

## **Pilgrims in the world of fate – Pilgrims in the world of choice:**

**Pilgrimages to Częstochowa and Santiago de Compostela and New Age spirituality**

*Stanisław Burdziej*\*

*Reports are made on participant observation during two pilgrimages: to Santiago de Compostela in Spain (2001) and to Jasna Góra in Poland (2004). The fieldwork is compared for evidence of increased receptivity to New Age. It is suggested that features of Polish Catholicism may 'block' the diffusion of New Age ideas, while features of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela may invite the influence of New Age ideology. More generally, religious and cultural diversity may create an environment that is more prone to accepting New Age ideas.*

Pilgrimage has a long history in all religious traditions (Coleman & Elnor 1995). Within Western Christianity it reached its apogee in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, declined during the Reformation and experienced a renewed interest between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most popular destinations included Rome, Palestine and Santiago de Compostela, where the tomb of the Apostle James was said to have been located and discovered as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, modernization and privatization of religion in Europe weakened the flow of pilgrims to most European shrines. Even more importantly, the character of these journeys was transformed. Penitence and search for miracles and healing were replaced by the quest for internal transformation and authentic religious experience as the chief motives.

However, the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the dawn of the new millennium, witnessed a considerable growth in the number of pilgrims, particularly to Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain. Those walking along the Way of St James (*Camino de Santiago*) tend to stay apart from the Catholic Church and organized religion in general, but declare spiritual and religious motivation. They often show interest in various New Age ideas.

At the same time, traditional pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady in Jasna Góra (Poland) have continued unabated since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, despite significant changes in the place of Catholicism in Polish society after the fall of communism in 1989 (see Byrnes 2002). These pilgrimages remain an important part of national identity, while the sanctuary itself serves as a spiritual capital of the nation. The pilgrims to Częstochowa (the city where Jasna Góra sanctuary is located), show little or no interest in New Age ideas; traditional Catholicism provides them with a framework to interpret their experience. The pilgrimages differ significantly, then. It is the aim of this paper to examine why New Age ideas successfully penetrate and influence the way pilgrims to Santiago interpret their journey, while they fail to exert any significant impact upon the pilgrims heading to Jasna Góra.

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\* © Stanisław Burdziej. The author acknowledges financial support from the Foundation for Polish Science and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria. E-mail: [stanislaw.burdziej@wp.pl](mailto:stanislaw.burdziej@wp.pl)

This paper is based on participant observation in both pilgrimages. I completed the pilgrimage from Toruń to Częstochowa between 4 and 13 August 2004, covering a distance of some 290 km (180 miles) within 9 days, and the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the French Pyrenees to Santiago and further to Cape Finisterre, starting on 5 August and finishing on 2 September 2001 (875 km in 28 days) (Burdziej 2005).

### **Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela**

After decades of decline, since the late 1980s the once-busy routes to Santiago de Compostela have experienced a considerable renaissance of walking pilgrimages. Initially, only a couple of hundred people a year walked the so-called French Way (*Camino Francés*) from Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees to Santiago, combining cultural and religious motivation. Among the first pilgrims were scholars, journalists, writers and spiritual seekers, rather than devout Catholics. The Catholic Church of Spain did not play a significant role in the early stages of the revival, but Pope John Paul II's visits to Santiago in 1982 and 1989, as well as solemn celebrations of the jubilee years in 1993, 1999 and 2004, helped attract numerous pilgrims in subsequent years. In 2005, almost 94,000 people walked to Santiago, often embarking on journeys of many hundreds of miles. In the jubilee years 1999 and 2004 these numbers were even higher – 154,613 and 179,944 pilgrims respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Most pilgrims to Santiago with whom I spoke during my research trip in 2001 mentioned “understanding themselves” as the chief motive for their journey. Many were young people at the crossroads of their lives, nearing graduation and having to decide on their professional future; others had experienced personal problems such as divorce or the death of a loved one, or were trying to confront their own serious illness. For another group, of mostly retired 50 to 60 year-olds, the pilgrimage was first and foremost a physical challenge, a proof to themselves that they remained fit and energetic. Finally, a considerable group of pilgrims treated the *Camino* as a cheap holiday, profiting from an extensive network of facilities prepared for pilgrims, such as refuges, campsites, and a well-marked path. This is why the phenomenon of the Way of St James is often described in terms of cultural tourism rather than as a pilgrimage. Ruben Camilo Lois and Jose Medina Somoza of the University of Santiago de Compostela have referred to the route as a “successful tourist product on a European scale” and “northern Spain's main tourist product” (2003: 447, 450). Despite the diversity of reasons for making the pilgrimage, however, a huge majority declared religious or spiritual reasons. According to the statistics collected by the cathedral Pilgrims' Office in Santiago in 1999, 62 per cent declared religious reasons, while only 4 per cent declared purely secular, cultural reasons. Fully one-third of the pilgrims mentioned religious-spiritual motivation (Garcia 1999).<sup>2</sup> It is this last group which is most interesting to me now.

