

# Of gifts and grandchildren: American Holy Land souvenirs

Journal of Material Culture  
17(2) 133–151

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission: sagepub.

co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1359183512443166

mcu.sagepub.com



**Hillary Kaell**

Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

## Abstract

Despite significant scholarship in anthropology and tourism studies related respectively to gifts and souvenirs, little is known about why and to whom people give souvenir gifts. Using an American case study, this article shows how Holy Land pilgrimage and its attendant gift-giving are a crucial way that older women navigate tensions specific to the consumer culture and religious patterns of the 21st-century US. By giving souvenirs, pilgrims uphold the importance of individuality (as consumers and as believers), while also fulfilling what they believe is their special responsibility to bolster collective faith, particularly amongst networks of female friends and family. Crucial in this endeavor is how pilgrims negotiate the fluid line between commodity and religious object. Sometimes they imbue these commercial objects with divine presence, thereby creating powerful tools for asserting 'soft' authority at home. At other times, they present religious souvenirs as commodities, downplaying their spiritual value in order to circumvent rejection.

## Keywords

gift, Holy Land, object, pilgrims, souvenir, United States

## Introduction

Wendy is a 62-year-old grandmother from South Carolina. She works full time as a nurse, cares for her special-needs grandson and is involved in her non-denominational evangelical church. She is also the primary caregiver for her husband, whose health has worsened over the last few years. Wendy fears he might die, yet he refuses to speak to Jesus and secure salvation for his soul. Overworked and worried, she decided in the spring of 2009 to board a plane and leave the Carolinas for the first time. She went to

---

### Corresponding author:

Hillary Kaell, Department of Religion, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Boulevard West, FA-101, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8

Email: h.kaell@concordia.ca

walk where Jesus walked – going to the places in the modern state of Israel and the Palestinian territories associated with the New Testament. There, she felt, she could speak to Jesus for them both.

Given Wendy's deeply spiritual reasons for being in the Holy Land, it may seem difficult to understand her behavior. She spent a significant portion of her time shopping. She even missed important sights, such as Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, while she was busy in the tourist market. Yet Wendy did not explain shopping as 'ludic', pleasurable or related to taking a vacation (Turner and Turner, 1978: 37); she described it as hard but necessary work. All this shopping, she clarified in a response typical of American pilgrims, was just a prelude to the main event: giving souvenir gifts to friends, family and acquaintances upon return.<sup>1</sup>

Women do most of the gift-giving in industrialized societies (Cheal, 1987; Komter, 1996), a pattern borne out in my research as well. Women fielded nearly every question related to souvenir gifts and, while they evaluated object after object in Holy Land stores, their husbands often retreated to a corner where shopkeepers provided them with chairs and Gatorade (a sports drink). Although scholars acknowledge this gender imbalance, so far there has been no significant research about how giving (and displaying) gifts relates to notions of domesticity (Hurdley, 2007). Nor, despite a prodigious amount of scholarship in anthropology and tourism studies related respectively to gifts and souvenirs, is much known about why and to whom people give travel mementos.

This article sheds light on these questions in the US context. When bought as gifts, American Holy Land souvenirs can be classified into two major groups: undirected ones for acquaintances and directed ones for family, especially children. I argue that the pilgrimage and its attendant gift-giving are crucial ways in which older women navigate tensions specific to the consumer culture and religious patterns of the 21st-century US. By giving souvenirs, returned pilgrims both uphold the importance of individuality (as consumers and as believers), while also fulfilling what they believe is their special responsibility to bolster collective faith, particularly in the family. Crucial in this endeavor is how pilgrims negotiate the fluid line between commodity and religious object. They imbue commercial souvenirs with divine presence, thereby creating powerful tools for asserting 'soft' authority at home. Yet souvenir givers are aware that they can be accused of showing off publicly or trying to control their offspring. In this case, pilgrims present souvenirs as commodities, downplaying their spiritual value in order to circumvent rejection.

## **Methodology, scholarship and shopping culture**

Since the 1950s, millions of American Christians have traveled to the Holy Land to visit the sites where Jesus lived and died. About 70 percent of these pilgrims are women between the ages of 55 and 75, a life stage that I call 'middle-old' (Kaell, 2010; Collins-Kreiner et al., 2006: 47). This article is based on ethnographic research conducted 'on the road' in the Holy Land (Frey, 1998) and then 'behind closed doors' at pilgrims' homes after we had returned (Miller, 2001). I held conversational interviews with 99 pilgrims and 34 industry professionals, the majority of the interviews consisting of pre- and post-trip conversations with pilgrims from five groups (three evangelical and two Catholic),

as well as participant observation with two of them in the Holy Land in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Here I focus on both Catholics and evangelical Protestants, the two groups that comprise the majority of US Christians on such tours.<sup>3</sup>

A standard Holy Land pilgrimage lasts 10–12 days and costs US\$2500–5000. Pilgrims travel by bus, usually led by an Israeli guide and an American pastor or priest. The trip is often exhausting; each day participants are active for at least 14 hours, passing through up to seven sites. Souvenir stands are ubiquitous. Irene, who organizes Catholic trips, describes how

some women wanted to stop at every little souvenir vendor. At one point, Father Brian actually jumped in front of the gift shop and barred the door, saying ‘No! You cannot come in here!’ But no one could stop them! There was a lot of attempted shopping.

Indeed, although pilgrims spend less per capita than other leisure tourists on accommodation, food and entertainment, they spend 25 percent more on souvenirs (Fleischer, 2000).

