

Article

Football Disasters and Pilgrimage: Commemoration through Religious and Non-Religious Ritual and Materiality

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Abstract: Although the relationship between religion and football has gained considerable interest during the last twenty years, scant attention has been paid to the relationship between pilgrimage and football. This paper seeks to advance the study of this relationship through an exploration of collective memory about football disasters that throws fresh light on central themes within pilgrimage studies—pilgrimage as both a journey to a sacred place and the performance of diverse rituals at such places. The paper explores, in particular, the ways in which three different tragedies involving English football clubs have been commemorated through journeys to and ritual performance at places seen as sacred to those involved in commemoration—football stadiums and urban spaces, and cathedrals and pilgrimage shrines in England, Germany and Italy. Through this analysis, we seek to show how the commemoration of football disaster is linked to pilgrimage as a process where people seek healing and reconciliation through the public performance of rituals that link the local to the global.

Keywords: pilgrimage: religious and non-religious; football disasters; commemoration; ritual; materiality; healing; local and global



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1. Introduction

Although most analyses of football by social scientists have treated it as a secular phenomenon, football and other sports have been seen as quasi-religious, para-religious, or even as a new religion (Miller-McLemore 2001; Fulconis and Pache 2014; Cusack 2023), while other studies have taken a narrower approach by focusing on the relationship between football and institutional religion in the UK and Western Europe (Alomes 1994; Davie 1993; Boyle 2001; Mills 2002; Henkel 2007; Lawrence 2013; Jones 2018). The role played by ethno-religious divisions/cleavages has also been analysed through studies of football rivalry and conflict in the UK (see Finn 2000; Boyle 2001; Julianotti and Gerrard 2001; Julianotti 2007), and attention has been paid to the ways in which gender, religion and ethnicity shape the playing of football (van den Bogert 2018, 2021; Al-Khanbashi 2022). These studies have focussed on the UK and other countries in Western Europe, but others have looked further afield to Poland, Brazil and Zambia (Fozooni 2004; Rial 2012; Mazurkiewicz 2018; Lubasi Ilubala-Ziwa and Hachintu 2021), while others have taken a historical perspective (Pivato 1991; Mills 2002).

The relationship between religious pilgrimage and football has not attracted the same interest. However, Gammon (2004), Kassing and Nyaupane (2019) and Edensor et al. (2021) have all drawn on the notion of religious pilgrimage in their analyses of football fan beliefs and practices. Gammon, for example, has claimed that those visiting football stadia can experience ‘intense feelings of awe and wonderment, similar to those experienced by pilgrims at religious shrines’ (Gammon 2004, p. 41), while Edensor and his colleagues argue that these visits by football fans can be ‘a means of cementing their fan identity and developing a greater sense of allegiance’ (Edensor et al. 2021, p. 227). Michael Brennan (2008) has also shown how football grounds can be interpreted as secular pilgrimage sites

through his study of collective mourning after the ‘Hillsborough disaster’ of 1989, where Liverpool fans were crushed to death (see also [Brennan 2009](#)).

Grace [Davie \(1993\)](#), in her pioneering discussion of the ways in which supporters’ reactions to the Hillsborough disaster were portrayed in the media, noted how the trope of religious pilgrimage was deployed by journalists. She cites the *Catholic Pictorial’s* description of the commemoration at Anfield, Liverpool’s football ground, immediately after the disaster. The stadium is presented as a cathedral and its famous Kop End as an altar where supporters of both Liverpool Football Club and its local rival, Everton, laid flowers and their football regalia. The media account develops the pilgrimage analogy by referring to those paying their respects to the victims of the disaster as pilgrims:

‘The cloisters approaching the Anfield Cathedral were crowded all day Sunday the only sound breaking the silence being the tread of the pilgrims feet approaching the main door of the Cathedral the Bill Shankly gates there to offer their gifts and messages *Catholic Pictorial* 23 April 89’ (quoted by [Davie 1993](#), p. 82).

Grace Davie also points out that ‘[t]he use of such imagery to describe Anfield was not restricted to the religious press’ ([Davie 1993](#), p. 82). She refers to a memorial edition printed two years later on the anniversary of the disaster by a local newspaper, the *Liverpool Echo*, where the pilgrimage trope appears once again in its description of the 1989 commemoration at Anfield—“the greatest football ground in the world became Liverpool’s third cathedral as around a million pilgrims flocked to pay tribute to the Hillsborough dead” (quoted by [Davie 1993](#), p. 82)¹.

