

The significance of religious pilgrimage.

In many of the world's major religions, there are historically sacred sites scattered across the globe that hold deep significance to those religions and their followers. In turn, religious pilgrimage became a natural progression of one's faith, and millions of people take part in some form of religious pilgrimage each year for a multitude of different personal reasons.¹ To understand the significance of religious pilgrimage it is important to delve into specific examples of it, including pilgrimage related to Islam, Buddhism and Catholicism, to discover the reasons pilgrimage is so important to religious people.

The definition of religious pilgrimage can vary due to the deeply personal nature of this form of pilgrimage. Each person that embarks on a pilgrimage will have their own reasons for doing so and may not take the same path as others who have done so before. In general, pilgrimage involves travelling to a location sacred to a person's religion, where they can experience further connection to their faith and participate in religious practices.² Though it is often described as a journey, it is just as equally about the destination and what it can offer, such as the specific religious rituals that can be experienced there, along with the environment and architecture you cannot see anywhere else.³ Pilgrimage is an intentional choice, sometimes out of mandatory requirement like in Islam,⁴ or for other reasons decided by the individual, but it can include both transformational and spiritual goals, and a deeper desire to connect with God.⁵

Any able-bodied Muslim that has the financial means to do so, must participate in a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life.⁶ It is mandatory as one of the five pillars of Islam called Hajj.⁷ Hajj only occurs during the last month of the Islamic calendar, Dhu al-Hijja,⁸ and involves participating in rituals with deep significance to the religion.⁹ These rituals include Ihram, Tawaf, Sa'i, Wuquf 'Arafat, Eid al-Adha, the final Tawaf, and more. For Muslims, Ihram involves preparing for the umra (The pilgrimage to Mecca) and requires dedicating themselves to 'a state of purity and

¹Somnuck, Jongmeewasin, *Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage, and Cultural Tourism*, (Siplakorn University, 2016) p. 1.

²Ibid., p. 1.

³Simon, Coleman, and John, Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions*, (Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 6.

⁴Andrea, Saayman, Melville, Saayman, and Agyapong, Gyeke, 'Perspectives on the Regional Economic Value of Pilgrimage', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, vol 16, (2014) p. 407.

⁵Jongmeewasin, *Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage, and Cultural Tourism*, p. 1.

⁶Muhammad, Riaz, Ahmad, Farah, Naz, and Abdul, Hameed, Khan, 'Exploring the five pillars of Islam', *Al-Awan*, vol 1, (2024) p. 26.

⁷Ibid., p. 26.

⁸The British Museum, *Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca*, (2017) <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/hajj-pilgrimage-mecca>> [Accessed 12 January 2026].

⁹Ahmad, Naz and Khan, *Al-Awan*, p. 26.

equality'.¹⁰ Men must wear simple white cloth, while women can wear whatever they want as long as it is modest.¹¹ They must also abide to the prohibitions of Ihram, these include no arguing, no sex, no wearing perfume and more.¹² These prohibitions are taken immensely seriously by pilgrims and may start even before stepping foot in Mecca. Adnan Mahmutović said in his article 'My Hajj', 'I told our guides as far as sex goes, I'd enter the state of Ihram when I bought the package and would exit when I return home.'¹³ Tawaf, is when the pilgrims visit the Kaaba, circling this sacred monument counterclockwise.¹⁴ They do this to show their commitment to Islam and it 'symbolizes the unity of the Muslim community'.¹⁵ Another ritual is Sa'i, where pilgrims will walk between two hills, Safe and Marwan, seven times, representing 'Hagar's frantic search for water for her son Ismail'.¹⁶ This ritual is all about reflecting on the struggles of life, and that you will be rewarded for having trust and faith in Allah.¹⁷ On the ninth day of Dhu al-Hijja, pilgrims gather on Mount Arafat to seek forgiveness for their sins.¹⁸ It symbolizes the day of judgment.¹⁹ Umair Ghorri, quoted in The British Museum's blog publication 'Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca', shared their experience of this ritual:

The stay at Arafat was the most surreal moment in my life. Millions of people around me... quietly contemplating or loudly crying for forgiveness. As the day moves on, silence descends and the sun feels hot no longer... I will never forget the sound of warm afternoon wind which seemed to ignore so many around me – how can a place so crowded with millions be so quiet?²⁰

There are many more rituals that occur during Hajj as well. Eid al-Adha is a feast that happens on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijja,²¹ Men will shave their heads (Halq) and women will trim their hair (Taqsir) to symbolise 'the shedding of worldly attachments and a new beginning',²² , and before the pilgrims leave Mecca, they will circle the Kaaba again for the final Tawaf.²³

When evaluating the significance of Hajj for Muslims, it is easy to think back on the many definitions of religious pilgrimage. Hajj is more than just a journey, but the journey is important too. It is the effort of completing all these rituals in which pilgrims are able to achieve a closer connection to Allah and leave with a reminder of how

¹⁰Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹The British Museum, *Hajj: Pilgrimage to Mecca*.

