

Pilgrimage as an event of encounter

Possibilities and chances for an interreligious dialogue and for a new identity construction in Europe

1. The current importance of going on pilgrimages in publications and exhibitions

In 2010, almost at the same time, two special exhibitions plus two extensive exhibition catalogues were presented in the USA: “Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art”¹ was displayed in New York, while a second exhibition – “Pilgrimage and Faith”² was travelling the United States. Both exhibitions tried to reveal the relationship between pilgrimage and art. Whereas the former exhibition confined itself to the subject of Buddhism, the second one used an overall interreligious approach as a working basis, thus making apparent that pilgrimage has become a worldwide phenomenon. However, we need not travel as far as America in order to realize the tendency that pilgrimage as an interreligious phenomenon has been made apparent within the framework of various exhibitions and publications. In 2010, the Deutsches Museum in Munich presented the exhibition “On the road to heal the soul – pilgrimages in the past and present.” Its goal was to promote the interreligious dialogue and, therefore, the exhibition displayed Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimages.³ Another exhibition – “Jews, Christians and Muslims. Intercultural Dialogue in Old Writings” – in the Austrian National Library in Vienna also focused on the interreligious dialogue.⁴

By referring to current exhibitions I want to emphasize the worldwide topicality of the issue of the interreligious dialogue, especially with regard to the fact that this topic is increasingly being seen in a global context. Our symposium, which focuses on the “Roles of Culture on the Foundation of European Integration”, cannot ignore the global context of this topic caused by the current migration which is taking place on a world-wide scale, and which affects Europe to a high degree. That is why I want to deal with the considerable cultural and spiritual importance of pilgrimage and the enormous shift of meaning of this phenomenon. For that purpose I am going to use for the main part examples of Christian pilgrimages. Finally we will have to deal with the question whether pilgrimage might be suited to contribute to a new European process of integration.

2. The semantic meaning of the term and its current use

Starting signal for a 'pilgrimage of variety' wrote an Austrian newspaper⁵ at the beginning of the event from the 7th to the 8th September 1996, which took place in Mariazell on the initiative of the Austrian Bishops' Conference. In this connection the media interest did not focus on the term "pilgrimage" but on the fact that the future of the Catholic church in Austria would be discussed. And so this *pilgrimage of variety* can be understood as a metaphor for a more pluralistic way of thinking within a common catholic church. At the same time - even if it was not intended - the *pilgrimage of variety* also showed a pluralistic definition of the term "pilgrimage", including the fact that the bishops were inviting the faithful to speak about the future of the Austrian church at the country's most famous place of pilgrimage. An event, which could have taken place anywhere else, is becoming a "pilgrimage" simply because of the chosen venue!⁶

In June 1994 Austria had to vote about membership of the European Union. At that time, the social democratic politician Brigitte Ederer, as permanent secretary was responsible for EU-affairs. She had promised to go on a pilgrimage from Vienna to Mariazell (a journey of about 150 km) if more than 51,5% of the Austrians would vote for membership. As we know, more than 66% were in favour. On July 8th, 1994, the permanent secretary left on her pilgrimage.⁷ But was this really a pilgrimage? Her hike was in the limelight. Newspapers, radio and TV accompanied Ederer's walk to Mariazell. But Ederer was a social democratic politician! So the press reports about the media circus were accordingly ironic. A well-known newspaper stated that a big mistake was being made saying: *It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a social democratic politician to go on a pilgrimage to Mariazell.*⁸ A church orientated newspaper simply refused to talk about "pilgrimage" in the context of Ederer's walk and spoke rather about a "bet", which Ederer had made good with her walking-tour to Mariazell.⁹ However, the formal setting for a traditional pilgrimage seemed to be in place - she had promised a pilgrimage and had made good her promise by her walking tour to Mariazell and by visiting the church. To accuse her of lack of attitude of mind, or of having been too much in line with the media requirements, would be tantamount calling other kinds of pilgrimages into question also.

In my opinion these two examples clearly demonstrate the problems of using the term "Pilgrimage" in our postmodern society.

