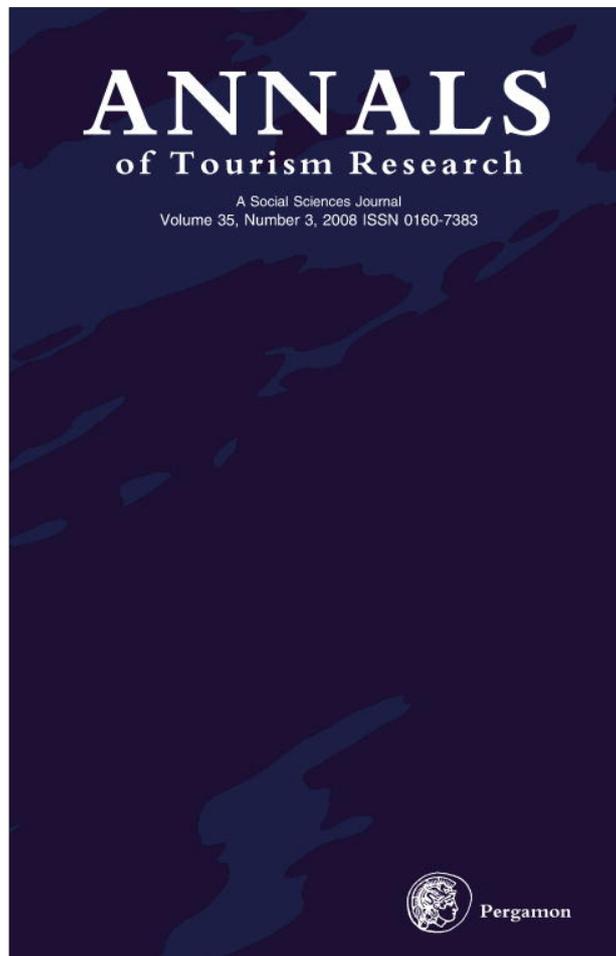


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THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY IN THE PILGRIM EXPERIENCE

Yaniv Belhassen

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

Kellee Caton

William P. Stewart

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Abstract: The present study enriches the theoretical debate on the concept of authenticity by examining its relevance to the experiences of pilgrims. Overall, the study argues that the recent conceptual shift in the tourism literature, which tends to view authenticity in a subjective sense, should be rethought due to its lack of consideration of ideological and spatial dimensions. Employing data from fieldwork on fundamentalist Christian pilgrimages, the study integrates previous approaches to authenticity through a conceptual framework referred to as theoplacity. **Keywords:** pilgrimage, authenticity, place, religion, theoplacity. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The search for authenticity has become one of the key themes in the academic literature of tourism. MacCannell (1973), who initiated this discussion, emphasized the central role that tourist settings play in the search for authenticity. He noted that pilgrims' desire to be in a place associated with religious meanings was comparable to the attraction of tourists to places embedded with social, historical, or cultural significance. More recently, however, the term authenticity has undergone a series of conceptual shifts from being viewed as objective and concrete to being envisioned in a more subjective and abstract way (Kim and Jamal 2007; Steiner and Reisinger 2006; Wang 1999). There is much merit in this conceptual shift, especially insofar as it highlights the individual and various manifestations of tourists' lived experiences. However, the tendency to approach authenticity exclusively through a subjectivist lens is also problematic as it obscures the influence of real physical places, with shared, collectively authored meanings. This study seeks to reexamine the way authenticity is experienced by tourists and

Yaniv Belhassen is an assistant professor in the program of Hotel & Tourism Management (Eliat campus, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel 84105. Email <yanivbel@bgu.ac.il>). **Kellee Caton** earned her PhD in 2008 from the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. **William Stewart** is Professor in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

to suggest a theoretical framework that bridges the conceptual gap between the subjective nature of authenticity, as reflected in contemporary scholarship, and the need to contextualize it both within the toured landscape and within the broader nexus of socio-spatial relations surrounding the journey—two important forces that exist outside of the tourist's self, but which nevertheless mediate his or her experiences of authenticity.

To be more specific, this study calls for an integrative analysis of authenticity that moves beyond the solely subjective to highlight the intersection of three central factors—place, belief, and action—as part of pilgrims' lived experiences of authenticity. The relationship between these elements provides a conceptual framework, termed “theoplacity,” which is illustrated through examples derived from recent fieldwork on fundamentalist Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. By examining the search for authentic experiences during the examined tours, the framework of theoplacity demonstrates that authenticity is shaped by religious belief underlying evangelical pilgrimage, the places visited and their meanings, and the activities undertaken by the pilgrims. As such, the suggested framework follows Uriely's (2005) suggestion for a balanced theoretical approach to authenticity in the wake of the increasing role of subjectivity in conceptualizations of tourism.

An Authentically Slippery Concept

Handler and Saxton (1988), Bruner (1994), and Wang (1999) all recognize that the term “authenticity” has not been used consistently in the literature, suggesting that the various uses of the term can be found across studies and, at times, even within the same study (such heterogeneity is reflected for example in the following studies: Bruner 1989; Cohen 1988; Daniel 1996; Eco 1986; MacCannell 1973; Reisinger and Steiner 2006; Selwyn 1996). Through a genealogical meta-analysis, Wang (1999) maps out conceptual developments of the term over the last four decades, and concludes by suggesting a classification of the different theoretical approaches toward authenticity in tourism studies (see Table 1 from Wang 1999:359). Wang offers a larger organizing framework that posits objectivist, subjectivist, and postmodernist conceptualizations of authenticity as discreet from and oppositional to one another. In particular, he notes three different paradigmatic approaches to the concept of authenticity—namely, objectivist, constructivist, and postmodernist—and suggests that these paradigms are reflected in three different types of authenticity—object, constructive, and existential.

