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## PILGRIMAGE AS A SOURCE OF CULTURE: A THEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL REINTERPRETATION OF PILGRIMAGE TRADITION IN THE POLISH CONTEXT

**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to present an interdisciplinary analysis of pilgrimage that takes into account its theological, cultural, anthropological, and historical dimensions. The analysis is based on research material collected within the framework of a scholarship-funded project carried out in 2024, comprising twenty expert interviews with representatives of academic circles and practitioners involved in the tradition of pilgrimage in Poland. The authors propose a reinterpretation of pilgrimage as a culture-forming phenomenon, deeply rooted in Polish history, yet examined from the perspective of late modernity as a response to processes of secularization, individualization, and identity transformation. The theoretical framework draws on the works of Victor Turner, Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Zygmunt Bauman, and Marcel Mauss. The findings demonstrate that pilgrimage fulfills essential spiritual, communal, and symbolic functions. It emerges not only as a religious act but also as a vehicle for cultural continuity and a means of moral

and spiritual renewal. The study contributes to the fields of theology of culture and contemporary religious and identity studies.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, theology of culture, community, identity, religiosity, anthropology.

**Streszczenie. Pielgrzymowanie jako źródło kultury. Teologiczno-kulturowa reinterpretacja tradycji pielgrzymowania w polskim kontekście.** Artykuł ma na celu przeprowadzenie interdyscyplinarnej analizy pielgrzymowania, uwzględniającej aspekty teologiczne, kulturowe, antropologiczne i historyczne. Analiza opiera się na materiale badawczym zebranym w ramach projektu stypendialnego zrealizowanego w 2024 roku, obejmującym dwadzieścia wywiadów eksperckich z przedstawicielami środowisk naukowych oraz praktykami związanymi z tradycją pielgrzymowania w Polsce. Autorzy proponują reinterpretację pielgrzymowania jako fenomenu kulturotwórczego, głęboko zakorzenionego w historii Polski, analizowanego z perspektywy późnej nowoczesności jako odpowiedzi na procesy sekularyzacji, indywidualizacji oraz przemiany tożsamościowe. W analizie wykorzystano klasyczne koncepcje Victora Turnera, Mircei Eliadego, Paula Ricoeura, Zygmunta Bauman i Marcela Maussa. Wyniki badania wskazują, że pielgrzymowanie pełni istotne funkcje duchowe, wspólnotowe i symboliczne, będąc nie tylko formą religijności, lecz także elementem kulturowej ciągłości oraz potencjalnym narzędziem duchowej odnowy jednostki i społeczeństwa. Artykuł wnosi wkład w rozwój teologii kultury oraz badań nad współczesnymi formami religijności i tożsamości kulturowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pielgrzymowanie, teologia kultury, wspólnota, tożsamość, religijność, antropologia.

## 1. BACKGROUND

Being one of the most universal phenomena in the history of humankind, pilgrimage retains its presence in nearly all religions and cultures—from Hinduism and Buddhism to Judaism to Islam and Christianity—and continues to fulfill an important spiritual, social, and identity-building role.<sup>1</sup> As a practice that combines the spiritual dimension with physical movement through space, pilgrimage has for many centuries captured the atten-

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<sup>1</sup> John Eade and Dionigi Albera, "Pilgrimage Studies in Global Perspective," in *New Pathways in Pilgrimage Studies: Global Perspectives*, ed. Dionigi Albera and John Eade (London: Routledge, 2016), 13–29; Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

tion of not only theologians but also anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, art historians, and cultural scholars.<sup>2</sup> What is more, it appears to be a complex construct that also remains relevant in the era of late modernity—a period marked by far-reaching cultural and social transformation.<sup>3</sup> As some scholars have noted, “in the case of the pilgrimage movement, the sphere of the sacred is paramount for the pilgrim, whereas in exploratory religious tourism, sacred sites and their historical, artistic, and symbolic values are just as important.”<sup>4</sup>

As part of a project funded under the Rev. Jerzy Bagrowicz Research Scholarship Program, a study was undertaken in 2024 to explore the impact of pilgrimage on Polish culture across the centuries from the theological, cultural, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives. The findings support the claim that pilgrimage is not peripheral to academic discourse; quite

