

THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA: AN EXPERIMENT IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

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Abstract and Rational

This paper focuses on the potential for economic equality and shared communal responsibility along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The paper takes the position that while Utopian Socialism has not been achieved by any traditional society or community, such a system does exist along this particular pilgrimage route in Northern Spain. Using the theories of Marx and Owsen in relation to the realities of the Camino experience, the paper argues that in the isolated world of the Camino, due to its relationship to the spiritual and connection to the divine, a sub-society has been created which operates on the moral principle of shared responsibilities to the community and its citizens – in this case the Camino and the pilgrims walking the Road.

The paper will highlight the origins of the pilgrimage, its ties to other major pilgrimage locations, and the economic considerations at play with regard to religiously motivated travel alongside international and multiethnic diplomacy.

To bridge the gap from the Medieval to the Modern a brief discussion of contemporary Spanish economics is included with relation to the Camino's inability to provide a real, long term economic boost for Spain.

Finally the paper concludes with a discussion of the shared social order and moral principles guiding the economic and civic construction of the Camino and how each person earns their keep, exchanges goods, serves the community, and works to allow others to truly engage in the task at hand; which according to the Center for Economic and Social Justice is the essence of an economically just society.¹

¹ Center for Economic and Social Justice. Accessed 4 April 2015. <http://www.cesj.org/learn/definitions/defining-economic-justice-and-social-justice/>

“With the roads to the exalted places we all want to visit more crowded than ever, we look more and more, but see less and less. But we don’t need more gimmicks and gadgets; all we need do is reimagine the way we travel. If we truly want to know the secret of soulful travel, we need to believe that there is something sacred waiting to be discovered in virtually every journey.”²

Pilgrimage Defined

Pilgrimage, the act of religious or spiritually motivated travel, is an idea inherent in all major systems of faith. Jews from around the world make their way to Jerusalem’s Western Wall – the only remaining vestige of the Temple destroyed by the Romans; Hindus participate in the Kumbh Mela, the largest religious gathering on the planet; Muslims go on *Hajj* to Mecca in fulfillment of one the so-called pillars of Islam; and Christians travel the ancient road to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain.³ Pilgrimage is a human construct and a human activity which clearly transcends systems of faith, ethnicity, national origins, gender, and whatever other identity constructs we seek to use. To go on pilgrimage is to participate in something profoundly human, and one which is linked to our view and understanding of the larger world and our context within that world.

Traveling in the service of God is something inherent in the development of the Christian tradition. The very founding of and continuance of the faith rests on the apostles leaving the potential safety and comfort of an ordinary life in order to spread the Good News, “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.”⁴ And when Jesus commands Ananias to restore Saul’s sight so that he might be Jesus’s vessel into the hearts of the Gentiles, he is likewise instructing the newly “re-born” Paul to understand a sacred journey to not only spread the word, but to convert the masses. The apostles were not, strictly speaking, taking part in the act of pilgrimage, but they were directed, by Jesus, to travel to the corners of the Earth with the holy mission of spreading his word.⁵ Thus, in a very real sense, Jesus’ inner circle along with Paul helped to establish a culture of sacred travel, which would eventually be transformed into what modernity labels as “pilgrimage.”

Paul and the Apostles’ mission was to bring mankind the “Good News”, the new truth of existence. The path of the pilgrim, in this sense, was not a penitential one, but a transformative-redemptive one. In converting Jews to what would become Christianity, they offered eternity to those willing to believe. That being said, as a form of cleansing and penance, pilgrimage evolved into just that, an act which could redeem the sins of man so he could avoid eternal punishment. While conceptually the judgement and potential wrath of an angry God is definitely not a modern or even a medieval construct, the fact of the matter is that pilgrimage did become a more popular form of religious expression during the high Middle Ages, but it hardly originated during the time period. In the First Book of Samuel Elkanah journeyed the Shiloh temple with his wives Hannah and Peninnah:

“And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the Lord of hosts in Shiloh...”⁶

In The First Book of Kings the prophet Elijah walks to Mount Sinai in order to meet God:

“And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.”⁷

² Phil Cousineau. *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred*. (Boston: Conari Press, 1998), XXII

³ These are merely a few examples of major pilgrimages from these particular faith systems. Each identified faith has many more examples of pilgrimage practices and locations.