The objectivist approach assumes that authenticity emanates from the originality of a toured object such as a site or a specific attraction. Hypothetically, this originality can be measured with objective criteria that determine whether the object is authentic or not. Arguably, this approach can be affiliated with the broader academic stream of objectivism and, to some extent, with post-positivism and empiricism, all of which presuppose the existence of authenticity as a quality that can be

Table 1. Wang's Taxonomy of Three Types of Authenticity in Tourist Experiences

Object-related Authenticity in Tourism	Activity-Related Authenticity in Tourism
<p><i>Object authenticity</i> refers to the authenticity of originals. Correspondingly, authentic experiences in tourism are equated to an epistemological experience (i.e., cognition) of the authenticity of original.</p> <p><i>Constructive authenticity</i> refers to the objects by tourist or tourism producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, powers, etc. There are various versions of authenticities regarding the same objects. Correspondingly, authentic experiences in tourism and the authenticity of toured objects are constitutive of one another. In this sense, the authenticity of toured object is in fact symbolic authenticity.</p>	<p><i>Existential authenticity</i> refers to a potential existential state of Being that is to be activated by tourism activities. Correspondingly, authentic experiences in tourism are to achieve this activated existential state of Being within the liminal process of tourism. Existential authenticity can have nothing to do with the authenticity of toured objects.</p>

measured. However, as Wang notes, this approach, as reflected in the writings of Boorstin (1964) and MacCannell (1976), does not specify how or by whom these criteria are established. In other words, this approach generates the problem of authentication, eloquently posed by Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as the question of “Who has the power to determine what will count as authentic?” (1994:459).

The constructivist approach takes a different tack. This approach is affiliated with the larger academic school of constructivism, which emphasizes symbolic meanings created through the process of socio-public discourses. Constructivists do not put as much stress on the originality of toured objects, and they reject the objectivist assumption of the binary nature of authenticity. Instead, they emphasize the pluralistic nature of the meaning-making process through which authenticity is established or recognized and assume that authenticity is projected onto an object by the influence of social discourses. Likewise, constructivists emphasize the heterogeneous ways that tourists perceive authenticity, which can be related to their personal interpretations of the definition of authenticity. Thus, within the constructivist approach, authenticity is viewed as a projection of the tourist's home culture, rather than as a reflection of an inherent quality of the toured object. In this way the constructivist approach opens ground for consideration of claims that bind authenticity with relations of power. Finally,

constructivists view authenticity as a dynamic concept, in the sense that it can come to be attached to a toured place that was initially perceived as inauthentic. This attribute refers to the “emergent” nature of authenticity in the context of places that have come to be seen as authentic over the years, such as Disneyland and Graceland (Eco 1986).

Lastly, the postmodernist approach, similar to the constructivist approach, tends to stress the subjective nature of authenticity. Wang (1999) suggests that this approach relies on the meaning ascribed to the term “authenticity” by existentialist philosophers such as Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. In short, this approach holds that authenticity is an existential state in which one is true to one’s real self in a given moment, a conceptualization intimately akin to Selwyn’s (1996) notion of authenticity as an emotional experience—an “alienation smashing feeling.” Thus, existential authenticity resides in the subject (i.e., the tourist) rather than in the toured object. Wang suggests that the ways in which existential authenticity is experienced in the context of tourism can be divided into intra-personal authenticity (i.e., when one’s feelings of being true to oneself are not related to others) and inter-personal authenticity (i.e., when one’s feelings of being true to oneself are directly related to others). In this context, authenticity is seen as an ontological mode of being that does not depend on any given quality inherent in any object.

Wang presents the first two approaches as historic uses of authenticity in the tourism literature and proposes that, while they may continue to hold some value, the last approach may be the most appropriate of the three for examining authenticity under the contemporary conditions of postmodern society because it has more explanatory power than the other two (1999:350, 366). In their paper “Abandoning Object Authenticity,” Reisinger and Steiner (2006) present a similar argument and arrive at an even stronger conclusion, suggesting that tourism scholars should eschew both the term “object authenticity,” on the grounds of its heterogeneous usage, and the concept(s) it represents, on the grounds of its lack of ontological tenability. Like Wang, they argue that existential authenticity is a more useful conceptualization for understanding ways in which contemporary tourists make meaning from their travel experiences (Reisinger and Steiner 2006; Steiner and Reisinger 2006). Opposing a wholesale shift to this new conceptualization, Belhassen and Caton (2006) have argued that the objectivist notion of authenticity, while admittedly problematic for all the reasons that have thus far provoked rebukes from the constructivist and postmodernist camps, nevertheless continues to carry conceptual value, at the very least because of the ongoing “street cred” it holds with tourism brokers and with tourists themselves (Belhassen and Caton 2006).

There is, however, a larger problem that comes along with abandoning the notion of “object authenticity”. When the objectivist approach to authenticity gets dismissed as ontologically untenable, the importance of the toured object and its “real” (i.e., consequential), intersubjectively understood characteristics and meanings get tossed out

along with it. Thus, the notion of shared, socially constructed meaning and the power that flows from it become obscured, and the idea of place—a central component of tourism—becomes lost.

Interestingly, the conceptual histories of “place” and “authenticity” both begin with physical objects, move to social constructivism, and lead to approaches linked to identity and meaning. Although these two concepts share similar trajectories of development and are both pertinent to the study of tourism, they have not been integrated within the tourism literature, and their respective streams of thought remain independent of each other. The discourse on place has posed questions about whether it is essentially about meanings, experiences, or the objective environment. Most literature reviews that emphasize social constructivist approaches start with Tuan (1977), who argued that place is not an inherent part of the environment but is centered on human interpretation of it. As Tuan claims, “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we endow it with value” (1977, p. 6). Tuan’s emphasis on the social construction of meaning has been expanded to appreciate that place meanings are influenced by one’s experience in an environment (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995; Eisenhauer, Krannich and Blahna 2000). This expansion of the idea of place is not about human experience being more relevant than socially constructed meaning, but instead claims that a dynamic relationship exists between socially constructed meanings of a setting and human experiences within it (Shumaker and Taylor 1983; Seamon 1987; Manzo 2003). The argument recognizes that meanings are not embedded in the physical world, but neither are they independent of human experience in the physical world (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Kruger and Shannon 2000).

