

*Once upon a time, Chuang Chou dreamt that he was a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower in the golden sunlight and flirting with the female butterflies. Then he woke up. "Was that me, Chuang Chou, dreaming himself to be a butterfly," he mused, "or am I now a butterfly dreaming himself to be Chuang Chou?"*¹

There and Back and In-between

Pilgrimage in Adventist Consciousness

by John R. Jones

Only 9:30, and already it's sweltering. As I sit in my car waiting, the clouds of dust from passing jeepneys mix with the shimmer of heat waves. But I don't have to wait long that



A pilgrim greets the small crucifix in the plaza by kissing the feet of Jesus. Photo: John R. Jones.

Wednesday morning of Holy Week in central Luzon Island. I hear the clatter and clank as they come from behind me along the roadside: the clanking from the eighteen-inch chain between the young man's ankles, the clattering from the old roller skate tied to the bottom end of the big cross on his shoulder. All three, he, his sister and their mother, are robed in faded and dusty crimson, standard pilgrim garb in the Philippines.

As they sip hot water from my once-cool thermos, they answer my queries. They are making their way to San Fernando, where hundreds of spiri-

tual sojourners converge at a major cathedral every Holy Week. Still fifty kilometers away, they will arrive some time on Good Friday, having journeyed a total of ten days from their hometown. This is their fourth year in a five-year sequence, promised in a sacred vow of gratitude for some divine boon bestowed on their family. And they're ready to move on.

I ask if I might join them for a few kilometers. "Katoliko kayo?" "Hindi; Sabatista ako." They hesitate, considering whether my Adventism will violate the ritual sacrality of the aura in which they move. But our shared Christianity—or our shared humanity—win out, and we set out together.

Blasts of heat and dust and air horns buffet us along the narrow road. Village curs, no pets, these, snarl out from every little barrio, drawn by our wrong scent and our clatter. Yet as if in atonement, each township offers a tiny shrine by the roadside, a sanctuary of permanent concrete construction or thrown together for the occasion out of woven split bamboo matting with palm frond roofs. At each of these little *kapilyas* we pause to pray the rosary, to read a snatch from the Gospel of St. Matthew, to make the sign of the cross, to rest in shade for

a moment. But above all, to tap the *kapangyarihan*, the mana-like spiritual power of the place. Each of these stations legitimates the pilgrims' alternative reality, a counterpoint to the mundane world through which they are journeying.

"In the world but not of it." Like a mantra, the phrase keeps hovering in my mind during the three hours we walk together. We interact with the secular scene sufficiently to purchase *empanada* snacks and lukewarm soft drinks along the way. But such transactions are held to a minimum. It is as if the little band moves in its own bubble, constantly reweaving the spell with Hail Marys and the hummed melodies of folk Catholicism. The pilgrims have kindly allowed me into their experience for a time,



Kneeling at the Cathedral entrance: A cross-bearer. Photo: John R. Jones

and, however vicariously, I have caught something of how it works for them. I am grateful.

Squeezed into the rattletrap bus on the way back to my car, I reflect on how much we have lost as the entire notion of pilgrimage has slipped from popular western consciousness. Perhaps more than most, we as Adventists have shared in that loss. The founding vision of our movement originally held great power for us. Generations of early believers defined themselves by its imagery of shared struggle toward a celestial city, along the "straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world."² Perhaps the ancient echoes of Canterbury and Chartres, Jerusalem and Rome, still hung on in the subconscious life of Americans of the mid-nineteenth century, people whose mental compasses still pointed back across the Atlantic. But already the advancing frontier was reorienting the country westward. The Old World gestalt of pilgrimage to ancient centers was yielding to a new vision, of claiming and taming this land, this place.

Pilgrimage Today

Thus, today the whole notion of pilgrimage, long dormant, is having to be reawakened for North Americans. The ancient summons is only beginning to be heard again, a resurgent call perhaps first

answered by hitchhiking hippies and "Jesus freaks" of the 1960s and 1970s. If the destinations have changed from those of past centuries, so have the challenges. Today's spiritual vagabonds who would reinvent the phenomenon in contemporary terms recognize that journeying as spiritual experience is linked to some sense of adventure, even of danger, a foray into the unknown other. Yet it is just these elements that are suppressed in the logistics of mass transportation and packaged tours. It is not easy to overcome the pervasive banalization of travel today—or the creeping homogeneity of most destinations.³

Yet it can be done. Contemporary studies of ritual behavior bring several religious phenomena to the surface of our understanding—phenomena that natural practitioners of rite and ceremony have understood instinctively. By paying some attention to these, we can hope to tap afresh something of the power of this archetypal idea. Among these characteristic features of ritual are those termed *liminality* and *communitas*.

