Fundamentalist Christian pilgrimages as a political and cultural force

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Based on fieldwork on a Midwestern American grassroots organization that conducts evangelical tours to Israel, this paper seeks to enrich analysis of the pilgrimage experience by suggesting a more contextualized approach to its study. To illustrate the implementation of the contextualized perspective, three thematic examples from the fieldwork are presented: men's emotional expression; religious deeds and their political meanings; and a case on the theo-political symbolism embedded in evangelical pilgrimage itineraries. It is argued that understanding not only the theological but also the historical, socio-cultural and political contexts in which evangelical tours operate can illuminate the way individual pilgrims construe meaning during their travel experiences. The paper concludes by suggesting that each of the examined examples illustrates the role of the pilgrimage as a cohesive force in the evangelical sub-culture.

Keywords: pilgrimage; culture; religious tourism

Introduction

Journeys to sacred sites are one of the most ancient forms of travel experience, and the resemblance of the experience of the ancient pilgrim to that of the modern tourist has inspired some of the most groundbreaking works in the study of tourism (e.g. Cohen, 1992, 1998; Dann & Cohen, 1991; Nolan & Nolan, 1992). MacCannell (1976), for instance, who advocates viewing tourism as a search for meaningful experience, suggests that tourists can be seen as secular pilgrims since, like pilgrims, they are motivated by the quest for authenticity and meaning. The trope of the pilgrimage also provides value in Graburn's (1989, 2001) study of the tourists' experience, where he analyzes tourism as a secular ritual. To date, Victor and Edith Turner's work in particular has had the most considerable influence on the development of our understanding of the nexus of tourism and pilgrimage experiences, and is even known in tourism studies as the "Turnerian tradition" (Cohen, 1988) and in the socio-anthropological study of pilgrimage as the "Turnerian approach". The Turnerian tradition is based on the premise that pilgrimages should be seen as a process in which the pilgrims depart, geographically and psychologically, from the social structure that governs their daily life. Notwithstanding the importance of this approach, the present study follows Eade and Sallnow's (2000) critique that while the Turnerian approach has produced many valuable insights, its intense foregrounding of the experience of pilgrimage has resulted in the overshadowing of this activity's connections

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with larger social, theological and historical contexts. Similarly, Coleman and Elsner (1995) illustrate the benefits that can be gained by employing a broad interdisciplinary perspective to the study of pilgrimage without totally neglecting the Turnerian terminology. Accordingly, the present study seeks to follow this trend of broadening the analysis of the pilgrim's experience by examining evangelical pilgrimages within their larger cultural, social, theological and political contexts. More specifically, by examining the experiences of pilgrims who partook in the grassroots organization of evangelical tours from Illinois to Israel, this article attempts to contribute to the study of the pilgrimage experience through empirical data which is "in dialogue" with the pilgrimage and religious tourism literature. As such, this study also evaluates the usefulness of the current epistemological shift, as pointed out by Eade and Sallnow (2000), in the way pilgrimage is studied and conceptualized, particularly within the context of evangelical tourism practices. Thus, this study aims to engage in the theoretical debate over the nature of the pilgrim experience by considering how its political, cultural and behavioral aspects are interrelated.

Overall, the underlying premise of this essay is that evangelical tours are driven and influenced by broader cultural, behavioral and theological processes as well as larger socio-political forces that are not restricted to the travel experience of the pilgrims in Israel. In light of the need to contextualize the pilgrims' experiences within wider issues, the objectives of this article can be formulated as an attempt to: (1) broaden the analysis of the pilgrim experience by suggesting a more contextualized approach to its study; (2) suggest viewing the examined travel practice additionally as a leisure activity through which contemporary evangelicalism maintains its separatist sub-culture and (3) offer insight into a unique manifestation of faith-based activism and into the development and the symbolic meaning of this practice. In the process, and despite the alternative approach to the study of pilgrim experience taken here, the study also aims to increase the value of the Turnerian terminology in the study of contemporary evangelical pilgrimage. Moreover, the study also illuminates the role of religious tours in the life of the individual, more generally. In this context, this article seeks to address theoretical queries such as the role that pilgrimages to Israel have in the religious lives of contemporary evangelicals and the social and cultural significance of such tours to the evangelical movement in the United States. The threefold findings section attempts to address these questions by considering the emerging role of pilgrimage in the evangelical movement as a formative leisure activity that serves as a cohesive cultural force in the evangelical community of East Central Illinois.