But where is the “actual” physical environment in research that ostensibly focuses on people’s relationships with it? A recent trend in research has been to recognize more fully the impact of the physical world on experiences and meanings about place. At times, this recognition has been part of arguments to ground place research within empirical evidence and quantitative science (Stedman 2003; Williams and Patterson 2007). Other researchers, such as Kruger and Shannon (2000), appreciate the complexity of the idea of place, and in so doing, link their research to lived experience within the physical world. They believe place is not something abstracted from daily living; rather, it is focused on the ways that humans integrate environmental experiences, meanings, and physical settings. Other place researchers have sought to include the physical environment more fully in understandings of sociopolitical contexts and ideologies (Entrikin 1991; Geiryn 2000; Manzo 2003).

Sociopolitical frameworks about place recognize that place meanings and experiences are vulnerable to changes in the physical environment. They do not imply that the physical environment determines experiences or meanings, but rather acknowledge that proposed or real manipulations of landscapes and settings are fodder for sociopolitical conflicts. In his comprehensive review of place research, Geiryn (2000:469) argued that landscapes are shaped by political forces that

reflect the outcome of competition amongst stakeholders with “powers to control the physical terrain in a self-interested way.” Geiryn characterizes environments with a sense of place as being “normative landscapes” that come with ideologies and moral judgments about right and wrong behavior, or good and bad practices. In championing the value of ordinary places Riley indicates the physical environment is “designed, owned, and maintained by people” (1992:31) to reflect their social and political positioning. The point here is that sociopolitical contexts for understanding place are sensitive to interconnections between human experience, social meanings, and physical environments.

In what ways can place research inform the search for authenticity in the pilgrimage experience? Integration of the physical environment within our framework of authenticity complements existential approaches. Authenticity is complex in that it not only points to one’s experiences and constructed meanings, but also connects with the act of touring a destination. It is not unusual for tourists—be they individuals or groups—to seek specific features of the built or natural landscape. Such physical features, particularly in the case of pilgrimage experiences, are essential to legitimize the experience of the trip, to enhance one’s identity with the place, and to validate one’s religious ideology. Without witnessing such features, or in general without grounding one’s tour in the physical world, the search for authenticity is lost. For the purpose of this paper, the concept of place is one that refers to the dynamic amongst experiences, meanings, and physical environments—without all three, place is not fully comprehended, and authenticity lacks grounding in the actions and environments of the tour.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE

Arguably, pilgrimage experiences engender physical and mental circumstances in which pilgrims experience an existential sense of being authentic to themselves—a sense activated by the actions of the tourists (Wang 1999). However, it is not only the tourists’ unique, personal actions that create authenticity in this context. The toured objects and social constructions surrounding the experience cannot be separated from the experience itself when analyzing it. Indeed, one of Wang’s examples of interpersonal existential authenticity in tourism (i.e., when one’s feelings of being true to oneself are directly related to other individuals) is the shared experience of a group of pilgrims, as pilgrimage is usually a collective activity (Campo 1998; Fleischer 2000). Wang explicates his argument by drawing on Turner’s (1969) concepts of liminality and *communitas* to convey the unique characteristics of human experiences while traveling in groups to sacred sites. The premise that renders authenticity applicable to tourism contexts other than pilgrimage is that liminality refers to a unique state of being in which individuals depart, geographically and psychologically, from their ordinary social state without entering another state of being

(Wang 1999). Consequently, individuals in a state of liminality experience an intermediate phase in which they are detached from any social condition. Turner notes that during the liminal condition, individuals experience behavioral changes and become distinctively sociable and affable. This sense of comradeship was termed “*communitas*” by Turner and is explained by the liminal conditions that pilgrims experience during their sacred journeys.

Thus, while Wang's (1999) division of authenticity into object-based (e.g., object and constructive authenticities) and activity-based notions (e.g., existential authenticity) is useful for calling attention to two disparate conceptualizations of this term, each with its own philosophical legacy and applicability to tourism, this dichotomy is problematic because it obscures the way that toured sites/objects and social discourses often exist in dialogue with experiences of existential authenticity. As shall become apparent, in the case of evangelical pilgrimage, it would seem that pilgrims' sense of existential authenticity depends very much on the setting in which they experience this feeling as well as on broader theocultural ideologies which help to construct the setting's meaning, both in advance of and through the process of the tourism encounter. Similarly, in Turner's (1969) conceptualization of the pilgrimage experience, there is significance to both the geographical detachment of the pilgrim from her/his familiar environment and the psychological mode he/she is in.

In an attempt to bridge the conceptual gap embedded in this dichotomy, this study illustrates how pilgrims are attached to sacred places because of the roles such places play in their religious belief systems and identities. Evidently, such an approach can be found in other types of pilgrimages and is not restricted to Christian pilgrimages. For example, the sacred city of Mecca plays a significant role in the identity of every religious Muslim who is obliged to visit the city at least one time in her/his life. Similarly, in the Jewish tradition, Jerusalem is mentioned frequently as the holiest city, and both the prayer of Yom Kippur and the Passover *Seder* (the Hebrew word for the annual ceremonial service and meal) end with the sentence “next year in Jerusalem.” Religious Muslims who visit San Francisco may experience a sense of existential authenticity, but it will not be comparable to the feelings of authenticity that they might experience while visiting Mecca in the Hajj. Thus, in some cases, examinations of existential authenticity must include a reference to the particular setting in which this feeling is experienced and to the collective, socially ascribed meanings that shape tourists' understandings of that space. In other words, there is always a dialogue between the cognition of pilgrims and tourists and the physical place to which they travel, since traveling is a spatial phenomenon, just as there is always a dialogue between their own direct, empirical experiences and the social discourses that have shaped the understandings that they carry with them into the tourism encounter. Pilgrimage, in this context, can be viewed as a performative act of religious belief, in which sacred sites play an important role.

