

Graceland: A Sacred Place in a Secular World?

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In the mid-twentieth century popular culture combined with mass communications to globalise certain entertainment icons, chiefly from the United States of America. These icons included the actors Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Marlon Brando, and rock musicians Elvis Presley and the Beatles. The enthusiasm generated by these 'stars' resembled the mass emotionalism of religious revival meetings, and explicitly religious parallels were occasionally drawn by the stars themselves: John Lennon scandalised middle-class society in the late 1960s with his claim that the Beatles were 'bigger than Christ'. This paper will examine the idea of Graceland, the former home and now burial site of Elvis Presley, as a modern secular pilgrimage centre. It will examine some of the reasons behind the apparent growth of a cult centred on Elvis Presley and will look at whether the 700,000 people who visit Graceland each year can be categorised as pilgrims or tourists. In analysing this phenomenon, an examination will be made of what those visitors are seeking when visiting Graceland and how these goals or aspirations are linked to religious ideals.

Elvis Presley was an American rock and roll star who apparently personified to many the typical American 'rags to riches' story. However, since his death in 1977 at Graceland, at the age of forty-two, there has developed, apparently spontaneously through his fans, a quasi-religious mythology about Elvis Presley. This ranges from concepts such as Elvis the martyr, sacrificed to the lifestyle of fame, to the myths, rumours and sightings which suggest that he is still alive and will return one day. There would appear, however, to be quite a lot of quasi-religious symbolism and imagery associated with Elvis Presley and with Graceland since his death. Most of this symbolism would appear to be based upon Christian symbols and myths and would seem to be generated both by fans and by journalists. Some people see a cult arising from the worship of Elvis, with the fans as disciples and Elvis impersonators seen as the priests.¹ To others, it would appear that devotion to Elvis goes along with and finds a place within their more orthodox religious beliefs.

¹ John Strausbough, *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*, New York, 1995, pp. 149-57.

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To others still, some of the rituals associated with the pilgrimage to Graceland and devotion to Elvis would appear to fulfil a need which standard religion no longer seems able to fulfil. Graceland itself has become a centre much associated with the mythology around Elvis Presley, and the centre of pilgrimage.

The life and death of Elvis Presley would hardly seem to qualify him for this saintly role: a rock singer who, apparently in decline, died of an overdose of prescription drugs on his bathroom floor. It has been suggested that part of the reason for the mythologising around Elvis is that he was an exemplification of the American dream. He was the poor truck driver who took his mother from a log cabin to a mansion. He is, in death, portrayed as a real folk hero unspoilt by the values of the world. Christine King, in an article on Elvis, has taken this further in suggesting that

Elvis is the modern equivalent of the corn king, a primitive sacrificial figure who catches the world's imagination, is raised to a position of wealth and fame for a brief period before being ritually destroyed, sealed as a martyr and taking our suffering with him¹,

thus making him a mixture of pre-Christian sacrifice and a Christian martyr. Further to this is the sense that, despite his apparent embodiment of the American dream, Elvis Presley was not happy, and that he suffered despite attaining this state. It would appear that many people look on him as a fellow-sufferer.²

To add to the quasi-religious nature of the Elvis Presley myth there are two churches devoted to Elvis. There is the '24-Hour Coin-Operated Church of Elvis in Portland', originally opened as a humorous project, which is extremely popular. Further there is The First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine, which although humorous in tone, has set itself up with church doctrine, stories and sacred rituals, one of which is that its members must make at least one pilgrimage to Graceland.³ Most of the rituals and texts of the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine are based, however loosely, on Christian tradition. There is also a chapel located near Graceland where couples can be married by an Elvis impersonator. Nevertheless, even when presented as a joke, the notion that Elvis

¹ Christine King, 'His Truth Goes Marching On: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland', in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Basingstoke, 1993, pp. 92-102, p. 102.

² Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: fans, faith and image*, Lawrence, 1999, p. 16.

³ URL: <http://chealsea.ios.f/hkarlinl/welcome2.html>, Doss, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

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has become a quasi-religious figure in popular culture would appear to give additional impetus to the idea of Elvis as saint simply by keeping the question on the table for discussion.¹ There are also a number of publications or images of Elvis as Jesus, creating a syncretic mix of late twentieth century popular culture and medieval Christianity. Often these images of Elvis as Jesus or Saint Elvis are satirical or mocking. However, not all of them are.

