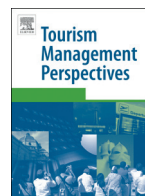




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An interview about spirituality and tourism: Theory and practice in dialogue

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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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E-mail addresses: yanivbel@bgu.ac.il (Y. Belhassen), bbowler73@hotmail.com (B. Bowler).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 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).

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