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, “The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” *History of Religions* 12, no. 3 (1973): 191–230, <https://doi.org/10.1086/462677>; John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Snejana Brumec and Piotr Roszak, “Exploring the Transformative Aftereffects of Religious Experiences on Pilgrims Along the Camino de Santiago in Spain,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 63 (2024): 4876–4901, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-024-02127-z>; Berenika Serczyńska and Tomasz Duda, “How Is Fortitude Among Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago Expressed and Formed? Clues from a Study of Polish Pilgrims,” *Pastoral Psychology* 70 (2021): 541–556, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00959-0>; Berenika Serczyńska and Tomasz Duda, “Is the Camino Just? Conclusions Drawn from the Survey Conducted Among Polish Pilgrims,” *Kultura Słowian. Rocznik Komisji Kultury Słowian PAU* 19 (2023): 187–199, <https://doi.org/10.4467/25439561KSR.23.013.18990>.

<sup>3</sup> George Greenia, “Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago (review),” *La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures* 39, no. 2 (2011): 250–253, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cor.2011.0008>; Piotr Roszak and Berenika Serczyńska, “A Pilgrim Blessing – An Alluring Folklore or Expression of Piety? Theological Insights from the Camino de Santiago,” *Bogoslovni vestnik* 80, no. 3 (2020): 685–696, 10.34291/BV2020/03/Rozsak; Izabela Soljan and Justyna Liro, “The Changing Roman Catholic Pilgrimage Centres in Europe in the Context of Contemporary Socio-Cultural Changes,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 23, no. 3 (2022): 376–399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2020>; Berenika Serczyńska, *Terapeutyczny wymiar pielgrzymowania w kontekście Camino de Santiago* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Jolanta Latosińska and Justyna Mokras-Grabowska, eds., *Kultura i turystyka: sacrum i profanum* (Łódź: Regionalna Organizacja Turystyczna Województwa Łódzkiego, 2016), 5; see also Jonathan Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (New Jersey: HiddenSpring–Paulist Press, 2003).

the contrary, it should be approached as a central phenomenon in order to gain a greater insight into the condition of contemporary humanity and the societal role of community. Poles account for approximately 5 percent of all pilgrims worldwide and as much as 20 percent in Europe—taking into account Catholic, Muslim, and Hindu pilgrimages as well as other religious journeys. This suggests that mobility has a particular significance in Polish culture.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the scale of pilgrimage continues to grow even in today's increasingly secular world:

It is estimated that today, several hundred million people of all faiths undertake pilgrimages to major centers of religious worship (both international and national) every year. If regional and local pilgrimage destinations are also included, the total figure is around one billion people per annum.<sup>6</sup>

From the philosophical perspective, the metaphor of the journey can be interpreted in terms of “the possibility of discovering meaning in continuous movement, in the breaking of walls and limitations.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, pilgrimage appears to be an existential strategy in the search for the meaning of life; moreover, it can also be seen as an opportunity for anthropological reflection on the ecclesial dimension of the path that one travels.<sup>8</sup> Even in the fifteenth-century Kraków, pilgrimage was an important part of the urban culture, contributing to the formation of collective identity and the organization of symbolic space.<sup>9</sup> As Aleksandra Witkowska notes, “to go

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<sup>5</sup> Antoni Jackowski, “Pielgrzymki zagraniczne szansą dla rozwoju polskich ośrodków kultu religijnego,” *Prace Geograficzne* 117 (2007): 239–257.

<sup>6</sup> Antoni Jackowski, “Pielgrzymki a turystyka religijna. Rozważania na czasie,” in *Turystyka religijna*, ed. Zdzisław Kropiewski and Aleksander Panasiuk (Szczecin: Uniwersytet Szczeciński, 2010), 21 [17–31].

<sup>7</sup> Marek Szulakiewicz, “Część druga. Metafizyka i życie – pytania dawne i nowe,” in Jan Kopcewicz, Marek Szulakiewicz, and Piotr Roszak, *Portrety życia. Życie jako problem biologiczny, filozoficzny i religijny* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, in press), 176.

<sup>8</sup> See Piotr Roszak, “Dialektyka widzialności. Eklezjalny sens Camino de Santiago,” in *Camino Polaco. Teologia – Sztuka – Historia – Teraźniejszość*, vol. 3, ed. Piotr Roszak and Waldemar Rozyński (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2016), 157–175.

