Introduction

Dale and I are waiting for the quiche to cool. It's her culinary specialty, brags her husband Glen laughingly. In front of me is a display on a shelf near the stove: small olive wood carvings, a miniature jug of water, a set of glass salt and pepper shakers filled with more water and sand—Holy Land souvenirs from Dale's recent trip. She turns on the CD of Christian hymns and Israeli-style melodies that she bought after their guide played it on the bus. Music fills the small bungalow and the two dogs start barking. Though normally subdued, Dale speaks excitedly for a moment, “The dogs love it and so does Glen. I play it all the time in the car and close my eyes and you feel—you're there.”

Dale is sixty-four years old and has been an evangelical Christian for more than thirty years. She was born the youngest of seven children in a poor Franco-American family in upstate New York. They were devoutly Catholic, but as Dale recalls it now, she always felt out of place. “I hated shrines. It was just—I always felt that we weren't praying to the right thing. . . . I was the one who was a rebel. If there was something this way, I had to do it that way. It could never just be the same as they did it.” She married in her early twenties and had two daughters before the marriage fell apart. In the midst of her divorce, a friend invited her to what Dale calls a “Bible-teaching church.” She immediately felt at home; it seemed like God was guiding her to make a change. Years later, Dale met Glen through church and remarried.

Today they live in a crowded, homey bungalow in a small town close to Burlington, Vermont, near her two adult daughters and grandchildren. Other than trips to Quebec and one to Mexico, Dale had never left the United States before going to the Holy Land. Nor had she had any inclination to do so. Exotic places don't interest her and international travel is expensive. But when her pastor organized a group to see
the biblical places in modern-day Israel and the Palestinian territories, she knew she wanted to go. Because Glen is not well enough to travel, she asked her unmarried daughter, Kayla, to accompany her instead.

Like nearly all such pilgrimages, the trip at Dale's church was a pre-packaged group tour, meaning that participants pay ahead of time and a company makes the arrangements. Most trips last eight to twelve days. Pilgrims travel by airplane and bus, led by a local guide and an American pastor or priest. Though it may be promoted by church leaders, the decision to sign up is always seen as personal. Reflecting on her impulse to go, Dale says:

I just feel connected to the place, period. . . . I feel like that's all part of my heritage, and I feel like I found it. And I've been there and it's kind of like a completion. You know how people say you have a bucket list with things you have to get done? That was mine.

Dale couches her motivations in stories of self that extend back a lifetime. The trip was an act of completion and compulsion—it felt like something she just had to do. Although she does not dwell on it, as a young woman struggling through divorce Dale effected a significant and traumatic break from her family and her past. She still speaks with anger about her childhood and the Catholic Church. Traveling across an ocean to a place she had only imagined made her feel that she had found her “heritage” in a way that all those trips to the parish church and across the Canadian border had not. She finds the words to describe it difficult to conjure: “Just the whole experience of it. I mean, it's just you can't—it's kind of like you can't explain it,” she says, as we cut into the quiche, “You're just—you're happy.”

Returning to the Source on Twenty-First-Century Pilgrimage

The Holy Land holds a central place in the American religious imagination. Each year, a quarter million U.S. Christians, Protestant and Catholic, travel halfway around the world to see the hallowed biblical places for themselves. The trips they take, like the one offered by Dale's church, are a product of modernity that have been honed and popularized, especially since the 1960s. Holy Land travel reflects the spread of
tourism, now the world’s single largest industry, and it is one facet of a multibillion-dollar Christian leisure industry that is today integral to how Americans practice their faith. Yet like Dale, prospective pilgrims invariably describe their motivations as rooted in Christian pasts—a historical past when Jesus walked on earth—and a personal past, when they first encountered the biblical stories that mean so much to them today. They undertake the pilgrimage as a self-conscious return to the “source” of their faith, physically and imaginatively.

This book takes what might be seen as the contradictory nature of this experience and makes it central: what does it mean to return to the source, to “walk where Jesus walked,” in the context of twenty-first-century American Christianity? For pilgrims, the Holy Land trip is an especially rich field of encounter and imaginative production precisely because it is both a return to the past and a projection into the future: it expands their access to the global flows—economic, cultural, touristic, cosmological—that characterize the person they believe they are and can become. That it is a trip abroad is therefore by no means incidental. However, underlying my approach is the recognition that the experience of pilgrimage extends before and after the trip itself. It is embedded in pilgrims’ everyday lives. This book’s orientation therefore differs from most other work on modern pilgrimage; it is the first in-depth study of contemporary American Holy Land pilgrimage and, more broadly, the first major study of Christian pilgrimage that tracks how participants prepare for the trip and remember it upon return.

As a result, this book offers a new perspective on what Holy Land trips mean to the people who undertake them. For tour producers and local actors—Christian ministries, Palestinians, and Israelis—American visitors are crucial because they spend millions of valuable dollars and are citizens of the foreign country most implicated in the regional balance of power. Attuned to these dynamics, scholars have examined how tourism plays a role in Israeli-Palestinian politics and have analyzed how relations are forged between Israeli tour producers (Jewish guides, the Ministry of Tourism) and Christian tour leaders (evangelical pastors and televangelists). This body of work offers detailed accounts of evangelical Christian Zionism and the international political alliances that result.

Yet the foot soldiers of this profitable travel industry, American pilgrims themselves, are by no means typical “global citizens.” Unlike the
guides, tourism professionals, televangelists, and clergy who lead them, they generally have neither significant travel experience nor transnational connections. Nearly three-quarters of pilgrims are working- or middle-class women, most of whom have rarely, if ever, left North America before. Few consider themselves implicated in what they might call “secular” or “worldly” global processes—the political, institutional, and commercial links between countries, companies, and organizations. Instead, even as they travel abroad, they see the experience as redounding to the personal and cosmological relationships they nurture at home: with loved ones on earth and in heaven, with Mary and angels, with Jesus through the Living Word, with other believers in a universal church. These connections are not more trivial or less real than socioeconomic or political ones; they are key to how many Americans, especially women, view their role in the world. From the perspective of lived religion, then, this book contributes to a burgeoning scholarly conversation that seeks to broaden our understanding of how Americans position themselves and act globally.

So what does it mean to go to the Holy Land? The major questions that engage pilgrims, and around which this book’s discussion turns, have deep theological roots: What is the significance of the particular place where God was made incarnate? How does individual salvation correspond to collective good? Is wealth inimical to spirit? The way these questions are framed, however, arises from a distinctly late-modern American milieu. I have distilled them into three broad themes: the intersection of religious pilgrimage and commercial leisure, the interplay between global travel and relationships at home, and the dynamic tension between transcendent divinity and material evidence. By highlighting what are sometimes viewed as dichotomous pairs—religion/commerce, home/away, transcendent/material—my aim is to tease out, through attention to areas of overlap, how such categories may be destabilized and reshaped—in pilgrims’ lives and in academic discourse. Thus these themes operate on two levels in the chapters to come: they illuminate how participants experience pilgrimage and how scholars approach its study.

