EGERIA, FA HSIEN AND IBN BATTUTA: Search for Identity through Pilgrimage?

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In the Pirates of Penzance, we find the Major General meditating among the ruins of his ancestors. In the subsequent dialogue, it transpires he had taken over the ancestors with the ruins of the Chapel in the estate he had bought.[1] Is pilgrimage a means of taking over ancestors, part of the process by which a new religion vests itself in trappings from an older, just as 'Christian' boys and girls in America, Africa, the Philipines come to be blessed with Jewish names 'since the Church is the new Israel?' Is it 'whether in the local congregation or on the wider stage of ecclesiastical politics ... a qualification for influence?'[2] Is it a rite of passage?[3] Many other possibilities can be suggested.[4] The whole concept is multi-faceted and the symbols multi-valent, even the word itself is slippery. 'The Pilgrimage narative' is hardly a real genre of literature. *Peregrinatio* may have a distinct meaning, but with *riḥla* and *ḥajj, yatra* and *tirtha*, the larger word often subsumes the more specific. 'The search for identity' is as useful a thread for argument and study as any, so it is the purpose of this paper to examine three well known examples of the species chosen from an enormous literature, using the search for identity as the leitmotif of our study and glancing at some of the other possibilities as well as a participant-observer interpretation.

The *Peregrinatio* of Egeria is a late fourth century account in Latin of a pilgrimage to the area of the Exodus, to Mount Sinai and to Jerusalem, with many details of the liturgical year developing at the latter, and of visits to holy places along the route to Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and on the road to Constantinople.[5] It is written by a lady of imperial rank. Everywhere officials and soldiers turn out to escort her; clergy, monks and laity treat her with great diffidence; clearly, she is used to wealth, respect and obedience. She is writing to a group of noble ladies dedicated to a religious life back in her homeland which is in the far west, perhaps in Spain or southern Gaul. The ruling Theodosian house was from that area, and its women were of no mean piety and power, but the attempt to identify the writer with a major figure we know about from other sources has failed. Of course, Egeria stands close to St Helena, Constantine's mother, in her interest in the Palestinian holy places. One of the best known accounts of the Invention of the Holy Cross (after which towns from Madras Airport to California are named) by Helena comes to us from the *de obitu Theodosiani* of St Ambrose which is but a couple of years older than the *Peregrinatio*.[6] Again, Egeria reminds one of her contemporaties, the holy women aristocrats of fabulous riches who gathered round St Jerome and Rufinus.

As one reads Egeria's writing one becomes aware of a strong woman who knows who she is, a leading member of a rich and powerful ruling class. But this ruling class had lost its sheet anchors. Symmachus, its great spokesman, had been routed (not defeated) by St. Ambrose and the imperial *coercitio* which was now

on the Christian side. Its members were deserting the old Graeco-Roman "paganism" and the old methods of defending the Empire. If we see them from the old point of view, they have lost their identity as upholders and defenders of the Roman *patria.* They are base deserters, treacherous Quislings, treasonous betrayers, lily-livered paltroons, as well as incapable of enjoying life and the delights of being human and aristocratic. These are not my accusations against them. One may cull examples of all these in Rutilius Namatianus' *de reditu suo* or Libanius' *pro Templis.*[8] Edward Gibbon of *Decline and Fall* fame took much the same point of view of the triumph of barbarism and Christianity. On the other hand, if one can enter into the mind of St. Augustine's *Civitas dei* and of the people who held out in Constantine's Christian Rome until 1453, one can perceive how Egeria and her ilk saw themselves as defenders, upbuilders and protectors of the new Christian Empire and strengtheners of its defenders and militia.

For Egeria then and many other west Europeans ever since, pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jerusalem has been a filling out of their baptismal identity. They have remained Europeans and the pilgrimage enables them to take over the Biblical ancestors from Jesus and Paul back to Adam. Earlier in Christian history, before the Roman Emperors and the Church came together, pilgrimage to Jerusalem had not apparently mattered so much. After the idea behind *Romanitas* and the Holy Roman Empire had faded, we find this pilgrimage for the moment less popular. Then as the journey to Jerusalem becomes easy, we find many going again. Then the flood starts. But by this stage it is not easy to tell the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim. But still today's pilgrim goes not so much to find herself or himself as an upholder of *Regnum Christi* but as someone trying to walk where those feet trod.

