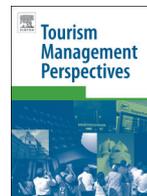




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An interview about spirituality and tourism: Theory and practice in dialogue

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1. Preamble

This Special Issue resulted from a public seminar on spiritual tourism held in November 2015 at Monash University, Australia. The seminar revolved around and was inspired by the “Monk for a Month” travel packages organized by World Weavers, a Melbourne-based organization. The discussions centered around three main interrelated themes: testimonies of participants with a special emphasis on the possibility of having authentic spiritual experiences in commercialized tourism contexts, the social conditions in Western societies that arguably cultivate the demand for spiritual tourism, and the challenges of tourism entrepreneurs to offer authentic and sustainable spiritual products. The seminar brought together tourists, practitioners, and academics. As might be expected from such a diverse forum, the discussion was not purely academic, and while sometimes polemic, it was always intriguing. Encouraged by our first meeting, we decided to meet again for an extended dialogue between a practitioner and a scholar: Ben Bowler and Yaniv Belhassen. This meeting took place at Melbourne on February 29, 2016.¹

Ben: I understand that back home you are also a peace activist, and I am curious to know if in your organization there are also religious people, or if it is a purely secular group?

Yaniv: There are some religious people in “Combatants for Peace.” Intuitively, I would say that most of these are on the Palestinian side, but you can find a few religious people on the Israeli side too. However, the Israeli peace camp is quite secular, maybe with the exception of “Rabbis for Human Rights.”

Ben: It is important that there is also a spiritual aspect to this activism. It is a cause for optimism. Do you have a spiritual motivation behind your activism?

Yaniv: I am not religious, but I grew up in what we in Israel call a traditional home typical to Sephardic Jews whose families emigrated from Muslim countries. For me, the link between Judaism and peace activism

is natural. It is written in the Psalms to “seek peace and pursue it” [Psalm 34:14].

Ben: Also, *Tikkun Olam* [i.e., repairing the world] is a famous concept in Judaism, isn't it?

Yaniv: You nailed it. Jewish ethics pertain to both the personal level, known as *Tikkun Middot* [i.e., repairing character traits], and the social level of *Tikkun Olam*. This link between spirituality and activism is also evident in your activities. And I am not talking only about the educational projects that you run through the “Blood Foundation” with Jildou [Ben's wife] in Burma and Thailand. This is obvious. I am talking about the spiritual packages such as “Monk for a Month,” “Muslim for a Month,” “Rastafari for a Month.” Do you see it as an activism that promotes understanding between people? Or am I too romantic in my interpretation, and you are a smart tourism entrepreneur who understands the power of spirituality as a tourism product? (Fig. 1).

Ben: It's more about culture and philosophy than it is about travel. Travel is a tool. To understand our motivation requires an understanding of the concept behind these travel programs, an understanding of the way we see our society. We are a very secular culture here in Australia, very materialistic, quite superficial where people are striving for material things, or for a level of comfort, or to be entertained. All these things in themselves are not necessarily bad, but when they are the highest values that a society has, then this is quite shallow. I suppose what happened is that our culture has abandoned its spiritual tradition or traditions. There are probably good reasons for that. It can be the inherent dysfunction of our spiritual traditions at certain levels, or at least the inherent dysfunction of the institutions that represent those traditions. People have abandoned it, culture has abandoned it, and I understand that. But I think it is important as human beings, individually and collectively, that we learn to benefit from the wisdom of our global traditions – whether it is Buddhism, or Islam, or Hinduism, or Judaism, or Christianity, or whatever. I think that as long as it is a credible, longstanding, widespread religious tradition that has stood the test of time in that sense, I think there is wisdom within it, and there is access to inspiration and access to transformation for individuals, which for me is super important and valuable. What happens here is relevant also to Europe – my wife is from the Netherlands which is one of the most secular countries in the world – and also to North America and to the UK. It is important to let people see the possibility that there is more to love, there is depth of wisdom, there is profundity to our existence, which can be reached through experience – not so much intellectually through

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¹ The ‘expert interview’, or in this case – the dialogue between two experts, has been qualified as a legitimate form of knowledge creation, see, for example, (Bogner & Menz, 2009; Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Pfadenhauer, 2009).