For historical, theological, and ontological reasons, Protestant pilgrims in the Holy Land, who are the subjects of this study, tend to

be disengaged both from the traditional holy sites that are visited by Orthodox and Catholic pilgrims and from the canonical narratives about the authenticity of Christian holy places (Collins-Kreiner, Kliot, Mansfeld, and Sagi, 2006). As a result, Protestants are predisposed to experience an existential sense of authenticity that emanates from a subjective sense that they ascribe to the toured object. This tendency will be further explained in the following sections. In short, Bowman (2000) suggests that Protestants usually view their visit to the Holy Land as a means of celebrating their unmediated relations with Jesus and with the Bible. Therefore, holy sites that are associated with Catholicism or with the Orthodox branches of Christianity are viewed as sites that signify religious institutionalization, to which Protestants tend to be opposed, out of a belief that such institutionalization of holy sites deters individuals from developing unmediated relations with the living Jesus in the Holy Land. Thus, while the attraction of both Protestants and Catholics to sites such as the city of Nazareth stems from the same basic idea (i.e., the association of the city with the life of Jesus), for Protestants “that inspiration devolves from what is ingenerated as an unimpeded relationship between the individual and Christ and not, as with Catholicism, from the sense of being part of a long history during which the will of Jesus has been enacted in the world through the agency of the church” (Bowman 2000:116). This alternative attitude toward the authenticity of the toured object/place in the experiences of Protestant pilgrims is thus examined in this study in order to advance the conceptualization of authenticity in the context of religious tourism as an experience that emerges in the dialogue between place, theocultural discourse, and individual engagement and understanding.

Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

The Holy Land has long been of importance to Christianity—a relationship which can be traced to the early days of this faith’s existence—and notions of authenticity have held constant salience throughout this history. Scholars agree that the roots of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land can be traced to Christianity’s nascent era as a budding religion in the Roman Empire during the fourth century. An early activity undertaken by the reigning Roman powers was to authenticate sites of importance to Christian history—a process championed by Queen Helena, who personally embarked on a journey to authenticate sites related to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In so doing, she laid the foundation for the journeys of future pilgrims, who accepted the findings of her research and visited the churches built in the landscapes she had marked. The need to mark and authenticate specific locations continued to play an important role in other Christian pilgrimages during the Medieval era, when the papacy was considered the authenticating authority for many pilgrimage centers across Europe. For example, holy sites on pilgrimage trails that revolve around the presence of relics (sites that are mostly of relevance in Catholic and Orthodox traditions) have their basis in a belief in the

objective authenticity of the relics, which, in turn, are believed to have a healing effect on pilgrims (Sumption 1975).

Following the Reformation in Europe, the practice of pilgrimage was almost abolished by the newly empowered Protestants. Nevertheless, the Holy Land remained attractive to some Protestants who could afford to travel abroad. Arguably, Protestants sought to redefine the Holy Land's holiness by providing alternative readings that ran against the grain of the Catholic orthodoxy. Accordingly, Protestants who traveled to the Holy Land sought to distinguish their tours from Catholic pilgrimage traditions by emphasizing motives other than the search for sites that had been authenticated by the papacy and/or to answer the call of a higher authority to embark on a pilgrimage. This desire to distance Protestant pilgrimage from earlier Christian pilgrimage traditions is reflected in the written accounts of early Protestant pilgrims such as William Biddulph (1609), William Lithgow (1632), Fynes Moryson (1617), and Sir Henry Blount (1636). In each of these accounts, there is an explicit attempt to “de-Catholicize” the landscapes of the Holy Land. In particular, one document that sheds light on this phenomenon is a book of travel writing published in England in 1672, entitled *A Journey to Jerusalem: Or, A Relation of the Travels of Fourteen English Men in the Year 1669, from Scandaroon, to Tripoly, Joppa, Ramah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, the River Jordan, the Dead Sea, and back again to Aleppo*, written by one T. B. In the book, the Protestant author explains his goals, in light of then current theological and political developments in his native England. In a careful examination of T. B.'s book, Matar (2000) notes that in the introduction, T. B. explains his need to write a “correct” (i.e., Protestant) account of the Holy Land, because “no accurate accounts [had] been available about Palestine since that of George Sandys in 1615” and because “many Catholic ‘legends’ [had] been added to the description of Palestine” (Matar 2000:45). Furthermore, T. B. explicitly contends that, despite the religious nature of the journeys he and his fellow pilgrims made to Palestine, their aim was not to emulate the pilgrimages of Catholics, but, “like ‘divers Gentlemen of the Reformed Churches,’ to satisfy [their] curiosity and interest in antiquity” (Matar 2000:45).

This characteristic of early Protestant pilgrimage is still evident in contemporary Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In this regard, Bowman (1991) offers a theological explanation by suggesting that Protestants seek to expand their personal relationships with Jesus through the pilgrimage experience, rather than simply to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and visit important sites previously authenticated by religious authorities. Applying this logic to the question of the manner in which the search for authenticity is manifested in Protestant tours, one could thus argue that Protestants tend to search for authenticity in an existential sense, with regard to the emotional experience of their personal relationships with Jesus, rather than focusing on the quest to witness sites that are considered by religious authorities to be authentic, in an objective sense. As the analysis of contemporary American evangelical pilgrimage below will indicate, however, this existential search cannot be logically decontextualized from either the

physical space these tourists visit or from the broader theocultural discourses that give this space meaning as a place.

American Evangelical Pilgrimage

The subjects of the present study can collectively be referred to as evangelical Christians who undertake pilgrimages to the Holy Land, although it is important to note that they hail from a variety of distinct denominations. The adjective “evangelical,” deriving from the Greek notion of “spreading good news,” generally refers to Protestants who take part in the contemporary revival and proselytization of emotional Protestant Christianity, a movement grounded in a belief in individuals’ personal relationship with Jesus as the pathway to salvation. Evangelicalism can be further described as a religious movement that emphasizes the absolute authority of the Bible, and the death of Christ as atonement for human sins. American evangelicalism emerged in the eighteenth century across several denominations (mainly among the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the Baptists of New England), and has consequently been characterized by multiple strands from its inception until the present day. Since the First Great Awakening, which took place in the seventeenth century and is considered by historians to be the social and religious genesis of the movement, evangelicalism has undergone additional reformations and structural changes that have increased its denominational diversity (Hatch 1989).

