Walking Hadrian's Wall: Meditations on Romans, Christians, Birds, and Growing Older

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Robert M. Royalty, Jr.

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EXCERPT

Let me explain a bit about the subtitle. Romans and Christians might be obvious, but about the birds. I am indeed an avid birder. Partly they are in the subtitle as a whimsical placeholder, a synecdoche if you will, to signal that this talk will include more than the history of Hadrian's Wall or early Christianity, my research field. The birds stand for life in general. I was pretty sure "Meditations on Romans, Christians, and Life" would rank as one of the worst subtitles in the canon of LaFollette lectures. But there will be a few birds today. Finally, there's "growing older." This too should have some obvious meanings, but I want to make a few points clearer. First, it's not "being old." I don't think of myself as old and I plan to get considerably older. Second, it's a dynamic phrase which I prefer to the more current "aging," which applies to cheese and wine but not people. Third, everyone here is growing older. I like to think that we are all growing. Hadrian's Wall itself is both object and metaphor. Hadrian's Wall takes us to Hadrian himself, the man and emperor. The Wall is longer metaphorically than 84 miles—it runs across the Roman Empire to Egypt and Judea. And it runs forward in time to our present day and our lives. Or I suppose I should say, my present life, connecting experience and memory.

The LaFollette Lecture Series was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

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The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

Walking Hadrian's Wall: Meditations on Romans, Christians, Birds, and Growing Older

Robert M. Royalty, Jr.
Department of Religion

The LaFollette Lecture has always been the signature event of the fall semester for me. The first LaFollette Lecture I heard was Tom Campbell in 1999, followed in due course by the rest of the English Department and many other fine colleagues. Anne and I drove Gerry LaFollette to Bill Placher's memorial service in 2008, a ride that was a bright spot on a somber, sad day. I want to thank the LaFollette family for their support of the college and this lecture, and Dwight Watson for the tremendous honor of giving this talk.

Today I will consider my research in terms of the humanities broadly conceived by examining an artifact and an activity. In religious studies, we study objects or artifacts and activities, the things people do. Sometimes these objects and activities sound "religious": scripture, a temple, an icon. A service, a liturgy, a pilgrimage. Others are more "secular": inscriptions, monuments, and even colleges or amusement parks.

But today I invite you to join me in thinking about that most basic of artifacts, a wall, and the simplest of activities, taking a walk. The artifact is a big one, Hadrian's Wall, running originally 80 Roman miles across northern Britannia, and the activity is my walk last May: a long walk, 9 days and 112 miles, the length of Hadrian's Wall from Northumberland to Cumbria. (The wall path itself is 84 miles but I took a few diversions and wrong turns). Hadrian's Wall is a special wall indeed, a World Heritage Site and the most famous ancient Roman monument in Britain if not the world.

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Hadrian's Wall itself is both object and metaphor. Hadrian's Wall takes us to Hadrian himself, the man and emperor. The Wall is longer metaphorically than 84 miles—it runs across the Roman Empire to Egypt and Judea (Palestina). And it runs forward in time to our present day and our lives. Or I suppose I should say, my present life, connecting experience and memory.

A good bit of my reflection on the activity, on the walk, is about me, my experiences, my memories. But I hope that what comes out about me is also about us. For the humanities study and express what it means to be human.

Some of you might have caught an allusion in my title to the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, who was chosen by Hadrian to be one of his successor Emperors.

Hadrian became Emperor in 117 under somewhat dicey circumstances when the Emperor Trajan died. Trajan was Hadrian's guardian and apparently planned to make Hadrian Emperor, but never got around to publicly declaring the succession. Perhaps he was ambivalent; his final years were marked by heavy drinking and failed campaigns against Parthia, roughly northern Iraq and Iran. Hadrian and Trajan's wife Plotina, a supporter of Hadrian's his entire life, had to scramble a bit to make his accession look legitimate in Rome, although he had the support of the army all along. At any rate, the often forward-thinking Hadrian made sure both his successor, Antoninus Pius and his successor's successor, Marcus Aurelius, were chosen before he died.

Hadrian reigned from 117–138, between as I said Trajan, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. These are four of the five traditional "Good Emperors."

These four, along with Nerva, ruled during the height of the Pax Romana from the end of the first to the end of the second century. They chose their successors by adoption rather than birth, although they were all senatorial families. But, as anyone who has studied history knows, "good" is quite a relative term, depending on who's doing the labelling. Hadrian is known for his love of Greek culture and magnificent buildings, such as the Pantheon in Rome and the Temple of Zeus Olympios in Athens.[1]

He was the first Emperor to sport a beard, which set a fashion for a century. But at the end of his life, he fought a bitter war against the Jews, destroying Jerusalem and renaming it Aelia Capitolina after his family and the chief Roman gods of the Capitol. It was in fact Machiavelli who coined the term "Good Emperors" in 1503. [2]

There's not much Wall left along the walk, maybe 15 out of the 84 miles of trail. I didn't see any Wall until the morning of the second day and left it behind about 30 miles before the end.[3]

What is excavated only suggests the ancient Wall. Rather than a fortlet every mile and two towers between, there are ruins of the milecastles and turrets here and there, or sometimes just the shape of one in a field. We're not even sure how high the Wall was or whether there was a walk and parapet along the top, although most scholars think there was.