Literature review

The renewed academic interest in pilgrimage practices is largely due to the global increase in travel practices that involve religious motives (Cohen, 1992, 1998; Coleman, 2002; 2004; Fleischer, 2000; Jackowski & Smith, 1992; Morinis, 1992; Murray & Graham, 1997; Rinschede, 1992; Stoddard, 1997; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Tweed, 2000). Within this body of literature, the examination of pilgrims' experiences involves an understanding of the psychological and social experiences of individuals and the special characteristics of pilgrimage groups (e.g. Badone & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000). The Turnerian tradition still has great influence on the conceptualization of the pilgrimage experience, especially through the development of such useful concepts as *liminality* and *communitas*, which have informed tourism literature far beyond the narrow scope of pilgrimage studies (Graburn, 1989, 2001; Vukonic, 1996). Much fine work has been produced using the concept of *liminality* to explore notions of transitioning between home and away,

and *communitas* to theorize about the unique intergroup dynamics that occur when pilgrims take to the road together.

In Turner's work, *liminality* and *communitas* are based on the influential work of van Gennep's (1960) *The Rites of Passage*. In his early work, Turner (1969) suggests that the religious rituals of an African tribe are characterized by the two strong human states that he called *communitas* and *liminality.* Later, Turner and his wife (Turner & Turner, 1978) used these concepts in their analysis of Christian pilgrimage, laying the foundations for the modern conceptualization of pilgrimage and tourism experience (e.g. Lett, 1983; Moore, 1980). For Turner and Turner, the term liminality – which is derived from the Latin word *limen*, or threshold – refers to a unique state of being where individuals depart, geographically and psychologically, from their ordinary social state without entering another state of being. Consequently, individuals in a state of liminality experience an intermediate phase where they are detached from any social condition. Turner (1973) noticed that during the liminal condition, individuals experience changes in their social behavior and become distinctively more sociable and friendly. He called this sense of comradeship *communitas* (1969).

Turner and Turner (1978) suggest that three types of *communitas* characterize the pilgrim experience, namely existential, normative and ideological. The first is a generic *communitas* that occurs spontaneously as the pilgrims liberate themselves from the social control that governs their daily life (Eade & Sallnow, 2000). The normative *communitas* refers to the institutional practices and rules that seek to create this sense of interrelatedness during visits to sacred sites. Eade and Sallnow (2000, p. xi) suggest that this type of *communitas* can be therefore "related to the historical process of cult emergence, growth and decline as particular pilgrimages become routinised and institutionalized". Lastly, ideological *communitas* refers to the transformative desire expressed in some pilgrimages. According to the Turners, pilgrimages include a reformist component as they seek to portray an idealistic society or utopian humanity to which the pilgrims should aspire.

The *center* is another important concept in the conceptualization of the pilgrim experience. It can be described as the spiritual destination to which the pilgrims travel (Cohen, 1992; Eliade, 1961; Turner, 1973); in the case of this article, the *center* is the nation-state of Israel. Turner claims that pilgrims travel to religious centers that tend to be located in the periphery, outside of their original world. Like Turner, Eliade (1961) views pilgrimage as a religious tour toward a center. For Eliade (1961), the pilgrimage tour is not a journey to a center located in the periphery, as suggested by Turner, but rather a journey toward the *axis mundi* (i.e. the center of the world), which serves as the main motive for the pilgrims' journey. Israel as a pilgrimage center for American evangelical pilgrims is located well outside of their daily life – in the Middle East. Yet for religious, cultural and theological reasons, Israel as a pilgrimage center can also be viewed as the *axis mundi* in the pilgrims' worldview. For the pilgrims, the construction of Israel as the center of the world is based on past, present and future theological, political and cultural lenses (McAlister, 2001; Vogel, 1993). In other words, the construction of Israel as an evangelical pilgrimage center is shaped both by their understanding that Israel is the place where the roots of Christianity lie and by their premillennial understanding of biblical prophecies according to which Israel will play a pivotal role in God's plans at the end of human history (for extensive explanation about evangelical premillennial eschatology see Weber, 1978). Furthermore, the construction of Israel as the *axis mundi* is guided by a broader tradition in the evangelical culture that emphasizes present-time political development in the Middle East as a fulfillment of God's will. Best-selling books about apocalyptic scenarios such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey & Carlson, 1970) and

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* series popularized such politicized readings of contemporary American culture (McAlister, 2001; Weber, 2004). Such cultural artifacts encourage their consumers to view Israel, and the Middle East more broadly, as the places where the biblical end-time prophecies are currently unfolding. For this reason, present-day geopolitical developments in the visited destination/this region also contribute to the construction of Israel as the center of the universe of these pilgrims.