Once it is framed in the context of contemporary tourism and leisure, Holy Land pilgrimage risks being dismissed (by scholars and by Christians) as too much like a commercial vacation or too political or...
too far beyond the bounds of local and denominational religious networks. Ultimately, I argue that the pilgrimage is spiritually powerful precisely because of the juxtaposition of religion with commercialism, tourism, and global experience. This tension heightens participants’ engagement with, and sometimes anxiety about, certain defining characteristics of Christian modernity along the lines outlined above. Consciously undertaking to “walk where Jesus walked” raises existential dilemmas provoked by comparing the present with an idealized Christian past. Going abroad makes pilgrims take stock of who they are at home. Encountering others elicits questions about religious pluralism and America’s role in the world. In short, by going to the Holy Land, 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.

Who Goes and Why: Holy Land Pilgrimage in Its American Context

Christians have traveled to the Holy Land since at least the fourth century. In Western Christendom, the practice peaked in the medieval period and then declined, sharply so in the early seventeenth century. Two hundred years later, Europeans revived the tradition and Americans followed suit. The first trans-Atlantic adventurers and missionaries arrived in Jerusalem in the 1820s. The group pilgrimage, as it is undertaken today, is a somewhat later development, and since I have described it as a product of modernity, it is useful to give a brief account of how it developed and to whom it appeals.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States underwent a major shift from an agrarian, craft-based economy to a more urban, industrialized one. This led to the growth of a new middle class and to the compartmentalization of time into separate periods for work and leisure. One result was the development of an industry that produced, packaged, and sold play. Middle-class tourism was part of this trend. In the 1840s, companies began to sell bulk tour tickets and arrange group travel in advance. Thomas Cook, a Baptist minister in England, is credited as the progenitor of the mass tour; by the 1860s, he had expanded internationally, with packaged trips to the Holy Land and Egypt.
Protestant pastors and educators responded to the commercialization of leisure with ambivalence even as they helped create it. Concerned about the draw of secular entertainments, they produced godly equivalents, including the creation of Christian vacation camps (the most well-known of which included representations of the Holy Land), and the promotion of early Holy Land tours. Upper-middle-class Americans, whose fortunes were rising in the Gilded Age, could finally afford the trip abroad, and they responded to Cook-style group tours with enthusiasm; they were a generation of “innocents abroad,” quipped Mark Twain in his description of one such pilgrimage in 1869.10

While these antecedents laid the groundwork for the trips we see today, it was almost another hundred years before international travel became possible for a broader swath of the population. The United States had entered World War II late, suffered comparatively few casualties, and emerged richer than ever before. The government encouraged its citizens to embark on overseas vacations as a testimony to the success of the American way of life—the “soft” side, historians note, of Cold War hegemony.11 Middle-class tourists were not conscious agents of Cold War politics, of course, but the era’s wealth and optimism bolstered their confidence that anyone could go abroad: American international tourism rose by an unprecedented 700 percent from 1950 to 1970. Most trips were to Europe, but the Holy Land industry also benefited greatly.12

Once commercial jet travel caught on, it revolutionized the trans-Atlantic trip. The first jets flew to the Holy Land in the early 1950s. Fifteen years later, ships were a thing of the past.13 Air travel lowered costs enormously, shortened travel time from days to hours, and trimmed the length of pilgrimages from five weeks to two. Whereas in 1925 an average tour to the Holy Land cost a staggering 69 percent of a typical American salary and necessitated five to six weeks’ vacation, in 1955 it represented 30 percent of an average yearly income, and by 1965 it had dropped to 11 percent, where it still hovers today.14 As a result, pilgrims were (and are) significantly more varied than their pre–World War II predecessors. A single 1955 trip from Wheaton College, for example, included a professor, an engineer, a cabinetmaker, a business executive, a farmer, a member of the clergy, a mail carrier, and one 62-year-old woman traveling alone who listed her occupation as “full-time evangelist.” Pilgrims were no longer primarily from affluent northeastern cities
either. By the early 1960s, 24.8 percent came from the Midwest, 24.4 percent came from the West, and most lived in small towns.\(^{15}\)

While these new markets opened up among Protestants, American Catholics also began to make the trip in greater numbers. Catholics were less well established economically in the Gilded Age, and very few of them took part in the initial burst of tourism to Palestine. But the American Church had been growing rapidly, and with rising numbers came institution building. In 1880, the Franciscans, the Vatican’s Holy Land custodians since the fourteenth century, established a U.S. commissariat. As elsewhere, this branch of the order was tasked with collecting alms for the upkeep of the Catholic Holy Places and promoting an awareness of the Holy Land among laypeople. To this end, in 1889, the Commissariat ran the first American Catholic pilgrimage, a trip marketed to (and made possible by) a thriving American-born, urban middle class.\(^ {16}\)

Since the 1950s, Catholics have consistently accounted for at least a quarter of American Christian Holy Land visitors. In 2011, while I was doing research for this book, evangelicals made up 35 percent and Catholics 25 percent of this market, about commensurate with their respective populations in the United States. Globally, Catholics make up more than half of all Christian Holy Land visitors.\(^ {17}\) I emphasize this point because while scholars have produced numerous studies of American Protestant Holy Land travel, next to nothing has been written about Catholics.\(^ {18}\) I include both groups here in order to address this lacuna but also because the Holy Land affords a unique field of comparison: it is the one place where American Catholics and Protestants encounter each other at worship in religious sites that both claim are equally theirs.

Catholic or Protestant, all American Holy Land pilgrimages since the mid-1950s share one major demographic trait: women comprise almost three-quarters of the average group. This gender imbalance is obscured in industry-produced brochures, on Internet sites, and in other media. Tour providers rarely mention it directly: some seem not to notice, and others see it as bad for business (“Men won’t go if they think it’s a bunch of ladies”). However, it is a remarkable trend when viewed historically. A hundred years ago a woman like Dale never could have traveled to the Holy Land. Fifty years before that, the thought would likely never have crossed her mind.
To be clear, middle-class women were early promoters of the Christian leisure industry. In the early nineteenth century, the specialization of employment and the growth of urbanization in the Northeast meant that more men worked outside the home. As the domestic sphere became associated with a female sphere of influence and with recreation and spiritual rejuvenation, middle-class women were left in the ironic position, notes historian Colleen McDannell, of performing their work in a place now associated primarily with leisure. Their household responsibilities reflected these shifts. Mothers were charged with nurturing the family’s faith and organizing its leisure time. Combining these roles, they sought wholesome Christian recreation, which the growing leisure industry was happy to provide.