<sup>9</sup> Franciszek Mróz, “Kraków w przestrzeni pielgrzymkowej świata. Potencjał i per-

on pilgrimage simply means to ‘depart from somewhere’ in order to ‘arrive somewhere.’ These two fixed points, the point of departure and the point of arrival, establish the framework of a pilgrimage space that comes with a whole mental assemblage of people’s hopes, tensions, and often effort.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars who study medieval Camino de Santiago routes emphasize the fact that in the Middle Ages, pilgrimage combined elements of physical journeying with deeply rooted ritual, art, and social practices, making it one of the foundations of Europe’s spiritual and cultural identity.<sup>11</sup> This gives rise to some important questions: Does pilgrimage as a phenomenon still offer a meaningful response to the challenges of contemporary reality – marked by the erosion of traditional values and the increasing influence of globalization and secularization on social and cultural life? Do all the theories – from Bauman’s diagnosis of modernity<sup>12</sup> to Mircea Eliade’s structure of the sacred,<sup>13</sup> Victor Turner’s concept of communal ritual,<sup>14</sup> Marcel Mauss’s analysis of the gift,<sup>15</sup> and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of memory<sup>16</sup> to Tocqueville’s concern for community<sup>17</sup> – combine into a coherent whole? The present study seeks to examine pilgrimage as a phenomenon

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spektywy rozwoju turystyki religijnej stolicy Małopolski,” *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis Studia Geographica* 13 (2019): 40–41.

<sup>10</sup> See Aleksandra Witkowska, *Kulty pątnicze piętnastowiecznego Krakowa. Z badań nad miejską kulturą religijną* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Naukowego Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1984), 124; see also the entire chapter III for information on pilgrimage practices in Kraków (115–169).

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Ashley and Marilyn Deegan, *Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago* (Farnham–Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2009), 7–9; Julian Barrio Barrio, “Transcendentny sens szlaku św. Jakuba–Camino de Santiago,” *Teologia i Czwłowiek* 24, no. 4 (2013): 111–126.

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Sage Publications, 1996), 18–36.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Turner, “The Center Out There,” 191–230.

<sup>15</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

that situates itself at the intersection of multiple domains: a ritual, a gift, a form of memory, a cultural axis, and a spiritual and social act. While the research is set in the Polish context, it holds the potential to open a broader interdisciplinary debate, and the findings suggest that pilgrimage may serve as a starting point for a new understanding of religious–cultural, individual–social, and historical–prognostic relationships.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using the qualitative method of expert interviews,<sup>18</sup> which made it possible to collect in-depth data from individuals having substantial expertise with regard to the phenomenon under examination. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with representatives of two domains of knowledge – that is, academics (theologians, historians, cultural scholars, and social scientists) and practitioners (pilgrimage organizers, priests, members of pilgrimage confraternities, and experienced pilgrims).<sup>19</sup> Respondents were selected purposively to ensure diversity in terms of specialization, age, experience, and worldview, the aim being to broaden the range of views represented in the survey and mitigate the risk of interpretive bias.

The interviews were conducted in two stages. In the preliminary stage, conversations with key experts were held to provide a basis for the development of a standardized list of problem-oriented questions to be used in subsequent interviews. These questions concerned, among other topics, the culture-forming nature of pilgrimage, the presence of religious symbols in the public space, and the relationship between the pilgrimage

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Bogner, Beato Littig, and Wolfgang Menz, “Introduction: Expert Interviews – An Introduction to a New Methodological Debate,” in *Interviewing Experts*, ed. Alexander Bogner, Beato Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230244276>; Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> A complete list of interviewees (including university affiliation details) can be found in the study report. See Berenika Seryczyńska, *Wpływ tradycji pielgrzymowania na kulturę w Polsce. Perspektywa teologiczna* (Rijeka, 2024), 9–22, <https://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36583.15528/1> (hereafter cited as the “Report”).

movement and the concept of “Poland as the Messiah of Nations.” Their open-ended format made it possible to explore theological, historical, and socio-cultural themes.

Theoretical inspirations included classic sociological and anthropological models such as Edward Tylor’s elements of culture,<sup>20</sup> theological concepts such as Paul Tillich’s “theology of culture,”<sup>21</sup> and the idea of sacramentality of space and signs.<sup>22</sup> The respondents were asked to identify the values which they believed to be the foundation of Polish pilgrimage tradition, assess their contemporary relevance, and reflect on pilgrimage as a form of “living heritage” that shapes spirituality and collective identity.