Those whom this study terms “evangelical Christians” are certainly not the only Protestants who travel to the Holy Land. Sizer (1999), for example, divides such travelers into three groups: “evangelicals,” “fundamentalists,” and a group he organizes himself, 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. The “fundamentalists,” Sizer argues, are driven by the same motives as the evangelicals, but with an “added eschatological dimension, believing themselves to be witnessing and indeed participating in the purposes of God, at work within Israel in these ‘Last Days’” (see also Belhassen and Santos, 2006). Sizer claims that his Living Stones pilgrimages exist in contrast with the previous two types because these tours “include opportunities to meet, worship with, listen to, and learn from the spirituality and experience of the indigenous Christians” (1999:85) Thus, as Sizer’s work illustrates, Protestant pilgrimage is theoculturally diverse. His work also illustrates the inconsistency of terms used to designate different groups. The tours analyzed in this study most closely resemble Sizer’s notion of “fundamentalist” pilgrimages, but they are referred to here as evangelical tours, in keeping with the terminology used by the organizers and participants themselves. As noted, this type of pilgrimage was deemed to be the most suitable for analysis within a framework grounded in notions of existential authenticity, given evangelical pilgrims’ typical prioritization of experiences of spiritual connection and emotionality during their Holy Land travels.

The fieldwork that serves as the basis for the arguments advanced in this paper was conducted by the first author between December 2004 and July 2007, and revolved around the activities of a Midwestern American evangelical couple who organize trips to Israel as part of a larger set of religious activities they coordinate as managers of a local evangelical radio station. Between 2000 and 2007, the couple organized eighteen trips to Israel. These trips were frequently defined in program literature produced by the organizers as “humanitarian trips and pilgrimages.” The trips involved visiting sites of religious significance, visiting modern Israeli institutions, and volunteering at various Israeli charitable organizations. Fieldwork activities consisted of 29 interviews and 22 informal interviews; 8 observation sessions; 115 e-mail exchanges with tour organizers; analysis of various documents related to the tours; consideration of written answers to open questionnaires submitted by trip participants; and analysis of transcripts of the organizers’ daily radio shows. More specifically, during the fieldwork process, 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the trip organizers, and 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with pilgrims. The seven participant observation sessions included attendance at 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, which were used to explain the religious significance of visiting Israel; nine informal interviews were conducted with future participants in this setting. During the post-trip meetings, the pilgrims recounted their experiences, shared photos, and discussed the significance the trip had held for them; ten informal interviews were conducted with recent trip participants who attended these meetings. Additional participant observation was conducted when the first author traveled with one of the tours in Israel in June 2005, and three informal interviews were conducted at this time. After the November 2005 trip, pilgrims were provided with consent letters and stamped envelopes and asked to provide written answers to a list of nine questions and to submit them to the researchers. Twenty-six of the thirty-eight trip participants replied. Finally, the research included an analysis of secondary materials, which included an ideological essay by Reverend Jack Hayford, of Living Way Ministries, entitled “Why Stand with Israel Today?” collected from a sales table during one of the promotional meetings; pictures taken by the pilgrims during the trips and presented at the post-trip meetings; and booklets, brochures, pamphlets, and other original materials produced for the pilgrims and hosts.

In analyzing the data, Vukonic’s definition of pilgrimage served as a useful point of departure, as it seemed to encapsulate the characteristics of the examined tours. Specifically, Vukonic (1996:117–118) suggests that pilgrimage is “an organized visit or journey, organized at least in the sense that there are religious motives for going to a place and that the contents of that place include religious rituals.” Although for Vukonic, pilgrimage is principally a religious act that devolves from pilgrims’ beliefs, his definition does not preclude other motives for and implications of pilgrimage tours. As suggested by Turner, temporal

sociocultural processes such as pilgrimages are imbued with symbolic meanings and processes of signification. Keyes (1976) dubs Turner's interpretive approach to the study of rituals "processual symbolic analysis," and it is this mode of analysis that was used to decipher the manifest and latent meanings of the examined tours. In turn, understanding the meaning of the trip for organizers and pilgrims, and grasping the relationship between their theopolitical beliefs, their actions as tourists, and the spaces they visited, created a context in which notions of authenticity could be fruitfully re-theorized.

Broadly speaking, evangelical pilgrimages like the ones examined here are governed by the ideology of Christian Zionism (Belhassen forthcoming; Weber 2004). This ideology can be broadly defined as a religious disposition that connects the existence of the contemporary nation of Israel with the biblical Israelites or one that, in general, displays an attitude of support toward the Zionist endeavor based on religious grounds. Christian Zionism derives from the doctrine of dispensationalism, a form of premillennialist theology, which has governed American evangelicalism over the past century (Ariel 1991; Marsden 1980; Sandeen 1970; Weber 2004). Briefly, dispensationalism is a literal approach to biblical interpretation that considers the Jewish people of today to be the descendents of the biblical Israelites (the children of Abraham), with whom God initiated a covenant and whose descendents God promised to bless, while cursing those who would curse them, as recorded in Genesis 12:2–3. Thus, 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 effect. (Their position can be contrasted with that of more traditional premillennialist schools, which argue that upon the biblical Jews' lack of acceptance of 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 by supporting his "chosen people." According to dispensationalist-premillennialist doctrine, the age in which we live today is the final era before Jesus will return to earth to establish his kingdom, over which he will reign for 1,000 years. The central events of this "second coming," it is believed, will occur after a series of biblical prophecies have been fulfilled and will unfold in Israel and surrounding areas. Thus, evangelical pilgrims who embrace this doctrine travel to the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to answer God's call to bring comfort to the Jewish people, and to experience the place where, as one tour organizer explained, "the history of the future" is going to occur (Marsden 1980; Sandeen 1970; Weber 2004).