There is a painting hanging high in the main hallway of Graceland which depicts Elvis in a rather Christ-like pose. The painting was commissioned in Elvis' lifetime by a famous portrait artist, Ralph Wolfe Cowan in 1969.² In this portrait, a young Elvis is dressed glowingly in white and stands in the clouds looking down on all those who enter the Trophy Room at Graceland. To add to the effect of this, the painting is positioned hanging rather high on the wall so that to look at it one must look up. There is apparently a tradition that says that touching the gilt frame of this painting will bring good fortune. This is, however, strongly discouraged by the staff at Graceland. Doss suggests that, particularly since his death, images of Elvis have replaced the popular image, *Head of Christ* by Sallman, that was a common feature of most American Christian homes in the early post-war years.³ Doss, in her study of what she termed 'Elvis culture', has noted that there are some Elvis fans who create what amount to altars to Elvis within their homes. She gives several examples of these altars and has interviewed those who create them. Most of the people who create these would appear to be firmly Christian in their views, however they look upon Elvis as someone special who, in death, can act in an intercessory role, rather like a Christian saint.⁴ She also points out that quite a number of people have special rooms in their homes where they keep their Elvis memorabilia or collections and they withdraw to these rooms often for periods of quiet reflection, like a private chapel. She argues that for many people these shrines or rooms speak to the way that material culture would appear to play a role in sanctifying Elvis, and links these rooms to the way in which in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America Catholic and Protestant families used to create religious rooms in their houses.⁵

1 Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis after Elvis: the posthumous career of a living legend*, London, 1996, p. 113.

2 *Graceland Official Guide Book*, Memphis, 1996, p. 43.

3 Doss, *op. cit.* p. 78.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 76-8.

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The importance of the growth of Graceland as a pilgrimage site would appear to be that Graceland was so obviously associated with Elvis Presley in his life. Most people cannot name the houses where most of their stars live, but the link between Elvis and Graceland is well known and thus 'serves as a physical point of articulation where a global community of Elvis fans could regularly congregate and acquire a true sense of themselves as a defined community'.¹ To this is added the fact that Elvis Presley also died at Graceland and is now buried there.

In their study of pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner describe the way in which the typical pilgrimage site develops:

a pilgrimage's foundation is typically marked by visions, miracles, or martyrdoms. The first pilgrims tend to arrive haphazardly, individually, and intermittently, though in great numbers, 'voting with their feet'; their devotion is fresh and spontaneous. Later, there is progressive routinisation and institutionalisation of the sacred journey. Pilgrims now tend to come in organised groups, in sodalities, confraternities, and parish associations, on specified feast days, or in accordance with a carefully planned calendar. Marketing facilities spring up close to the shrine and along the way. A whole elaborate system of licenses, permits, and ordinances, governing mercantile transactions, pilgrims' lodgings, and the conduct of fairs, develops as the number of pilgrims grows and their needs and wants proliferate. . . To cater for the fired-up pilgrim's spiritual needs, the merchants of holy wares set up booths in the market, where they sell devotional statuettes and pictures. . . and a variety of other sacramental objects and edifying literature.²

As it was with the death of Thomas Becket in Canterbury in 1170, and more recently with the death of Diana Spencer, within hours of the announcement of Elvis' death thousands of people began gathering at Graceland of their own accord, from all over America, bringing tributes, crying and praying. During the days that followed his death, stalls appeared in the shopping mall across the road from Graceland, selling tee shirts and other Elvis memorabilia.³ As mentioned above, it would seem that many fans perceived Elvis as a martyr to the way of life and fame that had created and consumed

¹ Rodman, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-03.

² Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York, 1978, p. 25.

³ Neal and Janice Gregory, *When Elvis Died*, New York, 1980, pp. 66-76.

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him.¹ All the functions of the pilgrimage, the access to the home and grave, the selling of 'sacred' objects and memorabilia, are now controlled by the company that manages Elvis Presley's estate, Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc. The days that are considered particularly special for visiting Graceland, those that see the greatest number of visitors, are the day of his death, 16 August, and his birthday, 8 January.