But travel to the Holy Land, although it was certainly Christian, was prohibitively expensive and comparatively difficult. It has never been considered a vacation appropriate for children. Women who made the trip before the Second World War were nearly always accompanied by male relatives: societal norms discouraged going alone, and very few middle- or upper-middle-class women had access to their own disposable income. This changed in the postwar period when international travel became more common, was perceived as safer, and, importantly, the proportion of white, married women in the paid workforce skyrocketed from 10 percent in 1940 to 66 percent in 1990. It is possible that this earning power fueled the upswing in middle-class tourism generally. Sociologist Viviana Zelizer points out that middle-class women’s wages were widely viewed as supplemental to husbands’ “real” earnings and thus, for those who could afford it, women’s money was seen as a bonus to be spent on luxuries such as travel. From my work with pilgrims, one thing is clear: women who are independent wage earners are more likely to act as independent consumers. American women attend church more often than their husbands and want to go to the Holy Land more too. “I saved my money so I could go,” one woman told me in a typical, if blunt, response. “He can come or not. That’s his problem.”

Beyond increased consumer power, women’s interest in Holy Land pilgrimage reflects the growing perception that leisure is an acceptable, even integral, part of religious life. Christian leisure increased after the Second World War when the middle class expanded and upwardly mobile families transitioned to the suburbs. Parishes and churches
responded by developing elaborate “activities programming,” including the occasional trip to the Holy Land. This market attracted a growing network of small family- and clergy-run tour businesses that were scattered across the country from Buena Park, California, to Milan, Pennsylvania. Interested travelers heard about trips through word of mouth, from the pulpit, on the radio and TV, or in local classified ads in newspapers: “See the Holy Land in 1955—6 weeks tour. . . . Write to Box 3-M, Wilmore, Kentucky.”

Pilgrimage also made sense to prospective participants in the context of small groups, an organizational model that has developed especially since the mid-1960s and is now represented in most American churches. Though Catholics and evangelical Protestants have responded to divergent historical trends, in both cases small groups appeal because they allow individuals to tailor personal religious commitments beyond traditional church structures without having to abandon them altogether. Because barriers to entry are low, participants can choose to affiliate with a small group for short periods that suit their spiritual development. Holy Land pilgrimages operate in analogous ways and appeal for similar reasons: pilgrims pay for a short-term experience that enhances their spiritual lives, supplementing their regular church services and activities.

Framing the pilgrimage in the context of religious leisure and “extra-curricular” church activities evokes a second demographic fact: nearly all American pilgrims are fifty-five to seventy-five years old, a life stage that I call “middle-old” in this book. This life-cycle stage, sociologists point out, evolved over the twentieth century as modern medicine extended life far beyond what was thought possible a hundred years ago, stretching out “old age” for two or three decades. Concurrently, as modern industrialization made production more efficient, Western countries instituted mandatory retirement ages to keep younger populations employed. Thus, a life stage emerged where people were in better health than ever before, were no longer deemed necessary workers, and often collected a pension, a form of deferred wages or tax-funded payments. The first old-age pensions in the United States date to 1940.

Two attributes of this middle-old stage are noteworthy. First, it is a “high point” of the life cycle for religiosity, and often levels of church activity increase significantly. And second, in the postindustrial West,
it is associated with leisure and moreover with *deserving* leisure. This idea is important. American Christians approach money ambivalently. They believe that having a lot of it is fine, even laudable, if one works hard, but laziness is unconscionable and self-indulgence is problematic; 83 percent of Americans, churchgoing or otherwise, believe that people should not “spend a lot of money traveling.” Pensioned retirement is therefore crucial because it construes leisure as a just reward after a lifetime of work. Older middle-class people are urged (indeed expected) to “take advantage” by embarking on RV vacations, cruises, heritage tours, short-term mission trips, and, of course, pilgrimages to the Holy Land.27

Piety and Play: Commerce, Leisure, and Individualism

This discussion segues into the first of the themes outlined above: the interaction between religious experience and commercial leisure. Sociologists and anthropologists of pilgrimage have inherited two sets of interrelated concerns: Émile Durkheim’s influential distinction between the profane and the sacred (“things set apart and forbidden”) and mid-century work on the mass reproduction of art and experience, including Walter Benjamin on art, Daniel Boorstin on “pseudo-events,” and Pierre Bourdieu on photography. Each of these scholars concluded that something of a thing’s power, its spiritual nature, was lost through commoditized replication.28

The seminal volume that defined pilgrimage studies, Victor and Edith Turner’s *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), drew on Arnold van Gennep’s ritual stages in order to argue that pilgrimage was liminoid, a release from mundane social and religious structures. At the level of individual experience, the Turners took an essentially Durkheimian approach: pilgrimage was a ritual “out there” apart from the everyday, though they acknowledged that worldly activities had always occurred at Christian shrines. “A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist,” they remarked in a well-known turn of phrase.29 Nevertheless, wealthy Westerners on tour buses posed a challenge for many scholars who did not see how replicated commodities, such as a package tour or a machine-made souvenir, could constitute religious experience. Sociologists have been especially devoted to the project of categorizing vacation tourism and religious pilgrimage, mapping out
sliding scales from “sacred” to “secular.” And, while some question the usefulness of binary distinctions, others, borrowing from tourism studies, are still apt to define packaged pilgrimages, like the ones I describe here, as “staged,” “McDonaldization,” “profaning,” or “Disneyization.”

Since the mid-1990s, scholars of American lived religion have deconstructed these lines between sacred and profane, “high” and mass-produced art, religion and commerce. Studies in this field, mine included, treat commodities as fully embedded in religious worlds: American Christians consume to express and even constitute religiosity. From this perspective, the challenge for scholars is to explore how Americans integrate consumption into religious practice—the growth of a Holy Land tour industry, for example—while also recognizing that the profane/sacred divide may retain importance for Christians themselves. Indeed, from at least the fourth century, Catholic Church officials admonished against nonreligious activities at shrines. During the Reformation, Martin Luther condemned pilgrimages as giving “countless occasions to commit sin and to despise God’s commandments” and Catholic counter-reformers discouraged them in favor of devotions closer to home. Nineteenth-century American Protestants, even as they set out on Holy Land tours, feared that consumer self-gratification would debase Christianity. Analogous discussions unfolded at Lourdes, a major Catholic pilgrimage site that was then developing in France. Today, theologians, clergy members, and pilgrims themselves are still aware of and may be concerned about the intermingling of Christianity and behavior they construe as “commercial” or “materialistic.”