Fig. 1. A participant's ordination ceremony as a novice monk (photo reproduced with permission from Ben Bowler).

a book, or through a conversation or relationship, but through actually going to have an experience overseas. We believe that these programs have a tremendous potential to transform people and to open their vision.

Yaniv: But I think that tourism as a framework is a crucial component in your programs. It's not only the spiritual component that makes these tours transformational.

Ben: Sure. Now, many people in the West are caught in the never-ending rat race of work and life and family. So it is really only in those few weeks a year of leisure time that we get to potentially have these amazing experiences and to expand our mind, and to come into contact with ideas and traditions and values that we are not familiar with.

Yaniv: Your analysis of the social conditions in the home societies of your participants reminds me of a famous model that was developed by Erik Cohen in the late 1970s.² He is one of our greatest thinkers in social studies of tourism. Cohen talks about five modes of tourist experiences that are characterized by both the willingness to connect to the local culture and the level of alienation of the travelers in their home countries before the trip. The existential mode in his model refers to those tourists who are quite alienated to their home culture and find their spiritual center away from their place of residence and, therefore, continue traveling to places where they can maintain, so to speak, their spiritual center. Do the participants in your programs become existential tourists after they discover Buddhism through your programs? Is this your ultimate goal?

Ben: There are of course a few of those, but I would say that probably in our tours the greater outcome is not so much that people find a new spiritual center, but rather that people open the door to the never-ending search, and really enter into that space of being a seeker. It's not in the grasping sense of always looking for something you can never find, but in the sense of always looking to learn, and always coming from a position of humility which is recognized in the sense that there is always somewhere to grow, there is always somewhere to understand.

Yaniv: And over the years, you actually have seen people who have been changed?

Ben: Absolutely. Look, our programs are transformational. That's because of the context where they are run in authentic local spiritual settings. You cannot be in the Himalayas, in a Tibetan monastery, thinking about life and death and the universe and not have a big experience. I can tell you that we have some people who come back to their routine and start getting involved in activism; others come back and open up their mind to spirituality in different ways.

Yaniv: But I can say that you have a self-selective bias in the people who join your tours. These people ask to be transformed and therefore choose this way of traveling. We know that the motivation and expectations are important. In another influential paper on tourism motivation theory, Graham Dann³ suggests that the decision to visit somewhere is the result of prior needs, and so the spiritual push factors are logically antecedent to pull factors.

Ben: Of course. There are those people who join our tours because they are already into it. They are into spirituality, or into Eastern philosophy, or they are attracted to the unknown. But a lot of people, Yaniv, are attracted to us because they see an ad on Facebook, they see us on the internet somewhere, or they hear about us from a friend or whatever it is, and there is something that intrigues them. We actually do get quite a lot of people coming who don't really know why they are coming. They are coming because they are in a period in their life where there is an opportunity. They are in between jobs, maybe a relationship has ended, and often people are coming in at a moment of transition in their life, for sure. If somebody is not ready for it, they are not ready for it. Why aim to reach people who are not ready? That would be bad marketing and not beneficial in so many ways – to attract someone who is not ready for it.

Yaniv: How can you assure that these changes that allegedly start in your tours are real and will last after the tour is over? For instance, I participated in a Vipassana retreat in Northern India 15 years ago. I know how difficult it is to maintain and incorporate these new insights and practices into my daily life.

Ben: We both know that transformation is hard to achieve through travel experiences, whether it is just traveling to another country to experience another culture, or when people go to volunteer abroad.

² (Cohen, 1979).

³ (Dann, 1981).



Fig. 2. A host & a guest in the 'Muslim for a Month' program (Photo reproduced with permission from Ben Bowler).

Spiritual tourism is no exception. It has the potential to transform, to open up the possibility to see things differently, but it is up to the tourist to decide what do with it. All we can do is really to provide our participants with the inspiration. Our travel programs offer the opportunity for people to expand their mind as human beings. What they do when they come back is up to them (Fig. 2).