Liminality

Traditionally, religious pilgrims moved along the margins of the mundane world, skirting all cultures, familiar and alien, for the sake of immersion in otherworldly realities. Hermann Hesse captured the



A pilgrim heads a procession of travelers, most likely family members. Photo: John R. Jones

classic modality in his description of the pilgrim band in *The Journey to the East*. "Faithful to our instructions, we lived like pilgrims," he wrote, "and made no use of those contrivances which spring into a world deluded by money, number and time, and which drain life of its content; mechanical contrivances such as railways, watches and the like came chiefly into this category."⁴

In our age, he could certainly have included airplanes. The act of flight simulates liberation, yet in its commercialized form it proves imperious in conforming us. It is true that altitude itself still raises us above our conventional mental frameworks. There's no question that at 30,000 feet the inner separation from the mundane world sets in. With flight, the ancient words of the Lankavatara Sutra

assume new meaning: "In the sky there is no East or West. We make these distinctions in the mind, then believe them to be true." The trick, of course, is to maintain such exalted perspectives back on the ground—even in the face of Hesse's perverse contrivances.

Victor Turner called this experience of inner distance "liminality."⁵ As a student of religious experience, he traced the power of ritual to change us. Like Arnold van Gennep before him, Turner saw that this happens as we are (1) separated from the normal world, (2) pulled through new experiences that challenge our ordinary perceptions of reality, (3) finally to be integrated back into our former lives as different people. It's the second of these three steps that is the most dynamic, because here we are most vulnerable to the alternative world that the ritual invokes. Cut off from what we were and will be, we have crossed the threshold into a "betwixt-and-between" condition in which ambiguity opens us up to other ways of seeing and being.⁶

Although Turner observes this condition of marginality in many ritualized contexts, he sees pilgrimage as an activity that particularly invokes it. Some of today's pilgrims, however, seem to me to differ from those of yore in the way they trigger the liminal condition. If previously the idea was to

skirt all of this world's cultural scenes for the sake of traveling within one's own parallel world of sanctity toward a destination defined by that same sanctity, the pattern now defines the other as an alternative cultural/spiritual context *within* this world. For such travelers, the liminality express the distinction between two or more human worlds, rather than between terrestrial and celestial orders. It comes through engagement with, rather than disengagement from, other human scenes. If pilgrimage once meant physical adventure while journeying within the confines of one's spiritual comfort zone, perhaps modern pilgrimage compensates for today's relative physical security by deliberately venturing onto other's spiritual turf. So Lhasa and Dun-huang win out over Chartres and Canterbury.

Perhaps this modern model makes more explicit a pattern that infuses all pilgrimage: To journey from culture A to culture B and back to A again is indeed a two-way adventure. More than a trek from the earthly to the heavenly, it is a bimodal experience within the single plane. Thus the reciprocal movement must receive its due, as we shall consider further below.

Communitas

Additionally, we contrive to rescue the spirituality of the experience by sharing it. Shinto pilgrims making the ritual circuit of temples around the perimeter of Shikoku island do so by bus and typically are complete strangers to one another. Yet in their arbitrary groupings they establish instant bonds that last for the duration. So strongly does their shared spiritual world overwhelm the secular, that even the mundane logistics of transportation are made to serve their group consciousness. A group photo of a particular pilgrim busload of travelers briefly thrown together by happenstance graces many a Japanese home, a memory of a significant moment experienced as a fleeting, floating community.

Turner called it "*communitas*," that intense mutual loyalty inspired by shared ritual experience. This quality, too, he writes, can regularly be found among groups of people on pilgrimage.⁷ An important characteristic of *communitas* is the strongly developed sense of comradeship, of shared endeavor, experienced by pilgrim groups. Tight bands of Shaivite pilgrims jogging in gong-paced cadence across India's parched countryside, bearing small brass pots of water from the Ganges to their home temples, exude an almost threatening solidarity. It was self-evident to me even before I was told, that they should be left absolutely alone. Even a misunderstood glance could trigger a swarming defense of any member of the group.

