



In praise of religious reflexivity: reflections from fieldwork

Yaniv Belhassen

Abstract

This article aims to enrich the methodological discourse on the practice of reflexivity, by presenting the concepts of religious reflexivity and theological reductionism as analytical devices with which to explore the relationship of researchers with their human research subjects. It illustrates reflexive engagement with interpersonal religious aspects from the fieldwork on an evangelical pilgrimage to Israel. Based on examples from the fieldwork, the article explores the epistemological importance and limitations of deciphering and presenting the researchers' role in their subjects' theological worldview.

Keywords: ethnography, methodology, pilgrimage, rapport, tourism

Introduction

During one of my first rides on the public buses of Urbana-Champaign, I had a conversation with a bus driver who recognised me as an Israeli. By the end of the short ride the driver had told me about his and his wife's recent trip to Israel, which he enthusiastically described as a humanitarian pilgrimage for underprivileged people in Israel, and he insisted that we exchange phone numbers and meet up again to discuss his trip. Soon enough, the friendly driver contacted me and invited me to a Thanksgiving dinner at his home with his family and friends. Initially, I felt uncomfortable accepting this invitation because I did not feel at ease with the 'chosen one' title that the bus driver had attributed to me and to Israelis more generally. Upon my return to my apartment, I also heard from my educated neighbour that the central

Yaniv Belhassen is a member of the Department of Hotel & Tourism Management at Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel. yanivbel@bgu.ac.il



26 (3) 2012

DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2012.705464



ISSN 0256-0046/Online 1992-6049
pp. 424-441
© Critical Arts Projects & Unisa Press

concern of groups like the one this bus driver was affiliated to, was to bring about a messianic era in Israel – an era they see as inextricably intertwined with the return of Jesus. I had also heard that these Christians usually believe that the Third Temple should be built in Jerusalem and appear, at times, to be oblivious to the political and territorial realities surrounding this situation. However, the friendliness of the driver and my curiosity superseded all of these concerns, and I eventually decided to go.

This was probably my earliest encounter with members of the local evangelical community which later on became the major resource of my dissertation, which dealt specifically with evangelical pilgrimages to Israel. Retrospectively, I find that the mixed emotions and the ambiguity I feel toward the people I have studied, as already reflected in this early encounter, are valuable for illustrating how my religious affiliation and nationality were interwoven with a religious research project. The above fieldwork diary extract of the accidental encounter with a former pilgrim also demonstrates the complexity of my relationship with most of my informants and the theological-political ideology – which is called *Christian Zionism* – that guides their journeys. My desire to talk to these people, who support Israel and love it passionately and unconditionally, probably emanated from my own sympathy for my country, at times when harsh criticism against Israeli policy and Zionist ideology were frequent. I have come to realise, however, that while I respect my Jewish heritage, my sympathy toward Israel and my understanding of the Zionist cause are mainly based on my lived experience as an Israeli and on other rational reasons, as opposed to those of some of my informants.

As it shall become apparent, I started solving the puzzle of my own attitude toward my informants by a dual process of listening to my respondents and understanding their worldview on the one hand, and learning the theological basis of the complex relationship between American evangelicals and the nation-state of Israel, on the other. Although it was quite clear from the beginning of this research that I could not ‘go native’ in this case, I wanted to gain entry into my fieldwork by being authentic to myself, and without pretending to be someone else simply in order to establish a rapport with my informants. This mission was quite difficult, as I became aware of differences between what seemed to be as a shared empathy toward the State of Israel and its complicated geopolitical circumstances. When these differences struck me during the meetings with my informants, I struggled with questions, such as how I should represent my role and my voice genuinely. How could I remain true to myself in these encounters without hiding my (liberal) approach to Judaism and Middle Eastern politics? How could I discuss political issues without hurting the feelings of people who truly believe in the holiness of the Holy Land and in the relevance of a promise made to my ancestors thousands of years ago? These issues became relevant during my fieldwork, which took place during events, such as the Israeli disengagement from Gaza and parts of the West Bank; the stroke-induced

coma of Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon; and the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War. Thus, in addition to the concepts of theological reductionism and religious reflexivity suggested here, this article also seeks to give voice to issues which usually remained in the background of the research.

Religious scholar Marie Griffith (1997: 21) insightfully notes that ‘anyone writing about the multifaceted and overlapping traditions of American evangelicalism encounters difficulties in terminology, owing as much to elasticity of the words used to describe various constituencies as to the intertwining of the traditions themselves’. Given the dynamic development of contemporary American evangelicalism in general, and dispensationalism in particular, such a mission becomes even more complicated. Thus, and notwithstanding the varying historical backgrounds and connotations of each of the various labels used in this study, it is important to note that I use terms such as ‘conservative evangelicals’, ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘Christians’ interchangeably. Following Griffith, I use the label ‘evangelical’ to indicate the larger sub-culture to which my subjects belong. I use the labels ‘dispensationalists’ and ‘Christian Zionists’ loosely to refer to general shared tenets in the religious ideologies held by the participants in this study.