⁴ Mark 16:15

⁵ Acts 9:11-14

⁶ 1 Samuel 1:3

⁷ 1 Kings 19:8

Timothy Lenchak argues that the most important reference to pilgrimage in the Pentateuch concerns Jerusalem. King David brings the Ark of the Covenant to the city and King Solomon builds the great Temple there as well, because of this, he claims, the Pentateuch calls for each male Israelite to visit the city three times a year for the “pilgrim feasts” of Passover, Pentecost, and Booths.⁸ Pilgrimage references are not limited to the Old Testament as the Gospels of John and Luke tell of Jesus himself visiting Jerusalem for the pilgrim feast of Passover.⁹ Man’s journey on earth towards death and ultimately salvation through Christ is itself seen as a pilgrimage in the Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews,

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they say such thing declare plainly that they seek a country... but now they desire a better country that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Ironically, the early Church was extremely skeptical of pilgrimage as they believed it to be less of a Christian tradition and more of a holdover from the many pagan cultures which had been amalgamated within the Christian faith.¹⁰ However, Church leaders eventually did see the act of religiously motivated penitential movement as one of the most devout forms self-sacrifice. Pilgrimage became, for the Church, not so much a superstitious journey devoted to a regional deity, but as a token of man’s acknowledgement of the one true God’s supremacy over all the world and mankind. Thus, the Church began using pilgrimage as the ultimate form of penance, and three sites more than any other became the focal points for the penitent; Rome, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and of course Jerusalem.

According to tradition, during the construction of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in the fourth century, St. Helena discovered the remnants of the True Cross. As word of this miracle spread, people began traveling to Jerusalem in order to be in the presences of the relic as well as walk in the literal footsteps of the incarnated God; and for the next three centuries the faithful came to Jerusalem by the thousands at various points throughout the year. But by 644, Muslim armies had conquered Christian Syria, Palestine and Egypt; the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was now in the hands of the infidel. These early Arab Muslims however were guided by two basic principles, one religious and the other economic. In regards to the religious, the Quran states that the holy sites of Jews and Christians should not be destroyed, and depending of the significance of it, should not even be converted, ***“Those who have been driven from their homes unjustly because they said: our Lord is Allah – For had it not been for Allah’s repelling some men by means of others, cloisters and churches and oratories and mosques, would assuredly have been pulled down... Those who if We give them power in the land, establish worship and pay the poor-due and forbid iniquity...”***¹¹

In regards to the economic motivations, the new Muslim rulers of the Holy Land very quickly saw the great value in allowing safe passage to Christian Pilgrims wishing to visit Jerusalem. Christian Pilgrims would pay a tax to enter the city, would pay a tax to worship freely, and would pay a tax in order to gain access to the Sepulcher; clearly a well maintained shrine and a promise of relatively safe passage through Muslim lands was in the best interests for the Arab conquerors of the Holy Land.

In the eleventh century however the Arab Muslim armies were conquered by a separate group of Muslims with whom they shared no political communion, the Seljuk Turks. They swept into the region and quickly took control of Armenia, Syria, and Palestine, and in so doing disrupted the peaceful status quo established by their predecessors. The Seljuks destroyed shrines and attacked pilgrims, and in 1009 Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah ordered the complete destruction of the Holy Sepulcher. It did not take long however for the Seljuk rulers to realize what their Arab predecessors had long understood, a safe pilgrim road and taxed access to Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims was good for business; and after the death of al-Hakim an effort was made to reestablish economic ties with the west. Alas the time had passed for such efforts to be able to yield any fruit, and the Christian armies of Europe

⁸ Timothy A. Lenchak, “What’s Biblical about a Pilgrimage?” in *The Bible Today* Vol 46. Issue 4 (July/August 2008): 260.

⁹ Lenchak identifies this as a “pilgrimage”. John 2:13. Other similar references come from John 12:20, Acts 2:1, and Luke 2:41.