Generally speaking, Protestant pilgrimages to the Holy Land are characterized by the search to expand the pilgrim's personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Bowman (2000) juxtaposes this desire for heightened spirituality with the Catholic experience in which pilgrims are more attuned to the sense of being part of a long tradition of visiting sites that were validated by the Vatican. These denominational differences are relevant in the context of the examined tours in which most of the pilgrims belong to non-affiliated churches. Arguably, the sense of what Turner might call the normative *communitas* of these non-affiliated, evangelical tours is significantly different from that of Catholic pilgrims, and therefore cannot be conceptualized as ecumenically driven. Turner's *ideological communitas*, on the other hand, can be found in fundamentalist tours to Israel in the eschatological belief of dispensationalism, by which the pilgrims are also encouraged to mark a relationship between biblical end-time prophecies and the landscape and people they encounter. In this context, Feldman (2007) suggests that the Israeli guides and the American pastors together co-produce a theopolitical narrative that guides the pilgrims' understanding of their visit. Such a narrative ties fundamentalists' premillennial eschatology regarding the second coming of Jesus and the role of the Jewish people in this era with the Zionist endeavor to build a homeland for the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

Christian Zionist tourism to Israel

Over the last 30 years, pro-Zionist pilgrimages from the United States have become increasingly attractive both to American Christian fundamentalists and to Israeli officials, and these pilgrimages have come to be seen as a means for celebrating and supporting the Israeli nation-state both economically and spiritually (Weber, 2004). Scholars who have examined the relationship between the evangelical community and the nation-state of Israel broadly agree that evangelicals' general attitudes toward Israel can be explicated through the central role that this nation-state has in the group's religious worldview (Weber, 2004). Nowadays, it can be safely estimated that American evangelical pilgrims to Israel number as many as 100,000.[1]

Given the central role of Israel in the evangelical worldview, the assumption held in this article – shared with many previous attempts to study fundamentalist tours – is that it is important to understand dispensationalist theology in order to understand these tours and the narratives they promote (Halsell, 1986; Sizer, 1999; Wagner, 1998). Historians and religious scholars agree that what is known today as Christian Zionism evolved from the doctrine of dispensationalism, a form of premillennialist theology that has governed American evangelicalism over the past century. Briefly, dispensationalism is a theological doctrine based on a literal approach to biblical interpretation which considers the Jewish people of today to be the descendents of the biblical Israelites (of Abraham's lineage). Thus, the followers of dispensationalism view today's Jews as the heirs to this original covenant and consider God's promise to be literal and still in full force. Their position can be contrasted with that of more traditional supersessionist schools, which argue that upon the failure of the biblical Jews to accept Jesus as the messiah, this group was effectively "replaced" by the Christian church, whose members became the new heirs to God's

covenant. Christian Zionists thus support the state of Israel out of a desire to do God's will, which requires them to support his "chosen people".

Pilgrims who participate in the studied tours can generally be said to hold a dispensationalist-premillennialist approach to biblical interpretation, which, as noted earlier, tends to govern fundamentalist Christian theology more generally (Ariel, 2001; Sandeen, 1970; Sizer, 1999; Weber, 1998). According to dispensationalist-premillennialist doctrine, the age in which we live today is the final era before Jesus returns to earth in order to establish his kingdom, over which he will reign for 1000 years. According to this belief, the central events of this "second coming" will unfold in Israel and the surrounding areas. Thus, evangelical pilgrims who embrace this doctrine, as do those pilgrims in my fieldwork, travel to the Holy Land not only to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, but also to experience, as a key informant expressed it, the land "where the history of the future is going to take place". There is also, however, an inherently political facet to the theological position of premillennialism: followers of this doctrine believe that before Jesus will return to earth, a series of biblical prophecies must be fulfilled, one of which is the restoration of the Jews in Israel – the land that dispensationalists believe God has promised them. Thus, Jewish sovereignty in Israel is viewed within this religious framework as the realization of God's promise to his people, a view that clearly has far-reaching ramifications for the Arab–Israeli conflict especially in light of the electoral power of the Christian Right (Ariel, 2001; Weber, 2004).

The fundamentalist wing in the evangelical movement emerged in the United States in the 1920s as a reaction against modern influences on both Christian theology and American culture. The theological agenda that reflects fundamentalist views on liberal theology and that informed their separatist stance on cultural issues can be found in a 12-volume set of articles known as *The Fundamentals*, published between 1910 and 1915, from whence the movement's name is derived. The movement suffered a crisis during the 1920s when it became an object of the press's ridicule during the "Scopes Trial". Carpenter (1997) argues that fundamentalism's ability to withstand this crisis, to remain relevant throughout the twentieth century and to ascend to the status of the most prominent religious movement in contemporary America is largely the result of its development of a rich separatist subculture that has been managed and sustained through interdenominational institutions and activities such as the Moody Bible Institutes, Youth for Christ, radio and television broadcasting, concerts and more. These institutions and activities offer members cultural support that shields them from undue exposure to cultural products that are not in accord with their religious beliefs and provide them with a sense of social solidarity that goes beyond the ordinary bounds of the Sunday sanctuary. Interestingly, the use of cultural products pertaining particularly to entertainment (e.g. popular books and films, radio broadcasts) to attract members and reinforce movement values is not new to fundamentalism.