Literature review

The practice of reflexivity in social research

Douglas Macbeth (2001: 35) provides a broad definition that may illustrate the view of reflexivity as a mode of thinking by referring to it as ‘a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersection of author, other text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself’. A more detailed explanation is suggested by Michael Patton (2002: 65), who argues that ‘reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports’. As reflected in the last part of his definition, Patton refers to reflexivity in the context of what he calls ‘triangulated inquiry’, which encompasses the intersection between the three research actors: the author, those studied, and the audience. He suggests a series of questions that social inquirers should address in their attempt to be reflective. In his approach, Patton not only stresses the need for a systematic procedure by which reflexivity can be part of the means used to establish the trustworthiness of research, but also the importance of presenting the ‘products’ of this activity to the audience in the research report (see, e.g., Cohen 2007; Saukko 2002).

In their book *Key themes in qualitative research*, Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont (2003) devote a chapter to revisiting Howard Becker’s (1967) influential article ‘Whose side are we on?’, in order to examine its relevance to

contemporary qualitative research. They suggest that Becker's formerly controversial argument, that social researchers cannot avoid taking sides while studying social issues, has become a common premise in the qualitative camp since 1967, largely because scholars have begun to recognise the value of reflexive thinking, in which they critically engage with their own role as constructors of their scholarship and interpreters of social reality, rather than attempting to take the role of 'objective' observers. An important development in this regard is the self-reflective celebration of personal characteristics that used to be considered private and irrelevant to the research, such as health status, victimisation experiences, racial/ethnic affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Interestingly, as Atkinson and his colleagues note, religion is perhaps the only dimension of identity that researchers still avoid being reflective about. As they put it, '[p]apers at conferences rarely start "As a Baptist", but frequently begin "As a cancer survivor", or "As a carer" or "As a recovering alcoholic/bulimic/domestic violence victim"' (2003: 90).

Despite the tendency to avoid religious reflexivity, regarding other aspects of researcher influence and their role in fieldwork, reflexivity has been encouraged as a practice in the methodological literature of social and cultural studies (Denzin 1997; Gray 2003; LeCompte 1999; Saukko 2003). All research involves the act of interpreting data, and the notion of reflexivity refers to 'interpreting one's own interpretation, looking at one's own perspective from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000: vii). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) argue that research conceived as a simple mirroring of empirical facts (reality) and research results (text) is untenable; however, careful attention to empirical material is central to good social research. They defend the view that empirical material is always interpreted reflexively. Reflexive interpretation, in turn, involves philosophical reflection on theoretical assumptions, the importance of language and pre-understandings on the one hand, as well as the problematic aspects of the researcher's assumptions, his/her interactions with respondents and informants, and his/her location in a research community, on the other. Thus, at least when taken in this basic sense, religious reflexivity appears to be a valuable exercise that can benefit almost all types of researchers in the study of evangelical pilgrimage, regardless of the scholar's religious affiliation and disposition (Hall 2004; Riley & Love 2000).

Arguably, the difficulty of being religiously reflexive derives from the supposed limitations of all religions as being pre-scientific, unscientific and antiscientific. Many philosophers and intellectuals during the Enlightenment – which is arguably the founding era of social research and humanities – attributed religion to primitive thinking, usually holding that in the rational era which humanity was entering, the role of religions would inevitably decline (Stark, Iannaccone & Finke 1996; Taylor 2007). It was the founding father of sociology, Auguste Comte, who argued in

his book *The positive philosophy* (1896) that the ‘theological’ stage was the most primitive stage in the course of cultural evolution. Similarly, Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychology, viewed religion as ‘neurosis’, ‘illusion’, and ‘childishness to be overcome’. A pertinent reflection of such an approach can be found in the collected volume on Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, *The fundamentalist phenomenon*, in which psychologist Mortimer Ostow (1990: 113) argues that evangelicals are unable to accommodate ‘the realities of modern life’ and that they are ‘regressing to the state of mind of the child who resists differentiation from its mother’. Given this alleged tension between academic research and religious belief, it is therefore not surprising that there is a lower level of religious adherence among many academic communities, and that religious reflexivity is not common practice among academics.

Early discussions of the concept of reflexivity often occurred in the context of concerns about the evaluation of qualitative research, as exemplified by Lincoln and Guba’s early (1985) work on this matter, in which they advocated the creation of an alternative set of criteria for assessing the quality and credibility of qualitative (or, in their terms, ‘naturalistic’) inquiry, anchored in the concepts of ‘dependability’ and ‘authenticity’. While dependability refers to the need for researchers to report on the systematic process followed during their investigations, authenticity refers implicitly to the notion of reflexivity, citing it as a key criterion that should be taken into consideration when evaluating qualitative research. Interestingly, these two criteria reflect yet another struggle of social researchers to justify their work as trustworthy and academic. The dependability criterion reflects an attempt to show that social inquiry does not lack the rigour of other academic endeavours, and the authenticity criterion reflects the unique characteristics and challenges of studying other humans.