¹⁰ Richard McBrien, ed., *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), 1001

¹¹ Koran, Sura 22: 40-41

launched the Crusades; the eventual result of which was the complete loss and access to the Holy Land in general and Jerusalem in particular.

With Jerusalem in the hands forces hostile to Europeans, Christians looked to other locations as their earthly connection God; Rome and Santiago de Compostela. Rome, as the seat of the Papacy and the location of St. Peter's martyrdom, was an obvious choice with which to substitute Jerusalem. Santiago de Compostela in Northwest Spain also had a direct connection to Jesus as Saint James was a disciple and one of the Twelve. His final resting place, being in Santiago, likewise became a pilgrimage destination, one in which the faithful would travel on foot along a network of trails leading, traditionally from Southern France through the Pyrenees, and across Northern Spain. Eventually Santiago would surpass even Rome in terms of popularity and devotion. Such popularity eventually led those in Spain to realize that the Way of Saint James or the Camino de Santiago de Compostela offered a truly unique economic opportunity.

In the twelfth century the Catholic Church began to actively promote the act of pilgrimage as a form of extreme penitence. Generally speaking, for the medieval pilgrim, the distance one had to travel was in direct relation to what one wished to achieve by making the journey. A short pilgrimage could be a punitive exercise as a form of public humiliation;¹² the act would bring the penitent closer to God by having him visit a local site associated with a saint or miracle while simultaneously serving the dual purpose of exposing the offender to public scrutiny. Pilgrimages to more distant shrines were sought in order to achieve healing or forgiveness in order to escape excommunication, or at times in order to offer thanks for already receiving such blessings; the penitent would of course have to pay to receive his blessing or indulgence from the priest of the parish or bishop of the cathedral. For members of the *Regula Magistri*¹³ the process of pilgrimage was a way to even further reject the comforts of life as an expression of devotion to God.¹⁴ What made the Camino de Santiago so unique was that it was not only the significance of the shrine of Saint James, but rather the road itself; hence the *Camino de Santiago* – the Way of Saint James became the focal point. So important was the road that in the twelfth century the papacy produced what traditionally is viewed as the first Pilgrim's Guide. Book V of the *Codex Calixtinus* entitled *Iter Pro Peregrinis ad Compostellam* provided the medieval pilgrim information about where to start the journey, where to sleep, what shrines to visit along the way, and how to properly conduct oneself as a faithful child of the Church.¹⁵ Eventually the paths defined by this manuscript developed into the modern Camino along which hundreds of pilgrim hostels, refuges, restaurants, and churches have been built in order to serve the needs of a growing number of pilgrims each year.

Economic Realities of Modern Spain

Though the Camino de Santiago may offer some economic advantages to those living or operating businesses directly along the Way, the nature of the Camino does not offer Spain as a whole any real economic advantages. According to the Wall Street Journal, Spain's unemployment rate was a staggering 24% in 2014,¹⁶ and even with the annual number of pilgrims along the Camino consistently reaching 150,000¹⁷ there does not appear to any measurable effect on the national economy nor does the increase in Camino traffic equal a decrease in unemployment. According to economist Jose E. Bosca labor productivity can only be measurably increased if the nation in question, in this case Spain, has a relatively high quantity as well as quality of physical capital, human capital, and consistent technological improvements relative to other industrialized nations.¹⁸

¹² Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 50

¹³ In English the "Regular Clergy" in reference to those living in monastic communities. Phrase is normally used in comparison to the "Secular Clergy" of the normal hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

¹⁴ Webb, 46

¹⁵ William Melczer, tr. *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela: Book Five of the Codex Calixtinus* (New York: Italica Press, 1993), 85

¹⁶ David Rooman. "Spain's Unemployment Declines in 2014." *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan 5, 2015) <http://www.wsj.com/articles/spains-unemployment-declines-in-2014-1420454136>

¹⁷ American Pilgrims on Camino. Accessed 2 April 2015. <http://www.americanpilgrims.com/camino/faqs.html> (2011 saw the highest number of pilgrim ever with the total number estimated at over 275,000.)

¹⁸J.E. Bosca "Long-run and Business Cycle Factors of the Spanish Economy in *The Spanish Economy: A General Equilibrium Perspective*, ed. J.E. Bosca (New York: Plgrave Macmillian, 2011), 11.