It has been suggested that Elvis' lifestyle, particularly the reclusive nature of the last years, kept him out of touch with people who would worship him in life. The siting of his home in Memphis, not Hollywood where many stars live, made Elvis obvious and led to him becoming a recluse. Therefore, towards the end, he became the epitome of the inaccessible rock star. In death, Elvis is accessible to the fans who could not visit him in life.² When he died, crowds estimated at up to 30,000 queued up to view his body before the burial, many stating that it was the only chance they would ever have to see him.³

Graceland, because of its associations with Elvis, is one of the most visited places in America, attracting over 700,000 visitors per year. It is interesting to note that the interior of Graceland is famous for the bad taste with which it was furnished and decorated: the furniture in the 'Jungle Room' is upholstered in fake fur and the room includes an interior brick waterfall, the 'Pool Room' is covered, wall and ceiling, with pleated patterned fabric and throughout there are many mirrors, chandeliers and dark velvet curtains. The typical visitor to Graceland is supplied with an audio headset to guide them through the mansion. This guide includes many 'happy memory moments' from Priscilla Presley, Elvis Presley's former wife, about what it was like to live in Graceland with Elvis, and what Elvis used to like about particular rooms and what were Elvis' favourite things. The tour proceeds through most of the living areas of the house, although Elvis' own bedroom and the bathroom in which he died are notably absent from the tour. The visitor then proceeds on to what is known as the 'Trophy Building' which houses many of Elvis' gold records, awards, photographs, stage costumes and other memorabilia. The visitor eventually proceeds to the Meditation Garden where it is suggested that one might have a period of quiet reflection. The Meditation Garden contains the graves of Elvis and his parents. There is an eternal flame on Elvis' grave and an enormous white marble statue

1 Doss, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

2 Rodman, *op. cit.*, pp.102-03.

3 Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

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of Christ with the word 'Presley' engraved on the bottom. After this, the visitor is then able to board the bus to return to the mall across the street where there is a museum housing many of Elvis' cars and bikes, a more personal photographic exhibition and the opportunity to go aboard Elvis' plane, the *Lisa Marie*.

An important question to ask is whether those that go to Graceland are pilgrims or tourists. Many contemporary tourism theorists suggest that the tourist is in general a form of pilgrim. Victor and Edith Turner's comment that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist'¹ alludes to the close relationship between the two: both go out from the familiar world to seek something that enriches their lives and then return home to the familiar world.² MacCannell, a tourism theorist, also believes that tourists are a form of contemporary pilgrim.³ Graburn, another tourism theorist, equates tourism as a form of sacred journey in terms of its relationship with the ordinary, workaday life from which tourism represents an escape, that is, the non-ordinary or sacred event. He goes on to say:

For traditional societies the rewards of pilgrimage were accumulated grace and moral leadership in the home community. The rewards of modern tourism are phrased in terms of values we now hold up for worship: mental and physical health, social status, and diverse, exotic experiences.⁴

Even in the medieval period it was noted that not all pilgrims were spurred on by spiritual desires, as Jacques de Vitry commented:

Some light-minded and inquisitive persons go on pilgrimages not out of devotion, but out of mere curiosity of love and novelty. All they want to do is travel through unknown lands to investigate the absurd, exaggerated stories they have heard about the east.⁵

¹ V. and E. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

² Ian Reader, 'Introduction' in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Basingstoke, 1993, p. 6.

³ D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, London, 1976, p. 19.

⁴ N. H. H. Graburn, 'Tourism: The Sacred Journey', in V. Smith (ed.), *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, Oxford, 1978.

⁵ Jacques de Vitry, *Hist. Hierosolymitana*, LXXXII, p. 1097 as quoted in Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion*, London,

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To further add to the general theories of tourists as pilgrims it would appear that many of the visitors to Graceland actually see themselves as pilgrims. It has been suggested that a sacred place is identifiable not by any single set of physical characteristics, but rather by what people do in relation to it.¹ The wall that surrounds Graceland is covered with the writings of visitors and include comments such as 'This is the pilgrimage I had to make'.² Press articles routinely refer to those going to Graceland as 'pilgrims'.³ Turner suggests that pilgrims 'are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of *communitas*, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine.'⁴ They come together with others seeking the same feeling and are bonded together, for that moment, in the experience. As regards Graceland, the most important and popular times to visit are around the time of the birthday of Elvis (8 January) and most importantly, the anniversary of his death (16 August). The week leading up to the anniversary of his death is known as 'Elvis Week' which sees many special events and functions at Graceland and throughout Memphis. During this week, the management of Graceland open for free the Meditation Garden to those who wish to go there from dawn until the usual opening time and from closing time until dusk.