In more benign form, this same bond takes its rise from the way we especially think of a beloved friend whenever we experience something meaningful, especially on trips to new scenes. During my own childhood in missionary contexts, all arrivals and



How the tradition gets passed on: A member of the next generation spontaneously imitates what he sees happening.

Photo: John R. Jones

departures, all significant moments in our corporate life as fellow workers, were marked by singing "Blest Be the Tie that Binds."

Communitas also regularly shows a strongly egalitarian streak. As Turner observes, the conventional social structures of the larger world are ameliorated within the pilgrim group.⁸ One thinks of Malcolm X's experience of this leveling within the Muslim *hadj* that so revolutionized his understanding of the potential for relations between races.⁹

Communitas does not suppress differences, but integrates them. Again, Hesse captures the spirit: "Each [pilgrim] had his own dream, his wish, his secret heart's desire, and yet they all flowed together in the great stream and all belonged to each other, shared the same reverence and the same faith, and had made the same vow!"¹⁰

Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews appears to have been written from within a pilgrimage consciousness. We read of Jesus' suffering "outside of the camp" as the basis for an appeal that we, too, should "go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come."¹¹ The liminality of the imagery comes through, as does the *communitas*: the believers are to "stir one another up" to love and good works, meeting regularly together and encouraging one another. All of this is to intensify as they "see the Day drawing near."¹²

Interestingly, it is precisely among millenarian groups, pressing toward the advent of a new order, that Turner also observes these phenomena typical of pilgrimage.¹³ He also acknowledges that the liminal sense and the intense *communitas* characteristic of such countercultural religious movements "are essentially phenomena of transition," in that they tend to fade with time. Read through these eyeglasses, Hebrews becomes intelligible as addressed to a circle of religious adherents whose experience has come to the point of reintegrating with the standard cultural structures of their day. The letter's repeated exhortations to reembrace the sufferings of estrangement, to pick up drooping hands and strengthen weak knees in the pilgrim band, in fact attest the nascent Christian movement's success; it has endured to the point of the third step in van Gennep's model.

Now for the author of Hebrews comes the crucial question: Which strategy to adopt? To try to pull the group back into an eternal state of otherness, to try to sustain the radical alienation from all of this world's reference points, or to find new ways of recasting old conventions, as two worlds are allowed to converge? The letter's option for the former strategy may have extended the liminal phase for a time in the early Christian alternative vision. In his butterfly dream he awakens us, too, to the implications of our own founding vision as a people, journeying always in that delicate but powerful threshold between two worlds.

4. Herman Hesse: *The Journey to the East*, trans. Hilda Rosner (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), 13, 14.

5. From the Latin *limen*, "threshold." Turner follows Arnold van Gennep, who first used the term "liminality" in his studies of rites of passage. It is Turner, however, who develops the concept and applies it to a variety of ritual settings, including pilgrimage. See his *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967) chap. 4; *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), chaps. 3 and 4; and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), chaps. 5 and 6.

6. "The attributes of liminality . . . are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. . . . Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon." Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

7. "[P]ilgrimages are liminal phenomena. . . . [T]hey also exhibit in their social relations the quality of *communitas*." Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 166. Turner prefers this form over "community" as a way of distinguishing the sense of mutual loyalty from a geographical area of common living. His meaning is closer to the German *gemeinschaft*.

8. In speaking about the *communitas* that characterizes separatist religious movements generally (whether their pilgrimage is literal or symbolic), Turner states: "Organizationally, they often abolish priestly hierarchies and substitute for them either prophetic charismatic leadership or democratic methods of representation." Ibid., 267.

9. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992 reprint), chap. 17.

10. Hesse, *Journey to the East*, 23, 24. Cf. Turner: "I am suggesting that the social mode appropriate to all pilgrimages represents a mutually energizing compromise between structure and *communitas*; in theological language a forgiveness of sins, where differences are accepted and tolerated rather than aggravated into grounds of aggressive opposition." Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 208.

11. Heb. 13:12-14, RSV.

12. Ibid., 10:24, 25.

13. "Among the more striking manifestations of *communitas* are to be found the so-called millenarian religious movements." Turner, *Ritual Process*, 111.

Notes and References

1. Adapted from *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 2.
2. Ellen G. White, "My First Vision," *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1882), 14.
3. Pico Iyer traces these trends in *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988; reprint, Vintage Books, 1989).

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