Young people encountered on the route were often critical towards the Catholic Church. Maria, from Greece, raised Orthodox, was particularly troubled by the dogma of the infallibility of the pope. Pierre, a Catholic, challenged the Church's position on excluding women from priesthood; it was only a matter of time before

this practice would be changed, he thought. Very few pilgrims took part in holy masses; virtually no outward religious practices could be observed among pilgrims. The only exceptions were the pilgrim mass in Roncesvalles, where ancient benediction was bestowed upon those starting their journey, and the noon mass in Santiago, which gathers all those who arrive at the sanctuary on a given day. The moment of arrival in Santiago is interesting: many of the pilgrims, who declare themselves non-believers, follow religious pilgrims in performing traditional rites: they put their hand into the cleavage carved over centuries in the column of the front portico of the cathedral or hug the bust of the Apostle James behind the main altar.

Many of the people I encountered on the road were inspired by the popular books by Shirley MacLaine and Paulo Coelho. Coelho, a world-famous Brazilian writer best known for his *The Alchemist* (1993), completed his pilgrimage in 1986, when the route was still in oblivion. The pilgrimage helped him overcome a serious drug problem and turned him back toward Catholicism. His account of this experience, *El diario de um mago (Sorcerer's Diary, also known under a different title: The Pilgrim, 1986)* brought him instant success and fame. He describes his pilgrimage as a journey of initiation to the secret Order of RAM (from: Rigour – discipline, Amor – love, Misericordia – charity, elsewhere explained as the Catholic society Regnus Agnus Mundi), through a series of rituals. Most Brazilian pilgrims – who are the fourth largest national group among pilgrims – are inspired by Coelho's book.

Shirley MacLaine, American actress and writer, walked the Way of St James in 1996. In her account of the pilgrimage she claims to have gained insight into the mysteries of the universe, the origins of humanity, human sexuality and ancient civilizations during the journey (2000). In an interview she listed her interest in the pilgrimage (and, more broadly, “transformational travels to sacred sites”) together with reincarnation, UFO phenomena, chakra balancing, reflexology, dream interpretation, numerology, astrology, chi energy, intuition, prophecy, feng shui, stress management, qi gong, the spiritual side of health and pet spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

Both writers are frequently identified with the New Age movement, although Coelho resists this identification. In both books, the sense of pilgrimage is found at a deeply individual level and is not intermediated in any way by the Church or any other religious institution. Both MacLaine and Coelho view the *Camino* as a patrimony of humanity, not an exclusive property of one religious tradition, namely Catholic. This idea is reflected in the strong interest many pilgrims have in the pre-Christian history of the Route to Santiago: according to some, long before the alleged tomb of the Apostle was found, even long before Christianity arrived to Spain, the Route was followed by Celtic druids on their way to Cape Finisterre (literally “End of the World”) to worship the sun dawning in the Atlantic Ocean. This point of view is also widespread among pilgrims. Religious affiliation is generally seen as irrelevant. Some pilgrims view religion as a major source of conflict, while spirituality is perceived as uniting and positive.