And here, in my opinion, we are confronted with a basic problem. The church and - which is more relevant for us - also the catholic public discourse seem to define pilgrimage and its

symbols from a pragmatically theological point of view, including also a certain abandonment of ritual behaviour.

On the other hand we are faced with rituals, which in some cases seem to have lost their traditional meaning and contents, but, nevertheless, can be regarded from a cultural scientific point of view as a pilgrimage, and perhaps can be described - following the Austrian Folklorist and Ethnographer Leopold Schmidt - as *custom without faith*.¹⁰

However, it is not only the church who bestows a modified quality on the term 'pilgrimage'. In common discourse he have got used to perceive the terms "to pilgrim" and "go on a pilgrimage" in a mundane context. Just think of the rituals taking place when people visit Elvis Presley's grave in Memphis (USA) or think of all the rituals in connection with the death of "Lady Di" or with a visit to her gravesite in Althorp (GB).¹¹ Apropos – meanwhile we have come to use this term in a totally secular context: we pilgrimage to a concert, to a shopping centre etc.

3. The current topicality of 'going on a pilgrimage'

After having dealt with the semantic importance of "going on a pilgrimage" in its current use, I want to investigate its topicality for our society. In my introduction I have already referred to the importance of pilgrimage in exhibitions all over the world. To what extent is this importance true for the people concerned? Have pilgrimages really become as topical as it has been made apparent by books and exhibitions?

On my institute I have dealt with a number of smaller and larger relevant projects over the past ten years. One project was a large one, which lasted for two years (2001 to 2003) and which was funded by the Österreichischer Forschungsfonds (Austrian Research Fund). This project investigated pilgrimage in post-modernism using examples from the Austrian federal province of Styria. Hypothetically we could well have proceeded from a larger number. However, the dynamics of the pilgrimage movement somehow surprised us. Let me explain by presenting some facts: at the beginning of our study we made an inquiry in 388 Styrian parishes (at this time 245 parishes had their own priest, 143 parishes were served by a priest from another parish). Altogether 245 parishes were part of our investigation. We were surprised by the result.¹²

Only 13 parishes did not organise any pilgrimages. Two thirds of the pilgrimages which occurred in the other parishes are one-day pilgrimages. About half of the pilgrimages are bus tours; one third of the pilgrimages are foot pilgrimages. For the rest of the pilgrimages people

use various means of transport, such as the bike, the motorbike, the train, the tractor, the horse, inline-skates, cross-country skis and the aeroplane. Technical facilities are integrated into the cultural pilgrimage system quite naturally thus elucidating the relevance of the pilgrimage to the present.¹³

There are further remarkable facts: About 75 % of all pilgrimages developed within the past 30 years. Not even 10 % can be referred to as traditional pilgrimages, which began before 1900.¹⁴

A cultural pattern which had become a mass phenomenon in the Middle Ages and during the late Baroque and which became practically insignificant during the 50s and 70s was rediscovered in the late 70s. Today this pattern will serve as a classic example for the fact that traditions are very much alive in the present

A further highly topical example: In May 2004 the famous Austrian pilgrimage center Mariazell was visited by about 80,000 pilgrims who wanted to attend the Day of Central European Catholics. A local parish magazine called it an “Event of Encounter” and the event itself had as its motto “Pilgrimage of Peoples”. Nothing can demonstrate more clearly the new definition of the term pilgrimage than this motto. It is not important to reach a place of pilgrimage on a traditionally defined day, influenced by more or less traditional motives: it is about the contribution the Church can make in order to support the international understanding. In other words: Mariazell invites the acceding countries, especially those of Central Europe, to gather under the sheltering cape of the Magna Mater Austriae – just like in the times of the Habsburg Monarchy. It must be pointed out that since the fall of the Iron Curtain a large amount of pilgrims to Mariazell is coming from the acceding countries in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁵

I would like to mention another example of how pilgrimage is used apart from its original purpose. The pilgrimage and historical paths of pilgrimage will be used to construct a new, common European identity. “Europe and its Citizens. The first pilgrims created paths of unity where the European roots are located and can be experienced” – thus runs the title of a homepage, which introduces within the scope of the additional course *European Studies* at RWTH Aachen (Rheinisch Westfälische Technische Hochschule in Aachen) the project Socrates Comenius. The project which lasted from 1997 to 1999, focused on the “*European Christian pilgrims in the Middle Ages as a factor getting something in motion and as a uniting element between the European peoples*”. Schools from different countries have cooperated in order to investigate the phenomenon of pilgrimages under historical and

sociocultural aspects and “by walking along the medieval paths of pilgrimage they have become themselves EU-citizens of a new Europe”.¹⁶

So far I have argued from the viewpoint of the Christian pilgrimage and I think that I have been able to demonstrate the topicality of this issue. But I also want to refer to the great popularity pilgrimage is enjoying worldwide: During a working visit in Japan in 2006, I was able to discuss with colleagues the enormous importance of a pilgrimage around the Japanese island of Shikoku. In 2007 I was offered the possibility to lecture at Wuhan University in China and there I discussed the topic of pilgrimage with many students from various Asian countries. The boom of pilgrimage proved right everywhere!!

From the Christian-European point of view the orientation of the Protestants towards pilgrimage is remarkable! In the autumn of 2010 I was invited to a congress in Germany and I was requested to speak about pilgrimage. Remarkably enough, this congress had been organised by Protestant groups. In this context it is important to know that Martin Luther hated any kind of pilgrimage and condemned it as “countless reason for sin”!¹⁷

4. Theoretical approaches

Now I want to refer to a central notion why modern people are attracted by places of pilgrimage, namely spirituality. – Spirituality in the sense of the Vienna psychiatrist and therapist Alfred Längle, which means that our mind is open for a stratum that carries us.¹⁸

“We are permanently on call, permanently mobile, so that we can hardly straighten out our thoughts. Equipped with artificial limbs, such as a mobile phone, a walkman, a pair of headphones, ... this new human being, who is networked with the whole world, is able to pull out a weapon at any moment, thus showing a striking resemblance with a soldier who is constantly in action at the front. Nietzsche says that exhaustion and overwork are the modern vices. Constantly fighting phantoms, we sustain injuries which are not calculable, thus suffering from every-day injuries instead of war injuries”. These lines we find in Pascal Bruckner’s revealing book “Verdammt zum Glück” (“Damned to be happy”).¹⁹ The pilgrimage offers an opportunity to straighten out our thoughts, to be released, even though only for a limited period of time, from the concatenation of every-day life. Experiencing one’s body and nature plays an essential role when we compose ourselves. Spirituality only makes sense if it connects experiences and unites mind, heart and body. Spirituality does not necessarily mean believing in God or in a god, but refers to the yearning for a human wholeness, and, therefore, it looks out for methods to achieve this aim. Yet it is possible that

this wholeness will remain fragmentary. Looking out for wholeness is a reaction to the fragmentation of the areas of life in modernism. Our world is split up in a world of work and efficiency and in a counter-world of the private.

The yearning for spirituality is only one aspect of the popularity of pilgrimages; the other aspect is the yearning for community.

The sensitive interplay of being alone with one's self and the security of the group are an essential experience for most of the pilgrims – only a few of them would set out alone for a walking pilgrimage. The size of the groups varies to the same extent as does the individual notion of the number of participants we feel comfortable with. Most of the groups consist of 10 to 20 some of 30 to 50 persons. Even though individuals join only temporarily in order to do something together, this gives them the impression of forming a relatively stable community, says the German sociologist Hans Georg Soeffner.²⁰

So, when participating in today's pilgrimages, we find the whole spectrum of people who are in quest for a meaning of life, devout Catholics and Protestants, esoterics of various colours, and agnostics, even Buddhists or Muslims.