Many scholars have examined tourism and shopping, pursuing topics such as the classification of purchases by tourist type (Gordon, 1986; Littrell et al., 1994; Roseman and Fife, 2008), post-colonial forms of domination and local politics (Graburn, 1989; Stein, 2008), or authenticity and souvenirs as socially constructed texts (Boorstin, 1964; MacCannell, 1976; Stewart, 1993; Timothy, 2005). Tourism scholars note that about 70 percent of tourists buy gifts for others (Gordon, 1986; Littrell et al., 1994), but as of yet the few post-trip studies of souvenirs have focused on personal items (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Morgan and Pritchard, 2005). Perhaps because of this lacuna, there has been little dialogue between scholars of souvenirs and anthropologists of ‘the gift’, although both literatures are relevant here in the context of souvenirs-as-gifts.

In anthropology, gift theory is traced to Bronislaw Malinowski (1961[1922]) and, most famously, to Marcel Mauss’s understanding of the Maori concept of *hau* (1974[1925]). As articulated by Lévi-Strauss and then by Marxists in the 1970s, gift theory focused on two major questions: the status of reciprocity and the interplay between gift and commodity. The first stemmed from Mauss’s much-contested use of *hau*, which he translated as the spirit of the giver – an inalienable quality whereby gifts possess ‘something of’ the donor, thereby requiring return. Gift exchange, as Mauss saw it, consisted of three obligations – giving, receiving and reciprocating – upon which societal laws are built (Sigaud, 2002). From the first, there was an assumed difference between archaic and capitalist societies, where mass-produced commodities neither possessed spirit nor carried reciprocal obligations (Gregory, 1982). This commodity/gift divide has since been critiqued as essentialist (Carrier, 1995; Thomas, 1991), and anthropologists have adopted a more flexible approach, exploring how objects move in and out of commodity and gift phases over the course of their culturally constructed ‘social lives’ (Appadurai, 1986; Jaffe, 1999; Zelizer, 1994).

Regarding Christian pilgrimage, the practice of buying and giving souvenir gifts dates back at least to 12th-century Europe (Webb, 1999: 124); however, the type of item purchased today has its roots in the 19th century. With the advent of industrialization, ‘ready-made’ gifts, bought mainly by women for other women or children, became an

important way to mark religious celebrations and to show affection (Schmidt, 1995: 116–117). At sacred sites like Lourdes, the Catholic Church harnessed these new production techniques to offer a wide array of popular ready-made souvenirs (Kaufman, 2005: 6–7). Thus it is no surprise that, although the ‘postmodern’ tourist may view mass-produced souvenirs with irony (Urry, 2002: 92), the pilgrim buys both hand-made and mass-produced items, often arriving with precise expectations about what she or he wants to buy (Shackley, 2006: 99). In the Holy Land, the most popular goods are book-marks, handbags, jewelry, Dead Sea creams, olive wood carvings and crèches (the scene of Jesus’s birth), t-shirts, items with Hebrew writing, pottery, rocks, pressed flowers and leaves. Most items are inexpensive and some are free.

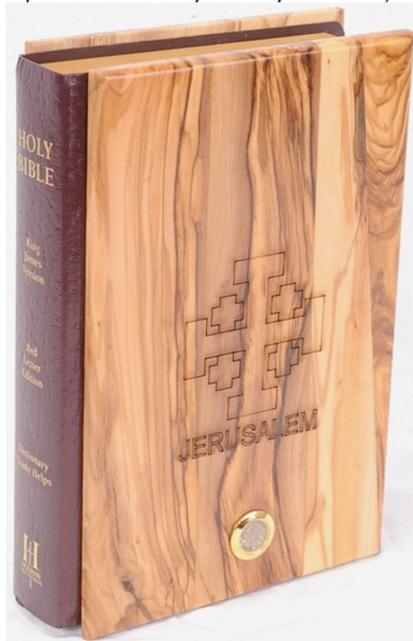
Owing to divergent theologies, Catholics and evangelicals have understood material objects differently (Butler, 1991). For example, because 19th-century Protestants saw manifestations of God’s plan in the Holy Land’s natural sites, they bought and produced religious souvenirs with landscape images (Wharton, 2006). Although few American Catholics went to the Holy Land in this period, they did go to European shrines where they bought statues of saints, blessed medals, water or relics in consonance with their belief in the mediating power of saints and apparitions. On today’s Holy Land pilgrimage, American Catholics purchase a wider range of olive-wood products, including rosaries and figures of Mary (see Figures 3, 4 and 7). Conservative evangelicals, given biblical literalism and dispensationalist theology tying Jews to the return of Jesus, are more likely to buy souvenirs with biblical quotes or those that link Christians and Jews. Particularly popular in 2009 were *mezuzah* cases<sup>4</sup> or pendants decorated with the ‘Grafted In’ image: a menorah and Star of David intertwined with a ‘Jesus fish’ (see Figures 1 and 2).



**Figures 1 and 2.** Items that link Jewish and Christian symbols, such as this ‘Grafted In’ *mezuzah* case and Star of David pendant, are popular amongst conservative evangelicals. (Figure 1 reproduced courtesy of the Jerusalem Christian Gift Shop, [www.thejerusalemgiftshop.com](http://www.thejerusalemgiftshop.com) and Figure 2 reproduced courtesy of Pastor Ricky Anderson, [www.holylandtreasuresonline.com](http://www.holylandtreasuresonline.com))



**Figure 3.** Catholic rosary made of olive-wood beads, with a Jerusalem cross and Virgin Mary image. These inexpensive items are popular undirected gifts. (Reproduced courtesy of Ricky Anderson)



**Figure 4.** Decorative olive-wood Bible with Holy Land soil insert. This item aims to appeal to both Catholics and Protestants. The soil insert recalls Catholic relics and the Jerusalem Cross is a popular Franciscan symbol. However, the fact that it is a King James Bible indicates that it is also geared toward Protestants. (Reproduced courtesy of Ricky Anderson)

While noting these differences, I have nonetheless grouped Catholics and Protestants together because I have found that, fundamentally, American women on post-Conciliar<sup>5</sup> Holy Land trips buy souvenirs for the same reasons. While my inclusive approach results in some loss of specificity, it serves to highlight key cultural and lifecycle trends that affect Americans across confessional lines. Pilgrims often explain souvenir buying in ways that correspond to Daniel Miller's characterization of shopping as a female ritual of sacrifice for loved ones: it gives expression to their perceived role as 'gate-keepers' of relational ties and repositories of family memory (Miller, 1998: 4; Hurdley, 2007: 138). For middle-old American women, this is related to another set of responsibilities: they feel principally responsible for speaking to God on behalf of their families, and they are the ones who fill church pews (Braude, 1997: 88; McDannell 1995: 38).