Even the great Roman forts are often just big lumpy squares like this, unexcavated or excavated and filled again.

Where there is no Wall, there are often the magnificent earthworks. As stunning as the remains of the Wall itself are today in the fields and farmlands of northern England, the ditch on its north side and Vallum along the south side a large berm, not clearly understood by historians—are almost equally impressive today.

To think that these massive Roman earthworks have survived almost two thousand years of farming, grazing and even quarrying is nothing short of impressive. Walking in and along the ditch and Vallum for days, you get a sense of the size and scope of the construction since the Wall itself comes and goes in short bits. Here, the Vallum is deep enough still to hide a sheep—or a walker named Bob who had to change after lunch when the weather turned colder.

And stunning indeed is Hadrian's Wall Path, across the crags and moors of Northumberland. But not always.

It starts east of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. I rode from the Central Station, where I saw many strung out drug addicts, five stops to the Wallsend Metro Station (dubbed *Raedarum publicarum Statio* on the wall) in the drab housing estates east of Newcastle.

Grimy bridges, warehouses, factories and abandoned railway abutments greet you during the first few miles on the Path.

On the western side of Newcastle lie the huge Dunston Coal Staithes, memorials to the famous coals of Newcastle, before you head away from the river across busy roads and motorways until finally reaching greener suburban parks.

In the first of these gritty neighborhoods of council flats, just a mile or two down the trail from the Roman fort of Segedunum in Wallsend, I looked up and saw a gang of youths blocking the trail. My guidebook had warned me that walkers had been hassled along here and I thought, oh great, I'm going to get mugged before I even start. I gripped my trekking poles and pressed ahead. Getting closer, I saw that they were 8 to 12 years old. Well, I thought, there's still a lot of them and I'm wearing a pack—they could easily push me over and I couldn't get up, let alone run. "Good afternoon" I said. They nodded, stared at me, and then one asked if I had seen any policemen. Trick question—If I say "no," I'm toast. They'll pin me down, take all my cash, and leave me on the ground wriggling like a beetle with my hands and feet in the air. I decided to keep my options open: "yes, about a mile back." Which was a lie but I thought a prudent lie. The reaction was priceless, especially for anyone who has seen young boys doing something they shouldn't. "Really? Where? How far is a mile?" They were so agitated. Turns out they had a little motorbike that they were trying to start, which is against the law on the trail, and my answer had sent them into a tizzy.

I walked on, amused, and had several carefree days, until I ran across a bull in a field.

After running into these boys, I kept walking through Newcastle, thinking about how Rome in many ways invented modern urbanization. The words "urban" and "suburban" are Latin words, of course. Our cities share a number of characteristics—the grand buildings of the Forum and downtown; squares and piazzas; large religious structures, great theaters, and stadiums. And slums. Rome had dense urban buildings, insulae, where hundreds and thousands of humiliores or lower-class people lived in apartment rooms five or six stories high. An appropriate start, I thought.

In the midst of this urban landscape—literally, in the very center of Newcastle, I saw the Kittiwakes, my first "lifer" birds of the trip. They look somewhat like the gulls you might see around Indianapolis but are in fact more delicate, smaller, with a more pleasing cry. They are not scavengers but true sea birds who fish for their food, and this is their furthest inland nesting colony in the world. In the midst of urban blight and decay—the old city of Newcastle, built on its former glory of coal, they appeared from nature as a symbol of hope. It was a moment to ponder, Kittiwakes in Newcastle.

The Kittiwakes were a bright spot in a hard first day but led me down a somewhat false path for the rest of the walk. They spoiled me: a flock of beautiful life birds in the perfect setting for juxtaposition and symbolic interpretation. And so every day henceforth I looked for "the bird of the day," without much success. There were candidates—the Chaffinches and English Robins, two of the most common birds in England, that I often struggled to identify; the large flock of pheasants in the field near Aydon Castle, after a wrong turn that added an hour to my walk to Corbridge; the Kestrel hovering in the wind at Blackcarts, on the coldest day near the northernmost point on the wall; the Curlews calling in the field near Cawfields.

The noisiest candidate was the almost omnipresent Eurasian Oystercatcher—here on the excavated ruins in Corbridge Roman Town.

But I choose as the bird of the trek Skylarks. Skylarks sing from the air along the moors and crags, in sun, rain, and mist. Skylarks sing in the rain, which captures well the mood of the walk for me.