The study of the relationship between football and pilgrimage has focused primarily on human beliefs and practices, especially those involving symbolism, ritual and shared meanings. Yet, the ‘material turn’ in the study of religion (see [Meyer et al. 2010](#)) has encouraged some researchers to take a different approach that concentrates on materiality through analyses of the ways in which items, such as football scarves and shirts, are involved in the emotional and sensual construction of authenticity and sacrality (see [Kendall and Osbaliston 2010](#)) and collective identity ([Hofmann 2016](#)). This focus on materiality, the emotions and the senses has also informed the study by Rosy [Szymanski \(2010\)](#) of the important role played by football grounds as ‘repositories for, and conduits of, public memory’ (<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315250304-21/topophilia-relicuary-pilgrimage-recapturing-place-memory-meaning-britain-historic-football-grounds> (accessed on 17 April 2024)). Football grounds are more than functional material structures, therefore, since they are places where human tragedy, as well as sporting success, is commemorated through highly emotive ritual performances.

2. The 1985 Heysel and 1989 Hillsborough Disasters: The Role of Religious Institutions

This paper is exploratory in nature. It seeks to encourage more grounded research of a relationship which has been largely ignored but has much to offer for those working in a variety of academic fields, such as pilgrimage studies, sports studies and tourism studies. We begin by describing two crowd disasters which involved the Liverpool Football Club. During the 1970s and early 1980s, this English club enjoyed its greatest success both domestically and internationally when it won eleven Football League and four European Championship competitions. However, in 1985, the club’s reputation suffered a grievous blow. Liverpool had reached the final of the European Champions Cup competition, where the team was to meet the Italian side, Juventus, at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels. Juventus supporters, who were occupying Section Z of the ground, were attacked by Liverpool fans, and, during the ensuing melee, 37 Juventus supporters were crushed to death when part of the section wall collapsed. The disaster tarnished not only Liverpool F.C. but also English football in general. English clubs were banned from taking part in the European competition for several years. Four years later, another disaster struck Liverpool F.C., but this time many saw its fans as victims rather than aggressors. Before a semi-final game in the historic English Football Association cup competition at Sheffield Wednesday Football

Club's Hillsborough ground, a crush led to the deaths of 97 Liverpool supporters who were standing behind one of the goals.

The commemoration of the Heysel disasters by the Liverpool club and its supporters contrasted with the reaction to the Hillsborough disaster. The Liverpool club was deeply embarrassed by the Heysel disaster and the highly negative image of its fans as violent aggressors. The Juventus supporters who died or were injured were widely seen as victims, and the memory of the disaster continued to be a bone of contention when the two clubs met in European competitions. The Hillsborough disaster was also interpreted in 1989 by the Conservative government, the police and media as another example of ill-discipline by football supporters, but those representing Liverpool F.C. and the bereaved families saw the dead as victims of mismanagement by the police and those managing the Hillsborough stadium. Eventually, in 2016, the jury at an inquest determined that those who died 'were unlawfully killed' and that 'a catalogue of failings by police and the ambulance services contributed to their deaths' (see <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/apr/26/hillsborough-inquests-jury-says-96-victims-were-unlawfully-killed>, accessed on 27 February 2024).

Academic discussion of the commemoration of these two football disasters has paid scant attention to role played by religious institutions and even less to how these commemorations were seen in terms of religious pilgrimage. As we have seen already, Grace Davie did explore the role of religion in her analysis of how the Hillsborough disaster was commemorated in Liverpool (Davie 1993) and how some media reports drew on the trope of religious pilgrimage. The role of religious identity has also been explored by Anne Eyre (1997) in her analysis of football rivalry in both Glasgow and Liverpool. She makes the important point about how these commemorations demonstrate the continuing influence of religion in a sport that has been largely interpreted as a secular pastime:

Both in the immediate aftermath of Hillsborough and in the years since, the significance of both football and Christianity as part of the religious make-up of the community are reflected in the rituals and symbols of commemoration. This highlights a further important point—namely that, in discussing football and traditional religion, one need not necessarily exclude or compete with the other. Both football and Christianity are part of the religious culture of that and other cities. (Eyre 1997, p. 10)