American evangelicals, like their secular neighbors, are members of contemporary consumer culture, and they are increasingly garnering resources, in terms of both time and money, to add global travel to their list of leisure pursuits. As their lives are profoundly influenced by their faith and by their religious culture, it is natural that they seek to integrate these elements into their leisure travel experiences. The growing market of evangelical pilgrimage has generated several specialized travel books from which potential travelers can learn about the destinations of religious significance that may interest them (e.g. Dyer & Hatteberg, 2000; Poole, 2000). They may, for example, desire to follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul in Greece and Turkey or to visit Jordan and Egypt in order to experience sites noted in the Bible. As Protestants, they may also wish to travel to sites in Germany and Switzerland, where the events of the Reformation unfolded. Another emerging type of American evangelical pilgrimage is organized visits to sites related to the founding

fathers of American evangelicalism (Tweed, 2000). Nevertheless, since fundamentalists' eschatology leads them to be oriented not only back into events of their religious heritage but also forward toward events of the prophesied future, evangelical leaders may herald the development of new sites of touristic interest. The growing phenomenon of evangelical pilgrimage will, in turn, affect the places that pilgrims visit, as well as the fundamentalist movement itself, which is well positioned to further incorporate this form of travel into its toolkit of quasi-pop-culture entertainment practices that add to its appeal as a lifestyle choice and increase its cohesiveness. It is hoped that the multidimensional, contextualized approach to the study of pilgrimage advocated here will pave the way for a better understanding of these connections, and others, between tourism, faith, culture and politics.

Methods

The fieldwork that serves as the basis for the arguments advanced in this article was conducted between December 2004 and July 2007, and revolved around the activities of a Midwestern American evangelical couple (Mr. & Mrs. B) who organize trips to Israel as part of a larger set of religious activities they run as managers of a local evangelical radio station. Between 2000 and 2007 the couple organized 18 trips to Israel that they frequently described in their program material as "humanitarian trips and pilgrimages". An analysis of the itinerary reveals that the trips involved visiting sites of religious (historical and eschatological) significance, visiting modern Israeli institutions and volunteering at various Israeli charitable organizations. The data upon which the study is based include the transcriptions of 29 interviews and 22 informal interviews; 8 observation sessions; 115 email exchanges with tour organizers; analysis of various documents related to the tours; consideration of written answers to open questionnaires submitted by trip participants and an analysis of transcripts of the organizers' daily radio shows.

To be more specific, 8 formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with the trip organizers, and 21 formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with pilgrims. Seven participant observations were conducted during three pre-trip meetings and three post-trip meetings. During the pre-trip meetings, the tours were marketed through sermons, lectures, videotapes, photos, booklets and various religious articles. In addition, nine informal interviews were conducted with future participants during the pre-trip meeting. During the post-trip meetings, the pilgrims recounted their experiences, shared photos and discussed the meaning and significance of the trip. Ten informal interviews were conducted in this setting. Additional participant observation was conducted when the author undertook a tour in Israel in June 2005, and three informal interviews were conducted and transcribed at this time.

In December 2005, pilgrims who participated in the November 2005 tour were asked to provide written answers to a list of nine questions and to submit them to the researchers. Twenty-six of the 38 trip participants replied (68% response rate).[2] Their answers were used to understand the way the pilgrims view the tour, the itinerary and the political aspect of the tour in which they participated. The fieldwork also included an analysis of additional materials, which included booklets, brochures and other original materials produced for the pilgrims and hosts.

The premise of the interpretive analysis used here is that human behaviors reflect the subjective perceptions of their experiences rather than the "objective reality" of the examined phenomenon. Nevertheless, the analysis was directed to illuminate cultural and social issues that shape the pilgrims' perceptions and experiences. The interpretation and presentation of findings are based on Turner's interpretative mode of analysis to pilgrimage, which

is also known as *processual symbolic analysis* (Keyes, 1976). This mode of analysis focuses on interpreting the symbolic meanings and processes of signification in the contexts of temporal socio-cultural processes. Accordingly, the analysis of the pilgrims' activities in Israel follows this approach by suggesting that the evangelical activities in Israel have overt and latent meanings that all have symbolic meanings.