¹²Adnan, Muhmutović, 'My Hajj', *World Literature Today*, vol 97, (2023) p. 12.

¹³Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴Ahmad, Naz and Khan, *Al-Awan*, p. 26.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 26.

²⁰The British Museum, *Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca*.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

they can continue their faith going forward. Summing up his Hajj experience, Adnan Mahmutović wrote in his article 'My Hajj':

In the end, they say if you do your Hajj right, and if it is accepted, inshallah, it's like being reborn. The old me would have doubted the purity of my intentions and the value of my efforts. Now I felt like when my kids were born. That first love. The synchronized crying. The tears that no one questions.²⁴



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For Buddhists, there are four significant holy places of pilgrimage. These include, Lumbini, birthplace of the Buddha,²⁶ Bodhgaya, place of the Buddha's enlightenment,²⁷ Sarnath, where the Buddha's first sermon took place,²⁸ and Kusinara, the place the Buddha passed away.²⁹ To experience any one of these pilgrimages requires a lot of time, effort and money, thus many Buddhists view pilgrimage as a 'once in a lifetime undertaking.'³⁰ Due to this tough expectation, it encourages the pilgrim to think deeply about why they are going on the pilgrimage, and to work harder to understand the importance of their journey.³¹ Buddhists who visit these holy places do so with different intentions than a regular tourist. Their pilgrimage is more focused on their mental state.³² At these holy shrines, they are to 'look upon them with feelings of reverence',³³ with goals of purification for one's

²⁴Mahmutović, *World Literature Today*, p. 14.

²⁵Al Jazeera English, *Al-Haram mosque - Flickr - All Jazeera English.jpg*, 2008, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al-Haram_mosque_-_Flickr_-_Al_Jazeera_English.jpg [Accessed 13 January 2026].

²⁶Chan, Khoon, San, *'Buddhist Pilgrimage'*, (2002) p. 79.

²⁷Ibid., p. 91.

²⁸Ibid., p.103.

²⁹Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰Ibid., p. 2.

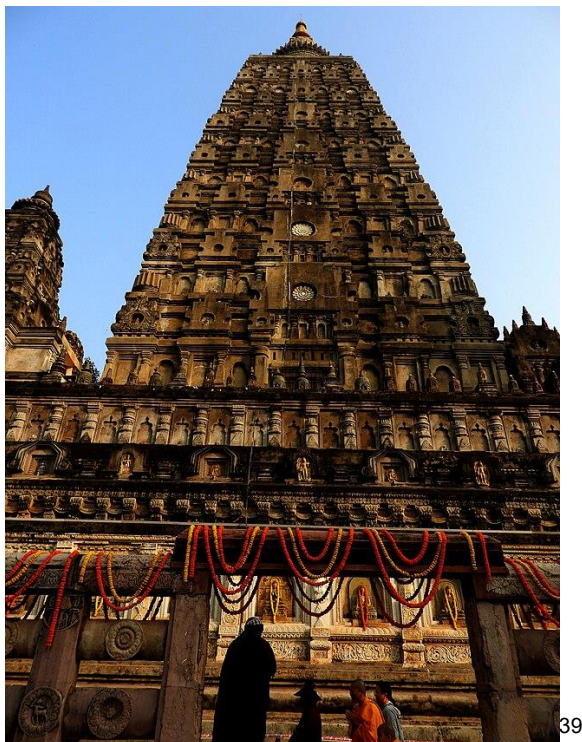
³¹Ibid., p. 2.

³²Ibid., p. 2.

³³Ibid., p. 2.

mind and actions.³⁴ They are also to let go of any cravings for luxury, to accept difficulty without complaint, and instead approach with 'patience and loving-kindness'.³⁵ Many Buddhists will perform dana, the practice of giving, on their pilgrimage to show gratitude to the Sangha, 'who take care of the holy places'.³⁶ They will also show devotion through normal offerings such as 'flowers, lights, incense and worship'³⁷ as well.

For Buddhist, the journey to any of these sacred sites is not easy, but as the Buddha was the one to call upon them to make these pilgrimages,³⁸ it is deemed a worthy effort for anyone. Buddhists are to have no such goals of tourism, only to focus on personal growth and a further connection to the teachings of their religion.



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Lourdes, France is a famous location for Catholic pilgrimage.⁴⁰ It is known as the place where Bernadette Soubirous reportedly saw many Marian apparitions in

³⁴Ibid., p. 2.

³⁵Ibid., p. 3.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁷Ibid., p. 3.

³⁸Ibid., p. 2.