Furthermore, she also deploys the concept of pilgrimage in her discussion of how the Hillsborough disaster was commemorated and interpreted:

over a million visitors made the pilgrimage to Anfield (Liverpool's home ground) to pay their respects. At this time, ultimate questions such as why God allowed this to happen were asked'. (Eyre 1997, p. 10)

Liverpool's Christian representatives were involved in the commemoration of both the Heysel and Hillsborough disasters from the start. The impressive alliance forged between David Sheppard, the Anglican bishop, and Derek Worlock, the Roman Catholic archbishop, facilitated the holding of services in the city's Anglican and Catholic cathedrals the day after the Heysel disaster, and both dignitaries joined the political and sporting mission, which flew out to Turin to formally express regret for the tragedy on behalf of Liverpool's citizens. As David Sheppard and Derek Worlock explain in their joint book, *Better Together: Christian Partnership in a Hurt City* (1989), 'There was considerable interest, especially among the press, in the presence of two bishops in what was recognised as primarily a political or sporting delegation. Yet as the visit took shape the role of the Church leaders and the reason for our presence became steadily clearer' (Sheppard and Worlock 1989, p. 248). After meetings at the City Council and the Juventus headquarters, they went to Turin's main pilgrimage shrine, *La Consolata*, for a Mass of Reconciliation, which was attended by Turin's Cardinal Ballestrero and 'more than two thousand enthusiastic Italians' (Sheppard and Worlock 1989, p. 249). Both bishops preached during the service and were invited by the cardinal 'to join him in blessing the congregation' (Sheppard and Worlock 1989,

p. 249). They conclude the section on the Turin visit thus: 'For the Turin supporters and especially the officials of Juventus, it was a totally new experience of ecumenical sharing. For Liverpool, football and religion came closer that night than ever before' ([Sheppard and Worlock 1989](#), p. 249). The two bishops combined again after the Hillsborough disaster, as one journalist describes in *The Tablet* (a Catholic weekly):

Derek Worlock immediately ordered a Requiem Mass to be said in the Metropolitan cathedral the very next day, and as 3000 prayed inside, twice as many, drawn by rumour alone, gathered in the precincts for an improvised service of their own. David Sheppard hurried back just in time to attend the Mass within. Outside, a Salvation Army band played—the Liverpool football anthem 'You'll never walk alone' especially—and the police lent a priest their loud hailer to lead the prayers. Spontaneously, a shrine of scarves and flowers took shape. . . . A week later it was the turn of the Anglican cathedral to hold a solemn memorial service, carefully prepared rather than improvised.

<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/922/anglican-and-catholic-partnership-helped-shape-liverpool-s-response-to-hillsborough-tragedy> (accessed on 17 April 2024)

3. Commemorating the Hillsborough Disaster and Pilgrimage

These large-scale commemorations, organised by well-established religious institutions, were complemented by private, intimate commemorations. Some devised their own rituals, and in the following example, we see how these private commemorations could bring together non-religious and religious elements in what the participants saw as a pilgrimage. In September 2021, a local newspaper, the *Wirral Globe*, reported that Steve (the brother of one of the victims) and his son, who were both involved in raising money for charities, including the Liverpool Family Support Group, were going on a pilgrimage:

Steve told the *Globe*, 'We're both lifelong Liverpool fans and for me when I turned 60 this year, I thought there's got to be one last challenge for me. At the time of Hillsborough, I was 28 and with George [his son] being at a similar age we thought we could do it as a pilgrimage to Liverpool fans whilst raising some money in memory of the 97. We had in our minds that we could do something as father and son as well as a making a great memory for us together'.

<https://www.wiralglobe.co.uk/news/19570617.dad-son-walk-hillsborough-anfield-memory-97/> (accessed on 17 April 2024)

Interestingly, in the following comment, the reporter discussed pilgrimage through a distinction between Liverpool's religious and non-religious centres and York Minster:

York Minster is not the obvious place of pilgrimage for a man keen to honour the 96 Liverpool fans who lost their lives in the Hillsborough disaster of 1989. Anfield, perhaps. Or one of Liverpool's two cathedrals. But York Minster?