Findings: illuminating the pilgrimage experience

The present study emphasizes the value of taking a multidimensional, contextualized approach to the study of pilgrimage experience. Understanding not only the theological but also the socio-cultural and political contexts in which evangelical tours operate can illuminate the way individual pilgrims construe meaning during their travel experiences. To illustrate the implementation of the contextualized perspective in the study of the pilgrim experience, I offer the following three thematic sections, each of which illustrates the role of the pilgrimage as a theocultural force in the evangelical sub-culture (Carpenter, 1997).

Men's emotional expressions

Examining the framework of fundamentalist evangelicalism's history as a rejection of mainstream American culture provides our first example of the interpretive benefits of embracing contextualized readings of evangelical pilgrimage. In their work in the local evangelical community, the Bs provide a set of specialized tours that reach out to particular subsets of the community to help them to achieve personal and spiritual growth. One such tour is a men's-only trip, which focuses on helping evangelical men deal with the unique problems they face as men in modern western society. I had the opportunity to spend time traveling with one such group, as well as to discuss the tour conceptually with Mrs. B, and it led to some interesting insights about the pilgrimage experience for these individuals. The trip appeared to be a highly emotional experience for many of the men, particularly the visit to Gethsemane, the garden in which Jesus and his disciples are reported to have prayed after the "Last Supper" on the night before Jesus' crucifixion. During the visit, the tour's leader discussed the challenges that many men face in expressing their emotions, and the participants were then given time to explore the garden and meditate individually. Many were moved to tears by the emotions evoked by the site.

This men's-only tour provides a particularly interesting case in the study of pilgrimage. In one sense, the tour takes advantage of the oft-discussed notion of liminality in order to achieve its mission of helping evangelical men to deal with the unique problems they face due to their socialization as twenty-first century American men. It brings its participants to a place that holds profound meanings for them, a place in which their ultimate spiritual leader experienced and openly expressed incomprehensibly intense and painful emotions. This place then draws upon the sense of liberation produced by the men's escape from the bounds of their everyday world to help them transcend the trappings of modern manliness that subvert open emotional expression. Interestingly, this act complicates notions of both *liminality* and normative *communitas*, because the provision of this space of emotional liberation simultaneously binds the participants more tightly to their own evangelical subculture; thus, it serves as a further example of tourism as a theopolitical catalyst, as discussed in the previous subsection. The relevant point for the present discussion, however, is that a consideration of the evangelical subculture's mandate as a social force that kicks against the currents of mainstream modernity renders the emotional experiences of these pilgrims at this site far more understandable than would a simple theological reading of the site's significance.

Religious deeds and their political meanings

The theological orientation of evangelical pilgrims is also expressed in its championing of humanitarianism, a none-too-surprising situation, given the pervasiveness of this principle across various sects of Christianity. In the case of the tours analyzed in my fieldwork, the ideology of humanitarianism manifested itself overtly in the form of organized projects conducted to enhance the social welfare of the Jewish people in Israel. Promoted by the tour organizers under the banner of "Comfort, Comfort My People" (Isaiah 40:1), this aspect of the tours included numerous charitable activities such as donating blood in Israeli hospitals, volunteering at centers that serve the country's disabled citizens and collecting teddy bears for at-risk children. In such activities, the tours offer an alternative way of traveling abroad. If American main stream of traveling devotes one's vacation to pleasure and relaxation, the humanitarian tours to Israel provided by the Bs offer a unique way to travel. To the question: "why did you choose to travel with this group (with the Bs)?", many pilgrims responded by referring to the humanitarian aspect of the tour as an important element. A man in his forties who traveled with his wife wrote:

> It was not just a pilgrimage but a missions [sic] trip also. This interested me more than just a tour because it would give me a chance to meet some of the Israeli people not just see them.

A similar notion was expressed more explicitly by a female pilgrim who wrote:

> I chose to go because of the humanitarian part that the group does. God has helped many situations in my life and this trip not only has always been a dream, but I also would get to Serve some of the Children of Israel.

While all aid work has political ramifications – even if they are not always recognized or intended by coordinating agencies or aid workers themselves (and indeed this was often the case with the pilgrims I interviewed) – the charitable service conducted by evangelical pilgrims in Israel is politically complex in a unique way. Unlike many mainstream Christian organizations that derive their theological mandate to engage in charitable activities solely from the example of Jesus, whose life and teachings are said to epitomize working to relieve the suffering of others, dispensationalist-premillennialist evangelicals arguably have an additional theological motivation to engage in aid work in Israel. This motivation derives from their literal reading of the Bible, which leads them to conclude that those who support the Jewish people of today are following God's will. The salience of this religious interpretation for the shaping of the humanitarian portion of the pilgrimages analyzed in my fieldwork is clear in the organizers' invocation of the phrase "Comfort, Comfort My People", as the unifying slogan for their charitable activities. It is also revealed in the literature used by Mr. and Mrs. B to promote their tours, particularly in an article by Reverend Jack Hayford, the pastor of Living Way Ministries in California, entitled "Why Stand with Israel Today?" In this article, Hayford (n.d.) argues that "Scripture declares there will come a time when all the nations of the world will turn against Israel. It is so highly conceivable this could happen in our time that it is critical to outline: Why we should stand with Israel today". This additional theologically based motivation helps to explain why most of the pilgrims' charitable projects focus on aiding the Holy Land's Jewish population rather than being directed more broadly at people of all ethnic and religious heritages who reside in the region where Jesus lived and taught.