### **A little heaven on earth: Undirected giving and relationships**

American pilgrims engage in two primary types of souvenir giving: undirected gifts that are distributed widely to acquaintances, and directed gifts for specific family members. Undirected gifts are often bought in bulk; this is the result of a bargaining technique in Arab markets, but it also reflects women's desires to bring back many small objects – often hundreds – for church members, choirs, workmates, and friends. Wendy, for example, filled two extra suitcases. She had no specific recipients in mind, but, as she assured me in the airport while she paid the extra baggage charge, 'I know *a lot* of people.'

These undirected gifts are akin to what Pierre Bourdieu (1990[1980]: 99) called 'little gifts', meaning inexpensive trinkets that are seen to be spontaneous expressions of affection. Nonetheless, as Bourdieu points out, even 'little gifts' order systems of relationships; most pilgrims give them in order to cement or create ties with other Christian women their age. They take relatively few risks, tending to choose recipients they believe will understand the souvenir as they do. Wendy, for example, describes giving a bookmark to one of the nurses with whom she works:

I don't know [this woman] real well – but ... when I got back from the trip, I gave her a bookmark and they were all different, but the one I gave her had the garden of Gethsemane on it. [It turns out] that's her favorite place in the whole world – she wants to go there, to the garden of Gethsemane. And she said, 'Did you know that when you gave me this?' Well, I happened to have my diary with me and it had some of the flowers I picked from there. So I said, 'Let me make that bookmark a little more special.' I gave her a flower and, well, you would have thought I'd given her the world! I mean, she just hugged that flower and put it in that bookmark and hugged me and said, 'You're just the most special person I ever met.' And those moments are the little incentives that God gives you ... It makes a little heaven on earth and that just made me cry. We stood there in the hall, hugging and crying.

As a 'Bible-believing Christian', Wendy prays for guidance regularly and believes that God intervenes, particularly in her relationships with others. In this case, she believes that God directed her to pick out this particular bookmark, and Wendy is careful to emphasize that she did not know her colleague well enough to have done so herself. In fact, this nurse is part of a 'prayer team', an extended network of women with whom

Wendy prays at lunchtime. Thus, although Wendy does not know her well, she knows enough to believe that her colleague will be receptive to a Holy Land gift. It is also important to note that the other nurse is African American. Wendy is white, but, having grown up during the Civil Rights clashes in the South, she believes that God has called her to mend ongoing rifts between blacks and whites in her hometown. This small souvenir, then, is a way of inviting and formalizing a relationship with someone who holds both personal and symbolic importance (Daniels, 2001: 221).

Wendy and her colleague cry and hug in the hallway. This reaction may seem out of proportion for a souvenir bookmark and a pressed flower; however, the importance of these small gifts is more understandable in the context of divine presence. 'Presence', a term featured in both anthropological and religious studies, is best understood as the manifestation of the divine, often through material things (Engelke, 2007: 14; McDannell, 1995: 18). It is the very real feeling that divine or invisible beings are present and, moreover, engage in intimate relationships with the living (Morgan, 1998: 9; Orsi, 2005: 2, 49–51). Most often, Holy Land pilgrims describe this with regard to Jesus, angels and deceased loved ones. Often, these presences manifest themselves most strongly when pilgrims handle rocks, sing certain hymns or gaze at particular sights, such as Jerusalem at dusk. It should be emphasized that, although the Holy Land trip can heighten the feeling of presence, it is by no means absent otherwise. Rather, pilgrims see the trip as one aspect of an ongoing relationship, a life of daily communication with the divine.

Objects brought back from the Holy Land can bring about heightened feelings of presence for months and even years after the trip. Particularly effective are found and natural objects (e.g. rocks or olive wood). Material culture scholar Beverly Gordon has classed these items as metonymic, rather than metaphoric: rocks, in other words, are actual pieces of the place and not just associated with it (Gordon, 1986: 139; cf. Stewart, 1993: 139). The pilgrims' notion of the metonymic corresponds to this description, but it also requires that the object connects to Jesus's own perceived mobility and practice. For example, like many pilgrims, Wendy and her friend Nolah collected rocks. They chose specimens from places identified in the Bible as those where Jesus walked; however, they pointedly refused to take any from the sites that Jesus cursed: Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida. Although Wendy acknowledged it was 'weird', she still said: 'Better not take any of that [curse] home with me!' Wendy and Nolah believe that the rocks are vitally attached to place, as Gordon says, but also to the divine presence (positive or negative) at their site of origin.