In addition to the establishment of research trustworthiness, reflexivity has also been discussed as a useful tool for expanding the perceptions of inquirers as to their own understanding of the examined phenomena. This is to say that the self-awareness of the various intersections in Patton’s ‘triangulated inquiry’ (authors, those studied, audience) also has an epistemological value. By being reflective about the research process, researchers may ask themselves genuine questions about how the way the research questions were written, the research designs planned, the ‘raw’ data analysed, or the research products presented to an audience, may have influenced the construction of their scholarly work.

From the popularity of the term in the research discourse, it seems that most scholars in the qualitative camp would agree that reflexivity is an important virtue that allows scholars to apply self-awareness to the process of conducting and writing social research. However, as reflected in various qualitative papers in the field of tourism, disagreements still exist about the role of reflexivity in the research report.

Arguably, most scholars accept reflexivity as an important mode of thinking about the practice of conducting social research, but there is little agreement on the way it should be presented when writing a research report (see Cohen 2007). Such disagreements probably emanate from the diverse philosophical premises that guide social researchers. Some approaches to social research are inherently reflective (e.g. auto-ethnography), while others do not overtly require reflexivity. For example, where inherently reflective approaches are concerned, sociologist Harlod Garfinkel (1967), in his development of the ethnomethodological perspective, suggests that scholars must assume that they are bringing their own meanings to their analyses of the actions of their subjects. In fact, Garfinkel advocates that social researchers should be reflective about their role as interpreters of other humans who hail from different backgrounds and hold different values.

Conversely, the post-positivistic tradition, which governed social research during the second half of the 20th century and still has numerous supporters in many social research circles, advocates systematic efforts to minimise the influence of the researcher in the production of research findings, as well as the researcher's presence in the final description of the examined phenomenon. Caton (2007) points to the relative absence of a reflexive voice in tourism scholarship, and suggests it can advance our understanding of the tourist experience (see also Phillimore & Goodson 2004). It is important to note that many core tenets of contemporary post-positivism are not necessarily incommensurable with the idea of reflexivity. For example, post-positivists are non-foundationalists, in the sense that they acknowledge the fact that there are no secure foundations for the knowledge that we humans are creating (Baronov 2004; Schwandt 2001). They recognise the fallibility and provisionality of knowledge claims, realising that both the generation and evaluation of research products are mediated by humans. These premises, along with the aspiration of post-positivists for methodological rigour and academic integrity, can be seen as an acknowledgment that the researcher is not a passive translator of objective reality, but an active agent in knowledge production. Despite these admissions, however, there has been very little room in the post-positivistic tradition for deliberate deconstructive reflective discussions on the influence of researcher values and identity on research processes and outcomes, although reflexivity would seem to be a valuable tool for a research philosophy that recognises the inevitability of researcher bias and seeks to minimise its effects. It is thus logical that the idea of formally including reflective discussions in research reports, in which researchers engage with their identities and emotions and reveal how they are personally intertwined with their projects, has a tendency to provoke unease in a research culture that advocates the value of professionalism and is suspicious of approaches that emphasise the researcher as a unified being who is personally and contextually engaged in investigations he/she undertakes. Thus, while some of the premises behind the notion of reflexivity would

appear to be implicitly evident in post-positivist thinking, issues of philosophy, history and academic culture combine to render it problematic in written practice.

Evangelical pilgrimage: theo-political background

The support of contemporary evangelical pilgrims for the nation-state of Israel is rooted in their attitude toward the Jewish people, more generally (Caroll 2002; McGinn 1979). To understand the development of such support, it is important to trace it within the theological tradition of supersessionism, or by its popular name, replacement theology. In the fourth-century Roman Empire, the church looked at biblical prophecies regarding the return of the Jews to their homeland through the supersessionist lens. Supersessionists perceive the diaspora of the Jewish people as a form of punishment for their failure to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Subsequently, in this view, the group that had been considered to constitute the biblical ‘Jewish people’ before the life of Jesus was seen as ceasing to exist, following its members’ failure to accept Christ. During the Reformation movement of the late 16th century, the wide circulation of the Bible and its translation into various languages allowed Christians to read the biblical history of the Jewish people. This, in turn, engendered various readings that challenged the established church and its related doctrines. By employing a literal approach to the interpretation of biblical prophecies, some Christian theologians concluded that the prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel referred to the Jewish nation, because God’s covenant with them was eternal. The combination of interpretive protocols that favoured a literal reading of the Bible and the assumption of the Bible’s inerrancy generated the idea that God’s covenant with the Jews was still valid. This new reading of the biblical prophecies stood in contrast to supersessionism, which assumes that Christianity is God’s new Israel and that the Jews are no longer the ‘chosen people’ (see also Ariel 1991; Marsden 1980; Pragai 1985; Weber 2004).

During the 19th century, several millennial theologians and clergymen who followed the tradition of the literal interpretation of biblical prophecies, popularised the notion that the restoration of the Jews in the Holy Land – an event believed to constitute the fulfilment of biblical prophecies – was a prerequisite for the second advent of Jesus (this interpretive tradition is known as futurist premillennialism). Hence, the material instantiation of the Zionist ideology (i.e. the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948) is viewed by futurist premillennialists as a signifier of the imminent return of Christ. The term ‘Christian Zionists’ refers to those Christians who perceive an affinity with the state of Israel, and with the Jewish people in general, and whose support is manifested in various ways.

