



มูลนิธิเอกสัมพันธ์เพื่อการท่องเที่ยวที่ยั่งยืน

Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism [ECOT]

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Israel, pilgrimage tourism, and Palestine *Questions for pilgrims*

The Holy Land draws pilgrims from around the world. However, the 42nd anniversary of the Israeli occupation of Palestine following the June 1967 war reminds us that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved even though it is acknowledged that resolving it should be a serious priority if peace is to come to the region that impacts on the wider world.

Given its complexity, this conflict, defined as it is by the sharp edges of a Jewish/Arab divide with its religious, historical, political, cultural and other dimensions, can be seen through the prism of various perspectives. One of these is tourism.

The Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism (ECOT), bringing together church and other networks, calls for and works towards a tourism that is fair and just, one that genuinely benefits host communities.

The Holy Land is home to the three monotheistic and Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is a rich repository of sites considered precious and of deep religious significance by believers around the world. These sites attract pilgrims in the thousands as illustrated, for instance, by media images of visitors participating in Christian Lenten events. Around the world, too, many travel agencies organise pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Obviously, to the Israeli authorities, these are an invaluable source of tourist dollars.

However, unfortunately, these encounters do not occur in a peaceful environment. The whole region is under a pall of conflict and suspicion. The territory in Palestine is under the control of Israeli law and administration that persists with the closure of the West Bank. The Israeli tourist industry discourages visits to the West Bank except for brief, controlled visits to pilgrimage sites.

In the interests of justice for all, ECOT calls on the pilgrims and the travel agencies which arrange these pilgrimages not to dissociate them from a living context - the situation confronting the Palestinian people.

ECOT urges that pilgrims seriously consider the following questions and concerns as the visits are planned:

- Who ultimately really controls Palestinian tourism? There is no free flow of visitors into Palestine. The visa one requires to reach Palestine is issued by Israeli authorities. Their heavyhandedness towards those they consider sympathetic to the Palestinian people is well known and documented. A

recent case involves Goan tourists from India denied visas with no explanations given and is being pursued by the Indian authorities.

- What is the nature of the visit allowed to the holy sites in Palestine, such as the Church of the Nativity? Is it defensible that pilgrims are bused in and out of Palestine in Israeli vehicles with little opportunity for interface with the local Palestinian population in turn denied access to tourist income?
- Why are the arrangements such that pilgrims end up staying at Israeli places of accommodation but are discouraged from using Palestinian hotels to the detriment of the Palestinian economy? This points to the broader difficulty there is in organising longer stays in Palestine which would enable an understanding and appreciation of the reality, history and culture of the Palestinian people so that tourism could be used to transform contemporary injustices.*
- How reliable are the material and advice provided to pilgrims by Israeli tourism with regard to the Palestinian people? Do they reinforce negative stereotypes of Palestinians and Arabs? One has to consider this aspect given, for instance, a recent attempt by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism to wipe Palestinian territories off the map and show them as a part of Israel.
- Given the manner tourism is now regulated by the Israeli government, pilgrims need to ask if their pilgrimage serves to bolster Israeli political and economic domination at the expense of Palestinians?

The considerations listed above would be a basis for reflection by those who have been to the Holy Land as pilgrims. They would also be relevant to secular tourists.

Many of the pilgrims who go to the Holy Land go there because that is where Jesus lived, taught and died. Jesus was a Palestinian too and belonged to a people who still live there. Jesus' teachings on peace and justice apply to his people as well. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land provides an opportunity to see his message in the context of their contemporary reality. A visit to the historical sites of the past is a valuable experience. The pilgrimage is immensely enriched if it assists the pilgrim to relate it to the 'living stones' – the people living there now. The insights generated can be communicated to the people back in one's own country, and thereby, within a global community of nations, help advocate for policies that usher lasting peace and transformation in the Holy Land. In this sense the pilgrimage would make a real contribution to peace in the world.

<p>For further information and your feedback, contact Caesar D'Mello, caesar@ecotonline.org; Tel: + 66 53 240 026, + 66 (0)85 145 0741; Amelie Vignaud, Amelie@ecotonline.org; Tel: +66 53 240 026</p>

** Please refer to 'The Code of Conduct for Tourism in the Holy Land', available at www.pirt.ps*