I found that, although Catholics also picked up 'natural' souvenirs like rocks, flowers, or twigs, Protestants gravitated toward these items most often. This is unsurprising given that conservative evangelicals, in particular, can be distressed by Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Holy Land structures and have compensated for nearly 200 years by focusing on natural sites and panoramas (Belhassen et al., 2008: 673–674; Bowman, 1991: 116; Feldman, 2007; Wharton, 2006). Sharon, a 68-year old Texan Baptist, used a common viewing technique at the Mount of Olives lookout. She explained that she envisions the entire Holy Land as a spirit-filled area where precise locations are of no importance. 'He walked all over this whole area so I know that if I walk enough my feet *will* be where he walked', she told me, making a sweeping gesture with her arm across the city of Jerusalem below. As a result of this type of viewing, divine presence can be felt in a wide range of found objects: those connected to specific biblical places and



**Figure 5.** Inexpensive olive-wood cross with a pressed sprig from the trees around the Catholic Basilica of Agony, which pilgrims believe date from the time of Jesus. A Catholic pilgrim put this gift together to give to me on the last day of our trip. (Author's collection)

those from the land in a broader sense, pictured as a large spirit-filled area that Jesus crossed continually.

For Protestants, a pressed flower imbued with divine presence is a vital addition to a mass-made commodity, like a bookmark (see Figure 5). Catholics are less dependent on natural items since a priest's blessing also serves to invest commercial souvenirs with presence. Father McDonough, a 20-year tour veteran from Maryland, describes how he copes with the constant demand for souvenir blessings: on the last day at Tel Aviv airport, he lines up all the suitcases and walks along the row, blessing everything at once.<sup>6</sup>

What is crucial here is that, for both Catholics and Protestants, presence bridges the potential gap between commodity and gift. This is particularly important for 21st-century American pilgrims who, despite vendors' assurances, know that the inexpensive items they buy as undirected gifts are sometimes made in China. Although they are not generally bothered by this – after all, some acknowledge that it is the reason they can afford to buy so many gifts – they rely even more strongly on divine presence to make sure that a bookmark is not just another Chinese product but a Holy Land souvenir.

At other times, pilgrims harness the permeability between commodity and gift for a different purpose – as protection when giving items to strangers and acquaintances. In Wendy's case, she began by presenting her colleague with a bookmark, an object that could be understood as commodity or presence-filled gift. If the receiver only sees the former, the pilgrim is rarely bothered but nor does she generally reveal its true significance. She allows the commodity to remain just that, saving face socially and protecting herself against accusations of unwanted proselytism, a charge with strong implications in US culture and law. In Wendy's case, her colleague responded immediately, prompting the flower, a second and more valuable gift. This two-step gift-giving can take place even between strangers. Another pilgrim from South Carolina, Loretta, described how a Walmart cashier recognized that she was wearing a 'prayer ring' from Israel (see Figure 6). Although Loretta did not know the woman, she returned the next day with a souvenir – a small bag of rocks. In this way, undirected gifts are spread far and wide to those who, pilgrims believe, will be able to feel the presence of God in the object given.

A variant of this undirected giving focuses on the larger community, generally a pilgrim's home church. Jean, a 71-year-old Methodist, provides an example. When she left for the Holy Land, her church was building a new sanctuary and garden so, she explains:

I took some of the dirt from our garden and the very first night I scooped up some white sand from Galilee and I buried our dirt there and I carried that [Holy Land] sand around the rest of the trip. I was worried about customs but when they asked me I just told them the truth, 'This is special sand from the Holy Land and it's coming home to Colorado with me.' And they let me pass! I said, 'That's going back to our church garden!' And that was that. Now it's in a bowl and I show it to everybody. When the garden's dedicated, I'll put the sand there during the ceremony. I think that will be very special and other people have said the same: 'What a good idea!'

When Jean exchanged Colorado dirt for Galilean sand, she created a physical link to match the spiritual one since, for her, both places are defined primarily by Jesus's presence. It was also a chance for her to share the trip with others. She could show them the bowl of sand, receive their praise ('What a good idea!') and then symbolically, at the dedication ceremony, incorporate her personal experience into the collective history of the Colorado church (Hitchcock and Teague, 2000).<sup>7</sup>

Although Jean revels in her role at the center of an important dedication ceremony, other pilgrims worry that sharing their trip publicly will bring accusations of 'showing off'. This fear is most common amongst pilgrims who are socially marginal (older, poorer, unmarried) and from the US South, where women's public roles are generally



**Figure 6.** ‘Prayer rings’ (with a passage from the Song of Songs) are popular gifts and personal souvenirs, particularly amongst conservative Protestants. Loretta was wearing rings like these, which a Wal-Mart cashier recognized. (Reproduced courtesy of Lena Mor, [www.HolyLandNetwork.com](http://www.HolyLandNetwork.com))

more circumscribed. Although giving gifts can reinforce a person’s own identity (Derrida, 1992: 12), these women worry that they can also seem to negate the identity of the recipient if the gift insinuates that the pilgrim is a better Christian. Helen, a 68-year-old Baptist from rural North Carolina, explains that she did not give a gift to her church or even show a slideshow for fear that the other women would think she was ‘acting ugly’: ‘They could think I think I know everything about being a Christian now that I went to the Holy Land. She’s getting too big for herself, [they’ll say].’

A related concern, particularly in communities where overseas travel is rare, is that giving souvenirs will be interpreted as flaunting one’s wealth. Though most souvenirs cost less than US\$20, they are evidence of a trip that cost thousands. Wendy, for example, evinced considerable anxiety about giving a memento to her sister, with whom she has had ongoing disputes related to money and the inheritance of their father’s land. In the end, she decided against it: ‘She already thinks we’re filthy rich so I didn’t want – I’m still paying that trip off! I didn’t want her to say, “Oh, one more thing [that Wendy got and I didn’t]!”’

### **To spur them on in their faith: The soft domination of directed gifts**

Even women who dislike shopping – and do little of it – buy souvenirs for their children and grandchildren. Directed giving differs from undirected giving, partly because the items tend to be worth more monetarily but mostly because pilgrims have different expectations when they buy for specific family members. Thus, directed giving tells us something about women’s hopes and fears for the younger generation.