Many of the pilgrims to Santiago combine religious and spiritual motives with an interest in supernatural phenomena and legends. Some are attracted by the history and craft of the stonemasons who built magnificent cathedrals in Burgos, Leon, Astorga or the Knights Templar of Ponferrada. Others are fascinated by the so-called ley-lines (alignments of ancient sites designed by the early civilizations) or points of telluric energy. Many stress their desire to become closer to Nature during their walk to Santiago. Days or weeks of lonely meditation and physical effort are seen primarily as beneficial for one's body and psyche. Some stress that they stay apart from organized religion and are unfamiliar with the basic tenets of Catholic doctrine, while seeking "something greater than themselves". They often define "spirituality" as more authentic and valuable than stiff, purely formal "religiosity", which basically means subordination to the dictates of an institution (see Kubiak 2002).

### **Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra**

As I have already mentioned, the tradition of pilgrimages to the Jasna Góra shrine of Our Lady dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Over the centuries the monastery, which hosts a holy icon of the Virgin Mary, a black Madonna which came to symbolize the unity of the Polish nation under her divine protection. During the 123 years of partition of the country (1795-1918), and later under the Nazi occupation (1939-1945) and the communist regime (1945-1989), Jasna Góra remained a spiritual centre of Poland. In this last period, many pilgrims combined religious and political motivation; for many, the journey to Częstochowa was a veiled manifestation of disapproval of the regime. As a consequence, pilgrims were harassed by the secret police and local authorities. Secret service agents and collaborators would accompany pilgrim groups dressed as pilgrims, trying to lower their morale (e.g. by distributing pornographic materials or smoking in the barns, where pilgrims were accommodated by local people) or even allegedly poisoning the wells used by the pilgrims (Berberysz 1991). These memories are still fresh among the older pilgrims.

Despite these difficulties, the numbers of pilgrims have been constantly growing since the 1970s. After the Polish pope John Paul II's first visit to Jasna Góra in 1979, some 4-5 million people come to the shrine every year, its popularity second only to Guadalupe in Mexico and Lourdes in France. Out of this number, around 200,000 pilgrims walk on foot. It is estimated that 80 per cent of all Polish parishes organize pilgrimages to Częstochowa, but each year there are also some 400,000 pilgrims from abroad (Jackowski 2004: 164-71).

The pilgrimage to Częstochowa is definitely a collective enterprise. Most dioceses (church provinces) organize their own pilgrimages, with distinct routes, separate accommodation and technical support. The pilgrimage from the diocese of Toruń, in which I took part in 2004, numbered 1,300 people, and was served by 55 priests, 10 doctors and 50 nurses (Strużanowski 2004). Pilgrims were further divided into smaller groups (in the past known as "companies") of around 200-400 people. Each of these was accompanied by several priests, often nuns, by a truck which transported pilgrims' luggage, as well as other cars to assist the weaker pilgrims in need.

All of these groups were structured in a similar way. Pilgrims walked in a single column, which enabled cars to pass by, and were preceded by marshalls. At the head of the column, one of the pilgrims – usually someone who knew the way – carried a cross. This position (called *brat krzyżowy* or *siostra krzyżowa* – brother/sister carrying the cross) is usually highly regarded among pilgrims. Then came mothers with prams and small babies, people bearing loudspeakers, and other pilgrims, with a musical band in the middle. To the rear there usually walked a priest, who was available for confession. Each group had its own identity, symbolized by distinct colours (e.g. blue-white), which was fostered by the clergy and lay people particularly involved in the organization of the pilgrimage. At the same time, all groups from the diocese had a common patron – that year it was blessed Stefan Wincenty Frelichowski (1913-1945), a scout and young priest of Toruń who died of typhus while serving the sick in Dachau concentration camp.

The collective aspect of the pilgrimage was also visible at the group's departure from the home town and arrival at Jasna Góra. The day of departure, early in the morning, a mass was held in the cathedral of Toruń, presided over by the local bishop and attended by all the pilgrims and many of their family members. The bishop and many of the relatives also accompanied the pilgrims for the first few kilometres. Very often, the bishop – referred to as the “father of the diocese” – either walks the whole distance to Częstochowa with the group or greets the pilgrims at their arrival at the shrine. Interestingly, while we were walking to Jasna Góra, a mini-pilgrimage was organized for the sick and the elderly of Toruń. They would meet every day to visit one of the city's churches, attend a service and pray for the ‘real’ pilgrims.

