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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Hillary Kaell

Walking where Jesus Walked –

American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage

New York & London: New York University Press,
2014, 259 pp.

In her *Walking where Jesus Walked – American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage*, Hillary Kaell takes up the task of exploring contemporary American pilgrimage to Israel and the Palestinian territories. It is an ambitious project, and one that has been neglected far too long. To be sure, several ethnographic accounts of contemporary pilgrimage to the “Holy Land” have been written before – and here I am thinking particularly of the works of Feldman, Shapiro, Bajc, Belhassen, Ebel, and Bowman – but Kaell’s account differs from that of previous scholars in several ways: (i) To my knowledge, nothing of this scope has been written on the topic before. With five years of field work, and 100-something interviews, Kaell’s study rests on solid ethnographic ground and is well-placed to describe and analyze contemporary pilgrimage trends. (ii) Secondly, the longitudinal approach, with interviews before, during and after trips to the Holy Land, contributes both to connecting the pilgrimage experience to the home context, and also to analyzing the meaning of the pilgrimage as it is remembered (and reconstructed) afterwards. Connecting the pilgrimage to the home context also serves to underscore Kaell’s dual approach in which the pilgrimage represents, for those who undertake it, “a conscious return to the ‘source’ of early Christianity”, while also being “deeply embedded in its late-modern context” (p. 27). Furthermore, although going on a pilgrimage is an individualistic endeavor, it is simultaneously “fully embedded in longer trajectories: as a stage in an individual’s life course; as a part of cultural, theological, and political trends; and as an aspect of ongoing relationships at home” (p. 27). (iii) The third aspect where Kaell’s work departs from earlier accounts of contemporary Holy Land pilgrimage stems from her choice to include both Catholics and Evangelicals in her study. This comparative perspective is particularly helpful in de-stabilizing traditional categories that have often been seen as separating Protestants and Catholics: the former’s preference for “biblical places” and panoramic views and the latter’s disinterest in the Bible and preference for more traditional ritualized places like the Holy Sepulcher. By choosing an innovative methodological approach and by tackling

these questions Kaell unarguably fills a gap in the scholarly conversations on American Christianity and on contemporary pilgrimage.

The main part of *Walking where Jesus Walked* is devoted to exploring three dualities that have long guided scholarly discussions on pilgrimage: the relationship between materiality and transcendence, between home and away, and between the religious and the commercial, which Kaell refers to as “piety and play”. Exploring these themes is also where Kaell’s major contribution lies. The first dichotomy (materiality/transcendence) is primarily engaged through the comparison between Evangelicals and Catholics in Chapters Three and Four. Here Kaell shows that the place/grace dichotomy so often mapped onto the Protestant/Catholic divide is much less stable than might be expected. While Protestants do prefer the Galilee with its hilltops and open spaces – with their opportunities for the so-called “panoramic gaze” – and construct “authenticity” through biblical archeology, they also rely on material evidence and sensory experience. Catholics, on the other hand – and here Kaell draws the reader’s attention to the growth of Catholic Bible study groups in a post-Vatican II context – “defy scholarly expectations by articulating a growing relationship with Jesus and the Bible” (p. 203). At the same time as Protestant/Catholic divisions are maintained in the pilgrims’ discourses, their practices and preferences are more similar than one might have imagined. Yet this is a study of *American* pilgrims and I cannot help wondering how the results might have differed if, for example, Latin American Evangelicals and Catholics had been compared in a similar way.

The second duality that Kaell explores (home/away) places the study in the context of transnationalism and life-cycle research. By studying the pilgrims both before and after the pilgrimage Kaell is able to show how intrinsically connected pilgrimage is to problems and concerns on the home front. Pilgrimage, Kaell writes “deepens and reorders home relationships” (p. 200); sometimes it is motivated by the hope that an unbelieving husband will recommit his life, at other times the hope of healing for a close relative, or simply a way to express and construct an independent and strong identity. Pilgrimage then should not be construed as a rupture from life at home but instead as a part of ongoing religious and social journeys. “By going to the Holy Land,” Kaell writes, “pilgrims grapple with what it means to be a Christian in the United States today. If the trip is a success, the pilgrim reaffirms and strengthens her own relationship with God while also enacting it for others” (p. 5).

The third duality discussed by Kaell (piety/play) cuts to the heart of scholarly discussions on the relationship between the secular and the sacred that the scholarly community has inherited from Durkheim. Here Kaell's careful ethnography explores both how and when this dichotomy is constructed in the discourses of the pilgrims, but also how this has been conceptualized in scholarly discourses on pilgrimage. In the first case Kaell demonstrates how pilgrims describe the places they have visited in the Holy Land as commercialized when they differ from their own way of being religious; what Evangelicals say about the Holy Sepulcher; and what Catholics often say about Yardenit, the place on the Jordan River where most pilgrims go to commemorate and re-enact their baptisms. The larger debate about the relationship between commerce and spirituality is approached through pilgrim practices, particularly shopping and gift-giving. Commodities, Kaell argues, are fully embedded in religious worlds; in fact, consumption can both express and constitute religiosity. As a case in point, Catholic grandmothers bring home Holy Land gifts in the hope that this indirect spiritual practice will influence the religiosity of their lapsed sons or daughters without challenging, meanwhile, the belief in the right of the individual to choose his or her own religiosity.

Kaell's bottom-up approach to American Christianity and its relationship to the Holy Land is a welcome contribution that is of relevance in broader contexts than pilgrimage studies alone. Nonetheless, although I endorse much of her criticism of top-down approaches that emphasize the political alliance between Evangelicals and Israel, and the eschatological paradigms that allegedly explain evangelical affinity for the state of Israel, I do find her rather limited discussion of those themes in the book somewhat surprising. While Evangelicals in the Holy Land certainly emphasize spirituality rather than politics and often have a limited grasp of political realities, and though the role of pre-millennialism and dispensationalist end-time dramas have often been exaggerated in scholarship on Evangelicals and their relationship to the region, it is difficult to avoid the fact that the State of Israel is imagined in conjunction with eschatological and salvation historical narratives across large sectors of American evangelicalism. "Walking where Jesus walked" is often simultaneously imagined as walking where Jesus *will* walk. Judging from my own experience, narratives of the land, in tour guide narratives and brochures, and in pilgrims' and tourists' discourses are also full of eschatological, or semi-eschatological themes. This is not a matter of classifying evangelicals as "Christian Zionists" or not (p. 202);

rather, exploring the role that the State of Israel occupies in the evangelical imagination would be important for understanding motivations for, and sense-making of, pilgrimages to the Holy Land as well. If Kaell's rather limited discussion of those themes is not the result of methodological or analytical choices – something which is hard to determine from the way the book is structured – her observations are definitely surprising enough to call for more research. I suspect though, that it is rather her focus on other themes and her narrow understanding of “Christian Zionism” that leads her to downplay these themes in the book. If so, a more solid analysis here would have enriched the portrait of the pilgrims' social worlds, and could have contributed significantly to de-stabilizing the category of “Christian Zionism” that Kaell criticizes.

This criticism aside, Kaell's rich ethnography is a very interesting read that contributes significantly both to the study of pilgrimage in a late-modern context, and to the more particular field of the relationship between American Christianity and the Holy Land. Her comparative methodological approach is illuminating and brings out the book's central themes brilliantly. It is the hope of this reviewer that more research along these lines will follow Kaell in offering rich and de-totalizing accounts of contemporary American Christianity.

Aron Engberg