I'll return to the walk later—back to the origins of the Wall itself.[4]

One of Hadrian's strategic policies was to stop Trajan's military expansions in Parthia, beyond the Tigris River, and Dacia (roughly Hungary today), site of bloody campaigns and one of Trajan's greatest military triumphs. The Empire erupted, from Britain to Egypt to Mesopotamia, around the death of Trajan. Hadrian had to act quickly. He made strategic retreats, negotiated treaties, and bribed kings on the borders. In other words, he began his reign by shrinking the borders of the Roman Empire, which was not popular. He was by no means a peaceful Emperor—and he was devoted to the Army—but he did not start new campaigns of expansion. A revolt against Rome in the north of Britain, which occurred during almost every new Emperor's reign, foreshadows our artifact for the day.

Before he left Rome for the first time as Emperor, three years into his reign, Hadrian redrew the sacred boundary of Rome, the *pomerium*, during the annual ceremony celebrating the founding of the city.[5] Trajan had extended the Empire into Dacia and Parthia but not its sacred boundaries; Hadrian emphatically re-drew the boundaries after giving up these very territories. This was in a sense his first Wall—the boundaries of the Empire were set with new boundary stones. He proceeded north to the German provinces and ordered the construction of a wooden palisade along the frontier.[6] This palisade was clearly more a symbolic boundary than a military fortification—and it kept the soldiers busy as well. Hadrian wanted to mark the borders clearly for both the Romans and the German barbarians.

Hadrian deserves the credit for building what we call today Hadrian's Wall—although it was called the Severan Wall until 1839 when a local clergyman proved it had been built originally by Hadrian. Severus made significant repairs and changes to Hadrian's Wall in the third century. But it is Hadrian's Wall, or the Wall of Aelius in Roman times, after Hadrian's family name.

Hadrian gets all the credit today, at least for the tourists and walkers—

although, when I finished the walk at Bowness-on-Solway, I was sitting in the small hut that marks the western end, savoring the moment and preparing to stamp my Wall passport at the final station. A British family showed up on the way to the beach for the Bank Holiday and one of their girls exclaimed loudly, "Hadrian! I thought his name was Adrian!"

Hadrian arrived in Britain from Germany in 122—hence the bus that runs along the Wall during the summer is called the AD122.

He probably stayed at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, built by Agricola (Tacitus' father-in-law) during a campaign in northern Britain. He likely surveyed a good part of the Wall as well, perhaps to the high peaks of the Pennines; Hadrian was famously attracted to climbing peaks. Roman legions built the Wall, originally stone in the eastern half and turf in the west, converted to stone by the end of the second century.

As far as I know, Hadrian did not claim that he would build a wall and the Britains would pay for it. Since the wall in the presidential race isn't my focus today, I want to deal with it and move on. I don't want that wall blocking my way. A wall with Mexico would be like Hadrian's German border of wooden stakes, ideological but hardly practical. I think about the pain and fear that modern walls, in Berlin, dividing Germans from Germans, and between Israel and Palestine, have created.

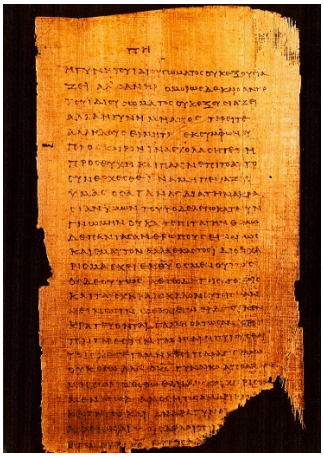
Here is the Israeli side;

here is the wall in Palestine.

It's divisive by definition and dehumanizing by design. It fits a Roman concept, "we" are on this side and "you" are on the other. You are a barbarian. You don't belong with us. But I disagree. Strongly. We are all human and we belong together. We don't need these walls.

Well, Hadrian didn't believe that for a minute. His policy not to expand formed symbolic and ideological boundaries, as well as physical lines, in *Germania*, North Africa, and *Britannia*. He set lines between Roman and Barbarian, two sides where previously there had only been one. There

were oddly Britains on both sides of Hadrian's Wall, perhaps even from the same tribe, which makes the analogy with the Mexican American border stronger.[7]



During Hadrian's time, Christians began to construct their own walls, the walls of orthodoxy and heresy. We are on this side, the Orthodox claimed; you are on that side. You are on that side because of what you think, what you believe, and what you don't believe. And what you think changes who you are. For Orthodox Christians, heretics were under the dominion of Satan and heresy led to damnation.

The foundation of this wall, the heresiological rhetoric of demonized difference, was being built for over a hundred years before Hadrian's Wall; that story is the focus of my 2013 book, *The Origin of Heresy*.[8] I won't rehearse that argument today—except to note that the book is available in paperback and author signatures are free. What changes soon after Hadrian's reign is that one of the first major proponents of "orthodox" Christianity's superiority to heresy, Justin Martyr, makes a political argument as well. In his *Apology* or defense of Christians written to Hadrian's successor Antoninus Pius, he claims that not only is his group of "right thinking" Christians the only proper type of Christians, but that they are also proper *Romans*—while the heretics who claim the name of Christian are not. They are really demonic. Justin's wall of heresy, in other words, dovetails with Hadrian's Wall. We Orthodox Christians are on this side with you Romans, while heretics are on the other side with the barbarians. I argue in my book that the notion of heresy is political, both within Christian communities and in its appeal to the *oikoumenē*, the inhabited world of the Roman Empire. Justin presages the Christian empire of the fourth century of Constantine and his successors, who codify and enforce Christian ideas of orthodoxy and heresy.

