A True Pilgrimage, A Journey of the Heart

While mountains represent the setting of Peter Matthiessen’s memoir *The Snow Leopard*, the work focuses on sacred mountains in particular only a few times. The first mention of sacred mountains occurs as Matthiessen (1978) and his company are journeying westward. The company passes by Mount Machhapuchare, a holy mountain that the Nepalese government has forbidden anyone from climbing. Matthiessen notes the mountain’s “pristine” quality and explains its history as a holy mountain revered by the Gurung people, and then he continues on his journey without mentioning sacred mountains again until the company finally reaches Crystal Mountain (p.27). There, Matthiessen (1978) describes how the mountain is a “shrine for pilgrims from all over Dolpo and beyond, who come here to make a prescribed circle around the Crystal Mountain” (p.187). Matthiessen (1978) quotes, “‘this worshipful or religious attitude is not impressed by scientific facts, like figures of altitude, which are foremost in the mind of modern man,’” yet he never explains exactly what it is about Crystal Mountain and sacred mountains in general that elicits such ardent worship by their surrounding peoples (p.186).

Part of the reason that Matthiessen chooses not to name the basis for a culture designating a mountain as “sacred” is that there doesn’t seem to be one defining characteristic in the designation of a mountain as holy. Despite Matthiessen’s ambivalence toward the significance of altitude, cultures do tend to revere most highly the mountains that are tallest: Mount Everest, for example, is one of the most respected mountains in the world today (Bernbaum, 2006, p.305).
Mountains are also often designated as holy when a community perceives them to represent the center of a region, the world, or the universe itself. According to Bernbaum (2006), the Balinese people believe that Mount Gunung Anung in Bali is a piece of Mount Meru—the central point around which the universe is organized in Buddhism and Hinduism—transported there by the gods. The Balinese people perceive Mount Gunung Anung to be the central point around which their island is organized, just as they perceive Mount Meru to be the central point around which the universe is organized. Therefore, everything on the island is geographically oriented in relation to this central axis (p.305).

These themes of height and centrality are recurrent in various mountains that have been designated as “sacred,” but they still do not serve as defining characteristics of holy mountains. For instance, the Navajos’ sacred mountains are not centrally located the way Mount Gunung Anung is. Rather, the Navajo orient their territory around four cardinal mountains that, when taken together, form the perimeter around their living space (Blake, 2001, p.716). In this respect, even though the mountains do not represent the center of the Navajos’ cultural area, they still provide a physical orientation within the people’s territory: “for the Navajo, events need to be spatially anchored, or their significance is reduced and cannot be properly assessed” (Blake, 2001, p.717). Thus, mountains can also be designated as “sacred” based on their spatial significance in relation to a community, even if they are not particularly tall or centrally located.

Another aspect of a mountain’s sanctity is its association with a higher power. Many holy mountains are believed to be either the resting places of gods or the physical manifestations of the gods themselves. According to Bellezza (2005), in Tibetan culture “tradition holds that lakes and mountains are sentient and affect one’s life and fortune just as other members of society do” (p.38). Thus, mountains are not just perceived as impressive structures, but also as actual living
beings. For instance, according to Bellezza (2005), there are six principle mountain deities worshipped by the spirit-mediums of upper Tibet, each of which is believed to be a territorial guardian of the surrounding area. Tibetans view these mountain gods as being incredibly fierce, with this ferocity manifested in violent storms, earthquakes, droughts, and other disasters that occur on or around the mountain (p.39).

While not all cultures worship mountains as sentient beings, some form of religious significance of sacred mountains exists in nearly every belief system—Christians and Jews revere Mount Sinai, Hindus and Buddhists worship Mount Kailas, and the Taranaki people of New Zealand are so enamored with Mount Taranaki that they took their name from that of the peak (Bernbaum, 2006, p.304-305). While the motivation for designating a mountain as “sacred” is not always clear, it is wholly apparent that cultures have revered mountains throughout history, manifesting this worship in their relationships with holy mountains.

The strangest thing about holy mountains is the fact that in spite of the reverence with which they are always treated, it is forbidden in most cultures for travelers ever to reach their summits. The reason for this rule is not completely clear: it is simply considered sacrilegious to walk on the peak of a sacred mountain. Mount Kailash in Tibet is a perfect example of a sacred mountain that has significance in four different religions—Buddhism, Jainism, the Bon tradition, and Hinduism—yet whose peak is forbidden from being reached. Instead, worshippers of Mount Kailash undertake a pilgrimage in which they circumambulate the mountain—reaching altitudes as high as fifteen thousand feet—but never actually see the top. This mountain pilgrimage is called a kora and is undertaken in order “to wipe away life’s bad karma” (Izu, 2013, p.69).