Although exceptions to this trend do occur, they tend to be ideologically loaded. For example, one of the charitable agencies to which the pilgrims offer support is Shevet

Achim, a Christian organization that transports Arab children to Israeli hospitals for free life-saving heart operations. It is hard to miss the subtext of the tour organizers' discourse regarding participating in these efforts to "fix the hearts of Palestinians", whom Mrs. B describes in general as being "a sweet, nice people" who are simply in need of a "normal" education. Another example involves the pilgrims' support of an organization known as the Children's Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), which coordinates religious educational programs for Arab youth. As Mrs. B explained, the pilgrims on some of her tours collect toys to donate to CEF, which are used as prizes to reward children for their learning accomplishments, such as the memorization of Bible verses. In the description provided to me by Mrs. B of her tours' relationship with CEF, she refers to Islamic teachings as "false doctrine" – a label she does not affix to the Jewish faith, despite the latter's clear lack of accord with her movement's interpretation of biblical doctrine and history. There are many reasons for this discrepancy. An empathetic theological reading would argue that evangelical groups like those led by the Bs do not proselytize to Jews because they are already accounted for in God's plan of salvation; a more cynical political reading would claim that this restraint is strategic, merely one technique employed by the denizens of fundamentalist America to buttress the harmony their movement currently enjoys with certain segments of the Israeli nation-state (Ariel, 2000, 2001; Weber, 2004). The relevant point for the purpose of the present discussion, however, is that for Christian Zionist pilgrims, charitable service in Israel means more than merely "loving thy neighbor" in the broad sense applied by other humanitarian projects of evangelicals abroad; in Israel, it is without question directed specifically at Jews.

Given the politics inherent in Christian Zionist pilgrims' aid work in the Holy Land, it is easy to see why some left-wing Israelis tend to be skeptical of such individuals' relationship with their nation, their suspicion logically emanating from their opposition to the place of religion in the political decision-making process regarding peace in the Middle East. Thus, while it would be hard to find fault with these pilgrims' aid projects per se, as their activities undoubtedly touch the lives of people, it is also important to come to terms with the fact that Christian Zionist social activism, guided by their theological worldview, has larger political meanings in the loaded geopolitical context in which their tours operate. Their practices illustrate the ways that tourism, theology and politics can intertwine in a nexus that creates forces not ordinarily brought to light.

Symbolic actions: the immigration centers

Following Turner's mode of analysis of *processual symbolic analysis* (Keyes, 1976), in this section I would like to suggest that the itinerary of the pilgrims in Israel should be understood symbolically in their unique theocultural contexts. Accordingly, any pilgrimage activity in Israel should be understood in terms of its wider contexts and as part of a whole system of symbols and meanings that the organizers of the tours seek to promote via the tours. These symbolic activities are, in turn, the mechanisms through which a theological element in the evangelical sub-culture is maintained.

In order to illustrate my argument, I will focus on the immigration center as a symbolic site of visit. The itinerary of the tours led by Mr. and Mrs. B is not limited to sites explicitly noted in the Bible. One interesting inclusion, for example, is a visit to an immigration center of the type found in any large Israeli city. Such a modern, bureaucratic, civil service institution clearly does not square with the classic imaginary of a sacred Christian site. However, understanding the premillennialist eschatology that shapes the evangelical pilgrims' worldview – as well as the political components of this theology – renders this choice of

destination logical and provides a context for understanding pilgrims' emotional reactions upon visiting such an institution. For these travelers, Israeli immigration centers are the concrete manifestation of the return of the Jewish Diaspora to Israel, a cause that lies at the heart of the Zionist enterprise, and their existence and activities represent the fulfillment of biblical prophecies that necessitate the return of the Jews to Israel before the second coming of Jesus. Thus, when pilgrims visit one of these sites, they do not see a drab government office filled with long lines, confusing paperwork and tired clerical workers – they see, as Mrs. B expressed it, "the work of God". As one of the pilgrims wrote: "I saw the covenant faithfulness of the God of Israel, how He is fulfilling His word in returning the Jewish people back to His land that He promised to give them".