At the end of the 19th century, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), a British clergyman, developed a distinct millennialist doctrine which he named dispensationalism. Based

on a literal interpretative approach to biblical prophecies and a belief that they would be fulfilled in the future, Darby suggested an outline for the end of human history. Like other post-Reformation theologians who challenged supersessionism, Darby argued that the Jews would play a crucial role in the end-times (Marsden 1980; Sandeen 1967, 1970; Weber 2004). Historians note that for some American evangelicals, who were influenced by such readings of the Bible, a visit to the Holy Land became a visit to see where the biblical prophecies would be fulfilled. William Eugene Blackstone (1841–1935), a popular Bible teacher and evangelical activist, illustrated how dispensationalism started to influence the motives of American evangelicals who travelled to the Holy Land. In 1888, accompanied by his daughter, Blackstone made his first trip to the Holy Land, where he met Jewish Zionist pioneers who were establishing new colonies in the Ottoman Empire. The trip gave an additional impetus to Blackstone's dream to see the restoration of the Jewish people in their ancient land (Ariel 1989).

Evangelical tours to the Holy Land in the 20th century were influenced by the political developments of the era and, more specifically, by the realisation of the Zionist aspiration to establish a Jewish homeland. Neither the evangelical visitors to the area nor the scholars who studied them could ignore the conflict between the Zionist movement and the Arab nationalist response that strongly opposed any idea of Jewish sovereignty in the region. Both pilgrims and scholars had to take sides in this conflict. For an academic scholar, picking a side means trying to be objective by revealing the way religious beliefs influence politics, and vice versa. Wagner (1998, 2003), for example, suggests that bringing evangelical pilgrims to Israel was part of an Israeli strategy that arose from 'the potential power of the evangelical subculture and Israel's desire to mobilize it as a base of support that could influence American foreign policy' (Weber 2004: 220–222). In his other writings, Wagner states that the Israeli government, with the help of American fundamentalists, secretly planned to take over the West Bank. He suggests that since American fundamentalists believe Israeli sovereignty in Judea and Samaria is a prerequisite for the Second Coming of Jesus, they collaborated to implement Israeli policy in the West Bank (a similar approach can be found in Halsell 1986).

Another example of such theopolitical reductionist analysis is reflected in Stephen Sizer's (1999) categorisation of Protestant pilgrimages. Sizer divides contemporary Protestant pilgrimages to the Holy Land into three groups: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and the Living Stones. He suggests that 'Evangelicals' visit places with biblical significance to enrich their knowledge, suggesting that these tours are educational, not religious in their essence. Accordingly, he claims that these tours do not address 'either the present Middle East conflict or necessarily [engage] in theological praxis' (ibid: 86). He further claims that 'the presence of an ancient and oriental Christianity is either ignored, misunderstood or ... criticized for desecrating

the archaeological sites with what are often regarded as pagan shrines' (ibid: 86). The 'Fundamentalists', Sizer (ibid: 86) argues, are driven by the same motives 'but with the added eschatological dimension, believing themselves to be witnessing and indeed participating in the purposes of God, at work within Israel in these "Last days"'. Sizer (ibid.) further states that contrary to 'the ignorance of many Evangelicals and the harm caused by Fundamentalists', the 'Living Stones' pilgrimages that he organises 'include opportunities to meet, worship with, listen to and learn from the spirituality and experience of the indigenous Christians'. Sizer's political agenda highlights how theologies held by the pilgrims and the researchers who study them can inform the way scholarship is produced. The reflexive exercise suggested here aims to help researchers come to terms with these issues, to better understand the limitations of their own scholarship. Despite my criticism about the way theological reductionism usually characterised the relationship between evangelicals and Jews, in general, and evangelical pilgrimages, in particular – as reflected in the studies of Sizer (1999), Halsell (1986) and Wagner (1998) – I believe such an approach can be useful when setting out to analyse my own relationship with my informants. In the following section I illustrate how such a theologically-based understanding of my relationship with my informants can contribute to my attempt to be reflexive about the theo-political issues surrounding this research project.

My love-hate relationship with Christian Zionism

The fieldwork on which this article is based revolves around a series of evangelical tours to Israel organised by Mr. and Mrs. B, an evangelical couple based in East Central Illinois. Mr. and Mrs. B started organising tours to Israel ten years ago and to date have put together 21 tours. Like other evangelical communities which support Israel, they frame their tours using Isaiah 40:1: 'Comfort ye my people says your God', and seek to create an environment of humanitarian aid among the pilgrims and/or to promote a view that considers the establishment of the State of Israel as a fulfilment of biblical prophecies. Since the first tour in February 2000, they have sustained a pace of two to three trips per year, one of which is primarily humanitarian in nature. Their tours usually last ten to 12 days and involve as few as 12 or as many as 72 pilgrims. A minimum of one pre-trip meeting is arranged by the organisers to share details of the trip and of the humanitarian work in which pilgrims will be engaging. I also attended promotional meetings with potential participants that were held in churches and included sermons on Judaism and the nation-state of Israel. The cost of a trip is around \$3000 per person. Some of the pilgrims get help in funding from the local evangelical community through the radio station. The organisers encourage 'delegates to build [a] support team to hold them up in prayer, to hear their stories upon their return, and assist them financially'. It is worth

mentioning that Mr. and Mrs. B are the managers of the evangelical radio station, to which I occasionally listened in an attempt to better understand them – especially those programmes broadcast from or about the tours to Israel (the couple’s daily programmes are recorded and available online as voice files).