In the case of Spain, Bosca argues, the primary reason for its economic struggle is in the quality of its human capital; specifically education.¹⁹ Adults in Spain have roughly half the total numbers of years in formal education than their counterparts in the United States and about twenty percent fewer years than their European neighbors.²⁰ This educational gap, along with the fact that Spain's GDP has a low volatility while its rate of private consumption is high, suggests that major policy shifts are needed in order to create a more productive, less dependent Spain. It was a drastic policy shift that cost former Prime Minister Jose Zapatero his office in 2011. However instead of investing in educational programs, Zapatero, in an effort at avoiding the economic fates of Ireland and Greece in terms of requesting a bailout from other European Union members, began a series of reforms aimed at reducing government spending by cutting public worker's wages and welfare payments as well as increasing retirement age from sixty-five to sixty-seven.²¹ Ultimately while these measures did decrease spending, they did nothing to help the joblessness throughout Spain as the unemployment rate actually increased from 2011's 20% to the aforementioned 24% of 2014.

It is difficult for any national policy to have long-term, measurable success in Spain due, in part, to its political structure. Spain is comprised of seventeen autonomous communities, each having control over spending. However the central government retains the power of levying taxes and how that money is distributed back to the communities. Essentially the central government can limit the spending of each community simply by reducing the amount of money it sends to each community; that being understood, whatever is sent to each community is used however that community sees fit. Thus instead of a system which encourages partnership for the betterment of the whole, one of internal competition and conflict has been established. Additionally, as the economy of an individual community grows and improves, their tax money may be sent to other struggling communities, de-incentivizing individual communities to make real, measurable change in spending or investment. Thus theoretically, even if the Camino infrastructure could be designed to increase economic productivity, it may not actually help the local economies along the Way.

The City of Santiago de Compostela: Exploiting the Camino

As the end of the Camino, as well as the location of the Cathedral of Saint James (Santiago), the city of Santiago de Compostela has unique economic opportunities which, in recent years, it has attempted to exploit. In 1985 the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the city a World Heritage Site due to its "prominence as a focal point of the most important religious movement in the Middle Age..."²² The Camino itself was given the same designation in 1993. With these important international designations the city of Santiago began to see an increase in general tourism outside of the normal pilgrim traffic. Pilgrims tend to spend a relatively low amount of money as their purpose is not one of vacation tourism but rather spiritual transformation. However as cultural tourism increased, the city saw a rise of people not walking into the city as pilgrims but rather visiting as part of cultural tours via trains and busses.²³

Today Santiago de Compostela has hundreds of stores, shops, and vendors all selling Camino related merchandise; from coffee mugs with the Saint James Scallop Shell, to Camino T-Shirts, to pseudo Compostelas,²⁴ tourists can bring home part of the Camino – though they did not walk it. Additionally, in 2006 the city began organizing free outdoor concerts and a special consortium of religious music during Holy Week. The hope is that for those who do not walk the Camino, they will still come to experience the city itself. In 2011 the city opened up a new terminal at the Airport to accommodate passenger jets and international travel. This Santiago de Compostela Renaissance represents a strategic move at increasing revenue by using available resources and capital, however it has yet to yield measurable improvements to Spain's struggling economy, while at the same time causing traditional pilgrims to resent the commercialization of something they consider to be sacred.

For Pilgrims there is a fine line between maintaining the integrity and sacredness of the experience and providing modern, safe facilities. They want an authentic experience – one filled with challenges and hardships, but

¹⁹ *ibid*, 27

²⁰ *ibid*, 14

²¹ Jonatan Lemus, "Saving Spain's Economy," *The Harvard International Review*. Kindle Edition. (Summer 2011): Loc 44.

²² Luis Cesar Herrero, "Measuring the Economic Value and Social Viability of a Cultural Festival as a Tourism Prototype," *Tourism Economics* vol 13. Kindle Edition, (2011): LOC 26

²³ *ibid* Loc 39

²⁴ A Compostela is given to Pilgrims, by the Church, for completion of the Camino.

ultimately they also want to be safe and relatively comfortable. They want to understand and connect with the medieval, while not actually having to become medieval. And while pilgrim may not want to think of their experience in terms of tourism, their process of pilgrimage is a form of tourism as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization which claims tourism, “*comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited.*”²⁵ However is there something unethical, wrong, or perhaps even sacrilegious in the economic exploitation of a potentially profound spiritual or religious experience? Perhaps.