Moreover, a contextualized reading of Christian Zionist pilgrimage can help us to better understand how these pilgrims construe meaning from their experiences conducting aid work while in Israel. In helping tour participants to prepare for the trip, Mr. and Mrs. B hold sessions in which they communicate information about the trip's logistics and offer details about the humanitarian projects in which the group will engage; they also lead a worship service and, in some cases, give participants a chance to interact with pilgrims who have made the trip in the past. In these sessions, as well as in pre-embarkation letters mailed to participants, the trip is presented as "an incredible adventure for the Lord" in which the pilgrims, through their aid work, will become "the hands, the face and the eyes of Messiah to His own people", personally representing Jesus through the "presence, kindness, love and care" that they will provide to the Israeli people during their visit. Thus, when the pilgrims undertake their charitable projects, they are doing more than simply helping others: they are donning the role of the earthly representatives of their messiah. Through this process, they are able to feel that they are strengthening their personal relationship with Jesus – an important feature of a healthy Christian existence, in the minds of many Protestants, and a key goal of evangelical pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Bowman, 2000).

Finally, it is important to note that most of the pilgrims interviewed said that the experience of traveling to Israel played an important role in their religious life. Being in Israel enabled them to see the landscape and the sites that they read about in the Bible everyday. As one of the pilgrims wrote:

> I now read my bible and when I come across locations, I think WOW I have been there and I just close my eyes and can see the Holy Land how Precious it is and I Pray for the Jewish people and for Peace.

Admittedly, such findings are not surprising and are actually in line with what we know about the experience of pilgrims, and thus, in my opinion, not worth a special section (see e.g. Bowman, 2000; Morinis, 1992). It is, however, important to look at this recurrent theme in a broader context. Since traveling to Israel has become relatively affordable and increasingly popular among evangelicals, it would be reasonable to argue that the experiences of these pilgrims are popularized in churches and through the evangelical media (e.g. magazine, Bible studies groups, radio and television broadcasting, etc.). As such, these experiences are increasingly becoming a unifying force in the evangelical sub-culture that is shared by the laity.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of a particular organization of evangelical pilgrimages, this study attempts to demonstrate the value of turning a broader, more sociological lens on

the pilgrimage experience in order to better come to terms with its social, political and theocultural dimensions. Such an approach can, in turn, shed new light on the experiential aspects of pilgrimage as well. Thus, scholars can better understand not only what pilgrimage means to pilgrims, but also what pilgrimage means for society. Accordingly, the overarching theme that governs the findings is the desire to contextualize the examined tours within what the social-historian Joel Carpenter (1997) calls the evangelical sub-culture. Specifically, while not heretofore explicitly discussed by historians of the evangelical movement, organized evangelical pilgrimage to the Holy Land can clearly be seen as an excellent example of a parachurch activity that aids the fundamentalist movement in maintaining its interdenominational subculture. The tours to Israel and surrounding areas provide the pilgrims with spiritual fulfillment, education and pleasure – a mixture of outcomes that emanates both from the structure of the tourism industry in which the tours operate as well as from the larger consumer culture that governs the pilgrims' home society. Like members of other contemporary American subcultures, however, fundamentalists seek tourism experiences that complement and enhance their broader beliefs and interests. In this context the findings of this article show that the examined tours serve as a theocultural force as it offers the pilgrims an alternative way of traveling. If one way of conceptualizing religious movements is to view them as economical and ideological entities competing for adherents in a marketplace of money and ideas respectively, then when viewed from an organizational perspective, the act of coordinating evangelical pilgrimages is quite a rational one, as it gives individual churches a powerful means of enhancing their members' sense of connection to the interdenominational sub-culture, and to each other, by facilitating direct, emotionally poignant, spiritual lived experiences for them. In turn, the cohesiveness of the evangelical movement, and more specifically of its fundamental wing, as a whole is strengthened. Pilgrimage thus becomes a theocultural force in its own right.