The recruitment of experts involved certain logistical and epistemological limitations (including doubts as to the relevance of some competencies), but the flexible research approach adopted in the study ultimately made it possible to acquire a diverse and analytically valuable body of material.

### 3. RESULTS<sup>23</sup>

The research perspective of the project is well illustrated by a remark from one of the experts, Rev. Prof. Piotr Roszak, who encapsulated the culture-forming dimension of pilgrimage as follows<sup>24</sup>:

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511705960>. First published 1871.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Tillich, “Religion and Secular Culture,” *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 2 (1946): 79–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1197321>.

<sup>22</sup> Dariusz Doburzyński, *Znak drogi. Teologia pielgrzymowania z perspektywy Camino de Santiago* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2021); Glyn Richards, “Symbols and Religious Language,” in *Symbols in Art and Religion*, ed. Karel Werner (London: Routledge, 2019), 1–13.

<sup>23</sup> This analysis is based on the report from the qualitative study completed in 2024. See Report.

<sup>24</sup> Piotr Roszak, “Droga wiary i kultury na Camino de Santiago. O hermeneutyce wiary i tradycji na Szlaku św. Jakuba,” in *1200 lat pielgrzymek do grobu św. Jakuba w Santiago de Compostela*, ed. Antoni Jackowski, Franciszek Mróz, and Łukasz Mróz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo “Czuwajmy”, 2013), 123–137. For a discussion of the experience of pilgrimage, its formative effects, and the transformation that it brings in a person’s life, see also Łukasz Skarżyński, *Camino – jak to przeżyć? Analiza antropologiczno-pastoralna fenomenu*



Goethe said that Europe was made on the pilgrim road, but I believe that what he meant was primarily that we reach a common source from which our identity flows. . . . When you move away from the source, the water becomes murkier . . . so you turn your steps toward the place in which it was clearer and from which it springs.<sup>25</sup>

This pertains to a source that is understood as both *arche* (origin) and *telos* (goal), thus forming the foundation of individual and collective identity. For Poles, the site most commonly regarded as such a source has been Jasna Góra.<sup>26</sup> The view of pilgrimage as an act of returning to an axiological source – one on which spiritual and cultural community is founded – seems to be perfectly aligned with the results of the study, which interprets pilgrimage as a process that purifies culture by taking it back to primordial values. A further detailed analysis of the data reveals that regardless of perspective (be it theological, anthropological, or sociological), the concept of returning to a source of values is consistently regarded as a vital prerequisite for community development and as an effective mechanism for cultural renewal.

Table 1. Research findings categorized into main themes and thematic areas (supported by quotations from expert interviews) and supplementary themes

Theme	Key conclusions from experts	Quotations
1. The theological essence of pilgrimage		
Pilgrimage as a spiritual movement toward God	Pilgrimage can be perceived as an existential act of journeying toward the sacred – an act that engages the whole person: body, spirituality, and will. It is a path of purification, penance, and deepening of one’s relationship with God.	“Pilgrimage is a metaphor for the human journey toward God. The theological ideas behind pilgrimage also include purification, penance, and conversion.” “During a pilgrimage, a person becomes open to the sacred and begins to think more introspectively.”

*pielgrzymowania do Santiago de Compostela*, Clavis Sapientiae (Pelplin: Bernardinum–Pro Futuro Theologiae, 2024), 81–109, 192–234.

<sup>25</sup> See Report.

<sup>26</sup> Magdalena Lasecka, “Współczesne pielgrzymowanie na Jasną Górę. Nowy rodzaj turystyki czy świadectwo wiary? Analiza socjologiczna,” in *Turystyka religijna*, ed. Zdzisław Kroplewski and Aleksander Panasiuk (Szczecin: Uniwersytet Szczeciński, 2010), 188–195.