In her study of British gift-giving, the anthropologist Pnina Werbner disputes studies (Caplow, 1984; Cheal, 1987) that characterize Christmas presents as approaching ‘pure gifts’, meaning that family members give disinterestedly without the need for reciprocity

(e.g. Malinowski, 1961[1922]; Sahlins, 1972). Werbner (1996, drawing on Bourdieu, 1984) argues that holiday presents in fact represent a 'hierarchical gift economy' where the powerful (parents, the rich) give to the weak (children, the poor), thus perpetuating a 'soft' domination. This critique is helpful here. Although pilgrims see souvenirs as 'pure', linked to faith and to the home as a spiritualized arena of love and devotion, by giving them they do implicitly assert power. Yet there is a caveat regarding Werbner's characterization of gifts flowing 'down' from strong parent to weak child (pp. 137–138). Many middle–old women are in a transitional life stage, particularly if they are single: they are still leaders in their churches and the family matriarch, yet they can no longer assert power over their children as they once did. In fact, they are often dependent: Loretta's son tells her to move to a smaller flat and she feels that she must comply since he supports her financially; Helen can only stay in her house if her children help her maintain the grounds; Cheryl's son tells her not to interfere with how he and his wife choose to raise their child.

These women go on pilgrimage – often despite their grown children's misgivings – and see it as an expression of independence and of their continued role as 'giver' in the family. This giving includes acts that often go unnoticed or, the pilgrims feel, unappreciated, like offering emotional support and daily prayers on behalf of the family. Holy Land gifts are one way to make this investment tangible, and pilgrims couch souvenir shopping (to me at least) in terms of sacrifice – the money, time and effort spent picking items out and bringing them back (cf. Miller, 1998). Indeed, women spend hours poring over cases of necklaces, statues and other objects, wanting to get presents just right (cf. Benson and Carter, 2008: 5). Helen describes how

when you're there you always feel that connection to [family] because you think about them and when [vendors] came by to offer things to buy, I'd run it through my mind, is this something my grandchildren would like? Who would like what?

Since Holy Land pilgrimage is not a mandatory trip for Christians, some returned pilgrims are accused of taking a frivolous vacation, while others express guilt about 'abandoning' the domestic sphere (cf. Radway, 1991[1984]: 90). To minimize these feelings, nearly all pilgrims postpone going until they are financially independent – no longer supporting their grown children or vice versa. Moreover, by characterizing the trip as filled with thoughts of family, as Helen does, pilgrims lessen the tension between individual needs and familial ones, an experience that is both far away and tied to home. They also emphasize that the money expended was, in fact, a form of 'pure gift', meaning that it was for the spiritual welfare of others. This speaks to the tension that most pilgrims feel between commerce and religion generally, which they believe should ideally be separate (cf. Parry, 1986: 469). The pilgrimage is both religious and also clearly a market-driven business; the belief that one gives 'pure gifts' can lessen this ambivalence.

Most pilgrims direct their gifts – both prayers and things – towards the youngest generation (cf. Miller, 1998: 104). Ella, a Catholic from Maryland, brought back rosaries and statues for her grandchildren, explaining, 'this is the time you really shape them by talking about it ... It's something that will give them a memory and spur them on in their faith.' Jill, an evangelical from Minnesota, brought back rocks, water and sand because

'[I need to] educate them a little. No one else is going to do it!' Although delivered as joke, implicit in these comments is the concern that adult children cannot be trusted with the youngest generation's religious education. Many pilgrims worry that children will forget the faith of their ancestors; others are sincerely concerned about their loved ones' souls. Some believe literally in punishments that follow sinful lives; others focus on the promise of heavenly rewards. As Helen says: 'I want to be sure I'll see them all again and they'll be with me and Jesus forever.'

Cheryl, a Catholic from New Hampshire, is in a predicament that worries many pilgrims. Her oldest son has just had his first child but refuses to baptize him. Cheryl prays about it daily, but he gets angry if she broaches the subject. She and her husband Bob hope that their pilgrimage (and the souvenirs they bring back) will inspire their son at some unspecified point in the future, perhaps even after they have passed away (cf. Thomas, 1991: 21–23).

*Cheryl:* As we [have gotten] older, we realize that the way we act and what we do is important. So that does inspire your children, I think. Because I've heard people [my age] say, 'I always saw my mother do this and now I know why.'

*Bob:* ... I think going to the Holy Land is part in their eyes of us being religious people, going to church. If you asked them, 'Did your parents go on a vacation?', I think they'd say, 'No, it is a religious trip.' You hope that all these things [you do] come together [for them] later in life.

*Cheryl:* ... I think it'll have an impact on them because they'll look at photos or souvenirs and remember, 'Gee, my mom and dad went to the Holy Land,' even if they don't see the importance at this moment yet.

Parents seek pastoral advice and swap stories (those ending with a prodigal son returning to church are particularly comforting). The standard advice falls into a gray area between action and inaction: pray for your children and keep hoping, but do not press them or they might cut ties and be lost to God forever. As Cheryl and Bob express, Holy Land souvenirs are one way for middle-old pilgrims to take action and relieve anxiety, asserting the 'soft' domination that Werbner describes. Giving souvenir gifts to an irreligious child (or one who could lapse in the future) provides a conduit for God in the home, a faith-filled 'Trojan horse'. Even if the child does not understand the object's significance, it becomes part of his or her personal space, invading the home in a way that a parent/grandparent cannot do in many US households – at least not without provoking resentment, as Cheryl found when she tried to intervene regarding her grandson's baptism.