Our second example of a pilgrimage narrative is the *Self-account of the Indian Travel of the Monk Fa-Hsien* which took place during 399-414 C.E.[9] Buddhism had entered China some centuries before and though the exact date is not easy to specify, there is no doubt that the basic features of Buddhism and of Chinese thought had met and indeed in a number of respects clashed.[10] It becomes clear from the first line of the *Self-account* that Fa-Hsien was trying to improve his knowledge as a Buddhist monk. He says at once he "was saddened by the incompleteness of the books of Discipline," so he "set out for India to search for copies." Within China he was treated as a person of high standing, receiving honor and assistance from Chinese officials and Prefects along all the way on the Chinese side of the Gobi. As he travels through Central Asia, apart from the terrors and horrors of the way, his only interest is in the practice of Buddhism. Mainly he is concerned with monasticism and the *Vinaya*, but he describes some fine popular festivals with processions of images on floats as well as the munificence of Kings to various shrines and stupas. He has a great interest in performing pilgrimages to places where the Buddha Sakyamuni's relics are treasured. Even before he reaches India, he visits a spitoon reputed to be the Master's, a footprint, rocks where the Buddha's clothes were dried and a place where the fortunate may see his shadow.

As he enters India proper, the visits to stupas with relics of the Buddha's bones and traditions of visits by the Buddha Sakyamuni become more numberous. The buildings and stupas of major Indian Buddhist Emperors like Asoka and Kanishka do not escape his interest and a reverent visit including no doubt a circumambulation. He comes to places where, as he carefully notes, ceremonies of offerings and other rituals have been passed down since the Buddha's day. The Indians on seeing the Chinese holy men said: "How is it possible for people from the borders to learn to leave home and, for the sake of the way, to travel so far searching for the way

of the Buddha" (Chapter XV). Soon after this they reached "the country called the Middle Kingdom." Of course, this is Madhya Pradesh, the middle land of the Indic world. Fa-Hsien accepts that he is from a border, China; to this day Zhong-guo, by definition the Middle Kingdom, to every Chinese, is no longer so for him. In a way his Buddhism has meant he is no longer Chinese, he has become an Indian.

When Fa-hsien reached the original hear-land of the Buddha's ministry, from the Yamuna to the Gompti, Gogra, Rapti, and Gandak, along the Ganges and south to Bodhgaya, the pace of his pilgrimage becomes breathless as he visits place after place where incidents in the Buddha's life took place. Fa-Hsien again and again rejoices in the privilege of being there and regrets he was born so far away. Thus on visiting the Jetavana he says of himself and his sole remaining companion: "they considered how the World-honored One had in time past lived there twenty-five years, they felt sad that they were born in a border area ... as they looked at the place where the Buddha had lived, they were sad down to the heart." (Chapter XX).

Again in the area of Gridhrakuta Mountain he offers his devotions with flowers, incense and lamps at the place where the Buddha performed miracles, lived and taught. His account says: "He felt sad. He tried to keep back his tears and said 'The Buddha in old times lived here and here uttered the *Shuu léng yan* (Surangama Sutra). I, Fa-hsien, in my own life do not live at the same time as the Buddha. I look only at his remains and the place where he lived.' "(XXIX)

After Fa-hsien had visited the holy places and completed the traditional pilgrimage to the major sites, he left Varanasi and Sarnath and returned to Pataliputra, Asoka's capital. As he says, his original purpose, the seeking for the books of the monastic discipline had not been possible in North India because there he found "master-to-master transmission by mouth, no written versions for him to copy" (XXXVI). But at Pataliputra, in a Mahayana monastery, he found a written set of the rules as well as other materials. He remained there three years studying Sanskrit and copying books. His sole surviving companion "remembered sadly how broken and imperfect the discipline was among the assemblies of monks in China and uttered this resolution: 'From this time till I achieve Buddhahood, may I never be born again in a border land.' He therefore ended his days in India (XXXVI). Fa-hsien went on to the great port at the mouth of the Ganges, Tamalipti. He stayed there two years' copying texts and diagrams of icons" (XXXVII). Then he visited the monks of Sri Lanka and Sumatra and finally got back home.