Yaniv: I would like now to speak about the way your groups are perceived by the local communities. Have you ever encountered any resistance toward your programs?

Ben: The reality of it is the people in the host countries are always thrilled that people come to have these experiences. Let's take our first program in Thailand as an example. Because the abbot, the Buddhist leader, was a partner in this program, the local people were and are always enthusiastic. When our guests meet the locals in the morning, these are the most moving moments in our program there. I think that because of our partnership model, so far, we have not experienced any resistance or hostility from the host communities, and this is a good sign. I must also say that working on the sustainability of our programs is an ongoing process. We always make sure that what we do is appropriate, and that is socially, culturally, and I should include spiritually, responsible. And we do it by engaging and working closely with locals.

Yaniv: Are their opinions and interests taken into consideration?

Ben: Of course. We are working to try and make sure that our programs are also beneficial to the local community. We follow principles of responsible travel operators and try to work with partners that also follow these principles.

Yaniv: Can you explain?

Ben: Every program we do has a local host organization, and typically they are responsible travel operators, respected and well ingrained in their community. Sometimes it is the actual temple or spiritual institution itself. We are not like a big travel company that runs our own programs in other countries. So, because of our partnership model, we cannot do anything without the whole-hearted blessing of the host organization.

Yaniv: And how did you come up with this model of partnership?

Ben: It evolved organically from the beginning. When we started our first program in Fang, Thailand, it was with one temple that we had

gotten to know during our residence in the village. My wife and I lived in that village and taught English there. In those years, we developed a relationship with the abbot of the local temple, and he wanted to bring international visitors to the temple to experience Buddhism. He understood that someone had to translate, organize the food, and to organize the transport – he understood all of that. Since we lived there, we were quite involved with the local community.

Ben: Maybe. The scale makes a difference too. In all our programs, we bring small groups, typically eight people, to remote parts of the host countries, and it changes the flavor a lot. If we ran a program in Phuket, bringing in thousands of people every year, it would be a different kettle of fish.

Yaniv: So, we can say that scale matters?

Ben: (laughing) I guess ultimately the answer is that sometimes small is beautiful, and size does matter. As I said, typically, we have a group of eight, and the biggest group we've ever had has been 12. If we grew, we probably would have more challenges.

Yaniv: I thought it's more something like 20 people a group. Does it make economic sense to bring eight people? How do you make a living?

Ben: Not from this. World Weavers is not yet profitable. This is our greatest defense of the common criticism against us that we are making money from spirituality. It is still more of a hobby than a profitable business – whether it is going to be this year or next year, we will know soon. Of course, we have a plan to make it sustainable, and we are getting closer to that goal. But right now, it is a labor of love. I have another business in the cookware industry from which I actually make a living. That also allows us to fund some of our other activities.

Yaniv: And all these wonderful guides who participated in the symposium at Monash were volunteers? I thought they are employees of World Weavers?

Ben: You met our facilitators. The facilitators go on the program with the group and get some money, but only a small amount, and I can tell you that they are not doing it for the money. We are a small team, but very passionate. We have a plan to add a new program every year, and maybe this will help us to become financially sustainable.

Yaniv: So is it only the model of partnership with local spiritual organizations that makes your program welcome?

Yaniv: One of the growing topics in tourism studies is the commodification of culture. I think that most scholars agree that commodification of a local culture impacts that culture. Scholars are divided between those who think this impact is necessarily bad – let's call them the purists or the essentialists because they view the local culture as something pure that is changing because of tourism. At the other end of this spectrum, there are those researchers who think that the commodification of the local culture for tourism purposes is not such a bad thing, and, in some cases, it is tourism demand that actually helps preserve some cultural practices or artifacts. However, I would like play Devil's advocate here to represent the voice of the purists and to blame you for commodifying the most intimate aspect of the local cultures in which you operate without thinking about the consequences. I can add a list of additional accusations, such as that you are promoting cultural appropriation, that you are creating a marketplace for conspicuous spirituality.