Pilgrims conceive of gifts as a conduit for Jesus's actual presence or, as Cheryl describes, as a reminder of actions that express a relationship with the divine. In other words, grandmothers hope that, upon seeing the souvenir, the child or grandchild will reflect upon a chain of associated thoughts: Grandmother went to the Holy Land. Why did she go? Because she loved Jesus. This reminder is only effective if it is also a 'launcher', as some evangelicals call the objects used to provoke conversations that ideally lead to conversion (Lindsay, 2007: 187). For pilgrims, souvenir launchers are meant to start a conversation between the child and God. In other words, as the child remembers that Grandma loved



**Figure 7.** Both Catholics and Protestants buy olive-wood Nativity sets for family members. (Reproduced courtesy of Ricky Anderson)

Jesus, he will open his heart and suddenly hear the ever-present divine call.<sup>8</sup> This notion corresponds with Susan Stewart's description of souvenirs as objects that 'surprise and capture a viewer into reverie' (Stewart, 1993: 150). However, whereas Stewart believes that a souvenir loses all meaning when its purchaser forgets it or dies, pilgrims emphasize that Holy Land gifts express and enable an ongoing relationship, not between tourist and object or even between giver and recipient, but between the recipient and God.

This conception raises an issue with which scholars of religion struggle: can we understand the gods as agents in networks of relationships (Chakrabarty, 2000)? Certainly, pilgrims believe that the divine acts in the world. Helpful here is the observation by the anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki (2000: 32) that, while anthropologists struggle to make the unknowable gods known, religious practitioners might insist that 'what is at issue is not so much the agency of these entities as the limits of human agency'. Thus faith is best characterized 'as the capacity to place one's agency in abeyance' (p. 44). Indeed, pilgrims often see the greatest proof of Jesus's real presence in the fact that they can be taken out of the equation; their burden is lifted – they have given the gift, meaning the Holy Land object but also, more expansively, religious education – and they trust God to develop a relationship with their children 'in His own time'. Within this understanding lies an inherent tension that pilgrims often recognize: they give up agency while also continuing to exert it by performing acts like pilgrimage, saying prayers and, of course, gift-giving itself.

### **Just whatever there was to buy: Coming to terms with rejection**

Although, as Mauss observed, it is difficult to refuse a gift, the very act of offering does leave one open to rejection (Mauss, 1974[1925]: 37–39; Miyazaki, 2000). Giving Holy Land souvenirs therefore entails risk because it allows children to make something tangible as well – their rejection of the church and their parents' faith. Indeed, pilgrims are

not always sure how children will react. Will the child understand the object's religious presence or message? If so, will he or she accept it?

Often, pilgrims are pleasantly surprised and report that the souvenir was enthusiastically received. This gift-giving – even if it takes place months after the trip – becomes an extension of the pilgrimage story and often the highlight of the whole experience (MacCannell, 1976; Timothy, 2005: 77). For example, Ella describes how she distributed her gifts two months after she returned.

[My nine-year-old granddaughter] loved the stone necklace. She said, 'Nana! Really? Is that *really* from the Sea of Galilee?' And she put it on and wouldn't take it off for weeks. She just wouldn't give it up. And both of my sons, the little rosaries, I had them blessed [by the priest] during the Masses in the Holy Land ... They loved their rosaries. I thought they'd just say, 'Oh ya, thanks'. So all my little gifts from the Holy Land were thought to be absolutely wonderful and that was a real surprise to me ... and I was, you know, very surprised and pleased! It really touched me. More than anything else [on the trip].

Others have a less positive experience. Citing years of failed attempts to bring her husband to Jesus, Wendy coped by downplaying directed gifts, which she anticipated might be rejected, in favor of undirected ones for a network of female friends, like the African American colleague mentioned earlier. Most pilgrims who use undirected giving in this way have already developed outside networks to compensate for disappointing family relationships. Presence-filled souvenirs provide a significant moment to reassert this network's importance by directing energy outside the home.

A more common strategy for coping with disappointment is evident in the case of Janine and Frank, a Catholic couple from Boston. They did not bring back anything substantial for their adult children, which Frank linked to earlier souvenir disappointments. On a Holy Land trip in 1999, he had carefully picked out olive-wood statues for his wife and children, spending hours choosing the right one for his teenage son, who had recently refused to attend Mass. Frank settled on an image of the boy Jesus wielding a hammer in Joseph's carpenter shop, which seemed perfect for the son who loved to build things and wanted to study engineering. But, recounts Frank, 'When he left [for university], he left [the statue], just saying he didn't want it. He just didn't take it with him. I don't know why. So it's on our shelf. We still keep it for him.'

Frank was equally saddened when his 12-year-old nephew rejected a religious souvenir, a statue of Our Lady of Czestochowa, which the couple brought back from their 1991 trip to Poland:

It really hurt me when I handed it to my nephew and he handed it back to me saying, 'I have no interest in this.' Ten or 15 years later I told him how much it hurt me when he did that, at least for your Polish heritage if not for your faith. And he just rebuffed it. There's still an issue there [between us].

Later, Frank found out that his brother-in-law was physically abusive with his nephew, who thought that Frank knew and was a hypocrite for calling himself a Christian while ignoring it.

As they retell the story, Frank and Janine focus not on the abuse but on the accusation of hypocrisy. They worry that, if they bring their children religious souvenirs even though they know they do not attend church, they will be accused of being hypocrites – shutting their eyes to their children’s reality. Janine feels that she may actually drive her children further from the Church by pressuring them with religious objects. She copes by downplaying the whole process of souvenir giving that for other women is central: ‘So on this trip’, she says, ‘I don’t even remember what we bought. Just whatever there was to buy. Which is kind of sad’, she sighs. This is a common protective technique for pilgrims who face an unfavorable reception: they describe the souvenir as a commodity (‘Just whatever there was to buy’) rather than as an item with unique value or divine presence, as Ella does earlier when she mentions her gifts’ place of origin (Galilee) and priestly blessing. Whereas scholars have shown how buyers harness the flexible nature of gifts and commodities to express new meanings (e.g. Jaffe, 1999: 116), here pilgrims use this fluidity as a mechanism for coping with disappointment.