The answer lay in Steve's decision to complete the last part of the Way of the Roses cycle route, which ran between the cathedral towns of Ripon and York. He was going to 'light a candle in honour of his brother and all the other Hillsborough victims in both cathedrals'. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 had prevented him from performing this ritual, but he was able to compromise:

With lockdown over, however, Steve is determined to do the ride from Ripon to York—the part of the Way of the Roses ride he missed out last year—and light a candle in honour of his brother and all the other Hillsborough victims in both cathedrals.

Very special candles they will be, too, he says. He's had two of them made, in red and blue to signify how the red and blue sides of Liverpool united in response to the tragedy.

<https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/18681342.everton-fan-steve-light-candle-honour-liverpool-supporting-brother-michael-hillsborough-victim-york-minster/> (accessed on 17 April 2024)

4. Commemorating the Heysel Disaster and Pilgrimage: Healing Wounds

In Italy, the commemoration of the Heysel disaster highlighted the role played by collective and public ritual, as well as religious institutions and pilgrimage shrines. Among the many commemorations held in honour of those who died in the disaster, one involved the Marian shrine at Cherasco in Turin's northern suburbs. In 2018, for example, a distinguished Juventus former player, Gianluca Pessotto, represented the club in the gardens of the sanctuary (<https://www.juventus.com/en/news/articles/turin/special-day-of-remembrance-for-heysel-victims> (accessed on 17 April 2024)), and in 2023, this annual ceremony was observed by the Quelli di via Filadelfia, which was a non-profit supporters' club dedicated 'to preserve the history and memory of those, who regularly occupied a section of the Juventus stadium called the Curva Difesa' (<http://www.quellidiviafiladelfia.org/> (accessed on 17 April 2024)). Commemorations were also held in Turin's cathedral, a far more famous centre of pilgrimage since it contained the Shroud of Turin, which had been, for centuries, an object of devotion (see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shroud-of-Turin>, accessed on 18 March 2024).

Several formal meetings were also held between Liverpool and Juventus club representatives after 1985, and although they were not discussed in terms of pilgrimage, they did illustrate the role played by ritual and symbolism in media reports and online discourse. The most significant encounter was in 2005, when the two clubs met home and away in the European Champions League quarter final. For the first match, which was held at Anfield, considerable attempts were made to heal wounds. The city's mayor welcomed the players and supporters when their plane arrived at the local airport; the local newspaper, *Liverpool Echo*, printed an acceptance of blame for the Heysel disaster; and before the match, all Juventus supporters were given a wristband in both clubs colours (red, white and black) and a match brochure, which contained an apology by one of those involved in the violence at Heysel, as well as a statement in Italian from Ian Rush, who played for both clubs and who expressed his affinity with the Turin club.

Yet, as one of Britain's national newspapers, *The Guardian*, noted in its 2005 report, these attempts to heal wounds were rejected by some Juventus supporters. Under the heading, 'Juve fans turn backs on peace move: Reds' gesture of friendship not enough to heal 20 years of pain', the newspaper's reporter, Paul Kelso, described what happened:

The most powerful statement on a night of intense emotion came shortly before the first Liverpool-Juventus match in 20 years had begun. A group of supporters from both clubs approached the 2600 Italian fans at the Anfield Road End carrying a banner bearing the words Memoria e amicizia, in memory and friendship.

It was a gesture intended to express regret and sorrow but it was met with a devastatingly eloquent response. As the banner moved forward, watched from the centre circle by Phil Neal, Michel Platini and Ian Rush, all of whom had played at Heysel, the front 10 rows simply turned their backs. They did so again moments later when Anfield stood for a minute's silence and supporters on the Kop displayed a mosaic repeating the sentiment, Amicizia. (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2005/apr/06/championsleague200405.championsleague>, accessed on 28 February 2024).

Paul Kelso did acknowledge that the majority of Juventus fans in the stadium welcomed this attempt to heal wounds, but the snub delivered by the first ten rows 'demonstrated beyond question the abiding pain inflicted by those Liverpool supporters who had rioted before the fateful 1985 European Cup final' (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2005/apr/06/championsleague200405.championsleague>, accessed on 28 February 2024).