I have tried to sketch the pilgrimage as a highly topical and diverse phenomenon, whose importance is increasing. This fact seems to be at variance with the notion of an increasing secession from the church and the growing secularization of society. On the other hand, however, it has long been evident that the rediscovered yearning for spiritualism and a new mythology involving auratic places (places with an aura), to which pilgrimage centres also belong, come to the fore more and more. Psychologists explain this phenomenon as a *compensatory opposite world to a prevailing mood of modern man.*²¹

Several years ago the German Ethnographer Martin Scharfe referred to a certain mechanism of compensation, which he declared to be culture producing in a certain way. Arguing against the compensatory approach of the German philosopher Joachim Ritter from the early sixties²², Scharfe criticized the museums. In his opinion they only compensate for some cultural lack of our industrial society, which means that the museums consider their sole task to be the preservation of cultural possessions lost in reality. They want to show the ideal world as a help against the situation of life.²³

In my opinion, the present search for the meaning of life, leading especially young people toward to spiritualist ideas, has one of its most important roots in a certain cultural and spiritual lack. In this context religion is a method for self discovery, but of course, it should be noted that Christianity has long since lost its monopoly also in the Christian occident.

In this kind of situation pilgrimage can have a dual significance. First of all, through the pilgrimage church, e.g. Mariazell, which could be a place of self discovery (even without sharing catholic symbols), and secondly by integrating the world of symbols of catholic customs through the pilgrimage itself. Psychologists regard regular repetition prayers, as is customary at the traditionally performed pilgrimages on foot, as a *rediscovered psychotechnic*, a kind of meditation, *with or without an explicit connection with god, with the aim, to sort things out in ones own mind, to find peace.*²⁴ Herbert Benson, a cardiologist at Harvard University, emphasizes the effect of relaxation through regular immersion in prayers. The regular repetition of words or thoughts provokes a physiological reflex of relaxation. It is something like the “oh mani padme hum” in Tibet!²⁵

Folklorists and ethnologists notice this comeback of traditional cultures nearly everywhere, but it is a comeback the other way round. In my lecture the pilgrimage will serve as an example for making this comeback apparent. However, pilgrimage is not a cultural phenomenon which can only be placed in a particular region because it was at a very early stage that pilgrimage developed nearly global features. That is why we simply cannot reduce pilgrimage to the re-discovering of regions because there is more to it: It is not only the regions and regional traditions which meet the needs of modern people. The recourse to stabilising, supporting customs and rituals generally correspond to these needs thus completing people's homesickness for their regions.

5. Pilgrimage as a chance for gaining a new form of integration and a new identity construction

I hope that I have succeeded in showing you that there is more to the term ‘pilgrimage’ than just revisiting an old religious tradition. Today ‘pilgrimage revisited’ helps people all over the world to ease their longings which ultimately originate from an economy-orientated, globalised world that offers people only little means of orientation. That is why pilgrimage has been constructed as a part of a counter-world that provides – at least temporarily – some security and stability. In the meantime the active participation in pilgrimages – mainly but not exclusively in walking pilgrimages – has become a part of identity construction for many people.

Over the past 20 years Europe has been facing an extraordinary wave of migration. People of the most different religious alignments as well as agnostics have come to Europe.

When we realise that pilgrimage is a phenomenon which is practised by people beyond any religious orientation, and when we further realise that this phenomenon has already turned into a mass phenomenon, then we may draw the conclusion that pilgrimage and the aforementioned interreligious dialogue might well serve as a tool to promote a new European integration policy. Perhaps this tool should be used more frequently.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ Adriane Proser (ed.): *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art*, New Haven und London 2010.

² Virginia C. Raguin, Dina Bangdel, F.E.Peters (ed.): *Pilgrimage and Faith - Buddhism, Christianity and Islam*, Chicago 2010.

³ Birgit Breitkopf et al.: *Unterwegs für's Seelenheil. Pilgerreisen gestern und heute, Kurzführer durch die Ausstellung im Deutschen Museum in München*, München 2010.

⁴ *Juden, Christen und Muslime. Interkultureller Dialog in alten Schriften*, Exhibition organized by the Austrian National Library, Vienna 2010.

⁵ *Kleine Zeitung*, Sept. 3, p.11.