The experiences of Janine, Frank and Wendy point to an underlying tension that anthropologist James Carrier (1990) argues is inherent in American gift-giving generally: that is, between the mutual obligations that gift-giving entails and the value placed on autonomous individuality. Although scholars (e.g. Schneider, 1980) have suggested that individualism does not apply in family gift-giving where people comprise a kinship unit, the pilgrims evince competing desires. When Frank urges his nephew to accept the Polish Marian statue, he refers to the boy’s heritage, his status among kin. But this wish to perpetuate one’s own cultural–religious world is balanced by wanting independent children, which American pilgrims see as a positive trait, as well as the belief, in Protestantism but also in post-Conciliar Catholicism, that each person must freely choose his or her own relationship with God.

## Conclusion

In his early work on tourism, the anthropologist Nelson Graburn (1983a: 2, 1983b: 28) called for studies of ‘the place and function of tourism within the life cycles of individuals’, particularly in relation to domestic patterns. Comparatively few scholars have built upon this theme. Holy Land souvenirs, most of which are purchased and given by middle–old women, provide a particularly fruitful way of doing so. Moreover, tracing how these objects are bought and gifted tells us something important about how American women understand commerce and materiality in the context of Christianity.

This article rests on three main assertions. First, I argue that in the US there are two major types of Holy Land souvenir giving: undirected and directed. Undirected giving is a development unique to modern pilgrimage – where one can buy many, even hundreds, of small manufactured items for large networks of friends and acquaintances. For American women, undirected giving cements ties with their peers, provides a chance to tell about the trip and can alleviate tension if they believe that directed gifts will be rejected.

Second, I argue that directed giving, meaning carefully chosen souvenirs for particular individuals, remains paramount for pilgrims. This speaks directly to a number of tensions in Christian pilgrimage, and in American culture broadly. Older women often have trouble reconciling their own actions, such as taking a personal commercial trip

abroad, with what they see as their religious duties in the domestic sphere. Because directed gifts are usually for family and often for children, they are one way for middle-old women to connect their trip to kin at home. Directed souvenirs are often couched in the language of sacrifice for others, linking commercial activity with sacralized devotion to the family's religious well-being.

Directed souvenir gifts are most effective if imbued with divine presence. The third assertion in this article is that Holy Land mementos derive power from how pilgrims make use of the fluid boundary between commercial object and sacred gift. Pilgrims believe that a ready-made object becomes a purveyor of divine presence through its association with a particular place in the Holy Land, the addition of natural objects or a priest's blessing. Once such a souvenir is gifted, pilgrims believe that it can embody and spur a relationship – between giver and recipient, but also between the recipient and God. When faced with the possibility of rejection, pilgrims carefully downplay a souvenir's potential spiritual value and often describe it as mere object.

The fear of rejection surfaces most often when pilgrims give directed gifts to children and grandchildren. Although they believe that the family's faith is their responsibility, female pilgrims often worry that direct assertions of power will be resisted. Moreover, they believe that, theologically and culturally, the adult child and his or her household should be independent. The souvenir, as presence-filled gift, can circumvent this problem. Whether or not their children understand its true significance, women believe that, once accepted and displayed, the Holy Land gift can open the way for a conversation with God, even at an unspecified point in the future. Thus the object plays a key role in displacing pilgrims' anxiety and feelings of powerlessness by giving up agency to the divine, while mediating the tension in American culture between the independence that pilgrims wish for their children and the desire to pass faith down to the next generation.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research for this article was part of my PhD dissertation fieldwork, funded by the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University. Thank you to Simon Coleman in particular for valuable comments on earlier drafts and to the anonymous readers for their helpful critiques.

### **Notes**

1. An exception is 'social justice' buying, meaning that pilgrims shop because they believe it will help local people in the Holy Land with whom they side ideologically. In this case, the act of buying becomes just as, or even more important than, giving. I should also note here that the Holy Sepulchre has traditionally provoked American evangelicals' ambivalence or even disgust and, as a result, Israeli guides, ours included, downplay it. This may have influenced Wendy's actions, despite her later acknowledgement that she had wanted to see it. Although beyond the scope of this article, I have argued elsewhere (Kaell, 2010) that scholars should rethink traditional divisions of Holy Land sites into 'Protestant' and 'Catholic', at least where American women are concerned.
2. All names have been changed. The five groups I worked with most closely were: a 2007 Crystal Cathedral evangelical tour (based in California), a 2008 Moody Bible Institute tour (based in Illinois), a 2008 Catholic parish trip from Maryland, a 2009 non-denominational

- evangelical group from North and South Carolina, and a 2009 multi-parish Catholic trip, mainly from Boston.
3. In scholarship, the word pilgrimage (and pilgrim) is often limited to Catholics, but here I also use it for conservative Protestants, largely for simplicity and because it is ubiquitous in the Israeli and US Christian tour industries.
  4. Jewish law requires that a *mezuzah*, a small container protecting a parchment inscribed with a scriptural passage, be fixed to the doorpost or gate of Jewish buildings.
  5. ‘Post-Conciliar’ refers to Roman Catholicism since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962–1965), or ‘Vatican II’, a series of sessions in Rome that resulted in major theological changes related to the modernization of the Church.
  6. Both Catholics and Protestants often believe that unique or expensive religious items, like wood-carved nativity sets (see Figure 7), already contain divine presence and therefore require no extra ‘work’. These objects are given as directed souvenirs.
  7. Although I use evangelical examples of undirected giving, I did not find that it was less prevalent amongst Catholics. There is, however, a cultural and class divide. Lower-middle or working-class women, especially from the South, are more likely to give to strangers. Others focus on acquaintances in relational circles (e.g. the friend of a relative).
  8. Catholics are more likely to conceive of the gift as engendering a conversation with the divine, whereas evangelicals – understandably, given their theology – describe it as producing a sudden faith conversion.