Hadrian certainly knew about Christians. He could have been aware of the letters between Pliny and Trajan 10 or 15 years earlier, in which Trajan gives that Roman governor some clear and not very drastic guidelines for dealing with Christians, who were just beginning to attract attention in the Roman world. While travelling in Germany or Britain, Hadrian received a similar letter about Christians from a governor of Asia Minor. His reply—following Trajan, basically, "leave them alone

unless they cause trouble"—was quoted and expanded on with some creative license by our friend Justin in his *Apology* to Antoninus.[9]

But there were many gods along Hadrian's Wall, whom the Emperor would have been much more familiar with than the God of these odd, new Christians: Jupiter, Mars, Mercury; *Fortuna, Disciplina, Roma* and the Emperor himself; local gods such as Coventina or Faunus; and gods who travelled with the army such as the Syrian Mother Goddess and Mithras.

There were at least three Mithaeums along the Wall, including this excavated one is at Carrawburgh / Brocolitia (Procolitia). But no churches. The evidence for Christianity in Britain emerges slowly, well after Hadrian's visit in 122. There were likely Christians by the third century, when the first martyr accounts are set, and British bishops attended Constantine's Council of Arles in 314. One of these was the Bishop of York, which gets us pretty close to Hadrian's Wall. Almost all of the material evidence for Christianity in Britain comes from the fourth century onwards, after

Constantine's Edict of Toleration, particularly in the more peaceful, Romanized south of Britain. There are hints, particularly in the Roman forts such as Vindolanda that remained occupied after the Romans left Britain.[10]

This cross is from the 6th century. We can say with confidence that the God of the Christians looked over at least some if not most of the last Roman soldiers along the Wall before they withdrew from Britain in 410 as the Western Empire collapsed.

After leaving Britain in 122 with the construction of the Wall underway, Hadrian travelled across Gaul (France) to the eastern end of the Empire, first to Bithynia in 123–124 and then on to Asia. It was probably on this visit that he met his lover, a beautiful boy named Antinous.

There is no public record of Hadrian and Antinous together until they were hunting in Egypt in 130. Many surviving statues portray Antinous as an idealized teenager but one shows him as a young man of about 20.[11] This could mean they were together for up to seven years. Hadrian was not crossing a wall by taking Antinous as a lover. The sexual exploits of Emperors such as Caligula and Nero were both infamous and legendary; Trajan, while known as both a virile general and family man, preferred boys in his later years. Hadrian clearly preferred men; today we might call him gay or bisexual, but modern gender identities are foreign to Greco-Roman antiquity. Hadrian's marriage to Sabina was political and polite but apparently loveless. Taking a young man for so long did however cross a wall; Hadrian might have been influenced by the ancient Greeks, as he was in so many ways. Many of you will know Plato's *Symposium* and the custom of an older man, the *erastes* taking on a younger man, the *eromenos*, as pupil or protégé as well as sexual partner. Hadrian's behavior provoked gossip and criticism in the Senate. The highest wall he crossed with Antinous was infatuation—perhaps love, perhaps obsession.

Was Antinous obsessed with Hadrian? Did he return the older man's love as well as his desire? Did he have a choice? That's what I wonder and we will never know. The Emperor of Rome picked him out while visiting Bithynia, perhaps at an athletic competition, maybe during a hunt, or

at a banquet where Antinous performed with other boys. Could someone resist or say no? I wonder about the power differential in this relationship, fueled by the infatuation of Hadrian. By Greek standards, the relationship was appropriate until Antinous reached manhood. We do know they were together for some time and toured Egypt in 130 as Hadrian continued his way around the Empire. There, Antinous committed suicide by drowning himself in the Nile—on October 24th in fact, 1886 years ago next Monday. Again we do not know why, only when and where. There was some indication of religious ritual around his death, that he was offering himself to the spirit or genius of the Emperor Hadrian by taking on the ritual death of Osiris in the Nile. And perhaps he was. Others have speculated that he had to end the relationship when he turned 20. But from our vantage point it is hard to see this as anything but a young man's suicide, what we would call today depression.

Twenty-five years to the week before I left for England to start this trek, my father committed suicide in his car at our Atlanta home. He died in May but the illness began well over a year before. The October before this he was giving dire warnings of a financial crash of apocalyptic magnitude. As graduate students with little income, we were both apprehensive and skeptical of his warnings not to spend a penny that wasn't absolutely necessary for survival. He pulled all funds from the stock market—he was a lawyer, wealthy enough—and put them in the money markets, anticipating a disaster. No disaster ever happened except the one he brought on himself and our family. By that Christmas we realized there were signs of serious, debilitating depression.