With this in mind, I frame the interaction between religion and commerce (and by extension pilgrimage and tourism) holistically. What I mean is that it is necessary to explore this question from multiple angles: how Americans make sense (to themselves and to others) of a commercial trip that is also a religious experience; how pilgrimage operators develop ways to obscure commercial processes; and how, on the trip, the actual exchange of money for goods can be justified and even lauded while pilgrims still use the rhetoric of “commercialization” to distinguish between self and the Other at shared Holy Land sites.

A related issue bears addressing. Commodities, including vacation leisure, not only muddy the sacred/profane divide, they are also often tied to notions of religious individualism. Indeed, a major sociological
paradigm is that American religion itself approximates a commodity: disestablishment created an open market where churches had to compete for adherents and therefore respond to the needs and desires of consumers. According to this theory, this process produced a greater diversity of highly adaptable churches, resulting in higher rates of church attendance in the United States than in other Western countries. Other scholars and pundits see a less rosy view, decrying American Christianity as overly consumer-oriented and individualistic. Even the pilgrims in this study sometimes spoke to me contemptuously of “pick-and-mix” Protestantism or “cafeteria” Catholicism.

This critique is directly relevant to my analysis since I see the rise of Holy Land pilgrimage, especially among Protestants, as part of a cultural shift in American Christianity toward increased choice, specifically in terms of paradenominational small groups. Today, whether Christians find a pilgrimage group online or sign up with their home church, they are paying for a tailored, personal experience that they believe will enhance their faith. Mass market pilgrimage is therefore dualistic: it is a personal consumer product that because of its clientele—most of whom are female retirees—is also viewed relationally, as a way to strengthen relationships and build religious community at home, as I describe in more detail below.

In pilgrimage studies, the question of intersubjectivity and relationality is equally important but it is approached differently, focusing on how pilgrimage groups cohere and interact. Again, a towering figure is Victor Turner, whose *communitas* model has fueled decades of debate. Sharing characteristics with Durkheim’s description of heightened group emotion during ritual (“collective effervescence”), Turner posited that engaging in ritual during pilgrimage created intense feelings of anti-structural collectivity and consensus, called *communitas*. By the early 1990s, scholars had supplemented and even supplanted this notion with theories of contestation that took into account the persistence of power structures and conflict. My understanding, like that of many scholars today, is that various competing discourses may coexist and even be articulated without hindering shared rituals.

These dynamics are crucial since nearly all American Holy Land pilgrims travel in a group—83 percent compared to 36 percent of other U.S. leisure tourists traveling internationally—and most consider it a
necessary precondition of the trip.38 Yet pilgrims’ goals are related to enhancing relationships at home and with divine beings, not with other members of the (short-lived) group. The result is a tension between the individual and the collective that, for pilgrims, feels satisfying nonetheless. To understand this pattern, I draw on what sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman terms “Golden Rule Christianity,” referring to the ethic of reciprocity expressed in the phrase “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It is, she argues, perhaps the dominant form of religiosity among middle-class suburban Americans today.39 On the pilgrimage, it is expressed in a commitment to avoid conflict at all costs. Though the result may seem to share characteristics with Turnerian communitas, the impetus is different. For pilgrims, being conflict averse is an extension of everyday practice, although the stakes are higher in the Holy Land where no one wants to risk ruining his or her “trip of a lifetime.” Here, as above, it is not enough to describe American pilgrims on mass-market trips as individualistic. The question must be, with whom do pilgrims see themselves in relationship and why?

Home and Away: Global Travel and Domestic Relationships

The Holy Land trip can confirm or cap a longer journey of faith. It is bound up in life-cycle transitions and relationships: faith sharing with friends, praying for one’s children, speaking daily to the Divine. While these preoccupations are not unexpected for Christians, especially middle-old women, there is something surprising, even paradoxical, about pilgrims’ belief that flying far away will help them meet the responsibilities and deepen the identities they inhabit at home.

To some degree, the interplay of home and away has always been central in the anthropological study of pilgrimage. Throughout the 1980s, scholars debated Turnerian anti-structuralism: Did pilgrims “cease to be members of a perduring system of social relations (family, lineage, village, neighborhood, town, state)” during their time away? Did the experience of pilgrimage have the potential to affect societal structure and, if so, did it reverse or reinforce it? This conversation moved in new directions following the theoretical turn to postmodernity and globalization in the 1990s. Theorists loosed pilgrimage from its historical and institutional moorings, adopting it as a metaphor for “liquid modernity,”
the fluidity and mobility of contemporary life. Although much of this work was strongly secularist, even predicting the demise of religion, it had an unintended effect: it fueled anthropological interest in the actual practice of pilgrimage. Not only did the topic draw more scholarly attention but the field also broadened to include a wider variety of meaningful travel. In this context, “home” was reconstrued. Many scholars began to see contemporary pilgrimage as powerful because it frees the journeying pilgrim from the localized, static traditions of home. For others, who cast the postmodern home as inherently mobile, meaningful travel is an attempt to (re)claim one’s community or roots.

In this period, anthropologists also began to revise conventional fieldwork models that privileged close participant observation in a circumscribed location, the “bounded” village field site, or, in this case, the pilgrimage shrine. Studies of pilgrimage are now more attuned to the porousness of “home” and “away” and describe, for instance, how the written and oral texts participants access before leaving and produce upon return are part of “one and the same continuum” with the trip itself. Yet studies of Christian pilgrimage do not include pre- and post-trip follow-up. I address this gap in the literature by beginning my research before the pilgrims leave and continuing it after they return. More firmly embedding the journey in home facilitates a shift beyond anthropologists’ traditional concern with, for example, communitas toward a more expansive discussion that illuminates broader cultural trends in specific historical frameworks. It is also more in keeping with pilgrims’ lived experience; they are, after all, mothers or Christians or neighbors long before and after the trip itself.