The deep wounds and bitter memory again surfaced when Liverpool went to play the return match at the Juventus ground in Turin. Under the banner headline, 'Taunts and trou-

ble mar Juve's attempts to deal with the past', *The Independent* newspaper's sports journalist, Glenn Moore, reported that, in the stadium, some Juventus fans held up banners reading 'Easy to speak, difficult to pardon: murders' and '15-4-89. Sheffield. God exists', which provocatively linked the Heysel and Hillsborough disasters (<https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/taunts-and-trouble-mar-juve-s-attempts-to-deal-with-the-past-5344777.html>, accessed on 28 February 2024).

5. Commemorating Disaster for a Global Audience and Healing Past Wounds

Although these commemorations demonstrate the ways in which the relationship between football and pilgrimage was deeply influenced by local social, cultural and political forces, European clubs emerged as prominent global football brands from the 1990s onwards, and the disasters described here have become part of their respective narratives in different ways. Encouraged by the global flow of information and imagery promoted by the internet and the global expansion of tourism, more and more people are making their way to football grounds, where they are taken on tours by guides who are intimately associated with the particular club. During these tours, they can visit the club museums, where the clubs' achievements are proudly displayed through material artefacts such as photographs, signed shirts and scarves.

At Liverpool F.C.'s Anfield stadium, international visitors have been reminded about the Hillsborough disaster in various ways over time—currently, there is a large plaque attached to a stadium wall where all the names of those who died are listed. The club's website recorded the 34th anniversary of the disaster—15 April 2023—for its global audience by showing a photograph of supporters displaying the number of those who died through cards in a solid block behind one of the goals, with the players in the foreground, followed by the banner headline 'Gone But Never Forgotten Rest In Peace The 97'. In the following text, both the symbolic and material nature of the commemoration were described for the global audience, as well as the respectful suspension of commercial activity:

The club will lay floral wreaths at the Hillsborough Memorial at Anfield, flags will be flown at half-mast, and the Anfield retail store will close from 1 p.m. for the remainder of the day.

(<https://www.thisisanfield.com/2023/04/gone-but-never-forgotten-rest-in-peace-the-97-2/>, accessed on 29 February 2024).

The commemoration of the Heysel disaster at the Anfield stadium was much more complicated, but, eventually, a plaque was attached to the wall of one of the stands at the stadium, with the following text: 'In remembrance of the 39 supporters who lost their lives at the Heysel stadium, May 29th 1985'. Below the text were displayed the insignia of the two clubs, and underneath were the Italian words used at the games between Liverpool and Juventus during 2005: 'In Memoria E Amicizia' (<https://www.liverpoolfc.com/news/lfc-mark-37th-anniversary-heysel-stadium-disaster>, accessed on 29 February 2024). As the club website on 27 May 2022 explained to its global audience, the 37th anniversary would follow a similar pattern to the Hillsborough commemoration:

As a mark of respect to those who died, floral tributes will be placed beside the Heysel memorial plaque at Anfield's Sir Kenny Dalglish Stand on Sunday afternoon. The men's team will observe a period of reflection at the AXA Training Centre to pay their respects following their return from Paris after the Champions League final. Flags across all club sites will be flown at half-mast throughout the day.

<https://www.liverpoolfc.com/news/lfc-mark-37th-anniversary-heysel-stadium-disaster>, accessed on 29 February 2024.

These commemorations were non-religious in character, but their use of ritual and symbolism paralleled ceremonies designed to heal the wounds of conflict at pilgrimage shrines. At the famous Roman Catholic shrine at Lourdes in France, for example, representatives of the French and German armies came together in 1958 to commemorate the years

of peaceful coexistence between their two nations since the end of the Second World War (see Eade 2018). This pilgrimage was followed by an annual military pilgrimage involving representatives of the NATO armed forces, and like the Anfield commemorations, peaceful co-existence and the healing of past wounds were repeated themes. However, as Robert Orsi has argued in a different context, healing was a complicated process:

From the mouths of others, ‘healing’ comes as an injunction to silence. It posits an end to their pain that survivors do not recognize from their lives. They do not deny that there is much to be healed, but ‘healing’ is not a simple or innocent matter. (Orsi 2017, p. 283)

6. Manchester United and the 1958 Munich Disaster

The commemoration of the Hillsborough and Heysel disasters involved bitter memories and highly ambivalent feelings where pilgrimage played a significant role in some people’s imaginations and both cathedrals and pilgrimage shrines acted as destinations for collective or individual ritual performances. In the case of the 1958 Munich disaster where most of the Manchester United football team, popularly known as the ‘Busby Babes’ after their famous manager, Sir Matt Busby, was killed, the rituals of commemoration were less entangled, and pilgrimage a more collective healing practice.