After a first suicide attempt in April I flew to Atlanta to visit him in the hospital. It was the weekend of the Masters, which remains an emotional weekend for me, even though I'm not a golfer. He was calm and controlled at the hospital when I was there, but he had "acted out" the night before and been restrained (placed in the padded cell, in his words). Perhaps he wanted a release from the pressures he faced in life, both real and imagined. By that point there was little difference between the two since his very very sharp mind had become so clouded by the disease.

His death was as bad as you might think it would be. Emotions were so conflicted: grief, horror, sadness, love. And anger. All of us were devastated, for days, for weeks, for years.
Everyone in the family and everyone who knew him wanted to know "why." Beyond a diagnosis of depression, that's a very hard question to answer. By nature, I want to understand things—I'm an analytical thinker, which probably suits being a professor more than other vocations where you have to make a decision and move on. But I've had a hard time understanding the "why" here. We know a great deal more about depression and depression medications today than 25 years ago but I'm not sure that would have saved him.

The week after he died, the children were gathered in a room in our house with my father's therapist, a man he had known well before becoming so ill. He asked us what we had learned, I think—I know what I replied. "Bend, don't break. Bend, don't break." That became a core lesson for me. No matter how bad it seems, no matter what you've done or what you think you've done, it's not worth breaking apart. Bend, don't break.

I understand more now, both cognitively and emotionally from other experiences, that depression is a disease and people suffer from depression like people suffer from cancer and heart disease. Medicine and therapy can help. There is no shame in the disease and there should be no shame in suicide. In ancient Rome, senators sought and received approval from Hadrian to commit suicide. Honor was a different concept then.

When I planned this trek, I wasn't thinking about the 25th anniversary of my father's death, or Antinous. That came later.

And there's nothing to connect my father and Antinous except a walk and a wall, an activity and an artifact. For many theorists of religion in the cognitive or symbolic anthropology school, this is what religion does. Religion makes connections and provides meaning; it tries to make sense where things seem senseless.[12] Or as Peter Berger writes, "religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant."[13] I thought a lot about the walk before I went. But in ways that I hardly anticipated, walking the Wall became a meaning-making activity for me.

I'll hold off for now on whether the walk was a religious experience. The Wall, like many ancient religions, functions today as a living object. It has been reused over and over—by the Romans, first as a fortified boundary, then as a staging ground to invade the north, then a customs border with villages around the forts; and finally an abandoned line of the collapsed Western Empire.

Afterwards, this Anglo-Saxon tomb joined to the Wall near Housesteads, shows how the next invaders used the Wall. The Roman stones found new lives in houses, churches, and many a cottage and farm walls.

A Roman arch and pele tower built of Roman stones in St. Andrew's Corbridge, and a Roman altar in St. Oswald's Heavenfield.

After its rediscovery in 1600, the Wall has found new life for tourists, walkers, runners, history buffs, archaeologists, and pilgrims.

From Wallsend to Bowness-on-Solway, you walk past villages called Heddon-on-Wall, East Wallhouses, Walltown, Walwick, and just plain Wall; and cottages named Vallum House, Old Wall Cottage, and Low Wallhead. Today, like a religion, the Wall brings new connections: connecting parks and trails across England, connecting families with nature, connecting this walker with his past.

Let's go a bit further with this "Wall as religion" idea. One of the most picturesque sections of the Wall is near the center, from Housesteads Roman Fort to Steel Rigg. It's a well-touristed section since it's easily accessible for day-hikers by car, coach, or the AD122 bus. Here, starting just to the west of Housesteads, is a section of "Clayton's Wall."

You can't spend too much time on Hadrian's Wall without running into John Clayton's work. He was a 19th century clerk and amateur archaeologist in Newcastle who inherited an estate that included the Roman fort and famous baths at Chesters. At that site, they have also preserved his extraordinary, over-stuffed, Victorian museum of Roman antiquities. He eventually bought four of the forts and restored quite a bit of the wall.

Clayton's Wall is without a doubt beautiful. It is also completely fake, which is one reason I like it so much. Sorry, it's not *completely* fake; these are Roman stones and it follows the line of Hadrian's Wall correctly. But while there are many questions about Hadrian's Wall, archaeologists are certain that Clayton's Wall does not follow Roman building techniques. Hadrian's Wall had a rubble core held together by clay or mortar on a broad, deep foundation and was faced with dressed stones. It might have been whitewashed and painted in order to give it more regularity. Over the course of its 300 years of service in the Roman Empire, the Wall was repaired and rebuilt several times because of war, neglect, and abandonment. But it never looked like Clayton's Wall, with loose stone construction and a turf top—not even the Turf Wall west of Birdoswald looked like this.