While the home/away schematic will be more immediately familiar to anthropologists, it speaks also to conversations in studies of U.S. religion where scholars have begun to reconceive the nation and religion more broadly as “boundless”—interconnected with other people and places through concrete and cosmological global flows. Thus far, in the subfield of lived religion, this concern is reflected mainly in work on immigrants and migrants, Atlantic-crossing intellectuals, or globe-trotting missionaries. In a recent book, religion scholar Thomas Tweed engages a more expansive conversation, using “dwelling” and “crossing” as multivalent terms that evoke “inhabiting place and moving across space” terrestrially, corporeally, and cosmically. While his discussion is
wide ranging, ultimately he grounds his argument in a model of lived religion: his inspiration lies in how the Cuban exiles with whom he works articulate transnational subjectivities clearly and often.\textsuperscript{45}

Pilgrims to the Holy Land complicate this phenomenological model and therefore offer a case study that expands upon Tweed’s call to more consciously theorize how global processes operate at the grassroots. Unlike the Cuban Americans in Tweed’s work, the men and women in this book rarely think of themselves as “global” people, even as they engage in transnational tourism. This is particularly true of the women, who are much less likely than their husbands to have traveled abroad for work or military service and who often feel that their best, truest self is evident in the care they provide locally for family and friends. Thus, for example, when a pilgrim named Patty told me that she was “really a down-home person” as we stood in Jericho—a far-off place that few U.S. Christians ever get to see—she was not speaking ironically or wonderingly or defending her integrity as a “true” American (although some certainly do). She was simply stating a fact. She has no family abroad, is unilingual, watches U.S. media and news, and has never traveled so far before and likely will not do so again. She was enjoying herself but sorely missed her husband, her kids, and her own bed. Patty is indeed a down-home person.

The difficulty I faced in conceptualizing this project, then, and the one that faces studies of lived religion more broadly, is how to acknowledge the subjectivity of pilgrims such as Patty while also examining global “crossings.” One way, I propose, is to follow Tweed in his multivalent use of “home,” a word that pilgrims also use often and in a variety of ways. Home is a brick-and-mortar place where the family resides, the very heart of Christian nurture as conceived by modern Americans. It is the United States and the imagined Holy Land as well as the intangible afterlife when one goes “home to the Lord.” Home is comfort, security, and doing one’s duty yet it can also lull believers into a dangerous spiritual rut. Therein lies the power of pilgrimage. It is a leap of faith—exciting, a little dangerous, a large expenditure—that is also to a home place, which Americans feel they have known viscerally since childhood. Moreover, pilgrims travel for home reasons: the trip confirms the faith that makes them a “ritual expert” in the places and with the people they know best.\textsuperscript{46}
Although much of my research focuses on the intimate details of domestic lives, “home” has a macro component as well. The pilgrimage is a time of cosmological closeness within the group and, they feel, with “global Christianity,” yet one where pilgrims maintain strong interpersonal and intergroup barriers, as I mentioned above. Encounters with foreign places and people may also destabilize one’s identity and feeling of belonging. At stake is the question of how “at home” Americans are in the Holy Land, a place where they feel rooted religiously, as Dale expresses above, yet where the public culture is foreign and often disorienting. How they come to terms with visible signs of difference and conflict is a running theme in the pages to come.

Transcendent and Material, Protestant and Catholic

American pilgrims rarely go to the Holy Land in order to receive physical healing or to fulfill a vow, and most of them do not believe that pain has penitential value. Yet the pilgrimage remains a supremely sensory experience: stepping on ancient cobbled roads, shouldering a cross along the Via Dolorosa, touching the tomb, and taking home twigs and rocks all contribute to making tangible Jesus’ presence and his lived experience on earth. Other heavenly beings also manifest more strongly, including angels, Mary, the Apostles, deceased loved ones. The dynamic tension between material and transcendent that is essential in religious life is heightened in the Holy Land.

Many theologians and scholars have described what anthropologist Matthew Engelke calls the “problem of presence.” Jesus’ incarnation radically altered the boundary between heaven and earth, divine and material. Now, Engelke writes, as Christians wait for a Second Coming, they are faced with absence: the divine is present yet invisible; divine works are occurring yet often intangible. The Holy Land is closely connected to this question of material presence and absence. When they travel there, Christians must grapple with a fundamental theological conundrum: if God is infinite and transcendent, is there power in this particular place? Can a believer feel Jesus’ presence more strongly where he became incarnate?

Americans who choose to become Holy Land pilgrims answer at least a partial “yes.” Pilgrims, tour operators, and local guides ascribe
authenticity to places and objects in the Holy Land, by which they mean that they are powerful because they are inherently sacred or unique. It is a perspective that in scholarship is most often associated with early theorists of religion such as Mircea Eliade and that was largely rejected in favor of a postmodern view of sacred places as empty vessels meaningful only through semiotic construction. Like most current scholars of religion, I take a measured approach between these poles, harking back to theorists such as Turner and Bourdieu: how pilgrims engage with a particular place is framed by discourse, but it is also shaped by the physical objects and geography around them.

In studies of Holy Land pilgrimage, these questions about authenticity and materiality inevitably draw on assumed differences between Protestants and Catholics. Historians and anthropologists are today broadly aware that Protestant models have played a formative role in the study of religion. One result was that the physical and aesthetic dimensions of American Christianity were given short shrift. “Real” religion was construed as spiritual and theological. That same logic, neatly reversed, still operates in studies of Christian pilgrimage: the implicit assumption is that it is Catholics, not Protestants, who travel to religiously meaningful places. Work on contemporary travel to the Holy Land, though exceptional in its focus on evangelicals, reproduces the divide between materiality and anti-materiality, taking as a starting point that Protestants seek open (outdoor) places devoid of material culture while Catholics gravitate toward shrines crowded with the stuff of ritual.

Undeniably, sound historical factors undergird this view. While the Catholic Church has become more critical of many devotions, especially since the Second Vatican Council, there is still a rich theological tradition that connects the sacred to the material world. In contrast, the protest of the Reformation was largely a rejection of Catholic sacramentalism. Early Protestant theologians believed that the Church encouraged the collapse of the sacred and the secular, which muddied God’s relationship to man and distracted from grace, faith, and scripture. Pilgrimages were highly problematic in that respect, associated as they were with miracles, salvation through “works,” and the veneration of saints. Reformists eschewed the physical practice in favor of the metaphoric. As seventeenth-century armchair pilgrim and Protestant apologist Samuel Purchas drily noted, “Thy selfe is the holyest place thou canst visit.”
Over the last fifteen years, however, scholars of American religion have developed increasingly nuanced portraits of how Protestants live their faith using objects and images. Building on this conversation, a guiding notion in this study is that contemporary American pilgrims inhabit post-1960s worlds of thought that complicate assumptions about “Protestant” and “Catholic” approaches to materiality. As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, evangelical pilgrims seek out more sensory and tactile experiences than is generally assumed and American Catholics are more interested in Bible reading and developing a “personal relationship” with Jesus. All American pilgrims draw on shared cultural tropes and aesthetic sensibilities in order to articulate belonging and distinguish what they view as authentic Christian practice.