The Evangelical Pilgrimage Experience

As noted previously, evangelical pilgrims' quest for personal spiritual experiences that will strengthen their relationship with Jesus is evocative of the notion of existential authenticity. Such experiences, however, cannot be decontextualized from the spaces in which they

occur or from the sociocultural webs of discourse and interaction that imbue these spaces with shared meaning. While several examples from the fieldwork could serve to illustrate these connections, the pilgrims' visit to Nazareth constitutes a particularly valuable porthole through which they can be analyzed.

The city of Nazareth has been almost a must-see attraction for Christian pilgrims over the course of the last 1,800 years (Cohen-Hattab and Shoval 2007). In her "authentication journey" to the Holy Land, Queen Helena marked the place where the archangel Gabriel revealed to the Virgin Mary that she had been chosen to be the mother of the messiah. Based on Queen Helena's research, the Church of the Annunciation was subsequently erected on this spot and has been one of the most important sites for Christian pilgrimage in the Holy Land ever since. The centrality of this religious narrative and the belief in the holiness of the church, however, are more a feature of Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions than of Protestant ones. Thus, unlike Catholic and Orthodox tours, the examined evangelical pilgrimages to Nazareth did not center on a visit to the Church of the Annunciation. Instead, the trip organizers chose to frame the visit in Nazareth as an opportunity to view "the work of God" in modern Israel, or, in other words, to witness the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

The November 2005 visit to Nazareth began with, and was framed by, a meeting with an evangelical Arab Israeli resident of Nazareth who manages the local branch of an organization called the Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), which specializes in proselytizing to the world's children. At the meeting, the pilgrims donated hundreds of toys to Arab children who participate in CEF's Bible club, as awards for individual achievements such as the memorization of Bible verses. Many of the donations came from radio listeners who did not participate directly in the tours, so the organizers usually describe their encounters with those who receive their donations on their radio programs, at times even broadcasting live from Israel. The following description, however, was offered retrospectively by one of the organizers:

We went up to Nazareth where we met Azmi (a pseudonym) and his group. . .the Child Evangelism Fellowship, CEF. They work with the little Arab kids over there, teaching them about Jesus—Yesua, I think it is Yesua in Arabic. So we met with them and gave them all the prizes, a thousand prizes or more. . . . They have Good News Bible Clubs all over the Galilee region, and Azmi was saying that. . .what happens is that the Mosques don't have any educational programs for children. On the one hand we, who believe in Jesus Christ, think that is good because we don't want them teaching them any false doctrine. On the other hand, it's sad because they don't have programs for kids. Well, Azmi is filling in that gap, and he said what is happening is the Moslems want stuff for their kids, so they allow them to go to these Good News Bible Clubs, after school or in the summer. . .so they are getting more and more Moslem kids. He had a little presentation; it was amazing to see the work they are doing [the Christian Arabs in Nazareth]. . . . We also went to the Church of the Annunciation and walked through the streets of Nazareth. We walked thorough those

streets with different eyes. It was so good that we had seen Azmi and his workers in the morning, and they shared their heart for the Arab people, and our hearts, the eyes of our hearts, were changed as a result of that, and we saw the people in a different light, in a loving light (broadcasted 24 November 2006).

As reflected in this excerpt, the experience of visiting the city of Jesus is mediated by the act of visiting with and providing support to the local evangelical community. Like early Protestants, the evangelical leaders try to de-Catholicize the visit to Nazareth by marginalizing the visit to the Church of Annunciation, instead framing the sacredness of the visit through an alternative narrative that stresses the current work of God in this place—a narrative that is grounded in the evangelical worldview that guides the organizers of the tours. The pilgrims are not only witnessing this “work of God,” but also showing their support for CEF. Arguably, the actions that the pilgrims undertake in toured destinations such as Nazareth help to produce what Wang might call a sense of existential authenticity, or a sense of being true to themselves and their faith—of having their hearts opened and changed. Donating prizes to the Arab children who attend evangelical Bible clubs engendered in the pilgrims a sense that they were not only “witnessing God’s work,” but also participating in it, and that doing so caused them to grow as Christian servants.

Wang (1999) discusses existential authenticity as a sense that emerges from the tourist’s actions rather than from the originality of the toured objects. However, the idea of Nazareth’s authenticity as an object (i.e., as the actual hometown of Jesus) was also central to the visit’s meaning for the pilgrims. The stop was described by one of the tour organizers as a visit to the landscape of the Bible and a chance to see “what Nazareth was like 2,000 years ago in the time of Jesus.” Similarly, an examination of various tour documents reveals the construction of the area as an (objectively) authentic sacred space because of its physical ties to biblical landscapes. The documents emphasize direct, corporeal connections through language like “following in the footsteps of Jesus” and “journey[ing] to the land where the word became flesh.” This idea was echoed in the narratives of tour participants. As one woman in her forties wrote:

It’s hard to put into words what it meant to walk where Jesus walked. To be there where the most significant events in history took place and where awesome future events will take place is truly unbelievable.

Similarly, a man in his fifties wrote:

To see the Holy sites that I have read about and to actually stand on the same ground as Jesus was a very moving experience. Now when I read of those places I feel like I can relate to what I am reading much better.

Thus, the actual space of Nazareth itself and its meaning as the place where Jesus lived were central in evoking pilgrims’ personal experiences of connection with their faith. The pilgrims’ individual experiences of (existential) authenticity, which arose from witnessing and participating

in “God’s work in the city of Jesus,” cannot be disassociated from the toured object or from this space’s intersubjectively ascribed meaning. In other words, the Heideggerian approach to existential authenticity, in which authenticity is viewed as a sense that emerges from the subject’s actions rather than from the properties of the toured object, cannot adequately account for these pilgrims’ experiences. Pilgrimage is a kinetic action that occurs in specific places embedded with religious meaning. Tourism and pilgrimage are spatial phenomena that derive from individuals’ mobility from one place to another. Thus, even a spiritual sense of being authentic to one’s self is influenced by the visited place in which this feeling occurs. The evangelical visit to Nazareth examined here must be understood in the broader context of the pilgrims’ religious worldview and of the meanings they assign to the site in which their sense of existential authenticity emerges. In order to understand this tourist experience, it is crucial for tourism researchers to bear in mind both the particular spatial context and the perception of it as Jesus’s city of origin, as well as the theocultural discourses surrounding evangelical Protestant Christianity that help to shape adherents’ views of themselves as servants doing the work of God.