Clayton rebuilt an imaginary wall that fit 19th century building techniques for farms in Northumberland.

There's much more wall like this, drystone farm walls, along the Hadrian's Wall Path than actual Hadrian's Wall. It's quite beautiful and you can see Roman stones being used throughout. In other words, Clayton—by all accounts a wonderfully interesting and energetic man—Clayton recreated the past in the image of his present time.

As a scholar of religious studies and early Christianity, I see this over and over in how communities reimagine Christian origins and Jesus himself. They tend to follow Clayton's Wall: Early Christianity (1) is beautiful and (2) fits our present world. We always recreate the past in the image of the present—I'm not sure that we can help it.

Clayton's Wall is reconstructed to create meaning in the present according to a particular view of the past. Religion, many have argued in the sociological approach, is similarly constructed by

human societies, the "sacred canopy" placed over our social world to provide meaning and prevent chaos. This is part of what gives religion its power. According to Emile Durkheim, a society needs a religion in order to exist, to hold it together. And according to Max Weber, religion has the power to shape that society.[14]

In either case, whether reading with Durkheim or Weber, religion is a social construction. Clayton's Wall is fake in that sense, a reconstruction of the Roman Wall that is a tourist destination rather than a border; there is England on both sides of the Wall wherever it crops up. I was participating in a ritual—walking from Wallsend to Bowness-on-Solway. Ritual is part of the many social constructions of religion, just as Clayton's Wall is part of the many constructions of Hadrian's Wall that I toured last summer.

As a scholar of religion, I am trying to learn the different ways a religion was formed, its origins or beginnings, and how it functions within a society and across history. In many ways I work as an archaeologist works on Hadrian's Wall, looking for layers, dating objects and repairs, describing the function in different times and places, trying to decide what was and what might have been. Rather than dirt or stone, I am peeling back the practices, the beliefs, and the myths to look more closely at the history. Since I work on living religions, in particular Christianity but also Judaism and Islam, this often upsets people. Michel Foucault wrote, "For centuries, religion couldn't bear having its history told."[15] Sometimes when I tell the story of early Christianity, it seems to me that religion *still* doesn't want its history told. Clayton's Wall is indeed beautiful and people might prefer it to the best and latest archeology of Roman wall and fort building. Religion too wants a beautiful past; it often doesn't want to have its history told when it's messy, ugly, or violent.

But I'm not here just to deconstruct religion or the Wall. Nine days on Hadrian's Wall Path was an exhilarating experience.

A friend commented that this had everything for me: history, nature, birds, and good food. To which I replied, "Yes, all that, and endless miles of sheep poop." I hope I can convey the experience I had doing this walk, aside from sheep poop, that is.

William James, in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of [individuals] in their solitude," in relation to whatever they considered the divine.[16] Constructed or deconstructed, religion is an *experience* as well as a set of beliefs or rituals. Often, for James, the experience of solitude was in nature.

In religious studies, we study beliefs, theology, or ideas about God, and the history of traditions, sometimes forgetting that we are talking about actual people who have aches and pains, families to worry about, and dreams of their own. As Marx wrote of his approach to philosophy in *The German Ideology*, "In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven."[17] I am not going to argue idealism and materialism today, but what Marx is getting at, at one level, is that who we are matters to what we think and believe as well as how and whether we worship a God. Surely it's clear that how we live and love and believe is different according to who we are, if we are male or female, cis or trans, or in between, rich or poor, black, white, or brown, if we are those who have the power to name themselves or those who can only be named by others. These tensions call to mind a word much used in religious studies and theology, embodiment.

Walking for nine days with a pack at age 55 is a good way to get in touch with one's embodiment. This was the first backpacking and longest trek I had done since I was a teenage Boy Scout. I injured my right knee during training in April. Soon, I was hobbling around campus and climbing the stairs in Center Hall with considerable difficulty. I made two visits to orthopedists, got a steroid shot and a knee brace, and started physical therapy. There were some dark moods during this time barely a month before flying to England—I really wanted to do this walk and started to worry that it wouldn't happen after all. And there was a LaFollette Lecture riding on my right knee! But I improved, and in fact the knee didn't bother me at all on the walk until the last 2 or 3 days.

I wore this brace the whole time for support, although it was also a reminder of growing older. To tell the truth, I finished the walk with some new pains to go with the knee: severe blisters and lumbar vertebrae pushing on some nerves. The very last day was short, but I limped slowly along the Firth of Solway, frightening off lambs, and took almost three hours to walk just over 6 miles.