Ben: I can understand these concerns, but I must say that I find this discussion very academic. Thai Buddhism does not just belong to Thai people. The wisdom of Rumi and Sufism does not belong only to Turkish or Persian people. The wisdom of Judaism does not belong – this is more obvious – to the Jewish people. Similarly, the wisdom of the indigenous Australian does not belong just to indigenous Australians. We live in an age where we can access the depth of these traditions. Some people might look at that perspective and criticize that as a kind of supermarket. I understand such criticism, but I disagree with it. I think it is a tremendous thing that people are able to experience these traditions – not in the way of cultural appropriation. I can understand peoples' concerns that some participants might ask to become a monk for the photos they can put on Facebook and to derive social benefits out of it. But the

people who join us are not like that. Maybe it's the length of time, maybe it is the group size, maybe it is the way we market ourselves – I can say that our programs are not superficial. We, in the West, need to find new ways to connect to these traditions.

Yaniv: So, you suggest that spirituality is a human need that we in the West are denied for many reasons, and that tourism is a platform to expose us to various spiritual traditions in the authentic locations where they emerged.

Ben: Absolutely. I believe so. Some may be go through their life, and have a good life, without it. I say good luck to them. What I am talking about is on a more systematic level of culture, of the moral fabric, if you like, of society. I am suggesting that ignoring the spiritual traditions of thousands of years is an incredibly stupid thing to do. And that's why making these traditions more accessible can and does has a profound effect on an individual.

Yaniv: I am sure that I am not the first to blame you for all sorts of things. Can you tell me about other criticism you have received over the years?

Ben: We have gotten criticism online, on the social media. I can tell you that the only criticism that we've gotten on our Asian programs are from Western Buddhists, I mean Westerners who were converted to Buddhism. Their criticism is that we are making money off of spirituality. I completely understand this perspective. But each time we get criticism we say: come, come visit us, come and have a look, come and experience, come and see the guests, come and see the host community. I understand the importance of this criticism. I do not want to dismiss it.

Yaniv: And your other organization, the Blood Foundation, which deals mainly with education projects in Thailand and Burma also helps in the funding of some of the activities of World Weavers?

Ben: The Blood Foundation is a micro NGO that focuses solely on education projects in this region. Jildou is more involved in it because her background is in education. But the answer to your question is no. Our annual budget for Blood Foundation is around 30,000 AUD. We would like to grow, but this is not a priority for us, particularly now when the situation in Burma has changed a bit in the last two years.

Yaniv: After the elections?

Ben: Yes. And hopefully it will become more stable, which will make it very attractive for spiritual tourism with all its spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism and meditation. You know S.N. Goenka – the leading figure in the revival of the Vipassana meditation you experienced – was originally from Burma.

Yaniv: And what about your personal spiritual path? I understand that you started your journey with Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Do you practice meditation today?

Ben: Not as much as I would like to. I think that meditation is a powerful tool. I have a lot of respect for Buddhism, and I am very grateful for the learning that I have experienced as a monk, but I am not a Buddhist. It was my experience as a monk in Thailand that inspired me to take other people to have similar experiences. I was a monk for a short period of time, only one week, and I was ordained, and it was an amazing moment.

Yaniv: Only for a week? And you are asking your participants to stay for a month?

Ben: I was in the temple for a short time, but for me not emailing, not answering phone calls, just practicing was a great experience. Really, that's what started these tours. For us, recognizing that in Thai culture, it is normal to take time out from studies, family life, professional life, and to go to the temple was a great discovery. Some of the Thais do it for three months, and others a bit shorter time, but everyone our age has spent some time in the temple.

Yaniv: Next week, I am going to volunteer at Warlukurlangu Art Center in Yeundumu, which is a rural aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. As part of my preparation, I am reading Bruce Chatwin's travel writing account on his journey there, and I am learning about the spiritual aspect of aboriginal art. I guess that what I am trying

to ask gently is why you don't have a program here in Australia with one of the indigenous tribes, after all it is probably the most ancient spiritual tradition in the world?

Ben: Great book – *The Songlines*. I think he was a tourist himself here.

Yaniv: Yes, I guess we can say that he was an Englishman on a spiritual journey to Australia.