In contrast with Egeria and Fa-hsien who stood at the beginning of a great pilgrimage tradition and could well be considered trail-blazers and pioneers, our third pilgrim, Muhammad ibn Battūta (1325-1358 C.E.), stands late in a well established tradition already seven hundred years old.[11] Indeed his account of the *ḥajj* is not even original; he has incorporated the account of ibn Jubair from the previous century in his own work. He does not seem in need of an identity, he knows who he is, above all he thinks of himself as an Arab and a Muslim. He is proud to call himself a member of the Luwata tribe, which connects him up with Berber ancestors. We know that his family had fairly recently been turned out of Spain and had re-settled in Morocco. He is proud of the Maghrib and its pure Arabic. We know other details of his self-identity; when he is old and tired and homesick, over against the people of Bilād-as-Sudān he identifies himself as white. Throughout he is dependant on women for company; he confesses he hates to travel without a female companion. He cares immensely for prestige, honor and gifts. We gather that his pretensions to scholarship were not well founded.[12] Yet the main things that strike the reader apart from admiration for the immensity of the man's travels — from Tangier to Canton via West and West Central Asia, India, Sumatra, East Africa to Sofala,

Constantinople, Spain, lastly across the Sahara to Mali and the Niger bend — are the centrality in his narrative of his divine vocation to visit holy places with the *ḥajj* as central. If in detail we compare his account of the *ḥajj* with that of ibn Jubair whose outline he has used, we find sufficient evidence to suppose that the effect of his first Meccan-Medinan pilgrimage had a tremendous and lasting effect on him as a young man. It was on his way to his first pilgrimage with mind obsessed by Lubbaika, "I stand to do thy will," that he perceived Allah's will for him. His vocation was to be, as ibn Ḥajar sums it up, "the pre-eminent traveller of the Muslim age." His repeated performances of the *ḥajj* and his residence at Mecca were undoubtedly central to him and indeed to the prestige which he used as his traveller's checks. (He being an Arab, we must spell it "cheque.")

Comparative Religion has tried to establish herself as a science based on hard objective criteria, and a satisfactory methodology for analyzing and evaluating participant observership has hardly been worked out. This writer has "roamed" and peregrinated over the Buddhist pilgrim ways from Barabudur to Bamian, has participated, so far as respect for others permitted, at Varanasi, Hardwar, Jeddah, Rome and Jerusalem and at sites in Eire and Mexico. Such things are not easy to write about in academic terms. One motive was to re-build a life which had been broken up, to re-find, re-new, ideals and purposes which had been destroyed. In a way, it was like a temporary spell in a mental ward or like an L.S.D. trip. In another way pilgrimage can be an attempt to blackmail the divine, to extort some sort of special experience as theophany. In such cases the divine answer is: "What doest thou here?" In another way it is a de-programming and re-programming, or to adapt the metaphor a little, an attempt to substitute parts of the DNA message so as to become someone else. In another way, it is a form of suicide for it was meritorious to die on the way and the hazards of the journeys and diseases rampant at pilgrimage centers made such merit reasonably attainable. Death apart, if the pilgrimage were really effective, a pilgrim was never quite the same again.

We are bound to conclude that the search for identity is a strong and pervading feature of the pilgrimage phenomenon. There is of course much which mingles with this. Even a cursory examination of Victor Turner's methodology indicates the rites of passage interpretation is highly valuable. So too is the idea that people go on pilgrimage so as to out-class the stay-at-homes. As Wingate told the Chindits: "You will be proud to say: 'I was there'." Again, by analogy with birds, insects and animals, lemmings, sheep, chickens and soldier-ants, once a stream of movement starts, others will by all means join in. Mere curiosity and voyeurism have their part. In one shape or form it will survive as long as human nature exists. At the moment the jet has enabled it to become one of the major industries of the modern world.

Pilgrimage remains one of the most curious and inexplicable ritual dances that *homo* so-called *sapiens* insists on carrying out. Those who study it are even curiouser.