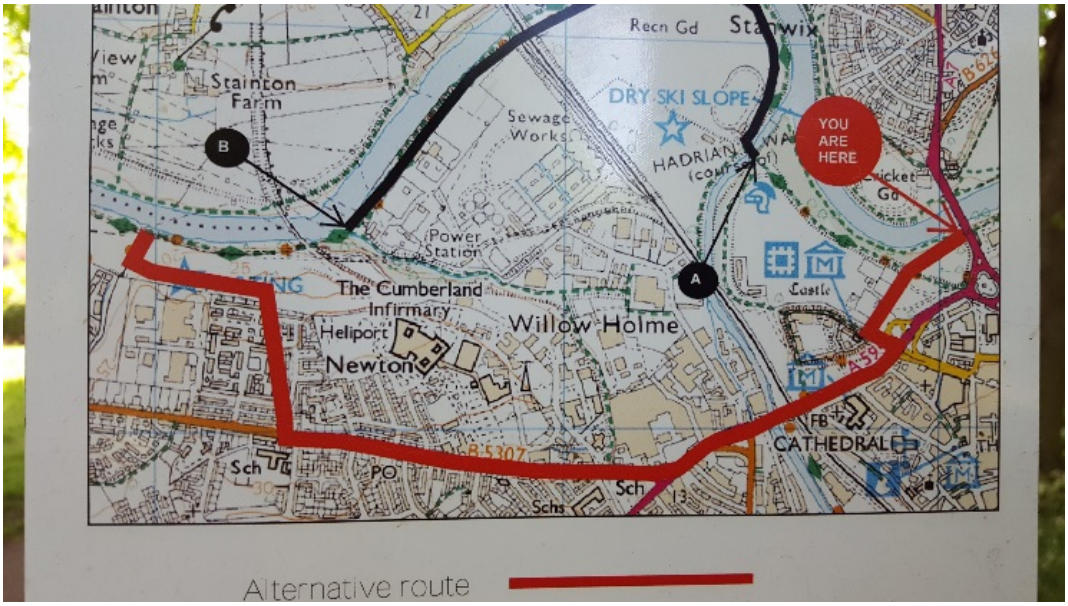
When I turned 50 and was having terrible lower back spasms, neck pain, and eventually rotator cuff surgery, my doctor was kind enough to point out that I had fallen apart. (She left private practice a year or two later to teach geriatric medicine at St. Vincent's; I'm not sure if I had anything to do with that.) None of these aches and pains are unusual for an active 55-year-old who keeps trying 100-mile bike rides and 9 day hikes. But as I grow older, the after effects grow longer.

I'm not going to leave the topic of "growing older" as just a matter of increasing physical pain, because there was such joy and so many moments of clarity during the trek. People have asked me what the best part of the walk was. My answer is that the walk in its entirety was the best part. It was a *Gestalt*. For me, it was a magical time from the creaky start in Newcastle to the painful half day limping from Hillside Farm to Bowness. I was engulfed in the experience, the rich palette of hiking, natural beauty, and Roman archaeology. I felt exhilarated even when exhausted by the miles, thrilled by achieving a worthy goal.

I discovered that, on a long walk such as this, life becomes simplified, focused, and clear. Everything I had went in my backpack each morning. The only task I had besides walking to the next inn or bed and breakfast was to enjoy the day: the history, the scenery, and the birds. In other words, the goal was to enjoy the moment as the miles ticked by (yes, I did look at the time and think about how long to lunch or dinner). I walked and looked, spied some birds, and I thought. For nine days, I carried everything I had. And I had to keep going. I suppose that's true in a sense of any travel, but on mile 10 out of 20 for the day, the only way to go was forward. This wasn't a day trip. I didn't have a car. I couldn't turn back to the inn I had checked out of that morning. I had to keep going.

Faced with obstacles that probably sound minor this afternoon but loomed large at the time, I kept going.

In Newcastle, I missed a diversion and powered through this construction site—foolishly, it seems now, but I tried to be safe and not fall into the River Tyne or the deep holes on the path (which I later learned were mitigating chemical pollution from some factory). In Newtown, I had to cut the day short and call my hotel for a ride rather than pushing on for a 10 pm arrival and no dinner. (They returned me to the same spot the next morning, so I just moved five miles from one day to the next). But on that next day, in Carlisle, another diversion closed the trail at the River Eden.



Faced with a long detour on a warm day through the city center, I called a cab to take me to where the diversion met back with the path.

And that bull in the field? I went around, of course, but had to climb a barbed wire fence to get back on the trail.

These diversions, minor as they might sound, upset my plan. I wasn't supposed to stop in Newtown that night or take a cab through Carlisle. But a lesson from twenty-five years ago. "Bend, don't break"— ran through my mind. So I changed my plan.

As I thought about keeping going during the walk, sort of "meta-thinking" about what was happening, I thought about how we live this way every day. It sounds trite now I'm sure, to say that we have to keep going, and perhaps it *is* trite. But think about how hard that can be. We all have lived in the past, dwelling on successes or failures or resentments, rather than moving ahead. And we have all known someone who couldn't move forward. We say they are *paralyzed*—by grief, fear, indecision, depression. They can't "get on with their lives." They can't *move*. The metaphor of movement, of progress along our life's journey or pilgrimage—this is fundamental to how we think about ourselves and our lives. There are many paths, yes, but only one direction, forward.