⁶ The following presentation is based on several papers, which are completed for this presentation: Helmut Eberhart: *Aspects of and Thoughts about Pilgrimage today on the Example of Mariazell*: In: Anders Gustavsson und Maria Santa Montez; *Folk Religion - Continuity and Change. Papers Given at the Symposium of the Commission of Folk religion in Portugal in September 1996, Lisboa 1999*, p.259-266. Helmut Eberhart: *Pilgrimage as an example for "the past in the present"*. In: Fabio Mugniani, Padraig Ó Héalaí, Tok Thompson (ed.), *The Past in the Present. A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Catania 2006, p.157-167; Helmut Eberhart: *Überall ist Wallfahrt. Ein kulturwissenschaftlicher Blick auf ein wiederentdecktes Phänomen*. In: *Heiliger Dienst* 61 (2007), Heft 1, p.7-25.

⁷ Eberhart: *Aspects of and Thoughts About*, (see note 6), p.259.

⁸ *Der Standard*, July 9/10,1996, p.23.

⁹ *Kleine Zeitung*, July 10, 1996, see also: Romana Gabriel: *Viele Wege führen nach Mariazell*. In: Helmut Eberhart and Heidelinde Fell (ed.): *Schatz und Schicksal – Mariazell, Beiträge zur Landesausstellung 1996*, Graz 1996, p.278.

¹⁰ Leopold Schmidt, *Brauch ohne Glaube*. In: Leopold Schmidt: *Volks Glaube und Volksbrauch. Gestalten – Gebilde – Gebärden*, Berlin 1966, pp.289-312.

¹¹ See: Christoph Daxelmüller: *Maria und Lady Di – Tradition und säkulare Religiosität*. In: Walter Brunner et al. (ed.): *Mariazell und Ungarn. 650 Jahre religiöse Gemeinsamkeit (Veröffentlichungen des steiermärkischen Landesarchivs 30)*, Graz-Esztergom 2003, p.205-214; Marion Bowman: *The People's Princess. Vernacular Religion and Politics in the Mourning for Diana*. In: Gabor Barna (Ed.): *Politics and Folk Religion (Papers on the 3rd Symposium of SIEF Commission of Folk Religion in Szeged 1999)*, Budapest 2001, p.35-49.

¹² Eberhart: *Pilgrimage as an Event*, (see note 6), p.14.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.14.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.14.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.22.

¹⁶ Stefan Krebs and Jörg Riemenschneider: *Europa und seine Bürger*. In: www.mes.rwth-aachen.de, p.1.

¹⁷ See: Martin Luther: *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung*, 1520; quoted in: Rudolf Schenda: *Wallfahrten*. In: Martin Scharfe, Rudolf Schenda, Herbert Schwedt: *Volksfrömmigkeit*, Stuttgart 1967, p.76.

¹⁸ See: Gabriele Ponisch: „... dass wenigstens dies keine Welt von Kalten ist“, Dissertation, University of Graz, Graz 2006, p.50.

¹⁹ Pascal Bruckner: *Verdammt zum Glück, Der Fluch der Moderne*, Berlin 2001.

²⁰ Hans Georg Soeffner: *Die Ordnung der Rituale. Die Auslegung des Alltags 2*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, p.115.

²¹ Heiner Barz: *Meine Religion mach ich mir selbst!* In: *Psychologie heute* 22 (1995), Heft 7, p.27.

²² Joachim Ritter: *Die Aufgaben der Geisteswissenschaften in der modernen Gesellschaft*. In: Joachim Ritter, *Subjektivität, Sechs Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main 1974, pp.105-140.

²³ See Martin Scharfe: *Aufhellung und Eintrübung. Zu einem Paradigmen- und Funktionswandel im Museum 1970-1990*. In: Susanne Abel (ed.): *Rekonstruktion von Wirklichkeit im Museum (Mitteilungen aus dem Roemer-Museum Hildesheim, Neue Folge 3)*, Hildesheim 1992, pp.53-65.

²⁴ Barz: *Meine Religion*, (see note 21), p26.

²⁵ See: Den alltäglichen Fluss der Gedanken unterbrechen. An interview with Herbert Benson by T. George Harris and Heiko Ernst. In: Psychologie heute 20 (1993), Heft 2, p.22.