FOOTNOTES

1 Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance*, Act 2, Scene 1.

2 E.D. Hunt, "St. Silvia of Aquitaine," *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 23, 1972, p. 373.

3 The recently deceased and much lamented Dr. Victor Turner revolutionized the study of pilgrimage by working out along these lines from his studies of African initiation rituals. Of course, there is much more than can be said concerning Turner's treatment. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, written in collaboration with Edith Turner, gives a full statement and refers to and relies upon the earlier work stretching back to 1969.

4 There is a good summary and discussion of a great number of these in the chapter "Theoretical perspectives for pilgrimage" in E. Alan Morinis: *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition, a Case Study of West Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984.

5 The text is readily available. H. Petre, *Ethérie, Journal de voyage*. Texte latin, introduction et tradution. *Sources chrétiennes*, volume 21, Paris, 1948. See also E. Francheschini et R. Weber: *Itinerarium Egeriae*. (Corpus Christianorum, Series Lat., volume 175), Turnhout, 1965, pages 27-90 (Indices in volume 176). English translations include C.E. Gingras: *Egeria, Diary of a Pilgrimage* (Ancient Christian Writers, Number 38) Westminster, Md., 1970 and John Wilkinson: *Egeria's Travels*, London, SPCK. 1971.

6 Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* XVI col. 1385 ff. Mannix published an edition at Washington in 1925. Theodosius died in 395 C.E.

7 Symmachus: *Relatio* III and Ambrose *Epp* XVII and XVIII.

8 Rutilius Namatianus: *de reditu suo* and Libanius *oratio* XXX, *pro templis*.

9 The Pin yin is Fa-Xian but the well known Wade-Giles spelling is retained for the name. The most readily available text is that given in James Legge's *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-Hien of his Travels in India and Ceylon*, London, 1886. That volume also gives a translation (which met with a great deal of criticism) and excellent notes. H.A. Giles published a better translation, *The Travels of Fa Hsien, 399-414 A.D.*, London, 1923.
The Chinese Buddhist Association published a new translation by Li Yung-Hsi at Beijing in 1957. The translation used for this paper is an unpublished one by Ching-Yi Dougherty. The beginning of his visit to India is to be dated to 399 C.E. when India was enjoying the prosperity and security associated with the Guptas. By contrast, China was in turmoil. He returned home in 414 C.E. The route taken by the pilgrim is well mapped in (edited) Joseph E. Schwartzberg: *Historical Atlas of South Asia*, Chicago: University Press, 1978. Details and bibliography of some others who followed in his footsteps will be found in T.O. Ling's Dictionary of Buddhism, New York: Scribner's, 1972. s.v. I Ch'ing and Hsuan Tsang. One should not omit Wu Cheng-en's *Monkey* conveniently available in Arthur Waley's translation (Penguin 1972, first published by Allen and Unwin). See also (translated and edited) Anthony C. Yu: *The Journey to the West*, Chicago, 1977-83 and his article, "Two Literary Examples of Religious Pilgrimage: the *Commedia* and *The Journey to the West*," *History of Religions*, 1982, volume 22:1, pages 202-221.

10 Eric Zuercher: *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972. Fa-hsien mentions the tradition that Indian missionaries first crossed the Indus in answer to a dream of an Emperor who reigned from 59-75 C.E.

11 A beautiful edition of the text with a serviceable French translation is to be found in C. Defrémery et B.R. Sanguinetti: *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, Paris, four volumes, 1853-1858, reprinted 1968. H.A.R. Gibbs: *Selections from the Travels of Ibn Battuta*, London, 1929, is still very serviceable. Three volumes of his full translation and notes have appeared in the London Hakluyt series from 1958 onwards. The fourth volume has not appeared.

12 See Ibn Ḥajar of Ascalon's *Al-Durar al-Kāmina*, Hyderabad, India, Volume III, 1929, pages 480-481.

Related works by the author of this paper:

African Cosmos, An Introduction to African Religion, Belmont CA.: Wadsworth, 1985.
Editor: *Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari's "Customs of the Swahili"*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981.
Ibn Battuta in Black Africa. London: Rex Collings, 1975.