Yet I do not mean to overstate the case for a similarity between Protestants and Catholics. Many differences persist, most evidently during the Eucharistic celebrations that occur on every Holy Land trip: Catholic communion is closed to evangelicals, and most Protestants understand ingesting the host in purely symbolic terms. Hence American Catholics and Protestants nearly always run separate tours. Still, because the Holy Land is the one place where they meet each other (and others) at shared Christian sites, it was important to me that both groups be included in this study. The pilgrims’ experience provides a unique lens through which to compare two of the principal religious traditions in the United States and an opportunity to move beyond the current comparative focus on evangelical-Catholic political coalitions (around issues such as abortion) to a broader discussion about how they encounter each other at worship.

Stories of Self: Narrative, Memory, and Method

This book draws on archival work, participant observation, surveys of tour professionals, and conversational interviews, a common methodology in anthropologies of U.S. Christianity. Over five years, I spoke with 131 pilgrims, usually for between two and four hours over two sessions, before and after the trip. Our conversations were wide ranging. Some stretched out a whole day. We looked at photos and souvenirs, cooked dinner, and sometimes went to church or out to a bar. Although I was not, therefore, conducting questions and answers in the
traditional sense, my purpose was nevertheless to elicit pilgrims’ stories of self: how they made sense of the trip and its import in their lives.

American scholars have gathered oral histories since at least the early twentieth century, but critical attention to the role of narrative as such really dates to the 1960s, when scholarship turned from realism to “reading” texts. It is appropriate that one of the early studies informing this theoretical shift was Maurice Halbwachs’s *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* (1941). Using Western travel accounts, he showed how the facts pilgrims construed as real actually reflected different historical periods. Individual narrative, Halbwachs concluded, is shaped by collective memory, which changes over time.\(^56\)

His insight then is no less true today. American pilgrims’ descriptions depend on cultural, historical, and personal experience. Their accounts are also “the creation of a particular situation in the moment of its telling,” and my interlocutors, no doubt consciously and unconsciously, redacted their narratives depending on, for example, earlier conversations or whether I interviewed them with their spouses. Not least, what they said was shaped by the fact that they were participating in an interview (no matter how unstructured) conducted by an academic, non-Christian, non-American, young white woman. And although I tried to minimize it, my body language (was I interested? uncomfortable? tired?) undoubtedly made an impact. As a number of scholars have pointed out, interviewer and interviewee are best understood as co-creators of narrative.\(^57\)

Westerners are trained from childhood in techniques of “narrative shaping,” of imposing meaningful patterns on events, of paring down stories to a core narrative arc, and the Christians with whom I spoke were often practiced storytellers about their faith. Yet they, like everyone, had moments when narrative became messy, when it changed over time, when it was contradictory, when they lapsed into silence. None of this means that their stories of self were “made up” or untrue, and my intent is not to contest what is vitally real for them.\(^58\) In fact, the people with whom I spoke were generally well aware that narrative is not static. Some even agreed to take part precisely because they wanted to compare what they said “before” and “after.” Nevertheless, at certain moments my observations or conclusions, particularly when I probe silences or point out inconsistencies, may not correspond with those of the pilgrims; I try to signal when this is the case.
I worked with seven main pilgrimage groups, using several criteria to choose which ones. First, I sought a balance of Catholics and evangelicals. I chose groups with typical demographics and schedules, I avoided specialty tours (such as college study trips or Hispanic ministries), and I limited my research to people who were born in the United States. I chose groups from various geographical areas and of various sizes. The groups organized through the Crystal Cathedral and Moody Bible Institute were “mega tours” of 500 people; the former drew participants from across the country, the latter mainly from Illinois. In each case, I worked with one bus of fifty or so people. Pastor Jim’s group was small but denominationally and racially mixed. The groups Father Mike and Father Joe headed were each from a single diocese (Boston and Raleigh, respectively) but drew people from beyond that catchment area. The St. Cecilia’s group and Pastor Derek’s group were both from single churches. I focused on two geographical areas where I could compare Catholics and Protestants (North Carolina and New England), however over the course of my research, I conducted interviews with pilgrims from thirty-seven states, in person when possible and otherwise by phone. In each of my seven primary groups, about 35 percent of the pilgrims agreed to conduct pre- and post-trip interviews, which were held approximately three weeks before departure and then two, six or, eight months after return. With a few I followed up again after three years, keeping in occasional contact over e-mail in the interim.

Given my reliance on pilgrims’ personal narratives, I should clarify two key terms. The first is pilgrimage. Decades of scholarly debate have produced a pared-down definition that I use here: an intentional journey (which is not obligatory in Christianity) to locations where it is believed to be easier to obtain access to the divine.\(^59\) Readers familiar with Protestantism will likely be most curious about whether “pilgrimage” accurately describes evangelical trips. As early as 1959, conservative Christian magazines began using “pilgrim” in conjunction with Holy Land travel. Evangelicals sometimes cite Psalm 84:5 as justification: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.” At the leadership level, however, the word (and the trip’s purpose) is still contested; while some pastors I interviewed rejected “pilgrimage” as a Catholic term implying false reliance on external signs of faith, others used it to emphasize that the trip would pointedly not be Catholic.
As I wrote this book, televangelist and megatrip leader Jack Hayford was advertising his Holy Land ministry as “more than just a trip . . . [it will be] a pilgrimage—a sacred journey born not of superstition but of a conviction that a divine purpose will be served by our journey.”

In qualitative interviews, 71 percent of American evangelicals referred to themselves as pilgrims, as did 89 percent of Catholics. Evangelicals who rejected the word generally did so because it felt foreign to them; they preferred “religious tourist” or “Christian traveler.” Catholics who opted not to use “pilgrimage” did so mainly for personal reasons: they did not feel religious about the trip, a sentiment I heard most often from men accompanying their wives. Noting these exceptions, I nevertheless use pilgrim to simplify my prose and because most interviewees did feel that the word best evoked the seriousness of their endeavor. Monica, a 55-year-old Catholic administrator in Raleigh, offered a typical response: “The tourist is just looking at places and pilgrims are trying to feel what God is saying or how they see God in that experience.”

Another term that requires brief explication is “Holy Land.” When Christians use it, they implicitly or explicitly efface contested political boundaries, modern people, and states. In Jesus’ day, the places now called the Holy Land were in Galilee and Judaea, outposts of the Roman Empire. Renamed Palestine, the region was then ruled by the Byzantines and Islamic dynasties, and in the sixteenth century, it was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. During World War I, the Turks lost Palestine, which the British then controlled for a 30-year “mandate” until the formation of the states of Israel and Jordan. As the dust settled after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, most of the Christian sites were in Jordan, but they changed hands again after the 1967 war. Since that time, the places “where Jesus walked” are mainly in Israel, although some (notably Bethlehem) are under the Palestinian Authority.

