COMMENTARY | WASTE

Trash Talk

US Pilgrims in Israel-Palestine

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Each year nearly 300,000 US Christians "walk where Jesus walked," traveling halfway around the world to visit biblical sites in Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). As they tread hallowed ground, gaze from bus windows, and snap photos at panoramic lookouts, these pilgrims notice trash: litter, abandoned cars, unkempt houses. Garbage is always present at idealized sites, of course, but most tourists overlook it (Urry, 2002). In the Holy Land, however, it is too symbolically resonant to ignore. In fact, "trash talk" serves a crucial role in the trip's discourse. It offers US pilgrims a way to speak in a moral register about Israelis and Palestinians without engaging regional politics directly, which most try hard to avoid.

Holy Land Politics

Nearly all US Christians travel by bus on a 10–12 day inclusive trip, with a US pastor and an Israeli guide. Scholars and journalists gloss these tours as the leisure arm of an Israeli-evangelical political alliance dating to the late-1970s. While this is an oversimplification, tourism is certainly one part of a focused effort by Israel to cultivate relationships with evangelicals who, for a variety of theological and political reasons, are some of its strongest current supporters. On the ground, Israelis and Palestinians both highlight Christian tourism's crucial economic and ideological role, leading a number of anthropologists to examine how local guides and American trip leaders negotiate shared Zionist (or anti-Zionist) messages (eg, Clarke, 2000; Feldman, 2007; Shapiro, 2008).

The average US pilgrim approaches the trip quite differently. She is a middle- or working-class woman between the ages 55 and 75 who has rarely, if ever, left the US before. She is often evangelical (55%) but also Catholic (30%) or mainline Protestant (15%). She does not call herself a "Christian Zionist" and is chary about engaging politics directly, feeling that she lacks the expertise to comment. She also intuitively espouses a moralistic dualism that sees the worldly, including politics, as potentially antithetical to spiritual experience.

As a result, most pilgrims engage in an ongoing effort to divert potentially disruptive political discussions—generally the guide's—into a moral realm that jibes more easily with their spiritual goals and expertise. Because moralizing about trash is not construed as requiring specialized knowledge, it allows for broad political participation—though this differs from the direct political or prophetic discourse that outside observers may expect.

Trash as Moral Symbol

Victorian Anglo-Protestants conceived of "filth" as an outward gauge of spiritual impurity; to be Christian and civilized meant to construe cleanliness as next to godliness (Cohen and Johnson, 2005). The first US Holy Land travel narratives developed in this period, and reflected the preoccupations of the day. Local Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants were carefully evaluated—"clean" or more often "fetid," "squalid," and "filthy"—as evidence of their moral character or lack thereof.

Today what is discarded in Holy Land gutters still generates extended discussions about conflict, belonging and Western values. Guides and pilgrims agree that Palestinian areas are more "trashy" than Jewish ones. The question is, why? Whether or not Jewish guides personally agree, they often astutely note people from the US associate garbage with laziness or a lack of personal responsibility, which therefore reflects badly on Palestinians. Some guides harness this impression to employ trash as an object lesson for Israelis' God-given stewardship. A Baptist from Texas describes how his guide "showed us the Jewish sections and the Arab ones were so poor and dirty. He meant to show how the Jews love the land because it was always theirs."

Guides and pilgrims who feel that Palestinians are suffering unjustly are equally likely to focus on the potent symbolism of trash. Ella, a Catholic from Maryland, is typical when she says:

> Well, you know? Whose land was it? And to be pushed – we could see [Israel's] barbed wire fences...You go over to the Palestine side [in Bethlehem] and it's really trashy. And whether that's lack of money, culture, whatever, but I felt *sad*. I thought of Jesus and Mary and Joseph who were certainly sad to be in that place...I thought of how they would have seen it that night, coming into Bethlehem, such a poor place and being pushed aside, pushed aside.

Ella gives two possible reasons for Bethlehem trash—lack of money or culture—but settles on the former, due to Israeli persecution. Thus Palestinian areas may be "trashy" but it does not reflect a lack of responsibility. Instead, superimposing the biblical story of Jesus' birth onto modern Palestinian history, trash becomes a material metaphor for people pushed aside.

Some guides attempt to deflect trash talk. When an evangelical group noted the refuse piled up in Palestinian areas of Nazareth and East Jerusalem, their guide, Isaac, waved it off as merely "cultural" and therefore unrelated to moral worth. Upon return, group members still struggled with his response. One pilgrim, Dave, and I discussed it at length. "I'm thinking, if I lived there, I would be up picking up all of this crap!" he said, "But they leave it. Isaac says it's a cultural thing [so] they don't even notice it." I extrapolated, "Right, so you think: this is just very different culturally. And it's not good or bad." Dave paused, "But yes it *is* bad. If you saw that occurring in Yosemite [National Park], you'd be outraged. And prisoners or somebody would be out there picking up that trash. We wouldn't tolerate that at a [special] site like that."

Home and Belonging

Invariably, when pilgrims reflect on Holy Land trash the conversation turns to home. In particular, both Catholics and evangelicals regularly describe crossing from Israel into the PA as "like" going from the US to Mexico. On an evangelical trip from the Carolinas, where many of the pilgrims compete directly with Hispanic labor in trades like construction, this rhetoric was particularly strong. Driving past poor Arab villages, my 70-year-old seatmate, Dorothy, took the opportunity to illustrate: "That's what I told you about with regards to the Mexicans. People come into your country and don't keep it up." Another pilgrim, Helen, and her adult son, Sam, took a more nuanced approach. "It makes me sad sometimes because I don't think the Muslim, Jewish *or* Christians here know what they have," Sam said, "They throw trash on it. It's a special place and if you open your Bible, or whatever book, you'd see that. So you got to take care of it...keep it *nice*." Helen continued:

> In the US too we've got trashy parts. And God made that land too so you've still got to keep it nice. Like with the Mexicans we got so many of them now and some people get awful upset about that. But that's wrong too. I try not to judge people like a group.

These conversations are really about belonging. Dorothy makes this explicit, of course, but Sam and Helen give a sense of most pilgrims' struggle to articulate a sense of ownership in both the Holy Land and the US—as Christians and as citizens, respectively—while Holy Land locals and Mexican laborers also stake a claim, making their presence evident though the material traces they leave behind.

Underpinning this frustrated sense of ownership is a moral core. Holy Land locals seem not to open their Bibles, says Sam, and Mexicans seem unable to comprehend that America is God's land, adds Helen. Comments like these draw on long-standing cultural and moral frameworks understood as common sense: respectable, deserving people "keep up" their property. Thus when Arabs (sometimes Israelis) and Mexicans are blamed for trash, it reflects their inability to be a number of things: white, American, modern, respectful. But just as importantly it is pilgrims' attempt to voice their own claims on deeply-meaningful but shared places, in Israel and the US.

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