The city of Nazareth provides but one example of the relevance and integrated nature of object-based and experience-based notions of authenticity in the evangelical pilgrimage experience. When asked to describe peak moments of the trip, again and again the pilgrims cited instances in which they felt connected with Jesus and with the history of their faith, and their descriptions were almost invariably saturated with notions of place and place meaning. For example, one woman in her forties discussed visiting the tomb where Jesus’s body is thought to have been interred. She made reference to scholarly uncertainty regarding whether the site her tour visited was the actual tomb where Jesus was placed, but stated that even if the space she had visited had not been the actual site of the tomb, it would have at least been “very similar” to it. Her statement illustrates that the even though pilgrims are sometimes well aware of the difficulties in determining the authenticity of the places they visit, the place/toured object and the web of sociocultural meanings surrounding it are nevertheless central to their experiences. In her case, the particular attributes of the space—its general location, climate, and topography—were enough to bring the story of Jesus’s death, burial, and resurrection to life for her because they were evocative of the place where these events occurred. Another popular peak experience described by study participants was baptism in the Jordan River. As one man in his fifties wrote, “One of the most important parts of the trip to me was being baptized in the River Jordan just like Jesus.” The act of being baptized is alone a powerful experience of spiritual connection for born-again Christians, given the symbolic power of this ritual in the Protestant worldview, but the location of this activity in the Jordan River, where Jesus himself was baptized, imbued the experience with a heightened sense of meaning for the pilgrims. Thus, the tour was steeped in moments in which toured objects, tourist performances, socialization, and faith merged to produce powerful spiritual experiences.

Physical environments, personal actions and experiences, and social meanings converge to shape the authenticity of evangelical tours. The sense of authenticity would not be as strong without such convergence. Put differently, individual human meanings alone are not enough. The authenticity of places like Nazareth and the Jordan River is not just about the experiences of individuals, but about a sociopolitical heritage manifested in those individuals' actions at a physical locale. Although commenting on sense of place, Manzo (2003) provides insight that enhances understanding of the importance of linking behavior to the environment. She argues that the meanings of home environments change based upon one's vantage point. When at home, one usually takes place for granted and does not notice the feelings of being at home. However when away from home, the meanings of home change and enter one's consciousness. According to Manzo, fluidity in the meaning of home environments is due to different reference points that include longing, safety, fear, family, and so forth, depending on one's current environment and his/her behavior in it (2003:49–50). In a parallel fashion, a pilgrimage experience is defined by most pilgrims as leaving home to witness, act, and create meaning within a specific locale. The experiential quality of a pilgrim's tour is cued by interaction with built and natural features of the landscape, and as such, authenticity emerges during the tour.

Theoplacity: Experienced Authenticity in Sacred Destinations

The case examined in this study illustrates that the search for authentic experiences during visits to holy sites is shaped by three interrelated components: the theopolitical ideology underlying the pilgrimage, the places visited, and the activities undertaken by the pilgrims. One way to view the relationship between these three elements is to consider place and belief as the physical and social contexts through which individual pilgrims negotiate meaning regarding their touristic activities, and then to view this sense of meaning as the foundation that gives rise to experiences of existential authenticity. We refer to this relationship as “theoplacity,” bringing together the Greek “theos” (god) and the Medieval Latin “placea” (place), in order to capture the hybridity of its socioreligious and sociospatial foundations. To illustrate this concept visually, a graphic representation is offered below (see Figure 1).

The work of Vogel is particularly helpful in illuminating the notion of theoplacity in the context of evangelical pilgrimage to the Middle East. As noted previously, the physical space of today's Israel and surrounding areas has long been characterized by shared, socially constructed meanings produced thorough Protestant theocultural discourses. In his examination of American travel books about the Holy Land, *To See A Promised Land*, Vogel (1993) notes that “the Protestant faith was a strong enough force in American life to pave the way toward the formation of a collective Holy Land image in the American mind” (1993:38). Vogel implicitly addresses the social construction of the authenticity of the Holy Land in the mind of nineteenth-century

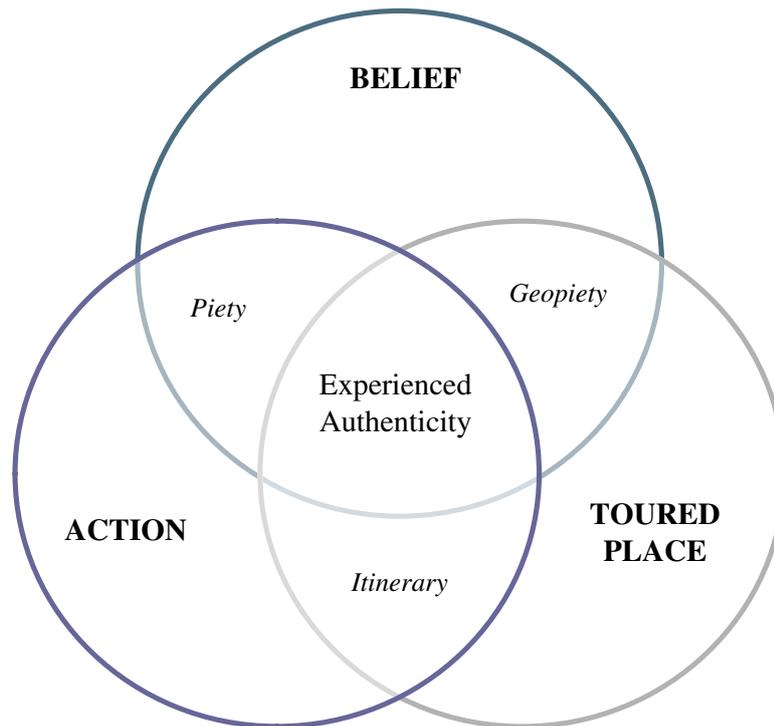


Figure 1. Theoplacity: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Authenticity

Americans and argues that such imagery shaped American views of the Middle East during the twentieth century. He brings together a rich collection of accounts written by guidebook writers, explorers, missionaries, settlers, archaeologists, adventurers, and diplomats, and demonstrates their influence over the popular American view of the Holy Land. His work thus calls attention to the idea of the Holy Land as a discursive formation. Vogel suggests that the religiously loaded relationship between Americans and the Holy Land is an example of what geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1977) calls “geopiety.” If piety is defined as one’s desire to perform acts guided by one’s religious worldview, then geopiety is a cognitive and emotional attachment to a sacred place that is based on one’s faith or values.