Noting these territorial realities, I chose to use “Holy Land” for consistency and because it is the term I heard most, although pilgrims also say they are going to Israel and evangelicals sometimes use “Bible Lands” to signal the importance of the Word. For the most part, pilgrims use these terms interchangeably, though they may unconsciously tailor their language to suit specific audiences. A Catholic interviewee, for example, noted that when she spoke to a Unitarian friend, “I didn’t
tell her that I was going to Holy Land. I told her I was going to Israel. That’s interesting to me that I made that choice.” Upon reflection, she concluded that she had intuited correctly; her friend understood the trip as related to social justice politics, and “I didn’t feel the need to explain, nor did she ask, that I was going for the spiritual part of it.”

Ethnography on the Bus

There are many voices in this book, but I highlight most often the people I met in Father Mike’s and Pastor Jim’s groups, with whom I went to the Holy Land in 2009. In Mike’s Catholic group, 69 percent were female and the average age was sixty-six. Most pilgrims were from the Boston area and a few knew each other from the same parishes, but others hailed from elsewhere in New England and from Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and South Carolina. Irish Americans predominated, though group members were also ethnically Italian, German, Polish, Ukrainian, and English. In Jim’s group, 71 percent was female and the average age was fifty-five. Sixty percent of the group was African American. Thirty-six percent were conservative Baptists of various stripes (including Jim) and the others were Methodists or nondenominational evangelicals. Most of the group lived in North and South Carolina but others came from Texas, Pennsylvania, and California. The trip was organized by a national company called Journeys Unlimited, which, like most large companies, maximizes profits by combining small groups and unattached individuals on one bus. Most participants knew no more than one other person before we set out.

Both pilgrimages were typical in that we were awake each day at 6 a.m. and active for at least fourteen hours. We walked an average of three kilometers daily and saw between four and seven sites, almost all outdoors, with time for shopping and meals in between. Most pilgrims found the pace exhausting. On Father Mike’s trip, we also held Mass every day and a group “sharing session” after dinner. Jim’s evangelical group, like most, held daily worship services and communion only once. Both groups visited the same sites, but Pastor Jim’s tour went to Masada, which is standard for most Christian groups (Catholics included), whereas Father Mike’s trip instead included a number of extras related to Palestinian Christians. This variation was mainly
due to the influence of a few group members and was made possible because the tour provider, a small Massachusetts-based company, was able to customize the itinerary as we went.

Mike and Jim were both exceptionally welcoming to me and I participated in all activities. With permission, I tape recorded and otherwise I furiously scribbled notes. Though the pilgrims made (gentle) fun of my dedicated writing, there was just enough journaling that I did not look completely out of place. In many ways, too, I blended in as a cultural insider. I am not, however, as much an insider as some recent ethnographers of American Christianity. First, I am Canadian. We know a lot about the United States—more than any other country does—but our understanding of its culture and history is not precisely the same as Americans’ own (this is obvious to me now but was surprising when I first got to graduate school). Throughout my research I encountered norms that were new to me, especially in the South. Being foreign (“the good kind of foreign,” one pilgrim assured me) seemed to give me license to ask nagging “but why?” questions about cultural or political issues that pilgrims assumed were unfamiliar to me. It also offered protective armor when I felt uncomfortable around those whose politics differed significantly from my own; the general impression that Canada is “socialist” seemed to allow me to say outlandishly liberal things without causing offense.

Another difference that I sometimes felt keenly was that I am Jewish. Given the recent turn in evangelical circles toward philosemitism, my religion actually shielded me from potentially uncomfortable attempts to proselytize. If anthropologist Susan Harding was considered a “lost soul” by her interlocutors, I was understood to be a member of an important religious tradition, though some evangelical pilgrims expressed hope that I would be “fulfilled” through Christ. More important, I think, is my own subjectivity in this regard. Growing up among friends of the lapsed United Church or Catholic variety, I had always thought of myself as someone “with a religion,” although my day-to-day routine was the same as theirs. In this sense, when I approached the pilgrims, I did so as a non-Christian but also as an insider to faith in the broad sense: I understood why it was important and why one might want to transmit it to one’s children.

Interactions with Catholic pilgrims felt natural to me from the beginning; I grew up with Catholicism as the de facto majority religion and
had studied it before beginning my PhD. But on the first day of Father Mike’s decidedly pro-Palestinian trip, a group member gestured at the Israeli “security wall” around Bethlehem and yelled, “It’s a concentration camp!” My heart sank. I felt no particular love for the wall, but my partner’s grandparents were Holocaust survivors and the glib comparison bothered me. I had not mentioned my religious affiliation and suddenly got nervous about doing so. I was due to introduce myself over the bus microphone so, palms sweating, I added: “And I’m Jewish.” The pilgrims barely reacted. Occasionally after that (and at other times during my research), I was asked for “the Jewish opinion,” but otherwise it went largely unremarked.

My age was the difference to which pilgrims were most often attuned. Nearly thirty, I seemed younger to them because of how I looked but also because I was still a student and did not have children, a house, a car, a husband, or any other clear indicator of adulthood. Yet I wanted to talk about aging, children, and death—topics that they understandably associated with older women. As Wendy, a pilgrim on Jim’s trip, told me once: “Young women are thinking about settling down and making a family. You’re the exception to the rule. You’re far beyond your years.” Thus I occupied an odd place—younger than my years, older than my years—and did not easily fit into the life-cycle stages most pilgrims felt were typical.

As I was the same age as their children, I also sometimes found myself cast as idealized granddaughter or daughter since I cared about faith and wanted to hear what they had to say.55 At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, my age made less problematic my honest ambivalence about, say, the existence of God. Pilgrims assured me that it was natural and perhaps necessary to be skeptical in one’s twenties; it was the same doubt that some of them had felt and that many more could see in their children and grandchildren—doubt they were trying hard to understand. In ways that sometimes surprised me, my lack of faith but quasi-insider positionality opened up channels for important conversations about their hopes and fears for the next generation.

Mapping the Book

Like the pilgrims’ journey, I begin this book before the trip itself. Drawing on archival research, the first chapter outlines multiple imagined
Holy Lands in the Halbwachsian sense: the collective representations in Sunday school lessons, travel narratives, and news media that have colored American Christians’ impressions since childhood. Few studies of contemporary pilgrimage offer the overview that I do here, but it seems an obvious place to begin since this book is an interdisciplinary endeavor and thanks to historians, there is a particularly rich set of sources detailing the production and circulation of Holy Land images between Europe, North America, and Palestine before World War I.66 The first chapter also introduces a discussion about the role of tour industry producers: U.S. companies, the Israel Ministry of Tourism, and local guides.