Table 1. Research findings... (continued)

Theme	Key conclusions from experts	Quotations
<b>Pilgrim vs. tourist: two different experiences</b>	The experts point to a fundamental difference between a pilgrim and a tourist. A pilgrim is focused on the spiritual goal and inner transformation, whereas a tourist primarily seeks excitement and consumption. Pilgrimage is a religious practice subordinated to the pursuit of an ultimate end.	<p>“A pilgrim is not a tourist. Their goal is not exploration, but encounter – with God, with another person, with oneself.”</p> <p>“Religiosity is the virtue responsible for the <i>ordo ad Deum</i> . . . for everything I do – as long as it brings me closer to the ultimate goal.”</p>
<b>2. The model of a cultural route</b>		
<b>Pilgrimage as a culture-forming process</b>	Pilgrimage generates culture not only in its spiritual dimension but also in the material and social sense. Pilgrimage routes serve as catalysts for the development of places of worship, architecture, art, and traditions. The experts also emphasize the impact of pilgrimage on community-building and nation-building processes.	<p>“Pilgrimage creates culture, and above all religious culture: behavior toward God, within the Church, and toward other people, as well as the related cultural aspects, such as music.”</p> <p>“On the one hand, yes – pilgrimage has shaped culture, but it is still a generative phenomenon – it is culture in itself.”</p>
<b>Spirituality as a response to the crisis of values</b>	The experts interpret pilgrimage as a spiritual response to the contemporary axiological crisis. In the face of relativism and cultural atomization, pilgrimage offers a stable system of reference that enables one to form deeper moral and spiritual roots.	<p>“What happens during pilgrimage . . . is the creation of certain new patterns that emerge during the journey . . . some form of heroism in the face of the changes that affect us all.”</p> <p>“Pilgrimage is the movement toward the source . . . of those very values.”</p>
<b>3. Historical aspects</b>		
<b>The role of pilgrimages in the formation of national identity</b>	In Polish history, pilgrimages have played a vital role in the development of community awareness and in the formation of national identity, especially in times of hardship (e.g., during the Partitions and periods of occupation). In many cases, they have acted as a form of spiritual resistance in the face of external threats.	<p>“Pilgrimages have influenced the development of Poles’ national consciousness, culture, and tradition. . . . They have contributed to social integration, served to strengthen the sense of community, shaped national identity, and fostered a sense of common good and responsibility for one another.”</p> <p>“In many cases, [religious sites] served as places where people sought unity against the occupying forces.”</p>

Table 1. Research findings... (continued)

Theme	Key conclusions from experts	Quotations
<b>Historically integrative role of pilgrimage</b>	The experts point out that pilgrimage has historically served to unite communities across local and social divisions, acting as a form of spiritual representation of collective identity (e.g., representation of the nation by the monarch). The pilgrimage movement has also played an integrative role in the political and cultural dimensions.	<p>“Take the example of King Jagiełło on the Mountain of the Holy Cross – he walks alone, on behalf of the nation. . . . This pilgrimage is, in a sense, commissioned or delegated by the nation – through the king, the entire nation is making the journey.”</p> <p>“Pilgrimage is a school where one learns to build a community, to preserve that community. . . . Nations have their goals, states have their goals.”</p>
<b>4. Values and symbols</b>		
<b>Pilgrimage as the practice of spiritual values</b>	The experts emphasize that pilgrimage instills and strengthens virtues such as faith, humility, solidarity, perseverance, and openness toward others. A shared experience of hardship reinforces interpersonal bonds and enhances self-awareness.	<p>“Is faith a value? If it is, then it serves as one of the foundations of pilgrimage, but it is also accompanied by openness to others, perseverance, self-sacrifice, and tolerance of discomfort.”</p> <p>“On the group level, . . . pilgrims develop solidarity and interpersonal bonds, become more sensitive to the needs of others, and support one another on the way.”</p>
<b>Religious symbolism as an axis of identity</b>	Signs and symbols (roadside crosses, icons, shells, the rosary) serve as both landmarks and identity-forming objects. They express shared values in the public space and make the community more united.	<p>“The role of religious symbols in the public space. . . . The cross is like a trail marker in the mountains. . . . Past generations have left this mark.”</p> <p>“While they are often marked on the Camino de Santiago, in Poland there is no set route – this emphasizes the immaterial, intrinsic value.”</p>
<b>5. Poland as the “Messiah of the Nations”</b>		
<b>The pilgrim as the figure of a spiritual guide</b>	The experts see the Polish pilgrim as a symbolic bearer of spiritual and moral values. In the spirit of Romanticism, as exemplified, for instance, by Adam Mickiewicz, the pilgrim appears as a conscious wanderer who transforms personal suffering into an ethical and spiritual mission undertaken for the community.	<p>“A pilgrim is someone who carries certain values. He or she is a symbol of those values.”</p> <p>“[The pilgrim] brings the <i>slow</i> aspect, causing us to slow down and reminding us of the values; perhaps even serving as a kind of conscience.”</p>