## References

- Appadurai A (ed.) (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belhassen Y, Caton K and Stewart WP (2008) The search for authenticity in the pilgrim experience. *Annals of Tourism Research* 35(3): 668–689.
- Benson M and Carter D (2008) Introduction: nothing in return? Distinctions between gift and commodity in contemporary societies. *Anthropology in Action* 15(3): 1–7.
- Boorstin D (1964) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R Nice. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu P (1990[1980]) *The Logic of Time*, trans. R Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bowman G (1991) Christian ideology and the image of a holy land. In: Eade J, Sallnow MJ (eds) *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Culture*. London: Routledge, 98–121.
- Braude A (1997) Women’s history is American religious history. In: Tweed TA (ed.) *Retelling US Religious History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 87–107.
- Butler J (1991) Historiographical heresy: Catholicism as a model for American religious history. In: Kselman T (ed.) *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 286–309.
- Caplow T (1984) Rule enforcement without visible means: Christmas giving in Middletown. *American Journal of Sociology* 89(6): 1306–1323.
- Carrier J (1990) Gifts in a world of commodities: The ideology of the perfect gift in American society. *Social Analysis* 29: 19–37.
- Carrier J (1995) *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism Since 1700*. London: Routledge.

- Chakrabarty D (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cheal D (1987) 'Showing them you love them': Gift giving and the dialectic of intimacy. *The Sociological Review* 35(1): 150–169.
- Collins-Kreiner N et al. (2006) *Christian Tourism to the Holy Land*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Csikszentmihalyi M and Rochberg-Halton E (1981) *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniels IM (2001) The untidy Japanese house. In Miller D (ed.) *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg, 201–230.
- Derrida J (1992) *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, trans. P Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Engelke M (2007) *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Feldman J (2007) Constructing a shared Bible land. *American Ethnologist* 34(2): 351–374.
- Fleischer A (2000) The tourist behind the pilgrim in the Holy Land. *Hospitality Management* 19(3): 311–314.
- Frey N (1998) *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago, Journeys along an Ancient Way in Modern Spain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gordon B (1986) The souvenir: Messenger of the extraordinary. *Journal of Popular Culture* 20(3): 135–146.
- Graburn N (1983a) Introduction. *Annals of Tourism Research* 10(1): 1–3.
- Graburn N (1983b) The anthropology of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 10(1): 9–33.
- Graburn N (1989) Tourism: The sacred journey. In: Smith V (ed.) *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 21–36.
- Gregory CA (1982) *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Hitchcock M and Teague K (2000) *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Hurdley R (2007) Objecting relations: The problem of the gift. *The Sociological Review* 55(1): 124–143.
- Jaffe A (1999) Packaged sentiments: The social meanings of greeting cards. *Journal of Material Culture* 4(2): 115–141.
- Kaell H (2010) Walking where Jesus walked: American Christian Holy Land pilgrimage in the post-war period. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Kaufman SK (2005) *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Komter A (1996) Women, gifts and power. In: Komter A (ed.) *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 119–134.
- Lindsay DM (2007) *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Littrell MA et al. (1994) Souvenirs and tourism styles. *Journal of Travel Research* 33(1): 3–11.
- Malinowski B (1961[1922]) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.
- Malinowski B (1996[1922]) The principle of give and take. In: Komter A (ed.) *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 15–18.
- Mauss M (1974[1925]) *The Gift*, trans. WD Halls. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- MacDannell D (1976) *The Tourist*. New York: Schocken.
- McDannell C (1995) *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Miller D (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller D (ed.) (2001) *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg.

- Miyazaki H (2000) Faith and its fulfillment: Agency, exchange and the Fijian aesthetics of completion. *American Ethnologist* 27(1): 31–51.
- Morgan DA (1998) *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morgan N and Pritchard A (2005) On souvenirs and metonymy: Narratives of memory, metaphor and materiality. *Tourist Studies* 5(1): 29–53.
- Orsi RA (2005) *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Parry J (1986) The gift, the Indian gift and the ‘Indian gift’. *Man* 21(3): 453–473.
- Radway JA (1991[1984]) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Roseman SR and Fife R (2008) Souvenirs and cultural politics in Santiago de Compostela. *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 21(2): 109–130.
- Sahlins M (1972) *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Schmidt LE (1995) *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schneider DM (1980) *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shackley M (2006) Empty bottles at sacred sites: Religious retailing at Ireland’s national shrine. In: Olsen D, Dallen JT (eds) *Tourism Religion and Spiritual Journeys*. New York: Routledge, 94–103.
- Sigaud L (2002) The vicissitudes of *The Gift*. *Social Anthropology* 10(3): 335–358.
- Stein RL (2008) *Itineraries in Conflict: Israelis, Palestinians and the Political Lives of Tourism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stewart S (1993) *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thomas N (1991) *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Timothy DJ (2005) *Shopping Tourism, Retailing, and Leisure*. Trowbridge: Cromwell Press.
- Turner V and Turner E (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Urry J (2002) *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage.
- Webb D (1999) *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*. London: IB Tauris.
- Werbner P (1996) The enigma of Christmas: Symbolic violence, compliant subjects and the flow of English kinship. In: Edgell S et al. (eds) *Consumption Matters*. Oxford: Blackwell, 135–162.
- Wharton AJ (2006) *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Zelizer VA (1994) *The Social Meaning of Money*. New York: Basic Books.

## Author biography

Hillary Kaell completed her doctorate in American Studies at Harvard University in November 2010, specializing in the history and practice of North American Christianity. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Concordia University (Montreal). Her first book, *Walking Where Jesus Walked*, is forthcoming from New York University Press.