When Americans choose to go to the Holy Land today they are drawing on what now seem to be self-evident connections between Jesus and the Bible and its associated places. More immediately, they sign up because of personal experiences related to a plethora of social, cultural, and gender dynamics. They often undertake the pilgrimage during times of disruption or loss related to their stage in the life course. Chapter 2 takes up these themes, looking more closely at pilgrims’ own stories of self: why they go and how they prepare. It also examines how pilgrims demand, and the tour industry provides, models of consumption that (at least partially) obscure commercial exchange and reconstitute traditional forms of Christianity en route.

The middle three chapters situate the reader with the pilgrims as they travel in the land where Jesus walked. Chapter 3 builds on recent scholarship on sensory perception and materiality in American religion in order to explore how Protestants approach the problem of presence. Chapter 4 shifts the focus to American Catholics. Drawing on work in Catholic studies that reevaluates the impact of the Second Vatican Council, I situate the pilgrimage at the nexus of postconciliar and “traditional” practices in contemporary Catholicism. These two chapters also seek to destabilize patterns in the scholarship on pilgrimage by associating evangelicals with materiality and Catholics with the Word. Chapter 5 most clearly concerns what anthropologist James Clifford called “contact zones,” the places where people encounter each other and where contestation may occur.67 It is most often in interactions with Orthodox Christians, local Jews, and Muslims that American pilgrims confront the porous boundaries between spirit, commerce, and politics.
On that note, I should clarify my approach. Most American pilgrims are “pro-Israeli,” though a fair minority of Catholics and mainline Protestants are “pro-Palestinian.” I use these terms as loose shorthand to signal bonds of sympathy and affinity. As I discuss later, pilgrims do not tend to be well informed about the details of Israeli-Palestinian land claims. In fact, they often avoid the topic altogether—a stance that has, at times, led activist-oriented scholars to criticize them for misrepresenting local realities. I take a different approach, exploring how pilgrims struggle to articulate belonging, often through imagined (and sometimes real) links to Israelis and Palestinians. In short, this is not a book about land politics, U.S. foreign policy, or Christian Zionism, but my observations may, I hope, prove a useful complement to more politically oriented studies.

For this reason, also, I focus more often in chapter 5 on “pro-Palestinian” Catholics, a topic about which very little has been written but that enhances our understanding of the dynamics on the ground.

Chapter 6 follows the pilgrims home. Drawing on scholarship that shows how discursive metaphor and material culture both express and constitute faith, I trace the narrative and material ways of “telling” that pilgrims use when they return. They are faced with the challenge of defining what it means to be transformed and how to make the Bible “come alive.” What, if any, practical changes result and how do they face disappointment? Much of this chapter delves into relationships. When pilgrims describe the trip, give gifts, and display souvenirs, they confirm their role as ritual experts, express a relationship with God, and hope to share that faith with the children, friends, and husbands they left behind.

* * *

Eight hundred miles south of Dale and Glen’s Vermont bungalow, 70-year-old Dorothy lives in a two-room apartment on the outskirts of Raleigh. She grew up on a tobacco farm, a hardscrabble life in the North Carolina countryside. As a child, she had the 3 a.m. shift: each night she would climb high up the silo ladders and, perched by candlelight, turn over tobacco leaves until dawn to ensure they would dry evenly. She married young and raised three children nearby. Her husband drank heavily and cheated on her until she kicked him out when she was in her mid-50s and moved to the city. She found herself a “regular
fire-and-brimstone” Baptist church, as she puts it, and a series of factory and fast-food jobs to pay the rent. Today, she lives alone and is fiercely proud of her self-reliance. She often repeats that “a little work never killed nobody” and “what don’t kill you makes you stronger,” expressions that might seem trite if they did not so clearly represent her life.

Dorothy and I were roommates on Pastor Jim’s trip. A few months before our departure, she lost her job and was not optimistic about getting rehired at her age. Sitting one morning beneath the trees outside our Galilee hotel, she said to me, “If someone says, ‘I’d pay you any trip in the world’ I’d say, ‘Pay me one to Israel.’” She continued, musing,

I don’t know why, I just like it over here. Well, I do. It’s because this is where Jesus was born, lived and died. And the people here are so nice, smile and treat you so nice. Not like at home where it’s dog-eat-dog and if you’ve got something I want I’m a-gonna get it. If I could stay, I’d sell everything I have and say to my kids, “Adios! Give me a call sometime!” It seems like you forget the rest of the world, all your worries are gone until you get back on that plane to come home. It’s peaceful here.

When scholars write about pilgrims like Dorothy, they tell us about her political affiliations (or, more often, about those of the men who lead and guide her). They describe how she sees the land and its inhabitants as romanticized relics of the past. Dorothy may certainly feel that way, but if we attend closely, she tells us something rather different too.

Two central premises run throughout this book. The first concerns how, for those who undertake it, the Holy Land pilgrimage is a conscious return to the “source” of early Christianity that is also deeply embedded in its late-modern context; pilgrims become participants in a lucrative leisure industry and in an international travel experience made possible (even for women like Dorothy and Dale) by the global flows that characterize our lives to an unprecedented degree. The second premise proceeds from the first. While we should not ignore the singularity of the journey itself, it is 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.

These contexts are fleshed out in the three broad themes mentioned earlier. The first of these explores the material manifestation
of imagined people and places in relation to a transcendent divine. How does the trip make the land-as-place and Jesus-as-man tangible to hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year? Though Dorothy did not broach this question directly, she certainly signaled its importance. After all, she wouldn't have taken the trip anywhere else; first and foremost, she notes, this is “where Jesus was born, lived, and died.”

What she expresses most clearly, however, is how it feels to be seventy years old, unemployed with no insurance, thinking daily about how to make ends meet in a world that seems “dog-eat-dog.” As I describe later, she is very concerned about whether, when the time comes, her children will put her in a nursing home and whether they will give her the Christian funeral she desires. This context suggests the second theme in the chapters to come: the interplay between global travel and the domestic sphere and the role of women (and sometimes men) as ritual experts within it—how divine presence can be rooted at home but felt most strongly far away.

For Dorothy, this feeling is augmented by how well she is treated in Israel, where she had her first experience in upscale hospitality establishments and on a prepackaged tour. Herein lies the last overarching theme: the imbrication of religious experience with commercial leisure. Commoditized travel heightens Dorothy’s awareness of her day-to-day worries but it also soothes them; all her energy can be directed toward getting “in line” with the Lord, as she often says. The outcome is that Israel and the Palestinian territories feel overwhelmingly peaceful—a notable irony, of course.

In Galilee, as we sat outside our hotel, we savored that feeling of peace for a moment, watching the sun rise over the hills. “I feel real good about today,” Dorothy said, breaking the silence. She looked over to where I was scribbling notes and joked, “Could be one for the history books!”