The Camino de Santiago a Utopian Socialist’s Dream

The Camino de Santiago, though it attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year, does not measurable enhance the national economy of Spain and at most promotes local areas and individuals who work alongside the Camino selling food and supplies to pilgrims as well as offering lodgings to them. And as certain effluvial elements of sacrality in the city of Santiago and other locations along the Way are under threat by the economic realities of religious tourism, the Camino may offer a great example of Utopian Socialism as practiced by the pilgrims themselves.

Under a truly socialist construct, property and production would be publically owned and controlled. There would be no national boundaries tying each person to an artificial unification with national identity, instead people would be united by their shared social standing. Each person would perform the tasks required by society because it is better for society. Motivation to work would stem from a moral responsibility to contribute to the whole rather than any potential for an abundance of personal wealth. Friedrich Engels argued that Utopian Socialists believed in the existence of, “absolute truth, reason, and justice...”²⁶ and that such a reality was impossible. Robert Owen however believed in and worked towards just such a reality. Owen attempted to establish cooperative communities in which private property did not exist and all land was owned in common. He attempted to organize a factory system in which profits were not allowed, and workers would develop a deeper sense of purpose and responsibility to each other rather than to money. Owen’s efforts in New Lanark and eventually New Harmony ended up in failure, however what he was attempting does exist in the contemporary world along the Camino.

Most pilgrims decide to make their experience a solitary one. They begin their journey from St. Jean, Burgos, Paris, Astorga, or a number of other locations with the intention of performing their pilgrimage devoid of mundane conversation and social interaction. Very quickly however the pilgrim realizes that while much of the Camino can be an introverted experience, complete isolation along the Way is impossible – and more to the point it is actually anathema to the pilgrim experience.

“Choosing not to sleep in pilgrims’ accommodation, or not to eat with others, identifies one as separate from the pilgrim experience, and either as a ‘tourist’ or a ‘loner.’ Thus the dormitories, and the close intimacy they bring further break down boundaries between pilgrims; they share the road, the meals, they sleep in the same room, packed in tightly, and even their daily ablutions are shared, sometimes in all their glory. This shared life reinforces and upholds the intimacy needed for the conversation pilgrims engage in.”²⁷

There are two different elements of the shared communal experience at play here. The first is that in the conscious attempt to distance oneself from the parts of the Camino that are designed to be taken in common, a person runs the risk of becoming the “other” and loses one of the most crucial elemental experiences of this pilgrimage... togetherness and the strength and support which comes from the shared struggle of the road. The second communal experience discussed above relates more directly to and Owenesque construct of community. Along the way pilgrims are expected to provide not for themselves but for others. A pilgrim is expected and even required by tradition to give freely to those in need. Whether it be ear plugs at night to help a weary traveler sleep amongst the symphony of snores in the hostel or helping to treat the intense foot blisters of suffering pilgrims as they arrive,

²⁵ Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, destinations and encounters*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.

²⁶ Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific Socialism*: Translated by Edward Aveling. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), Kindle Edition, LOC 588.

²⁷ Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*. (London: Bloomsbury 2011), 52.

pilgrims live an existence separate from their normal everyday lives while acknowledging that though every person has their own Camino, no person does it truly alone.²⁸

The pilgrim participates in a truly egalitarian experiences which fails to recognize social class, socio-economic status, or occupation. Everyone along the Way is the same, is a pilgrim, and all are expected to pull their own weight for the betterment of the Camino, fellow pilgrims, and the tradition of the Camino itself. It is this existence which Owens was attempting to instill in people in New Harmony; a society based on economic equality, a lack of poverty and income based value judgements. Along the Way people are participants in a life experience rather than a doctor, teacher, retail worker, or welfare recipient, and each person manages to survive the experience due to a shared responsibility to the larger community.

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²⁸ *ibid*, 51.