Table 1. Research findings... (continued)

Theme	Key conclusions from experts	Quotations
<b>Universalization of the Polish pilgrimage experience</b>	On account of its communal, sacrificial, and religious character, the Polish experience of pilgrimage may serve as a source of inspiration for other nations, particularly in the European context. However, the experts note that the concept of "Poland as the Messiah of Nations" requires reinterpretation and needs to be approached critically.	"Poland has much to offer other nations. Elements of traditional religiosity . . . may be rediscovered by European societies thanks to Polish pilgrims." "Polish experiences radiate outward, although they are not always fully understood – which is something that warrants further research."
<b>6. Elements of culture</b>		
<b>Pilgrimage as a form of collective cultural participation</b>	Pilgrimage is perceived as a cultural practice that integrates religion, art, music, customs, and communal rituals. The experts point out that pilgrimage constitutes a form of active cultural engagement in terms of not only tradition but also creative contribution to the formation of values.	"Pilgrimage can be a culture-forming factor . . . The influence that elements of culture have on an individual can be so strong that they may be able to convince representatives of specific institutions to support new culture-forming activities." "Pilgrimage creates culture, and above all religious culture: behavior toward God . . . as well as the related cultural aspects, such as music."
<b>Impact on spatial and economic structure</b>	Pilgrimage routes have influenced and continue to influence the surrounding space – from the layout of settlements to the function of churches and chapels to the development of local infrastructure. Places of accommodation, service facilities, and even new forms of local economy have emerged around pilgrimage sites.	"Whether it was a pilgrimage to Gniezno or a pilgrimage to Gietrzwałd, settlements and infrastructure would develop along the route." "A village or town that formed along a pilgrimage route has a linear housing pattern and is characterized by the emergence of specific forms of economy, such as currency exchange points."
<b>7. The impact of pilgrimage on pilgrims' morality and spirituality</b>		
<b>Spiritual and moral transformation</b>	Pilgrimage leads to spiritual self-reflection and moral transformation. Physical exertion and exposure to the sacred allow pilgrims to reorder their hierarchies of values, experience conversion, and realize their personal limitations.	"After returning from the pilgrimage route . . . the pilgrim is inclined to improve some aspect of his or her life." "Pilgrimage . . . allows one to see one's environment in a new light and to observe how one responds to certain life situations."

Table 1. Research findings... (continued)

Theme	Key conclusions from experts	Quotations
<b>The communal character of transformation</b>	Spiritual transformation does not occur in isolation. The shared journey strengthens the sense of solidarity and offers important lessons in responsibility, empathy, and humility. The experience of community fosters a deeper attachment to moral values.	“Friendships are formed through joint action, and that action can also be pilgrimage . . . because it reminded people that the nation has a purpose, that we become pilgrims as a nation.” “We participate in the pilgrimage on equal terms, helping one another regardless of our individual histories.”
<b>8. Tradition of hospitality; formation of other habits</b>		
<b>Hospitality as an expression of spiritual community</b>	The experts emphasize that hospitality toward pilgrims is not merely a cultural tradition but also a manifestation of spiritual belonging within the Church community. The pilgrim is seen as a bearer of intentions and blessings.	“Hospitality . . . is not limited to the Camino – it is there for everyone, that is, it is about receiving and being received . . . by the local community that welcomes me. . . . Here, I do not feel like a stranger, but like someone who is at home. This definitely changes one’s perception.” “The living relationship between the faithful – those who are here and those who walk the path – is a sign of the living Church.”
<b>Formation of attitudes and life skills</b>	Pilgrimage is a lesson in perseverance, collaboration, resilience, and responsibility for the community. It is a space for acquiring social skills that carry over into everyday life.	“The pilgrim develops soft skills – kindness, gratitude, care for others . . . and reorients his or her life toward higher goals.” “Pilgrimage . . . pulls a person out of their comfort zone . . . it teaches responsibility, collaboration, understanding.”
<b>9. Supplementary themes</b>		
<b>Theology of culture; pilgrimage as “ultimate concern” (Paul Tillich)</b>	In light of Tillich’s definition of religion as “ultimate concern,” pilgrimage may be interpreted as an expression of the deepest spiritual need of the human person – one that also shapes cultural life. Thus, the act of embarking on a pilgrimage reflects not only faith but also a cultural imperative to preserve and reinterpret one’s identity and communal values.	
<b>New forms of pilgrimage as adaptations of tradition (Extreme Way of the Cross, scouting)</b>	Phenomena such as the Extreme Way of the Cross (EDK) or the “Pilgrim” merit badge in Polish scouting organizations (ZHP and ZHR) demonstrate that the pilgrimage movement has not lost its relevance; rather, it is adapting to the contemporary conditions. By combining spiritual exertion, responsibility, and communality, it responds to the needs of individuals living in a secularized and comfort-oriented world. This is a testimony to the continuity of the tradition and its capacity for renewal.	