Vogel’s argument has important implications for the integrative approach to authenticity presented in this study because it demonstrates the importance of the sociospatial when examining authenticity in travel-related experiences. Since both tourism and pilgrimage are spatial activities, the physical dimension of the toured destination plays an important role that cannot be abandoned in conceptualizations of tourists’ experiences, including their experiences of existential authenticity. Furthermore, since pilgrims bring with them preconceived understandings of the sacred spaces they visit, the notion of collective, social authoring of the meaning of these spaces also cannot be ignored. To this idea, the present authors would add that social constructions help to shape not only the meaning of toured objects for pilgrims, but also the meaning of their own activities and experiences in the visited space. Thus, pilgrims’ experiences of existential authenticity are the result of socially constructed understandings about the places

they are touring and the actions they are undertaking in those places, combined with their own direct, empirical encounters (for an illustrative study regarding the active role of the Jewish Israeli tour guides and Protestant pastors as performative constructors of the holy land in contemporary evangelical tours, see [Feldman 2007](#)).

In the specific example of the evangelical pilgrimages examined in this study, the land in and near the modern nation of Israel can be seen as an objective space that has been and continues to be theoculturally constructed as sacred. This collective imaginary of the Holy Land has ramifications for the way pilgrims experience the space. Likewise, the ideology of Christian Zionism helps to shape pilgrims' understandings of their own role and activities in the places they are visiting. They see themselves as God's servants, bringing comfort to the Jews through particular volunteer efforts, proselytizing to Muslims, and strengthening their personal relationships with Christ. Thus, the powerful emotional experiences they have during their travels, for which the notion of existential authenticity seems to hold much explanatory power, are directly tied to socially constructed understandings of the places they visit as being authentically sacred in an objective sense, as well as to collectively authored understandings of themselves and their behaviors. The meaning of place and self-in-place, combined with the external circumstances that are the product of the tourism encounter, gives rise to pilgrims' experiences of existential authenticity.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to synthesize previous approaches to authenticity in order to create a more coherent analytical framework through which to conceptualize the tourist experience. Recently, scholars have argued that a postmodern, existential approach to authenticity is most appropriate for making sense of contemporary tourists' experiences ([Kim and Jamal 2007](#); [Reisinger and Steiner 2006](#); [Steiner and Reisinger 2006](#); [Wang 1999](#)). Such an approach, however, has tended to separate the existential experience of authenticity from the toured object and from the social and political contexts that help to imbue it with meaning. This study seeks to reassert the importance of these factors in producing lived experiences of authenticity. Based on an analysis of fieldwork conducted with American evangelical pilgrims to the Holy Land, it reveals that, at least in the context of pilgrimage, notions of the spatial and the social are both highly relevant in mediating tourists' internal experiences. The framework of theoplacity is thus suggested as an integrative conceptual tool that combines the elements of place, belief, action, and self, which exist in dialogue and which act together to produce the complex notion of authenticity. This framework thus suggests a more comprehensive approach to authenticity that recognizes the importance of each of the previous conceptualizations of this idea (i.e., objective, constructive, and postmodern) and allows them to be incorporated into a framework that connects tourists to their environmental and sociopolitical contexts.

The designation of a geographical site as sacred is based on the belief that it bears inherent originality and particular spiritual worth (Eliade, 1969; Turner 1973; Turner and Turner 1978). Thus, at least on the surface, the study of any sacred site is the study of objective authenticity from the believer's point of view. Arguably, without a belief in the objective quality of sacred sites in the Holy Land, such as Nazareth and Gethsemane, the Christian pilgrims in this study would not have been attracted to them. For critical observers and non-believing visitors, however, the evolution of a site as a pilgrimage center might be viewed as a process that is based on human authentication of the site as sacred. In other words, sacred sites are socially constructed as sacred, like any other human phenomenon, and so, for non-believers, they do not necessarily contain any intrinsic holiness. Finally, those who visit sacred sites may experience intense personal, emotional experiences. Such experiences, however, are mediated by the visitors' beliefs regarding the site and its meaning. Thus, even highly individualized, powerful internal experiences are framed by broader social discourses about physical spaces. The study of authenticity of sacred destinations thus entails an ontological understanding of all actors involved in the research process (i.e., the study participants, the authors, and the audience) and their attitudes toward the sacred place. In this case, a dialogic framework is suggested that weaves back and forth between an empathetic approach, which allows the researchers to engage with pilgrims' beliefs and to recognize their personal experiences of existential authenticity, and an etic, analytical approach which situates these lived experiences within a broader matrix of social and theocultural understandings regarding the meaning of the Holy Land and of performing evangelical pilgrimage there in the early twenty-first century.

The integrated framework suggested here almost certainly has applicability beyond the study of pilgrimage. Its transfer to other types of tourism, however, will require careful examination of the guiding ideologies at play, because most tourists consider themselves ideologically free. Thus, the theoplacity framework will be most easily adaptable to overtly ideologically driven forms of tourism, such as volunteer tourism or ecotourism in which tourists' perceptions and experiences will be mediated by a set of beliefs about the toured place and their role in it. A general characterization of a tourist's worldview and ideological purposes of travel provides a basis for understanding personal experiences of authenticity within the toured landscape. **A**

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