrimage experiences in more natural settings, such as hiking groups, wilderness retreats, and fireside rituals, may further illuminate its collective and healing dimensions.

Another important topic for understanding the environmental effects on human and non-human subjects is the epistemological implications of plant consciousness and their communicative channels, particularly in relation to the pilgrimage process. In chapter three, I discussed scientific research that has discovered trees emitting chemical signals and electrical impulses, which can alter human consciousness.²⁰⁸ This raises important questions: If trees communicate and heal parts of their environment through these signals, what effects do they have on humans? How might these signals facilitate knowledge or healing in the human body and mind, and perhaps even induce spiritual experiences in humans and animals? If the forest operates as a network similar to the human nervous system, how does it influence humans, and what messages are communicated? Considering this line of inquiry, it would be interesting to incorporate Monica Gagliano's work, an ecologist whose research in *Thus Spoke the Plant* investigates plants' abilities to listen and communicate.²⁰⁹ When conceptualized through a neo-animistic lens, the science behind plant consciousness could enrich our understanding of the deep interconnection and interdependence between human and non-human worlds. Several case studies presented in chapter four highlighted instances where individuals sensed that nature was calling them. Considering Gagliano's findings—that

²⁰⁸ See note 130 above.

²⁰⁹ Monica Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018).

plants do indeed communicate—raises the possibility that nature may be calling out to humans, not only through plants but also through other natural elements such as water, rocks, soil, air, and more. In this vein, science can offer new insights into why pilgrimage, including forms like pilgrim-tourism and wilderness adventures, holds significance and continues to attract people. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that examines the interrelationship between humans and nature, future research can address the potential ecological risks of pilgrimage, promote ethical responsibility, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of sacredness, healing, and spiritual experiences in today's world.

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