The culmination of 'Elvis Week' is the vigil held in the Meditation Garden the night before the anniversary of his death. On the twentieth anniversary of Elvis' death in August 1997, there were 100,000 visitors to Graceland. The night of the vigil, candles are lit all along the walls of the estate and the streets surrounding Graceland are closed to traffic. Those who attend the vigil carry candles and there is a procession which files past the house and congregates at the grave where Elvis' voice is broadcast as are songs which are both religious and sentimental such as 'Amazing Grace', 'Old Rugged Cross' and 'In the Ghetto'. The vigil at the Meditation Garden at Graceland has been described as follows:

Anyone who has ever witnessed the Holy Fire on Easter Sunday in Jerusalem or has studied the fire rituals connected with ancient solar heroes will immediately sense the eerie familiarity of the

1975, p. 257.

1 Rodman, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

2 Reader, *op. cit.* p. 1.

3 Cameron Stewart, 'Viva Dead Elvis', *The Weekend Australian*, 16-17 August 1997, p. 16; and Lauren Martin, 'They're off to Graceland, via the Heartbreak Hotel', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1997, p 10.

4 V. and E. Turner, *op. cit.* p. 20.

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annual procession held in Graceland's 'Meditation Gardens' the night before the anniversary of Elvis' death. Every August 16, in the predawn darkness, the faithful circle Elvis' grave with lighted candles – extinguishing the flames with the first glimpse of the rising sun.¹

A further example of visitor behaviour that helps to mark Graceland as a sacred place is the votive offering. Like Christian pilgrims of the first millennium, Elvis fans visiting Graceland frequently leave behind tokens symbolising their faith, love and devotion: scribbled notes, prayers, flowers, pictures, teddy bears.² Further, many of the offerings resemble *ex votos*, which are usually tokens that resemble parts of bodies which are often left at traditional Christian pilgrimage centres to give thanks for cures. Many of the offerings left at Elvis' grave are personally decorated images of Elvis or dolls of Elvis and have the donor's name attached with notes of thanks.³

In a further link with medieval Christian pilgrimages it should be noted that Elvis was originally buried in a tomb at Forest Hill Cemetery in Memphis, although his body was moved to Graceland in the October after his death after a number of apparent attempts to open the tomb. The original crypt was bought by an entrepreneur who cut it up into 44,000 pieces which he then sold at \$80.00 a piece.⁴ It would not be stretching the point too far to draw a parallel between this and the great medieval relic trade.

An integral part of pilgrimage has always been that the pilgrim returns home with an object that in some way relates to the charisma of the sacred place.⁵ These relics provide pilgrims with portable vehicles of the sacred. Pilgrims have always wanted to take away with them relics as souvenirs and tangible proof of their visits. Christian pilgrims visiting the holy land in the middle ages would return with flasks filled with water from the Jordan, boxes with earth from sacred tombs.⁶ There have always been objects made available, usually by the authorities in charge of the pilgrimage site, for pilgrims to take back with them as reminders of their visit.⁷

1 A. Silberman, 'Elvis: The Myth Lives On', *Archaeology*, Vol. 43 No. 4, p. 80.

2 Rodman, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

3 Doss, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

4 Alan Attwood, 'Well It's One for the Money. . .', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1997, p. 13.

5 Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage. Past and Present – Sacred travel and sacred space in world religions*, London, 1995, p. 100.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

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Graceland is no different. Since the death of Elvis there have been available at the mall across the street from Graceland souvenirs for the visitor to purchase as a reminder of their visit. The supply of all these relics are now controlled and produced by Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc. who, rather like the medieval Christian church, control the marketing, packaging and delivery of the pilgrimage experience.¹

It should be noted that most of this mythology and religious fervour about Elvis appears to be largely the product of Elvis fans and media. Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc., the company which controls Graceland and all other material and copyrights relating to Elvis Presley and Graceland, denies that there is any religious or spiritual symbolism associated with Elvis and stresses the point that it is not in the business of making Elvis into a god-like figure.² However, it should be noted that while Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc. does not attempt to make Elvis into a god-like figure, it does engage in practices that help to reinforce the quasi-religious nature of the Elvis myth: it allows access to the Meditation Garden so that the all night vigil may take place and even provides first-time visitors with candles so they may participate. Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc. has also built the Elvis Presley Memorial Chapel adjacent to Elvis Presley's Birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi. It would also appear that the company has been actively involved in sanitising the story of Elvis' life. In fact in some ways the publicists of today could be described as the hagiographers of the twentieth century in the way that they sanitise the image or figure they work on to the point where it can be pitied, held up for worship and perhaps even deified. There is little mention of the sex and drug controversies that surrounded Elvis when he lived and, when asked, Graceland staff will only say that Elvis died on the second floor of the mansion, and will refuse to verify any statement that he died of a drug overdose in the bathroom. In fact, management of Graceland has admitted that providing visitors with portable audio guides of