³⁹Sumita, Roy, Dutta, *Mahabodhi Temple DSCN8010 2.jpg*, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahabodhi_Temple_DSCN8010_2.jpg [Accessed January 13 2026].

⁴⁰Kristin, O'Malley, 'SACRED SPACED: EXPERIENCING THE SUPERNATURAL AT LOURDES', *Ecumencia*, vol 10, (2017) p. 35.

1858.⁴¹ The legend attached to this site details how 'Mary, the Mother of God, appeared to Bernadette in the Grotto near her house twenty-two times over the course of a few weeks.'⁴² During one of those appearances, Bernadette was asked by Mary to drink water from the ground despite there only being a stream of muddy water there, but when Bernadette drank, clean flowing water took its place.⁴³ The water was claimed to have healing properties by the townspeople even though Mary hadn't said so herself, and ever since Lourdes has been a sacred place for pilgrimage.⁴⁴ For pilgrims travelling to Lourdes, many seek a connection with the divine through participating in religious practices.⁴⁵ Many people have reported a supernatural feeling in the area, such as Kevin, stating in the article 'Transcendent Experiences Among Pilgrims to Lourdes: A Qualitative Investigation':

What I found at the Grotto was pure silence... I can't say for sure that I can feel Mary, but I feel that someone, and that probably is Mary, is there with us... it's so still and it's so peaceful... someone is watching and someone is saying it's going to be all right... the Grotto is the most special part – especially at night-time... with the stillness then that's when... you know they are watching over us.⁴⁶

While in Lourdes, Catholic pilgrims participate in a multitude of different religiously significant activities, such as gathering nightly to recite the rosary,⁴⁷ attending mass in the Underground Basilica,⁴⁸ and visiting the Grotto where 'Mary appeared to Bernadette'.⁴⁹ Although Lourdes is known 'as a sanctuary for healing'⁵⁰, Catholics are not only visiting to heal their physical ailments, as it is also used as a place to garner emotional strength while connecting to their religion.⁵¹ Pilgrims travel to Lourdes to bask in community and deepen their faith, to find 'spiritual renewal' and respite from the burdens of their lives.⁵² It is a pilgrimage taken when needed the most.

The importance of Lourdes to Catholics revolves around its connection to the virgin mother Mary. Traveling here gives pilgrims an opportunity to deepen their religious relationship, while also finding moments of healing within its divine history.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 35.

⁴²Ibid., p. 35.

⁴³Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁶ Emmylou, Rahtz, Sarah L., Warber, Sarah, Goldingay, and Paul, Dieppe, 'Transcendent Experiences Among Pilgrims to Lourdes: A Qualitative Investigation', *Journal of Religion & Health*, vol 60, (2001) p. 3794.

⁴⁷O'Malley, *Ecumenia*, p. 36.

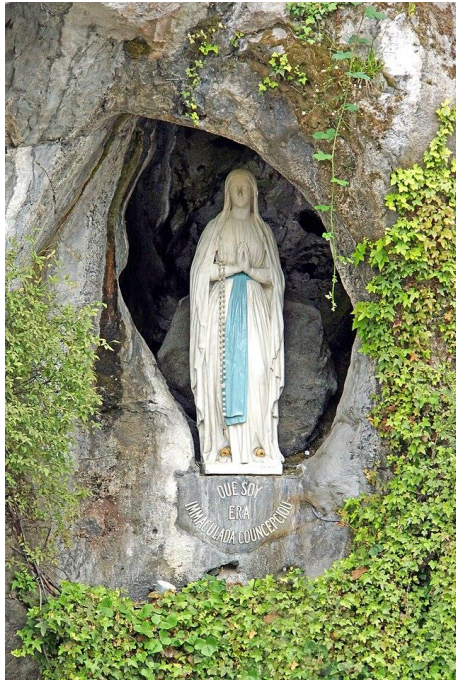
⁴⁸Ibid., p. 36.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁰Rahtz, Warber, Goldingay, and Dieppe, *Journal of Religion & Health*, p. 3788.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 3789.

⁵²Ibid., p. 3789.



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In conclusion, religious pilgrimage is not contained to one purpose or reasoning, nor is it cemented in one specific location. Each religion will have several places across the world considered sacred and worth visiting. It does not matter whether the pilgrimage is mandatory or not as there is evidentially much to gain mentally and spiritually from taking part in these pilgrimages. Religious people who crave a deeper connection to their God or prophets can find that along their journey following in their footsteps, while pilgrims interested in instilling their religions core values and teachings can experience that too through the vast exposure to such historically significant practices. Every person who makes the choice to go on a religious pilgrimage will have their own unique reasons for doing so, but these journeys will always offer a kind of personal meaning they wouldn't be able to find anywhere else.

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