Participants in the trips volunteer in institutions and collect items from their communities which they wish to donate to the ‘people of Israel’, as declared in one of the brochures of the trip. The observations recorded here were also collected from a group that travelled to Israel in November 2005; their trip was titled ‘Cargo of Care & Bucket Bridge: The 2005 Painting Pilgrims’. As is the practice before each humanitarian trip, the prospective pilgrims collected various items to donate while visiting Israel, including 347 teddy bears, 750 Beanie Babies, and hundreds of other toys, clothes and housekeeping articles. In Israel, the pilgrims are assigned to groups that volunteer in various institutions serving underprivileged people. Pilgrims on the ‘Cargo of Care’ trip were divided into seven teams, each headed by a ‘team captain’. One of these captains is the painter Kathleen Jennings, who has thus far participated in six tours and painted the two pictures presented in this article (see Figures 1 and 2, see also References for further details).

The initial encounter with Mr. and Mrs. B, as well as the idea to conduct this research into the tours to Israel, was encouraged by the couple from the very beginning of this research project. In fact, they contacted me first, saying they had heard I was an Israeli who had come to Illinois to conduct research on tourism, and that they would be a perfect subject to study. The wife, who is the living spirit behind these tours, was very clear about the religious meanings she assigns to our collaboration. In our first meeting she said: ‘I think God’s hands are on this, God’s hands are on



Figure 1

you ... I can see it, I can sense it’ After realising that the couple saw me as a potential agent of God, the task of deciphering my role in their religious worldview became an epistemological mission. It did not take long for me to realise that I would have to learn more about evangelical eschatology (i.e. end-time theology), in order to understand their relationship with, and attitude toward, the nation-state of Israel which, in turn, would help me better understand their motivation to travel and volunteer in Israel. Learning the outline of dispensationalism, the guiding theological doctrine behind mainstream evangelical eschatology in the past century, has helped me not only contextualise the way my respondents view me; it has also helped me understand the obstacles I faced while

trying to gain entry into the fieldwork and establish a rapport based on trust with my informants.

Understanding my role in the dispensationalist worldview

In order to understand my role in the worldview of my key informants, it would be useful to go back to the doctrine of dispensationalism. Darby, who stressed the Jews and their role in the world's future, suggested that after the restoration of the Jews in Israel, the Antichrist (a figure from the prophecies in the Book of Revelation) would come to power and lead the world into a war between believers and non-believers in Christ (this war is known as the Battle of Armageddon, a site located in Northern Israel). As reflected in Mrs. B's answer, before this battle, during the second arrival of Christ only a small number of Jews (144 000) will be able to recognise him as the Messiah, and they will be harshly rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. Later on, a short period of judgements and punishments, also known as the Great Tribulation¹ or the Time of Jacob's Trouble, will begin, and all those who are not true believers in Jesus will remain on earth to suffer during this period. The true believers will be raptured² (i.e., lifted into the air/heaven to meet Christ) and will not undergo this suffering. Only about one third of the Jewish people will survive to realise that the rejected 144 000 Jews, who accepted Jesus at the beginning of the Great Tribulation, were actually right, and will join the church.

The negation of replacement theology was clearly stated by the people of Illinois as one of the core reasons behind these tours. In one of my e-mails to Mrs. B., I asked her about her theological view in this regard, and she wrote:

We align ourselves with many of the dispensationalist doctrine, but not fully ... I believe that the rapture will come first (i.e., that Yeshua will meet those who love Him in the air), that the antichrist will call himself G~d (and I never have read in the Bible or anywhere else that he'd be Jewish) and set himself up in the Temple, that will have been built there. (By the way, this is the time period when I believe that the Jewish people in Israel will flee to Petra, to escape what's to come, i.e., the time of Jacob's trouble, two periods of 3.5 years.) Then Yeshua, King of Kings and Lord of Lords returns to earth to set up His kingdom. He returns with all the saints before, including Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, etc, etc, etc, as well as those who believe in Yeshua and who came after Yeshua's birth, death and resurrection (like me).

The premillennial worldview is clearly reflected in Mrs. B's answer to me. The premise of this interpretative approach of the Bible is that God did not abandon his chosen people (i.e. the Jews), and therefore Christians should not be seen as God's new Israel but as the biblical gentiles. According to Mrs. B. this was the reason most people in the churches I attended during the fieldwork were so eager to speak to me.