The evangelical tours from Illinois can, therefore, serve to broaden Turner's conceptualization of pilgrimage as a social and psychological process. First, the examined evangelical tours are a modern tourism phenomenon and, as such, the journey to Israel is not as physically rigorous or as long as that of the pilgrimages that inspired the writings of the Turners. The pilgrims from Illinois fly to Israel in a Jumbo Jet and arrive at their sacred destination in less than a day. Nevertheless, the pilgrimage to Israel can still be seen as a longer process if we employ Schade and Hahn's notion of *psychic journey*, where the periods preceding and following the trip are regarded as part of the journey (cited in Parrinello, 1993, p. 240). Thus, the spiritual as well as the educational preparations for these trips can be seen as the beginning of what Turner calls the pilgrimage process. More specifically, prior to the trip, the pilgrims meet with the organizers in order to discuss the theological and administrative issues regarding the role of Israel in Christianity. In these meetings, the pilgrims are encouraged to view the modern state of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Accordingly, contemporary news about Israel and the Middle East is discussed as a porthole through which the prospective pilgrims can witness God's action. It is also important to note that prior to each trip, the pilgrims learn about the historical relations between Christianity and Judaism. These relations are theologically contextualized through refuting the replacement theology according to which the Jews are no longer the chosen people since they have failed to accept Jesus as the messiah. The prospective pilgrims are then familiarized with an alternative theological understanding of the role of the Jews in God's plans for humanity. In this theological worldview, which became quite popular within many evangelical communities (Weber, 2004), God's covenant with the Jewish people remains valid. It can be argued, therefore, that the tours to Israel play an important role in the formation of the premillennial perspective as a leading viewpoint among evangelicals in the United States.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, traveling in groups is one of the few shared characteristics of pilgrimages, and the examined evangelical tours are no exception. This, in turn, may explain the popularity of Turner's notion of *communitas*. Turner (1969), however, argues that it is the sense of liminality that explicates the emergence of this sense of friendship and companionship. Arguably, it is the experience of traveling abroad with a group of people who share one's religious beliefs that engenders this sense of communitas, and not exclusively the state of liminality, as Turner suggested. In other words, the unique circumstances of evangelical pilgrimages in which a pilgrim shares intimate moments, such as baptism/rededication in the Jordan River or communal prayer in Gethsemane, facilitate and generate this sense of communitas. In addition, it is important to note that such groups are often formalized during the preparation meetings, as well as in the gatherings that take place after the tours and which allow pilgrims to share the influence of the tour on their life. It is therefore important that in the context of contemporary evangelical pilgrimages, such activities be taken into consideration in future discussions of the *communitas*, as they allow for a further contextualization and conceptualization of the term and its relevance to global contemporary culture.

Finally, the approach taken in this essay exemplifies the importance of contextualizing contemporary pilgrimage practices in their historical roots. Such an approach is frequently not employed in the study of modern tourism practices, which are considered to be a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Pilgrimage has been an exception to this rule, since it is often discussed as an illustration of one of the ancient forms of travel (Coleman & Elsner, 1995). The evangelical pilgrimage to Israel, however, should be seen as a modern phenomenon, which has developed in the context of the conditions of modern society rather than as a modern embodiment of an ancient form of travel to a holy destination. It is recommended that future studies continue to shift from the historical perspective to a more contemporary viewpoint that examines pilgrimages as modern travel practices with historical roots.

Notes

1. An exact count of evangelical Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land is notoriously hard to achieve. The calculation offered here is derived from the 2006 Israeli Annual Tourism Report statistics. In that year, 123,500 US tourists classified as pilgrims visited Israel, or some 25% of all US tourists to the country (US tourists, in turn, composed 27% of tourists to Israel in 2006). Although not all of these pilgrims are evangelical Protestants, this group does make up the majority of this figure, as the number of American Catholics making pilgrimages to Israel is negligible, and American Jews generally do not define their visits to Israel as pilgrimages. The number of evangelical pilgrims who tour Israel is also augmented by Christian Zionists from other parts of the world, such as Canada, Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, who share many characteristics with their American counterparts.
2. The questions the pilgrims were asked to answer were: (1) When did you decide to travel to Israel? How did you come to that decision? What influenced your decision? (2) Why did you choose to travel with this group [with the Bs]? (For those who have traveled several times: you can write generally about your initial motivation and if your motives changed over the time); (3) What was the peak of the trip for you (you can choose several of them)? (4) Do you think that your religious belief was influenced by this trip? How has your relationship to the Bible been affected? (5) What was the religious significance of this trip for you? For

example if you are a born-again Christian you can write about how visiting Israel has shaped this experience for you; (6) What is your opinion about the State of Israel? Do you feel more close to the Israeli people or Jewish people? Do you think that your political opinion regarding Israel has changed due to the experiences of this trip? How? (7) Do you think that there are connections between these trips and politics? What types of connections? Can you provide examples from your experience? (8) Would you define yourself as a tourist, as a pilgrim or as a volunteer? Why? What characteristics of the trip helped you in your definition? (9) What is the significance of this trip for you? Did the trip influence your daily life? For example, did you start to learn Hebrew after the trip? Did you start watching news about the Middle East more carefully? Did you start volunteering in your community? If you started to volunteer, why did you start to volunteer? And, what types of organizations did you start to volunteer with? Did you share your experiences with others? With whom?

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