In 1958, the talented young Manchester United team travelled to the Serbian capital of Belgrade to play against Red Star Belgrade in the European Cup competition. After refuelling at Munich airport on the way back, the plane crashed upon take-off, and most members of the team were killed or injured. The disaster led to a regular commemoration involving a variety of groups—those representing Manchester United and Munich’s famous football club, Bayern Munich, the two clubs’ fans, municipal officials, Munich hospital doctors and residents close to the airport.

The Manchester Munich Memorial Foundation organised annual trips to the site of the disaster, and in a February 2023 article on Bayern Munich’s official website, the chairman, Patrick Burns, explained the following:

[m]any of us became Manchester United fans because of the Busby Babes . . . The fact they weren’t able to fulfil their potential is one of the saddest chapters in English football. We still don’t forget it today.

<https://fcbayern.com/en/news/2023/02/the-flowers-of-manchester>, accessed on 27 February 2024).

Pilgrimage once again appeared as a trope as Patrick Burns continued:

Every United fan should make a pilgrimage to Munich at least once in their life. <https://fcbayern.com/en/news/2023/02/the-flowers-of-manchester>, accessed on 27 February 2024).

The pilgrimage trope also appeared on Bayern Munich’s website later in 2023, when Manchester United came to play Bayern in the European Champions Cup. The article under the title ‘FC Bayern and Manchester United side by side’ spoke about the following:

At the suggestion of the late city councillor and member of the Bavarian state parliament Hermann Memmel, the city of Munich renamed the site of the accident Manchesterplatz a few years ago and erected a memorial stone with the names of the victims as well as a display case there. It has become a place of pilgrimage not only for Manchester United supporters but for football fans from all over the world.

<https://fcbayern.com/en/news/2023/02/the-flowers-of-manchester> (accessed on 17 April 2024)

The disaster had forged a ‘special bond between the two clubs’ which lived ‘on to this day, especially at the place of pilgrimage, Manchesterplatz’. <https://fcbayern.com/en/news/2023/02/the-flowers-of-manchester> (accessed on 17 April 2024) and:

at the end of the Busby Babes' story there is not a catastrophe, but reconciliation and friendship. Bridges were built between two clubs, two cities and two countries that have endured to this day.

(<https://fcbayern.com/en/news/2023/02/the-flowers-of-manchester>, accessed on 27 February 2024).

The pilgrimage had built up over the years as a 'bottom-up' process led by club supporters and did not appear to involve local religious leaders in contrast to developments in Liverpool. As a 2019 article in GQ magazine explained, '[w]ind back 25 years and there wasn't much of a commemoration on the day'. However, the anniversary had 'become increasingly important for many United fans who have no memory of the Busby Babes' with a testimonial game held forty years after the disaster in 1998 and 'a commemorative display' installed at the Manchester United stadium. Fans also wanted to visit the site of the disaster to pay their respects, and as travel became 'easier and cheaper', the numbers making the journey increased so that now:

hundreds make the annual pilgrimage to Munich, where they've gotten to know local publicans and politicians. They've raised money for Bavarian charities, they marvel at the work of the Red Docs, who take care of the shrines left by supporters. They want a permanent encased shrine so that the memorabilia left by fans can be protected.

<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/manchester-united-remembering-the-munich-air-disaster>, accessed on 29 February 2024.

Once again, the theme of healing was introduced. At the 2019 commemoration, Bayern Munich's chairman, the renowned former footballer, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, was quoted as claiming that 'the disaster helped heal wounds'—a process that involved not only physical but also social and political healing:

I have the impression that, in the darkest of days for Manchester United, the selfless support and sympathy offered by Munich, in particularly the German doctors at the hospital, the residents and also FC Bayern Munich made an important social political and contribution to restore those relations.

<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/manchester-united-remembering-the-munich-air-disaster>, accessed on 29 February 2024.