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL DISCUSSION

The present study confirms that pilgrimage continues to play a significant role in the development and renewal of national and religious identity in Poland – a notion once emphasized by Adam Mickiewicz, who wrote: “every Pole in pilgrimage is not called a vagabond, for a vagabond is a man wandering aimlessly; . . . a Pole is called a pilgrim, that he has made a vow to wander to the holy land.”<sup>27</sup> In the study, pilgrimage has been analyzed not only as a religious practice but also as a form of cultural, symbolic, and communal activity within the context of today’s secularization and globalization. Pilgrimage may serve integrative and normative functions by referring to deeper structures of spiritual and social meaning. From a theological perspective, it constitutes a sacramental sign – an expression of one’s relationship with transcendence and rootedness in tradition and community.

Drawing upon Victor Turner’s concept, pilgrimage is interpreted as a rite of passage that leads from a liminal state to the experience of *communitas*<sup>28</sup> – an egalitarian community that strengthens social bonds and collective identity. In this context, religious imagination gains particular significance as images of holiness help structure the participants’ experiences and affect their spiritual perceptions. According to Paul Ricoeur, memory and identity require ongoing reprocessing of the past.<sup>29</sup> In that regard, pilgrimage can be seen as a means of reinterpreting one’s heritage in the present-day cultural context.

By combining the theological, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives, it has been possible to grasp the multidimensional nature of pilgrimage. In light of Zygmunt Bauman’s diagnosis that contemporary identity has been shifting from the attitude of the pilgrim to that of the tourist,<sup>30</sup> pilgrimage may be analyzed as an alternative axiological orientation that

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<sup>27</sup> Adam Mickiewicz, *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*. Wydanie drugie [Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage. Second Edition] (Awenjon: Drukarnia Wdowy Guichard Ainé, 1833), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, “The Center Out There,” 191–230.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

<sup>30</sup> Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist,” 18–36.

counteracts the fragmentation of experience and values. The conclusions of the study align with the broader debate on the role of religious and cultural practices in community-building and identity-building processes in the context of late modernity. As a practice that combines religious, symbolic, and social elements,<sup>31</sup> pilgrimage provides access to meanings that constitute the communal order.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, it can be understood as an act of gift-giving and participation that renews the individual's relationship with God, other people, and the cultural space. In the face of normative and axiological disintegration, pilgrimage remains a vital mechanism that supports spiritual and cultural continuity.

Considering the fact that pilgrimage practices are present in nearly all religions and cultures, this study – conducted within the Polish cultural context – may serve as a starting point for broader comparative analyses. Pilgrimage understood as a movement toward the source of values seems to have the potential to act as a universal culture-forming mechanism that, in line with Alexis de Tocqueville's reflections,<sup>33</sup> serves to purify and revive a community's axiological order. In this sense, a stagnant culture loses its clarity and capacity for renewal, whereas pilgrimage practices enable its recontextualization and reinterpretation. By applying a similar research perspective to other national and religious settings, it might be possible to identify common patterns and local differences, and thus to further the understanding of pilgrimage as a transcultural phenomenon of anthropological and theological significance. To follow this direction, it would be necessary to conduct further empirical research based on a comparative qualitative analysis that takes into account the historical, social, and religious particularities of the environments under study.

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<sup>31</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

<sup>32</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*.

<sup>33</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

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