With this in mind, I realised that for dispensationalist evangelicals, my religious affiliation played a significant role in their willingness to cooperate with me, either because they viewed Jews as playing a key role in their eschatology or (in the case of lay people who are not familiar with the details of the dispensationalist doctrine) simply because they were interested in meeting an Israeli Jew who lived in the land where Jesus is going to show up eventually. In any case, I came to realise that in this fieldwork, respondents were overly willing to cooperate with me as a researcher. As an Israeli Jewish Ph.D. student, I play a role in the worldview of the people I study or, as Mrs. B. puts it, I 'have a part in God's plan'. More specifically, as an Israeli academic, I can potentially be a part of the 'new generation' in Israeli academia who will eventually realise and reveal the role of the 'gentiles', in general, and the role of evangelical 'humanitarian pilgrimages', in particular, in the existence of the State of Israel.

Further evidence of the divine role I might play in the evangelical theological worldview was provided in one of the sermons held at a Midwestern church one Saturday evening. In this sermon, Israeli society and the Israeli academia, in particular, were blamed for not paying tribute to the central role of Protestantism in Israeli history. The lecturer provided a survey of historical Protestant contributions to the existence of the nation-state of Israel. He also connected these contributions to biblical visions, citing the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah, presenting Protestants as the biblical 'gentiles' in 'God's plan' to bring the 'chosen people' back to their land. He ended his historiography of the state of Israel on an optimistic note, when he called attention to a new trend in Israeli academia, in which he claimed that 'they' (Israeli-Jewish scholars) had begun to come to the inevitable conclusion that the traditional story of Zionism failed to fully explain the existence of Israel, due to the lack of references to the role of the (mostly Protestant) gentiles in the creation of modern Israel (Merkley 1998).



Figure 2

Obstacles to an authentic relationship with my subjects

My presence in churches in pre- and post-trip meetings posed some ethical and methodological challenges, as I attempted to get closer to my participants, despite our difference. My status of 'unbeliever', the expectation on me to join the songs, the expectation from me to represent Israel, to represent Judaism, turned the churches into ethnographic sites in which

I did not feel at ease. Through these encounters with the tourists in their churches before the trips, I wanted to better understand if what I had read about them was a true description of their faith; I wanted to understand their motivations for travelling to Israel. In post-trip meetings I wanted to see what impact their visit had on them and to hear them speak about formative moments on their journey. At times, in the homes and churches of the tourists, I felt like ‘the Other’; I felt like the peculiar tourist who is gazed upon by the host community. Although I knew I could not be a full participant in this research, I could not be a full observer either – they would not let me be one. Instead, I decided to develop a relationship with my subjects and their ideology. In my attempt to forge an authentic relationship with them, despite the evident challenges, I encountered three interrelated obstacles:

First of all, my early visits to the churches made me realise that the fact that I was a ‘non-believer’ could spark theological conversations which embarrassed and bothered me. During these visits, I also met some Jews who had joined the churches and were very curious about my religious intention to study evangelical pilgrimage. Like them, most of the people I met in the churches were curious about my religious orientation and ‘my relationship with Jesus’. I understood that since both my religious affiliation and my nationality would play a significant role in these people’s willingness to cooperate with me, and would also have a significant impact on the way they communicated with me, it would be problematic to base my research on accidental encounters in churches where conversations usually deal with faith and spirituality. Usually, I told them the truth – that I was a non-believer – although, at times, I changed the subject of the conversation. I realised that talking about my faith not only embarrassed me, but also made the other side quite suspicious of my motives to sit in churches and talk to them.

Secondly, since the issue of evangelical tours has been discussed in the literature mostly in a political context (see Halsell 1986; Sizer 1999; Wagner 1998; Weber 2004), I realised that discussions about political issues could not be avoided. I wanted to engage openly in political discussions with the people I met, in order to understand the extent to which they were aware of the political aspects of their tour. When I questioned someone face to face about politics, or when politics somehow surfaced in the conversation, I realised that I was expected to share my own view on the subject. As an Israeli, I found their understanding of the Israeli position in the ongoing Israeli–Arab conflict very appealing. This feeling was intensified in the summer of 2006, during the crisis in the Middle East between Israel and Lebanon, when the local evangelical community participated in a support gathering for the State of Israel, held at a local synagogue, to which I was invited by Mrs. B. While the international media tended to portray Israel as war-thirsty state, which led many liberals to criticise it for its reaction against Hezbollah and Lebanon, the evangelicals I studied remained supportive of Israel and the tours to Israel were never cancelled.

Both the language and the behaviour of my respondents have a Zionist appearance; in fact, similar volunteering tours are also organised by various Jewish communities around the world who supposedly share with the evangelicals such Zionist zeal. For me, as a Zionist (i.e. one who supports the idea of a Jewish homeland), this similarity poses a real challenge. On one occasion, I was even requested, without any preparation, to come to the stage and sing the Israeli anthem with playback music, at the end of the meeting. Despite my scepticism, I found that I could not remain indifferent to the evangelicals' understanding of Israel's position in the ongoing conflict with the Arab world, or to their humanitarian projects in Israel. The process of realising that my evangelical respondents' reasons for supporting Israel did not entirely fit with my worldview, and that they sometimes directly contradicted it, was not an easy one because it forced me to silence my voice where I felt I had a moral obligation to explain the alternative position. For example, some key informants strongly oppose the notion of territory for peace – a notion that I do not reject. This disagreement on territorial issues highlighted yet another distinction between me and my respondents. As opposed to them, I believe that the existence of Israel should be founded on a moral, rather than a biblical imperative. While travelling with one of the groups in Jerusalem, I tried to voice my view that Jerusalem's holiness was not a sufficient argument for refusing to negotiate about its future. Such opinions, although not clearly presented to the pilgrims during the tour to Jerusalem, put me at odds with most of my respondents.

