JSRNC
https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.21905

Book Review

Marion Grau, *Pilgrimage, Landscape, and Identity: Reconstructing Sacred Geographies in Norway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), viii + 249pp., £48.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780197598634.

In this fine study, Marion Grau investigates the spiritual culture of pilgrimage in Norway, including the surfacing of old rituals that reflect on the very origins of Christianity in the nation. Among pilgrims, a new sacred geography and identity has emerged, she argues, which has fostered informal beliefs that defy the binary between sacred and secular, spirituality and religion.

Pilgrimages are popular. Most famous, perhaps, is the Camino de Santiago with hundreds of thousands of people walking for weeks from cities as far away as Seville, Lisbon, and Lyon. These walks may cross national boundaries and have thus been promoted by the European Union as one of many ways to socially refigure and unite Europe at little cost. For local businesses, pilgrims may entail guests in faraway hostels and bistros. Progressive church leaders see pilgrimages as an ecumenical project that connects different branches of Christianity, while also appealing to the young. They may even foster respect for God's creations and each other, as walking together cultivates proximity to landscapes, democratic values, and perhaps also a renewed sense of belonging to a congregation. Grau walks the reader through these arguments and much more while focusing on Norway.

Protestantism has long dominated Norwegian spiritual life, and Martin Luther was no fan of pilgrimages. '"Let every man stay in his own parish, where he finds more than in all the shrines of pilgrimage"', he once argued (p. 57). No wonder, then, that conservative-leaning Protestant theologians are skeptical of the new phenomenon. At the same time, churches have become increasingly empty with priests worried about the spread of secularism. Perhaps pilgrimages can renew the parish and convert people to the Christian faith?

The most famous convert in Norwegian history is Olav Haraldsson, a gruesome Viking King that ruled a substantial part of Norway between 1015 and 1028. According to the myth— which is not entirely fictional—he christened the nation, and as a result, was later made into a Saint. Known as St. Olav, his life serves as the chief origin story of Norwegian Christendom. The country's most important cathedral, The Nidaros in Trondheim, was even erected over his tomb. As a chief destination for pilgrimages, the tomb of St. Olav serves as an homage to the convert and as a place harboring both the origin and a new spiritual beginning for the nation. He was 'an ideal convert, moving from Viking bloodthirst to Christian charity, serving perhaps as a mirror for the corporate journey of the population', Grau argues (p. 10). Indeed, her analysis of the various rituals of St. Olav within a

largely secular nation is fascinating and novel to me. Using participant observation methodology, Grau portrays the typical pilgrim not as a hardened Christian believer, but instead as a seeker on a path of spiritual renewal. They are converts in the making, so to speak, walking to the home of St. Olav, the chief convert of all.

Though pilgrims are a diverse group, Grau notes that they tend to lean in a direction of spirituality that pays respect to both nature and society. They would typically be concerned about climate change, species extinction, and pollution, along with harboring progressive ideas about social inclusion and democratic participation. Environmentally-friendly walking is thus their chief mode of transportation, with ocean pilgrimage in sailboats as an exception.

'Pilgrims are a niche group in the context of the tourism industry', Grau notes (p. 123). The group is indeed minuscule in comparison to the 7 million tourists arriving in Norway every year, with Grau reporting between 600–1300 registered long-distance walkers (p. 14), and 1000–1500 shorter guided pilgrims in the Trondheim region (p. 82). The pilgrims are also a tiny group in comparison to other Norwegians walking the mountains, with over half of a nation of 5.3 million people taking nature hikes longer than three hours every year, according to recent statistics. Yet Grau hardly discusses this larger social context of Norway's friluftsliv (free-air-life) and how it may relate to the experience of pilgrims. There are no references to thinkers within this culture, such as the Deep Ecology of Arne Næss, Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng, and Nils Faarlund. It was in lieu of these secular philosophers that Norway's eco-theology first emerged, as in the writings of Gunnar Breivik, Gaute Gunnleiksrud, Hans Eirik Aarek, Dagny Kaul, and others. While reading Grau, I kept wondering if there is a connection between these thinkers, Norwegian eco-theology, and various pilgrimage initiatives.

While an appreciation of Norwegian friluftsliv is lacking, Grau makes up for this through her acute observations of pilgrims, her analysis of secret geographies and rituals, and in her critical reading of St. Olav mythologies. This is where this book truly shines. It is indeed a fine and novel study of pilgrimage in Norway, with interesting nuances and rich source materials. The book is written in an engaging language free of theological jargon, and it is both thought-provoking and interesting. It's well worth the read.

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