On the pilgrimage, everybody called each other “brother” and “sister”, while the members of the clergy were addressed as “father”. This was important for reducing potential conflicts between pilgrims and created a special atmosphere, clearly distinct from everyday life. Pilgrims were not supposed to leave their group without the permission of the “brother guide” – the priest in charge of the whole group. This feature, together with many the others listed above, created among the pilgrims what Victor Turner called *communitas* (Turner 1977; Turner & Turner 1978). Virtually all religious activities on the pilgrimage were collective. Each day, after breakfast – usually served by those offering accommodation to the pilgrims – we started walking singing *godzinki* (the hours), a popular form of devotion to Saint Mary going back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The pilgrimage was very often referred to as “recollections on the way” (*rekolekcje w drodze*). Each day, the priests offered meditations devoted to the basic tenets of Catholicism (e.g. confession, prayer, Mother of God, the life of the blessed Stefan Frelichowski).

Between these meditations we would continuously sing religious songs. Very little time was spent in silence, and talking among pilgrims was discouraged while walking. Some pilgrims performed additional religious practices, such as walking around church altars on their knees or prostrating on the ground with their arms stretched like a cross, as a form of individual penitence. Most of the traditional practices described above were eagerly endorsed by the pilgrims, including the teenagers.

The rules of conduct during the pilgrimage were explicitly laid out in a booklet that every pilgrim received when signing up for the pilgrimage several days before departure. They included daily attendance at mass, participation in scheduled prayers, no smoking or alcohol consumption, obedience to the guide and marshalls, no radio or television, no consumption of ice cream (for reasons of health and safety during the hot summer), sharing the burdens of pilgrimage organization (carrying the loudspeakers, flags, loading luggage on the truck), modest dress, a 10pm curfew, no swimming in the lakes, mandatory head covering (against the sun) and a “general religious spirit”. Registration involved signing a statement that these rules would be obeyed. Those breaking the rules could be asked to leave the pilgrimage (I observed no such situation, although some – especially young men, including the marshalls – had a rather loose attitude towards the rules).

The sense of community and belonging that stems from the collective character of the pilgrimage was further reinforced by the message conveyed in meditations and songs. This is neatly summarized in the following stanza of one of the songs sung during the pilgrimage:

What I have promised to God at my baptism / I earnestly want to fulfil /  
Always obey the Church / And persist in the holy faith / O Lord, thank you /  
for opening the doors of the Church to me / I want to live and die in it.<sup>4</sup>

One can hardly find a better illustration of the fact that pilgrims to Jasna Góra stay within what Peter Berger (1979) called “the world of fate”. Pilgrims were generally advised to rely on God, who alone is able to help them in need, while individual effort to solve problems (such as illness or family problems) was presented as deeply insufficient.

Although any far-reaching generalizations would need empirical verification, it seems that the overall result of taking part in the pilgrimage to Jasna Góra is – for most pilgrims – an increase in identification with and attachment to the Church at national, local (parish) and individual level. Its main impact is a periodical – although often only temporary - reinvigoration of the religious life of some 200,000 Poles every year. Taking part in the pilgrimage involves an endorsement of a set of values and interpretations with little space for individual innovation: no manifestations of New Age practices and beliefs were observed among the pilgrims to Częstochowa.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested – in regard to pilgrimage – those main features of Polish Catholicism that may ‘block’ the diffusion of New Age ideas. These are, once again: (1) the collective character of religious experience; (2) the construction of *communitas* among believers; (3) the high position and prominence of the clergy; (4) discipline and the orchestration of religious experience; and (5) exclusive control of the Church over the interpretation of the meaning of religious experience.

Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra is first and foremost an occasion to strengthen the believer's Catholic identity. However, it should be stressed here that everyday life in Poland is quite different from the situation of a pilgrimage. While Polish Catholicism retains its mass character, the clergy still plays a dominant role, and religious experience is controlled, the fourth crucial element is lacking. The mass character of religious activity prevents believers from experiencing the feeling of *communitas* in their parish churches. This shortcoming, however, cannot easily be remedied by New Age alternatives, since they are mostly individualistic and private in character. In consequence, manifestations of New Age ideology are virtually non-existent among pilgrims to Jasna Góra. What is more, they are also discouraged by Church representatives (see Olechnicki 1995, 1998).

Polish Catholicism, the study of pilgrimage reveals, still provides an interpretation of human life that is attractive to both young and old. Contrary to what Marysia Galbraith claimed in her study of pilgrimage to Częstochowa (2001), I have observed young people readily accepting basic truths and dogmas, together with the leading role of the Church and its representatives. One explanation of these conflicting conclusions is the timing of Galbraith's research. She studied the pilgrimage in the early 1990s, when the Church was still learning how to operate in a democratic and pluralistic society. After 1993, when some clergy explicitly urged parishioners to vote for a right-wing party, the Church hit its lowest public approval ratings. Nevertheless, the Church relatively quickly mended this and abandoned direct involvement in party politics. Today, the Church remains among the most respected institutions in Poland.

At the same time, several features of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela invite the influence of New Age ideology among the pilgrims. These are: (1) stressing the individual character of (potential) religious experience; (2) individualism, lack of discipline and, hence, *communitas*; (3) absence of clergy; (4) lack of an official interpretation of the meaning of the pilgrimage; and (5) cultural and religious pluralism among the pilgrims. The Catholic Church in Spain, due to its traumatic 20<sup>th</sup> century history during the Spanish Civil War and nationalist government, tries only in a modest way to influence the way pilgrims experience their *Camino de Santiago*. When it does, it proposes and offers, rather than imposing and limiting.

This study, although very limited in scope, challenges the supply-side theory of religion proposed by William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (1987), and later developed by scholars like Laurence Iannaccone (1994) and Roger Finke (Finke & Stark 1998). Such theory suggests that, generally, diversity and pluralism foster religious vitality. In the case of the pilgrimages to Jasna Góra in Poland and Santiago in Spain we can observe, to the contrary, how religious homogeneity and monopoly helps to preserve the high level of identification with a religious tradition, while religious pluralism and the highly competitive "marketplace of ideas" turns religion into privately constructed spirituality.

The study of both pilgrimages suggests, first of all, that religious and cultural diversity creates an environment that is more prone to accepting New Age ideas.

Social control and collectivity significantly limit the range of New Age influence, at least in the short run. Here, we can risk the following hypotheses: as long as Polish society remains relatively homogenous in terms of ethnic and religious composition, the Catholic Church will be able to retain its dominant position in the construction of a religious worldview. However, this worldview is likely to be challenged as social diversity starts to increase. Such an increase of moral and religious pluralism is already in sight (Borowik and Doktor 2001). With Polish entry to the European Union, demographic decline and economic growth, immigration is likely to achieve a scale comparable to Western European countries, although this process may take decades.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Peregrinos en los últimos años", Registro de la Oficina de Acogida de Peregrinos, <http://www.archicompostela.org/Peregrinos/estadisticas/peregrinanos.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> "Religious" and "religious-spiritual" are both categories offered to respondents in the survey, but their meaning is not explained. We can presume that "religious" means "traditionally religious, observant member of a church", while "religious-spiritual" involves professing religious beliefs without having a (strong) affiliation with a religious body.

<sup>3</sup> "'The Camino': A Book Chat with Shirley MacLaine", [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/24/story\\_2429\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/24/story_2429_1.html).

<sup>4</sup> Com przyrzekł Bogu przy chrzcie raz / dotrzymać pragnę szczerze. / Kościoła słuchać w każdy czas / i w świętej wytrwać wierze. / O Panie Boże dzięki Ci, / żeś mi Kościoła otwarł drzwi / w Nim żyć, umierać pragnę.