Such a complete cleansing does not come without significant hardship, for religious pilgrimages are based on the principles of sacrifice and growth. According to Nordin (2011),
“sacrificial elements and hardships are constitutive parts of pilgrimage” (p.633). This pattern of hardship prevails throughout the tradition of religious pilgrimages as a result of “religious notions of redistribution, rewards, and merit” (Nordin, 2011, p.634). In almost every religion, the principle of paying for one’s sins is prevalent. This principle creates a need for a tangible sacrifice in order to cleanse one’s soul. In many religions, this sacrifice takes the form of a pilgrimage.

The sacrifice made by undertaking a religious pilgrimages usually involves a transformation of being. For instance, a kora “marks a journey from self-centered concerns to a sense of interconnected being” (Izu, 2013, p.71). Thus, a kora involves a personal transformation. Moreover, in Hinduism religious pilgrimage is called *tirtha yatra*, and “is usually held to enable a ‘crossing over’ between different realms of reality” (Nordin, 2011, p.641). Since the very idea of crossing over involves a spatial translocation, it can be ascertained that the main significance of religious pilgrimages results from the act moving from one place to another both physically and metaphysically.

Thus, religious pilgrimages derive their significance more so from how they occur than from where they occur. In fact, religious pilgrimages do not even have to take place on or around mountains. There are many examples of other forms of cultural journeys. According to Nordin (2011), a pilgrimage “may be at a river or lake or some other place associated with water, or it may consist of a sacred mountain, statue or natural object, cave or temple, or even a psychophysical point…in the body” (p.641). Thus, a religious pilgrimage is not defined by the place in which it occurs so much as it is shaped by the personal transformation undergone by the pilgrim.
At the most basic level, sacred mountains and religious pilgrimages are connected in that sacred mountains often represent the fixture of a pilgrimage, serving as the destination or the point of spatial orientation. For instance, the Tibetan kora in which pilgrims circumambulate Mount Kailash is focused completely on the holiness of the mountain. On a deeper level, sacred mountains represent the true meaning of a journey for religious pilgrims. Their height, centrality, spatial significance, and theistic import imbue certain mountains with the sort of spirituality that elicits a pilgrimage.

However, the fact remains that it is impossible to pinpoint one single characteristic that elicits a designation of a mountain as “sacred.” It seems almost possible that it is the pilgrims themselves who give a mountain its significance. By the very act of worshipping a holy mountain, religious pilgrims make it holy. In that sense, maybe the defining characteristic of a sacred mountain is not altitude, or location, or spiritual history, but the unconditional reverence of the people who journey around it.

In *The Snow Leopard*, anyways, the distinction is meaningless. Matthiessen (1978) argues that it is foolish to try to define what makes a sacred mountain sacred because the power of mountains in general is incapable of being defined (p.212).

The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself: the mountains exist simply, which I do not. The mountains have no “meaning,” they are meaning; the mountains are.

In this manner Matthiessen encapsulates the true significance of a sacred mountain—for the only defining characteristic of holy mountains is that none of them can be defined beyond that they exist in all their enormous majesty. Matthiessen knows “how meaningless it is to try to capture
what cannot be expressed,” and so he appreciates the awesome power of Crystal Mountain in the only way he knows how—in fact, in the only way anyone seems to know how: by undertaking a pilgrimage towards it (p.212).

Matthiessen’s pilgrimage to Crystal Mountain is a perfect example of the principle of personal transformation that exists in religious pilgrimages. From the very beginning of his memoir, Matthiessen (1978) notes the significance of his expedition: “to go step by step across the greatest range on earth to somewhere called the Crystal Mountain was a true pilgrimage, a journey of the heart” (p.5). Matthiessen’s motivation for undertaking such a pilgrimage is also clear: with the wound of his wife’s unexpected death still fresh, Matthiessen is left feeling guilty for the destruction of their relationship immediately prior to her diagnosis of cancer. Before D died, Matthiessen assuaged this guilt by spending more time with her in an effort to rekindle their former love. However, after D passes away, Matthiessen is left without an outlet for his guilt, and so, much like a religious pilgrim, he sets out on a journey in order to cleanse his soul of his sins and begin anew.

Thus, in Matthiessen’s story, D’s death represents the metaphorical sacred mountain. Matthiessen’s figurative emotional journey of learning to be at peace with his wife’s passing is manifested in his actual pilgrimage to Crystal Mountain. In the same manner in which a kora never reaches the summit of Mount Kailash, the significance of Matthiessen’s journey would not have been affected if he had never reached Crystal Mountain, nor will it be affected by whether or not he ever sees the snow leopard. The very act of going on a pilgrimage imbues the journey with the power to wipe away Matthiessen’s bad karma—or rather, his guilt. Matthiessen has made the decision to sacrifice several months of his life to his personal transformation: the same decision made by religious pilgrims all around the world. And just as no one culture can name
the defining characteristic of a sacred mountain, Matthiessen cannot name any one reason for undertaking his pilgrimage— but he sets out anyways, fighting against all odds to achieve the sort of transformation that changes one’s life.
References


