

Focus

The split between Pauline Christianity and Gnostic Christianity. The former emphasized Jesus' death and resurrection and the latter distinguished itself by focusing on the wisdom and knowledge that Jesus' teachings transmit. Since we are visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I will emphasize the significance of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection for this site, primarily in terms of the multitude of pilgrims the church receives on a daily basis.

The Breakdown

1. I will first briefly discuss the contents of the church, or what is believed to be held inside, which determines its sanctity in the eyes of the pilgrims, then
2. I will outline some aspects of the conflict between various Christian sects over the maintenance of the site and the question of ownership
3. The main focus of my discussion, however, is Christian pilgrimage to contemporary Israel. I emphasize pilgrimage mainly to point out one of the ways in which religion is very much part of Israel's public life, whether it is for the purposes of tourism, piety, or scholarship.

The Church's Content

- it is called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because, according to the Christian tradition, it is believed to be the site where Jesus died on the cross, was buried and resurrected. Most Christians also believe that within the walls of this church are the remains of the rocky mound on which Jesus was crucified and piece of the rock that covered the tomb where he was buried

Does the Church of the Holy Sepulchre really contain the tomb of Jesus?

- Orthodox and Roman Catholic scholars accept the authenticity of the site and many Protestants doubt it
- it is important to note that the contents of the Church and their legitimacy were determined by Helena, the mother of Constantine, who is said to have discovered the cross of Jesus at this site in the 4th century

The Question of Ownership

- in 1775, the Ottoman government gave the Greek Orthodox Church supremacy of the holy places over the Franciscans
- in 1852, the Ottomans reaffirmed the post-1775 arrangement of Greek Orthodox control through a decree commonly known as the Status Quo Agreement, which has been maintained by the three subsequent municipal administrations of the site—the British, the Jordanians, and the Israelis
 - Status Quo Agreement: the Ottoman decision regarding religious control over the site, which ultimately determined the balance of ecclesiastical power between the various groups with a stake in maintaining the many parts of the building
 - these groups include: the Greek, Latin, Armenian, Ethiopian, Coptic, and Syrian Churches, the first three having a larger position of control than the last three

- conflict between these sects was heightened when an earthquake in 1927 caused deep structural damage to the building and there was difficulty deciding what renovations would be made and by whom
- the contract that was drawn up by the Ottomans states that possession, usage, and ceremony in the holy site should not change, but "will all remain forever in their present state." That said, the Status quo agreement drew boundaries that were difficult to overcome when making decisions about how to maintain the site

Religion and Public Life: Pilgrims in Jerusalem

POLITICS ASIDE, some debates that have also surfaced are whether Christians who visit these sites are truly acting out of piety or are mainly engaging in tourism, OR whether the architecture itself constructs the sanctity of the Church, rather than the true presence of the relics themselves.

Some scholars have even gone to the extent of making a definition of a pilgrims to distinguish them from mere tourists, the criteria to determine this distinction includes:

1. The motives for the journey;
2. The period in the year of the journey as well as its duration and the mode of travel;
3. The travelers' religious affiliation and social background;
4. The travelers' reaction to Israel and their response to the country's holy sites; and
5. The services used by the travelers during their stay in Israel

As a scholar of religion it is not my place to determine the nature and purpose of one's pilgrimage and piety. Do note, however, the practice of pilgrimage in Jerusalem, particularly those who walk the Via Dolorosa (the way of suffering) and visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to experience Jesus' suffering through one's own body and spiritual experience at a particular place and time.

Theory

- in Jonathan Z. Smith's study of ritual theory, he argues that "the specificity of place...is what gives rise to and what is perpetuated in memorial." Nowhere is this more true than in Jerusalem, where history, ritual, and holy sites merge in the experience of the religious. In Jerusalem, according to Smith, "story, ritual, and place could be one."
- Think about this in terms of Robert D. Miller, who argues that "Pilgrimages provide liminality, a marginal experience of transition and potentiality for the pilgrim," therefore offering pilgrims a religious, ritual experience that differs from the ordinary reflection on a liturgy or frescoes and stained-glass depictions of the 14 stations of the cross

What is Pilgrimage, according to Miller?

1. "seeing" the holy places: Miller elaborates on this by drawing on the words of John Chrysostom who wrote, "People are drawn from the ends of the earth to see where the Lord was born, buried, and crucified." So today, pay attention to the different people who are visiting the site, where they might be from, how their clothes or prayers distinguish them from other groups, and how they react when they see and touch the sacred sites within the Church;

2. to mentally visualize the events that supposedly took place at the spot in question;
3. to physically touch the holy places;
4. to reenact the events commemorated by the site;
 - while we are walking the via Dolorosa, watch for people carrying a wooden cross, to mimic Jesus' burden as he walked to his execution

These modalities, according to Miller, highlight the sanctity of pilgrimage for those involved. So please make note of the rituals you are about to witness and think about the ways in which these acts of religiosity are acted out in a very public manner and be open to criticize Miller's model if you see or hear something today that does not quite fit his analysis of religious pilgrimage.

Sources

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