Ben: We have been talking about it for a long time. I have a family connection to indigenous Australians. My dad was the archeologist who discovered the Mungo Man [Dr. Jim Bowler] – 42 years ago this week. This discovery was proof of human culture here that is dated 42,000 ago. It is now a UNESCO heritage area. So we did a lot of traveling in indigenous communities here in Australia as a family. He would take us, the kids – I am the youngest of six – to fieldwork, and we were exposed to this rich culture and history of indigenous Australia. So we had this in our minds for a long time, to develop a program here in Australia. We are in the process of finding the right host community to partner and to work with. We are even examining a possibility in the Kimberly in a remote desert community. Like anything, it takes time, but the intention is there, and the desire is there.

Yaniv: Do you reckon Aboriginal spirituality can appeal to Australians too?

Ben: I guess what's interesting about any culture is that it is always dynamic and evolving. There are some trends in Australian society that can tell us about the future. Perhaps, you are a little disconcerted about understanding our relationship to the indigenous past right now. You can also look at Australian society and see a lot of optimistic things. You can see a lot of people who are very aware of the suffering of indigenous Australians and the nature of the history, about the disposition of the land, the oppression of indigenous communities by European settlements. There are many people in Australia right now who are aware of it.

Yaniv: I like your optimism. And what are you working on these days? Any new products?

Ben: Next week, I am going to ITB [Internationale Tourismus-Börse] in Berlin, and we are going to launch a new web-based product there that we developed here in Melbourne. If you look at the industry, you can see that we are in a very review-driven industry. We have TripAdvisor, which is a leading review platform for hotels and destinations, but there is a real lack of peer-to-peer accountability for multiday tour operators. We created a website – tourreview.com – to provide a platform to fill this gap because as a company that enjoys great reviews, we are trying to give exposure to others, and our own website is not an objective platform for that. There are a lot of companies saying, "We are green, we are responsible, we are sustainable, whatever..." and customers need a place to share their experiences. Of course, I am also going to present the spiritual travel programs of World Weavers there, and also the U Day festival next year in Ethiopia on Bob Marley's birthday.

Yaniv: And this is a new product of World Weavers?

Ben: No. The U Day is more a collaboration between us with other movements around the world through 1GOD.com.

Yaniv: And what is 1God?

Ben: A website we launched in the Parliament of World Religions [PoWR] last year in America.

Yaniv: And this festival is open also to pagans?

Ben: We also have a self-described pagan who writes for the blog of 1God, as well as Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, and different groups who are open to the idea of a unified supreme reality.

Yaniv: And are you thinking about more spiritual products for World Weavers?

Ben: We are excited about launching a new program in India very soon called the Mystique Express. This program will offer a multi-faith travel experience that will include a variety of traditions that exist across India such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The novelty of this program is that the participants will be able to experience a variety

of spiritual traditions that exist in one country. We are excited about it because, philosophically, it is in tune with what we are trying to achieve with World Weavers.

Yaniv: What about other religions?

Ben: Eventually, one day we would love to do something in the Western hemisphere that will be called the “Inter-Faith Express” that will include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The goal is to experience the variety of traditions and find the distinctions as well as the commonality between these traditions.

Yaniv: I hope to see you soon with spiritual tourists in our region then.

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Yaniv Belhassen received his Ph.D. in 2007 from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the United States, and then joined the faculty at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, where he now holds the post of Senior Lecturer. In 2015–6 he spent his sabbatical leave at Monash University in Australia. His teaching and research interests include critical analysis of tourism, epistemology, pedagogy, and socio-political aspects of tourism.



Ben Bowler is a serial entrepreneur and in 2008, with wife Jildou they founded Blood Foundation, an education focused NGO in Thailand. In 2008, he founded the Monk for a Month temple-stay program in Chiang Mai province offering the opportunity to experience Thai temple life and temporary ordination. In 2010, Ben launched Muslim for a Month offering first-hand experiences of Turkish Islam and Sufism, underneath the banner of Rumi. Ben launched World Weavers in 2011 and operates spiritual immersion programs in Tibetan India, Nepal, Cambodia and Ethiopia. He is Social-Entrepreneur-in-Residence at INSEAD Business School and blogger for the Huffington Post.