Thirdly, during the face-to-face encounters in the churches, I was also quite confused by the realisation that the people I studied might wish to convert me. I quickly learned that this was also a common critique in Israel against the supportive attitude of the Israeli government toward the growing number of evangelical pilgrims. Thus, I believed that understanding this complexity at the personal level might advance my understanding of the broader phenomenon I was studying. Historians Yaakov Ariel (2000) and Timothy Weber (2004) agree that this is the theological explanation for the paradox inherent among evangelicals who seek to spread dispensationalism among the Jews before the Great Tribulation, i.e., to convert them or to leave them in the state of 'unbelief', as the dispensationalist outline suggests most of them will be in when Jesus comes. They solve this dilemma by pointing out that those who hold the dispensationalist worldview assume that only a small number of Jews will be converted to Christianity, but at least some of them (144 000) will be able to understand the events correctly, due to their previous exposure to dispensationalism. This, as implicitly explained to me by key respondents on several occasions, was my role. Of course, they would be more than happy if I 'accept Jesus as my personal saviour', but this was not the only reason they wanted to share their worldview with me. Potentially, I could be one of those 144 000 Jews who would be able to recognise

Jesus; at the very least, I could spread awareness of the dispensationalist doctrine among other Jews.

Discussion

This article illustrates why and how a theologically reductionist analysis of the relationship between researcher and those researched is a valuable analytical device, despite its obvious limitations as a narrow examination of human interactions. In doing so, I seek to expand the reflexive capacity of researchers by drawing on a unique example of the way religious reflexivity can advance researchers' own understating of the manner in which their relationship with the religious people they study influences the trajectories of their research, and their own understanding of the religious phenomenon they examine. The premise of this article is that conducting and writing social research is a cultural act that has some performative quality. Engagement with methodological issues as reflexivity is an invitation to glance at the backstage of the research show. I conclude this article with a twofold discussion on the limitations of the reductionist analysis, and on the extent to which such analysis should be presented in final research reports.

To begin with, like any other reductionist approach in social sciences, theological reductionism has some limitations, the main problem being that it uses a single lens to analyse and understand social and personal issues that are much more complex; it ignores the cultural, political and circumstantial issues that also affect the relationship between researchers and the people they study. Research on evangelical tourism to the Holy Land already uses reductionist logic to explain the political agenda of such tours (Halsell 1986; Wagner 2003). By offering theological reductionism as an analytical tool to decipher the relationship between me and my respondents, my intention is not to advocate for a reductionist logic to analyse evangelical actions, political agenda or behaviour while travelling in Israel. Such logic usually obscures the way other forces shape how evangelicals construe meaning during their travel experience (in another publication I offer a contextualised approach to the study of pilgrim experience, as opposed to the reductionist mode of analysis advocated in the current study [see Belhassen 2009]).

Being religiously reflexive during and after fieldwork is an exercise that demands a high level of self-consciousness and for us to acknowledge that our religious affiliations and beliefs influence our scholarship. And if this is the case, the next question would be to what degree social researchers should write about these issues while reporting on their findings. My answer to this debate would be a practical one, and it concerns the rhetoric nature of the knowledge we produce. Writing reflexively about our own beliefs and religious affiliations should appear in the research report only to the extent that it serves the argument we are making.

Another concluding point from the abovementioned accounts is that my religious identity has not only impacted my research by influencing the way I gather data and the analysis I produce; it has also powerfully shaped the way I am viewed by my respondents, positively impacted their willingness to cooperate with me, and forced me to negotiate on some challenging ethical territory, as I have repeatedly had to face the question of how much of the other aspects of my identity (e.g., liberal and secular political orientation) I should reveal to participants. Being reflective about all these issues and coming to understand how my identity has led me to develop a complex relationship with their ideology of Christian Zionism will render me better equipped to produce balanced research reports that will neither belittle nor glorify my respondents and their worldview.

Nevertheless, even as one who fully acknowledges the value of this exercise when studying religious issues, as this article hopefully illustrates, the current article does not provide an answer to the question of whether extensive reflective accounts should always be explicitly provided with research reports. Critics of the reflexive mode of writing would say that such a style focuses on the researcher instead of the phenomenon under observation and, therefore, would be considered self-indulgent. While I do not necessarily fully agree with this estimation, I do see many practical constraints to the inclusion of lengthy reflective accounts in research reports. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that this mode of writing is still not accepted in all research circles. Some structural constraints to presenting religious reflexivity in research reports can and should be overcome, however, such as the eschewing of first-person prose, as these constraints seem to serve only ideological rather than practical purposes. While writing a research report in the first person and discussing one's own religious stance and affiliation as a useful resource for understanding the data does not necessarily verify the quality of the research, neither does writing it in the third person necessarily guarantee 'neutrality' or 'objectivity'. The acknowledgement of our own beliefs/ideologies/opinions can be exercised explicitly when presenting our research in public (i.e., in classes, conferences or the media), since all intellectuals should be reflexive regarding their role in society and their status as experts in the public's perception.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carrie Burns, Kellee Caton, Carla Santos and Thomas Schwandt for the many valuable discussions that helped me in taking a reflexive stance toward this fieldwork. I would also like to thank Andrew Causey for his suggestions and comments on earlier versions of this article.