7. Place, Ritual, Materiality, Music and Song

The commemorations of disaster which were described in terms of pilgrimage involved both religious and non-religious places, therefore. The Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals in Liverpool served as sacred spaces where religious services were performed, but the Anglican cathedrals of Ripon and York were also chosen as locations where individuals could perform their own ritual commemorations. As the commemorations performed at Manchesterplatz in Munich demonstrate, non-religious spaces could also be transformed into pilgrimage destinations.

The commemorations held in Liverpool, Turin and Munich involved a variety of participants—local and national politicians, football club officials and fans, as well as representatives of Christian institutions—and engaged with a local and more global audience. The Liverpool delegation, which went to Turin immediately after the Heysel disaster, included political and religious representatives, and these delegates attended not only a civic meeting in Turin's City Council but also went to a ceremony held at the city's most important Marian pilgrimage shrine. The Hillsborough commemorations also involved religious and non-religious performances since services were held not only in Liverpool cathedrals but also fans and others came to Liverpool F.C.'s Anfield stadium to pay their respects. The example of the commemoration performed by Steve, his son and his friend also demonstrates how individuals could invent their own rituals and perform them at religious venues.

The materiality of these performances played an important role in these commemorations. As Grace Davie noted in her 2010 paper, outside the Liverpool Catholic cathedral, where the first service was held after the Hillsborough disaster, a ‘shrine of scarves and flowers’ took shape—a practice that was similar to the flowers and other items laid outside Kensington Palace after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 (Davie 2010). Steve chose to commemorate his brother’s death with candles that he had made himself in the colours of both the Liverpool and Everton football clubs to symbolise how fans from these rival clubs had come together in the face of adversity.

However, materiality was not the only means through which people expressed their sorrow—music and song were also deployed in the singing of the Liverpool F.C. ‘anthem’ (*You’ll Never Walk Alone*). The song comes from the 1945 musical *Carousel*, and it became the Liverpool F.C.’s ‘anthem’ during 1963, when the song was recorded by a Liverpool band, Gerry and the Pacemakers, and became a big hit. One of the explanations for the song’s popularity lay in its hopeful message about facing adversity, and during the commemoration at Liverpool’s Catholic cathedral, the anthem ‘was sung by a lone choir boy, offering both comfort and hope to a city in mourning’ (<https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/youll-never-walk-alone-liverpool-fc/> (accessed on 17 April 2024)). The performance of the anthem is most popularly associated with those fans, who occupy the ‘Kop End’, a high-banked terrace behind one of the goals. As the fans sing, they hold aloft their football scarves, and the impact is highly motivational and emotional (see <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/youll-never-walk-alone-liverpool-fc/> (accessed on 17 April 2024)).

8. Collective Memory, Penance and Reconciliation: The Traces of Christian Pilgrimage

The annual commemorations help to keep the collective memory alive across the generations. The relevance of pilgrimage here is useful as a way of thinking about how pilgrimage has been understood in the Christian tradition and pilgrimage studies. The historic association of Christian pilgrimage with fulfilling a vow and healing wounds through arduous commitments and devotional practices seems to be reflected in the various individual and collective commitments, such as raising money and taking time to travel to religious and non-religious ‘shrines’.

The tradition of repentance evident within Christian pilgrimage also seems to inform the attempts by Liverpool fans to apologise to their Juventus counterparts at the stadium shrine, even if such offers of reconciliation were rejected by some of the visitors for whom the wounds were too deep. This rejection raises the issue of the institutional structures associated with Christian pilgrimage. At Christian shrines where ceremonies were held to ritually reconcile old foes and heal past wounds, priests played a key role (see Eade 2018) and reminded participants of the Christian belief in repentance and reconciliation.

9. Conclusions

The 1989 Hillsborough disaster, where 97 Liverpool fans were crushed to death, is just one example of how football grounds and their environs can be the scene of collective disaster rather than joy and celebration. During the 1980s, there were a number of fatal crushes in and around European football grounds. In 1982, 66 people were crushed to death while leaving a football match between Spartak Moscow and a Dutch team from Haarlem, and three years later, 39 fans died at a Brussels stadium before a European Champions League match between Liverpool and Juventus. These disasters were not confined to the European region, however, since in 1989, while 97 fans lost their lives at the Hillsborough stadium in England, 93 fans also died in a crush at a Kathmandu stadium in Nepal. Although various reforms introduced since the 1980s have prevented further disasters in Europe, fatal crushes have continued to occur elsewhere, i.e., in S. Africa, Guatemala, Ghana and Indonesia (see <https://apnews.com/article/travis-scott-sports-soccer-africa-abca243dda43964702fd99297db9ee4c>, accessed on 27 February 2024).