¹ John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of the Saints in the Early Christian West* c. 300-1200, Oxford, 2000, p. 39. Crook observes: 'Closer to the more exotic medieval relic cults, perhaps, is devotion to the deceased pop star, Elvis Presley. In 1991 a wart that had been excised from his wrist twenty-four years previously was bought by an American artist and subsequently featured in an exhibition at the Royal Festival Mall. A fan club magazine advertised small phials of liquid under the heading "ELVIS' SWEAT! only for the most devoted fan: ABSOLUTELY contains a few precious drops of Elvis' perspiration".'

² Rodman, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

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Graceland tends to stop people asking these sort of questions.¹ It has been suggested that the images presented by the official Graceland history of Elvis help to reinforce the image of Elvis as martyr, emphasising his poor beginnings, love for his mother, spirituality and his premature death.²

In her study of Elvis fans at Graceland during 'Elvis Week' Doss notes that many of them deny the religiosity of the Elvis phenomena. While they tend to admit to feeling very strongly about Elvis and coming to Graceland during 'Elvis Week' because of their devotion to him, they deny that they see Elvis as a challenge to mainstream Christianity and, in fact, many profess strong Christian faith. Many of those interviewed by Doss seemed to feel that any attempt by the media or academics to classify their devotion to Elvis as a cult or a new form of religion is an attempt to marginalise or ridicule them.³ However, it would appear that many see Elvis as a more than human figure and many believe that Elvis is with God and that he would act as intercessor for them if prayed to, rather like a saint.⁴ It has been suggested that American religion in particular has always been a rather personal type of religion and that, for many people, Elvis has become part of their syncretic belief structure.⁵

A suggestion has also been made that perhaps, in a world where religion is increasingly less important to people, religious needs still exist and it is possible that, particularly in American society, these religious needs or impulses often lead people to invest themselves in the mass media, particularly in the form of idolatrous worship of stars. To many people, stars are the closest thing they have to gods and goddesses: they are highly charismatic figures who are deeply embedded in cultural myths and legends and that the behaviour that fans exhibit towards them is often nothing less than worshipful.⁶ People find it easier to relate to media stars than to traditional Christian saints. The Elvis Presley phenomenon would seem to fit in to this model, and this can perhaps help to explain why the pilgrimage to Graceland and the semi-deification or sanctification of Elvis Presley have emerged.

1 Doss, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

2 Gary Vikan, 'Graceland as *Locus Sanctus*' in G. Deaoli, T. McEvilly and W. McDavis (eds), *Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal*, New York, 1995, pp. 150-66.

3 Doss, *op. cit.*, p. 48-50.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 105-10.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

6 Rodman, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

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There is a quote from Eddie Murphy in a discussion about Elvis Presley that seems to sum up the Elvis Presley phenomenon:

You know what's interesting about Elvis? When he was getting ready to die, Elvis was broke, wearing big platforms and was like a joke in show business. It shows you how fucked up society is, 'cause in the movies they only want happy endings and shit. What happened is, when this man died, that was their happy ending. Elvis was their American dream, the poor boy that got rich and they hated him for it. And then he died and they turned him into this God form. And I think that's fascinating.¹

It would appear therefore that although the phenomenon around Elvis Presley does not form a religion, or even a religious cult as has been suggested, it is a form of devotion that for many people has taken on many aspects of religious ritual. Most fans do not appear to believe that Elvis Presley is any form of god, nor has there been any specific cult or religion formed around Elvis Presley, other than in a spirit of humour. However, the rituals that have begun to grow around Elvis Presley and Graceland seem to fulfil a need for people that the more formal religious structures no longer appear to fill. What has resulted is a syncretic mix of Christian faith and devotion to Elvis for many people.

¹ Spike Lee, 'Eddie Murphy - Interview with Eddie Murphy' in *Spin*, October 1990 p. 34 as quoted in Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: a chronicle of a cultural obsession*, New York, 1991, p. 185.