Hadrian could not move forward after Antinous' death. We know about Antinous because of Hadrian's public, powerful grief that obsessed him for the rest of his life. He immediately deified Antinous, a process that was still reserved for the Senate, and built his temple-tomb in a new city across the Nile. His magnificent villa outside Rome included a temple to Antinous and multiple statues and images of his deceased beloved. There are at least 100 marble images of Antinous discovered so far, more than any other ancient Roman besides Augustus and Hadrian himself; [18] his cult continued long enough to be critiqued by Christians in the fourth century, for whom Antinous was seen as a rival savior to Christ.[19] If Hadrian loved Antinous during his life as fiercely as he grieved and memorialized him after his death, then it was powerful infatuation indeed.

I am not sure we look back more as we grow older, but there is more to look back on. Regrets, resentments, joys, successes. We carry the past with us, just as I carried my pack forward every day. Sometimes that feels very heavy indeed, sometimes lighter, but we carry who we are. The pack gets heavier as we get older, as dreams fade or become realities, as we lose loved ones. This burden, the things he carried, must have been very heavy for my father. And he could not keep going.

On the night before the last day of the trek, I sat in a beautiful room at Hillside Farm on Bousted Hill, watching the sun set over Scotland. And then, the next day, it was over. For a week, two weeks, three weeks, I lived in this moment. Reliving the routes and photos and researching Hadrian and the Wall was my work. But soon life intervened—deadlines, meetings, another trip, the daily grind. Experience faded to memory.

Last August, as 25 years became 25 years and three months, I realized while walking the dog by the creek that I would never have a conversation with my father. That seems obvious, of course, hardly unique to me; indeed, that acute realization is one of the most painful parts of grief when a loved one dies. But memories fade, 1 year becomes 5, 10, and now 25. Since my walk in England I've spent more time in sustained reflection about my father, who he was, what did and didn't happen in our 30 years together. Last year I started a sort of conversation; I realized this summer with clarity how that conversation was one-way.

Experience fades and becomes memory. Memory becomes narrative. I hope that this narrative of my experience, of an artifact and an activity, of a wall and a walk, has not been unique to me. Self-reflection is part of our life as academics, as humanists, as humans. And if the study of religion and the humanities does not bring us closer to what is truly human, what ties us to each other as humans, then it is study in vain.

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[1] Hadrian's building programs are detailed in Anthony Birley, Hadrian: The Restless Emperor (London; New York: Routledge, 1997); for analysis and photographs, see esp. Thorsten Opper, Hadrian: Empire and Conflict (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 98–128.

[2] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), I:10, p. 43.

[3] There are some very small bits of Wall at Segendunum Fort (Wallsend), which I did see, and various bits in Newcastle, which I did not.

[4] For an exhaustive literature review of scholarship on the archaeology, history, and functions of the Wall, see Southern.

[5] Birley, 111–112.

[6] The German palisade could have been ordered after the British Wall. This sequence is confusing in the *Historia Augusta*. See Birley, 150 and n. 23; Southern, 86–88.

[7] Discussed in Southern, 70–88.

[8] Robert M. Royalty, *The Origin of Heresy: A History of Discourse in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[9] The letter was from Silvanus Granianus; Hadrian's rescript was to Minicius Fundunas, the new proconsul of Asia Minor; see Justin *1 Apol.* 68. Hadrian might have also received a defense of Christians from Quadratus and Aristides while visiting Athens in 124–5; see Eusebius *EH* 4.3; Birley, 183.

[10] A stone-lined tank at Housesteads, one of the forts along the Wall, could have been used for baptism. Four "fortress chapels," rectangular buildings with an apse, have been dated closer to 400 than 300, after Theodosian made Christianity the official religion of Rome. One is at Housesteads, on the Wall, and

another at nearby Vindolanda, one of the large forts just south of the Wall that preceded Hadrian's Boundary. See Malcolm Lambert, *Christians and Pagans : The Conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 13–43.

[11] So Birnley, 158. See also Opper, 166–91; this excellently illustrated volume from an exhibit at the British Museum covers Hadrian's life and career with extensive photographs of statues, buildings, and other artifacts of material culture.

[12] Followers of Max Weber's *Verstehenden* method; the most well-known anthropologist in this school is Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York, Basic Books1973).

[13] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy; Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 28.

[14] Émile Durkheim, Carol Cosman, and Mark Sydney Cladis, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Max Weber, Hans Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). A classic example of Weberian sociological interpretation is Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

[15] The passage continues: "Today, our schools of rationality balk at having their history written, which is no doubt significant." Michel Foucault and Jeremy R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 151.

[16]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 36. Edited by me for inclusive language.

[17] Robert C. Tucker, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 154. He continues, "Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding form of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence."

[18]Statues and objects depicting Antinous have been found from Spain in the west all the way to Georgia in the east, beyond the boundaries of the Empire; Opper, 191; cf. 166–93.

[19] Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos*, Part III, 5.230; cited by Opper, 166.