Notes

1. The term 'Great Tribulation' derives from the prophecy described in Mathew 24: 21.
2. Darby based his assumption regarding the rapture on Thessalonians 4: 16–17. However, this idea is also claimed to be part of a private revelation that Darby had.

References

- Alvesson, M. and K. Skoldberg. 2000. *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Ariel, Y. 1989. An American initiative for a Jewish state: William Blackstone and the petition of 1891. *Journal of Israeli History* 10(2): 125–137.
- Ariel, Y. 1991. *On behalf of Israel: American fundamentalist attitudes towards Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865–1945*. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publication.
- Ariel, Y. 2000. *Evangelizing the Chosen People: missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Atkinson, P., A. Coffey and S. Delamont. 2003. *Key themes in qualitative research*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Baronov, D. 2004. *Conceptual foundations of social research method*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Belhassen, Y. 2009. Fundamentalist Christian pilgrimages as a political and cultural force. *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 4(2): 131–144.
- Caroll, J. 2002. *Constantine's sword: the church and the Jews*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Caton, K. 2007. All in favor say 'I': a case for centering the tourism researcher in the research endeavor. *Proceedings from the 2nd International Critical Tourism Conference*, Split, Croatia.
- Cohen, A.P. 2007. Self-conscious anthropology. In *Ethnographic fieldwork: an anthropological reader*, ed. A.C.G.M. Robben and J.A. Sluka, 221–241. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Comte, A. 1896. *The positive philosophy*. Trans. H. Martineau. New York, NY: Calvin Blanchard.
- Denzin, K.N. 1997. *Interpretive ethnography: ethnographic practice for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. New Jersey, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gray, A. 2003. *Research practice for cultural studies: ethnographic methods and lived cultures*. London: Sage.
- Griffith, R.M. 1997. *God's daughters: evangelical women and the power of submission*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hall, C.M. 2004. Reflexivity and tourism research: situating myself and/with others. In *Qualitative research in tourism methodologies, epistemologies and methodologies*, ed. J. Phillimore and L. Goodson, 137–155. London: Routledge.
- Halsell, G. 1986. *Prophecies and politics: militant evangelists on the road to nuclear war*. Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill.

- Jennings, Kathleen (artist). 2003. Jingi Bear's Journey [painting]. Mahomet, Illinois. <http://www.watchmanonthewall.com/portfolio/work/1> (accessed 10 January 2011).
- Jennings, Kathleen (artist). 2006. Heart to Heart from a Servant's Heart [painting]. Mahomet, Illinois. <http://www.watchmanonthewall.com/portfolio/work/21> (accessed 10 January 2011).
- LeCompte, M.D. 1999. *Researcher roles and research partnerships: ethnographer's toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and E. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Macbeth, D. 2001. On 'reflexivity' in qualitative research: two readings, and a third. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(1): 35–68.
- Marsden, G.M. 1980. *Fundamentalism and American culture: the shaping of twentieth-century evangelicalism, 1870–1921*. New York NY: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, B. 1979. *Visions of the end*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Merkley, P.C. 1998. *The politics of Christian Zionism, 1891–1948*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Ostow, M. 1990. The fundamentalist phenomenon: a psychological perspective. In *The fundamentalist phenomenon: a view from within; a response from without*, ed. N.J. Cohen, 99–125. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Patton, M.Q. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Phillimore, J. and L. Goodson, eds. 2004. *Qualitative research in tourism methodologies, epistemologies and methodologies*. London: Routledge.
- Pragai, M.J. 1985. *Faith and fulfilment: Christians and the return to the Promised Land*. London: Valentine Mitchell.
- Riley, R.W. and L.L. Love. 2000. The state of qualitative tourism research. *Annals of Tourism Research* 27(1): 164–187.
- Sandeen, E.R. 1967. Toward a historical interpretation of the origins of fundamentalism. *Church History* 36(1): 66–83.
- Sandeen, E.R. 1970. *The roots of fundamentalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Saukko, P. 2002. Studying the self: from the subjective and the social to personal and political dialogues. *Qualitative Research* 2(2): 244–263.
- Saukko, P. 2003. *Doing research in cultural studies: an introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*. London: Sage.
- Schwandt, T.A. 2001. *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sizer, S. 1999. The ethical challenges of managing pilgrimages to the Holy Land. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 11(2/3): 85–92.
- Stark, R., L.R. Iannaccone and R. Finke. 1996. Religion, science, and rationality. *The American Economic Review* 86(2): 433–437. Papers and Proceedings of the Hundred and Eighth Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association San Francisco, CA, 5–7 January.

Copyright of Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.