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Reporting Religion with Dan Damon
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Dan Damon: This week hundreds of thousands of Hindus began a two month pilgrimage in Srinagar, Kashmir called the Amarnath Yatra. Their goal is to reach a cave shrine, high up in the mountain where they worship a stalagmite which they see as representing Lord Shiva. Some will travel by foot, some will hitch a lift, increasingly though, others will take advantage of new packages offered by tour operators. Religious travel, used to be a small niche, but in the last five years it's grown into a fully fledge industry. Spiritual tourism is one of the fastest growing travel sectors worth about eighteen billion dollars a year and this year a World Religious Travel Association was created to help promote the industry.

I spoke earlier to **Helen Tomei** who runs as travel agency specializing in spiritual travel and also, I spoke to Professor **Ian Reader**, he's in Lancaster Northern England. I asked him first, why such a rapid growth?

Ian Reader: Well there is a number of reasons, one of them obviously is that the modern world provides many more facilities for travels. So for example if you look at many things like the Haj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca, thirty-forty years ago maybe thirty thousand people did it, now two and a half million. That's because people can get to these places much more quickly. That's one reason. Then of course another reason is that people are often seeking alternatives to the pressures of modern life. Pilgrimage in general has always been a way of escaping or part of it has been a way of escaping and seeking alternatives to everyday life.

Dan Damon: So is it still people following a specific religion or specific pilgrimage?

Ian Reader: No not at, well two good examples I will give are the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Europe, which is a traditional old Catholic pilgrimage that has been done for several centuries, and the Shikoku Pilgrimage in Japan, the Buddhist Pilgrimage that has been done for several centuries. Both of them have seen huge numbers of new pilgrims in the last few years going on foot, they're long journeys on foot. And interestingly large numbers of the people doing it, mainly young people, are saying that while they're following this Catholic or Buddhist pilgrimage, they are not Catholics or they are not Buddhists, they are following a path of spiritual search, a personalized path of spiritual search. It is as if people are now making use of these pilgrimage routes or going to these sacred places, seeking things for themselves but not having much to do or anything to do with the traditions themselves, which is very interesting.

Dan Damon: Well let's now speak to **Helen Tomei**. Helen, you run a travel agency called **Sacred Earth Journeys.**

Helen Tomei: Yes, I would say that there is definitely no doubt there is a trend for people looking for a deeper meaning to their travel experience. Lying on the beach for a week is great but it's loosing some of its attractiveness, I think, as more people are looking within.

Dan Damon: And tell us about the kind of trips you organize.

Helen Tomei: We go to places like Bali or England, visiting Stonehenge and other sacred stone circles. France, Japan, Peru, Egypt, of course India, being probably the country with the oldest continuously operating pilgrimage system in the world.

Dan Damon: Ian, it might be a problem if all of these people encourage by Helen and others go to these places, which have deep significance in the beliefs of people who are there, then tourists are coming not sharing those beliefs.

Ian Reader: Tourism and commercialization have always been part of the pilgrimage structure. I mean if you go back to medieval times, churches, priests would encourage the rumors of miracles and promote the cult of relics in order to get people to come to their church. So in Japan or in India or whatever….because whether they're pilgrims or tourists they bring offerings, they bring money. There's always been a commercial dimension to the whole process. And probably the most famous pilgrimage site certainly in Europe is Lourdes, and Lourdes would never have developed as a pilgrimage site without the development of commercial infrastructures, without the development of the railways, without the activities of the local people and the local merchants to promote it, as a pilgrimage site in order to get customers coming.

Dan Damon: One of the values of faith, Helen, at least it's meant to be, is that it changes your life; it gives you a way of coping. If you go to a place that is holy to some but you don't share that faith you just say "oh that's quaint" are you getting the benefit?

Helen Tomei: Yes, I think so. I think that in all spiritual traditions, whether it's Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Incan, Mayan, Egyptian, that there is what I like to call gems or spiritual truths that really transcend all religions and traditions, and I know for myself this is really the most important part of the journey. It's like the old saying "One God, Many Paths", and I think that's what people really are longing for.

Dan Damon: Pilgrimages are meant to involve a bit of suffering, in some faiths, aren't they?

Ian Reader: In the Hindu tradition, they say that pilgrims should return thinner and poorer and if you go to Hindu pilgrimage sites you will find large numbers of beggars outside the sacred places to help you become poorer. But at the same time, there's not necessarily an injunction that you have to suffer.

Dan Damon: Helen, any hardship for your travelers to these special places?

Helen Tomei: No, we're modern pilgrims, so we kind of go the comfortable route (laughs).

Dan Damon: So no one has to go on their knees as some pilgrims do to some of those shines?

Helen: They can do that (laughs). I think it's about the intention of the journey. It's not necessarily the method or even the destination, but the journey itself. So to me a pilgrimage is really a chance for people to separate themselves from the everyday concerns of life, restore some balance into their lives, and return with a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

Dan Damon: **Helen Tomei in Vancouver** and **Dr. Ian Reader** speaking to us from the north of England.