The massive crowds attracted to pilgrimage shrines have also presented serious problems for those in control of religious sanctuaries, and much larger fatalities have been recorded during similar crushes. Pilgrimage to Mecca and Mina (*hajj*) has been marred by such disasters, with 1426 dying in crushes there in 1990, followed by another 270 in 1994, 118 in 1998, 251 in 2004 and more than 2411 in 2015. Hindu pilgrimage has also been affected by crowd disasters, with 265 mortalities at a shrine in Western India, while over 168 died at a Hindu temple in 2008. More recently, in 2021, 45 Jewish pilgrims were crushed to death in Israel (<https://apnews.com/article/travis-scott-sports-soccer-africa-abca243d4a3964702fd99297db9ee4c>, accessed on 27 February 2024). In all of these disasters, many more people were injured, some seriously, with long-term physical and psychological effects.

Pioneering studies of contemporary pilgrimage largely focused on religious destinations defined as sacred or deeply meaningful places (see [Turner and Turner 1978](#); [Sallnow 1981, 1987](#); [Morinis 1984, 1992](#); [Eade and Sallnow 1991](#)). However, the volume edited by [Reader and Walter \(1993\)](#), which included Grace Davie's paper on the Hillsborough commemoration, encouraged the exploration of non-religious processes (see [Reader 2014](#); [Coleman and Eade 2018](#)), while the increasing popularity of walking the various routes across the European region to Santiago de Compostela has encouraged a shift in emphasis on pilgrimage as a journey (see [Coleman and Eade 2004](#); [Bowman and Sepp 2019](#); [Bailey 2023](#)). This paper draws on all three approaches by studying how and where human disasters are commemorated at both religious and non-religious destinations. Pilgrimage is seen as more than just what happens at sites administered by religious officials, and football is viewed as more than a secular, commercialised sport. As we have seen, the brother of one of the victims of the Hillsborough disaster combines a cycle tour, designed to raise money for a football charity, with performing a personal act of devotion at York cathedral, while others describe their travel to football grounds such as Anfield and other sites associated with football disaster, i.e., Manchesterplatz, as pilgrimage destinations.

The paper has also engaged with the attention paid within pilgrimage studies to the role played by materiality ([Higgins and Hamilton 2020](#)) and sensual, emotional expression in ritual performance ([Bull and Mitchell 2015](#); [Pénicaud and Jolivot 2023](#)). Football scarves, shirts and candles have deep significance for those coming to particular destinations to pay their respects (see, for example, [Derbaix and Decrop 2011](#)), while music and song express the fans' devotion to their club and club anthems, fervently performed at matches, can be included in religious settings as during the Mass held at Liverpool's Roman Catholic cathedral after the Hillsborough disaster.

The trope of pilgrimage rather than tourism appears to have been favoured by those involved in commemoration because the commemoration of football disasters involves deeply held attachments to the past and a determination to keep the memory alive of those who died in tragic circumstances. What we have seen here could be located within the history of place pilgrimage where journeys to Christian shrines in the European region were usually associated with fulfilling a vow, healing wounds through making penance or expressing devotion. However, the global reach of European football raises an important question about the extent to which supporters beyond the European region identify with both the tragedies and the sporting achievements of their chosen club. Furthermore, the study of the relationship between pilgrimage and football could contribute to the increasing globalisation of pilgrim studies (see [Albera and Eade 2017](#)) and throw fresh light on the relationship between local and global processes. Hence, the exploratory nature of this paper is designed to encourage more grounded research of a relationship which has been largely ignored but which has much to offer for those working in a variety of academic fields—not only pilgrimage studies but also sports studies, tourism studies and religious studies, for example—and those seeking to understand the interweaving of religious and non-religious processes in a changing Europe.

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Notes

- ¹ Her paper is part of a wider engagement with the secularisation debate within the sociology of religion delivered, for example, through her discussion of religious belonging in Britain (see Davie 1990) and her exploration of the continuing role of religion within collective memory among European nations (see Davie 2000) and ‘vicarious religion’ (see Davie 2007).

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