

Book Review

Contemporary Christian Travel – Pilgrimage, Practice and Place, by Amos Ron and Dallen J. Timothy, Bristol/Channel View Publications, 2018, 224 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-84541-663-8

Contemporary Christian Travel – Pilgrimage, practice and Place is a well-organised, structured and comprehensive text that examines the complex relationship between pilgrimage, travel and tourism. Aimed at students, researchers and the wider academic community of tourism and religious studies, the book is among the first titles to provide an in-depth analysis of the scope, complexity and uniqueness of Christian pilgrimage and more specifically, the contemporary patterns of religious tourism development. The volume draws on substantial theoretical base and includes case studies from Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and North America.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each of them designed to provide a holistic overview of the notion of pilgrimage as a spiritual practice but also as an enjoyable and meaning tourism experience. The first chapter, *The Context of Christian Travel*, is a concise introduction to pilgrimage and religious tourism in which the authors also focus on some initial patterns of Christian travel and the geography of Christian pilgrimage destinations. Most importantly, this chapter deconstructs our traditional understanding of pilgrimage, defines what constitutes a pilgrim and then goes on to examine the confusing and rather contested differentiation between religious tourism and pilgrimage on one hand, and tourists and pilgrims on another. The main argument here is that the traditional notion of pilgrimage has considerably changed, and it should be understood as a form of tourism, largely referred as religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism or faith-based travel (p.5). Pilgrims, the authors argue, should be referred as tourists and travellers as they utilize the tourist infrastructure, including commercial

transportation and accommodation facilities, visit historical sites and attractions, engage in shopping, dine in restaurants, etc. Drawing a clear distinction between pilgrims and tourists is very problematic since many travellers to a religious destination can be motivated by different reasons such as business, leisure and visiting family and friends among others.

The second chapter, *Evolving Patterns of Christian Travel: Denominational and Geographical Perspectives*, provides a comprehensive (but not exhaustive) introduction to several Christian denominations and their unique travel patterns. Divided into various subsections, this part of the volume begins with valuable insights into the Catholic, Protestant, Letter-Day Saint and Eastern Christianity travel patterns focusing on the geography of pilgrimage travel, including religious trails and routes, sacred destinations and historical landmarks. The chapter goes on to trace the evolution of Christian travel and more specifically, the geographical broadening of the Holy Land, the shift from sacred spaces to sacred experiences, and the globalisation of Christian travel. The authors explain the broadening of the original concept of Holy Land (Jerusalem) into 'holy lands' that include three groups of destinations, namely New Testament locales, sites associated with sacred scriptures and non-scriptural holy places. This is also intertwined with the globalisation of Christian travel and the rise of the religious tourism industry as a whole. In the end, the chapter considers how geopolitics and political instability have changed the geography of religious tourism destinations. A concise but very informative analysis is provided here, focusing on how political instability, terrorism, wars and social unrest in the broader Middle East (e.g. Gulf War in 1991, Iraq War and the Arab Spring) and the Holy Land in particular, have resulted in the 'Mediterraneanization' of Christian travel – the (re)discovery and promotion of alternative religious destinations such as Malta and Sicily.

The third chapter, *Commoditizing Holy Places and Commercializing Sacred Experiences*, is focused on the critical role of religion as a tourism commodity and in particular,

the commercialization of religious sites, experiences and artefacts for economic gains and financial benefits. Religion has become a commercial enterprise and many destinations and service providers worldwide capitalise on the commoditization of religious attributes and their potential to attract visitors and capture tourist spending. An important point raised by the authors here is that over-commercialization we see in many religious destinations today such as Jerusalem and Lourdes, is not a new phenomenon. This is supported by substantial historical facts dating back to the establishment of the first accommodation and catering facilities (e.g. inns and eateries) for medieval pilgrims and their eventual evolution into hotels, restaurants, museums and souvenir shops. The chapter explores the commercialization of religion by drawing on the establishment of religious theme parks and the increased popularity of religiously themed escorted tours and cruises, but a particular attention should be paid to the section that explores the souvenir industry. Exploring the geography of religious souvenirs, the authors provide a very informative and well-structured section that provides an in-depth analysis of the consumption patterns, the reasons why tourists buy destination mementos and the development of the tourist merchandising at different religious destinations.

The fourth chapter, *Promoting Christian Tourism*, continues the theme from the previous chapter and examine how various destination management stakeholders promote their unique religious attributes as tourism products. The role of the main stakeholders such as destination management organizations (DMOs), tour operators and travel agencies, religious organizations and service providers, is examines in sufficient depth followed by a critical overview of some of the marketing tools used to attract broader market segments.

The fifth chapter, *Christian Volunteer Tourism: Solidarity, Spreading the Gospel and Humanitarian Service*, examines the importance of volunteer tourism within the context of Christian travel. The chapter provides a thorough discussion about the origins of volunteering and its relationship with the Christian humanitarian work (also referred as 'humanitarian

tourism’). The main contribution of this chapter is the provided typology of Christian volunteer travel that introduces four types of volunteering, namely short-term missions, long-term missions, solidarity visits and volunteering at biblical archaeological sites. Drawing on relevant examples from Jerusalem, Nazareth and Lourdes, the authors conclude that volunteer tourism forms an important part of Christian travel and Christians are involved in a wide range of activities but no two Christian denominations have exactly the same patterns of volunteer travel behaviour, desires or outcomes (p.102).

The sixth chapter, *Christian Themed Environments*, builds on the commercialization of religious as a tourism commodity from the third chapter and explores the development of religious themes parks in more depth. It begins with a conceptual introduction of themed environments and themed tourism spaces followed by the expansion and development of Christian-themed spaces in the US, Israel and elsewhere. As the authors note, the themed environments vary in several aspects of form and content and their number is constantly increasing. A very legitimate point here is raised with regards to the level of authenticity at religiously themed environments – how is authenticity sought, ignored or perceived in Christian-themed spaces?

The seventh chapter, *Heritage Trails and Cultural Routes*, examines the importance of religious trails and routes as essential resources for pilgrimage tourism and Christian travel. It describes some of the most popular and important Christian heritage trails (e.g. Camino de Santiago, Via Dolorosa, St Olav’s Way) and discusses some management implications and issues that surround their preservation and development from a tourism perspective.

The eighth chapter, *Christian Events and Gatherings*, is devoted to important religious events, pageants and religious gathering. It examines the travel of church leaders, most notably the popes of the Roman Catholic Church, as a form of pilgrimage while also focusing on

international conferences and national conventions that take place at various parts of the world. As the authors explain at the beginning, it is not possible to examine all the different types of Christian event around the globe, but this chapter provides a very comprehensive coverage of the diversity and scale of Christian events. The main argument here is that attending a Christian event, even if it occurs at a traditionally non-sacred environment, has become just as much as pilgrimage as traditional physical mobilities to a religious shrine. This is largely due to the journeys undertaken by religious leaders (e.g. Pope John Paul II) and how they influence followers to travel and attend religious gatherings.

The final chapter is a conceptual discussion that reiterates the notion that religious travel is a multidimensional phenomenon that often encompasses commercialization and commoditization of religious, economic growth, geopolitics and a wider tourism development. As the authors argue, there are no boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism, and it has become difficult to differentiate between religiously motivated travel and leisure experiences. Some conceptual insights are further discussed and some avenues for further research are also presented.

Overall, the book is very well organised and structured to a high level. From a researcher's perspective, the book enhances our understanding of Christian travel and provides a very thorough and critical look at the complex phenomenon of religious tourism. As such, it will comprise a good learning resource for anyone interested in pilgrimage, religious tourism and religious heritage and particular for scholars in tourism studies, geography, cultural studies and anthropology. In conclusion, the book is a useful volume which is a must for any university library. Not only as a textbook or academic reference but also as a text that reminds us about the centrality religion continues to play within our culture, heritage and society. I would highly recommend it to students interested in pilgrimage tourism, heritage studies and visitor experiences.

Nikola Naumov
University of Northampton, United Kingdom
nick.naumov@northampton.ac.uk