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"Authentic Experience" and Manufactured Entertainment: Holy Land Experience Religious Theme Park

Abstract: Holy Land Experience is a religious theme park in Orlando, Florida. The city is home to some of the main theme parks in the United States, however, Holy Land Experience is not a typical one, and in official flyers it claims not to be a theme park at all, its role being, instead, educational. Holy Land Experience is a plaster replica of Jerusalem from the times of Christ, spread on 15 acres of land.

At the same time, it is an interesting example of promoting spirituality using tools attributed to entertainment. Inside the theme park Christianity is shown offering a direct, emotional experience using imitations of Biblical places and events. Indeed, according to the visitors, the overwhelming artificiality of the place does not thwart religious feeling. At Holy Land Experience spiritual experience is merged with entertainment and a sense of America's uniqueness.

Keywords: authenticity, Christianity, Holy Land Experience, spirituality, theme park, United States

Introduction

Holy Land Experience, a theme park in Orlando, Florida dubs itself a "living, Biblical history museum" (Branham 2009). It was originally created in 2001 by Marvin Rosenthal, a Jew who turned to Christian religion, and became a Baptist minister. According to the founder, the place was intended as a space for Christian education, (Goodheart 2007) but, a newborn Christian critical of Judaism, he was accused of including anti-Semitic allusions in the park. Their message could be boiled down to "murderers of Jesus" or, in a more subtle version, "those who do not realize the Messiah has come." As Rosenthal's proselytizing idea for the park did not bring enough revenue, Holy Land Experience was sold in 2007 to Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). It is the largest American Christian media corporation and owner of numerous preacher television channels, as well as to other media outlets and real estate. TBN not only quickly got rid of the anti-Semitic features, but refocused the stated educational role of the park to include more pro-Israeli features.

I decided to visit Holy Land Experience—an unusual mix of theme-park entertainment and religious zeal—to explore how today Christianity can be reinterpreted to fit a commercial, entertainment-focused enterprise. After all, strong ties between the state and Christianity, Protestantism in particular, have always been a significant social glue in the United States. Already Alexis de Tocqueville argued in *Democracy in America* (2000) that in the US religion and democratic principles mutually support each other. Indeed, on the one hand, religiosity has remained prominent in American public life, and at present, too, open

references to God are a common feature in US politics. On the other hand, since Protestantism in the United States is not regulated by any single religious institution, it opens space for more diversity and the privatization of religious experience. Furthermore, as Max Weber (2003) famously argued Protestantism, with its focus on individual effort, is sympathetic towards consumption, since it is considered evidence of the success in one's hard work, and, more importantly, a visible sign of Divine Grace. In the United States, material expressions of personal achievement interpreted as signs of God, have been, and still are, considered by many as symbols of ties between religion and the capitalist nation state.

Holy Land Experience religious theme park is a prime example of linking consumption, religion, and the nation. Located in a city famous for Disneyland and other amusement parks, it is seemingly just another commercial entertainment space. Its makers, however, emphasize its role as a space for education on the sources of Christianity. In this sense, the location of Holy Land Experience makes it look like a lone missionary in the center of an entertainment-focused jungle, and in order to attract visitors the park adopts methods similar to those found at the neighboring theme parks. Thus, the use of entertainment to present Christianity makes Holy Land Experience a place where religion can compete with nearby theme parks. At Holy Land Experience it is reformulated to fit the familiar reality of consumption and entertainment. Yet it goes further: by employing well-known contexts from American pop culture it presents a vision of unique ties between the American nation and God, which lie at the foundation of American Christianity (see e.g.: Stevenson 2013).

The Schedule

Holy Land Experience is located not far away from Universal Orlando Resort theme park and a huge 1.2 million-square-foot shopping center, The Millenia Mall. Like other theme parks in Orlando, Holy Land Experience is situated next to a highway and the best way to get there is by car. Located on fifteen acres of land, roughly half the size of the mall, the park welcomes visitors with a ten-feet-tall golden plaster lion and silver horse in front of the entrance to the parking lot. A guard standing in front of the gate hands out leaflets with information on proper behavior inside the park (shirts and shoes should be worn at all times, no outside food, no smoking) and directs visitors toward the parking space. It is decorated with palm trees and plastic animals, bringing to mind a Disneyland version of "Jungle Book." The park itself is surrounded by a plaster wall, which resembles an ancient fortress. The name "Holy Land Experience" written in a font which reminds one of "Aladdin," another Disney animated movie, hangs over the faux-rock entrance gate, inspired by the Damascus, Jaffa, and Lion's Gates in Jerusalem (Beal 2005; Wharton 2006). The entrance gives the impression of a merge between old and new: Holy Land Experience employees dressed up in a sequined adaptation of 1st century Middle-Eastern clothing hold ticket barcode scanners, standing in front of shiny metal turnstiles under a faux-stone arch. They greet visitors with a respectful "shalom" and hand out stylized maps of the space with a schedule of the "performances" on the back. After entering the park one finds oneself in

the middle of an ancient Middle-Eastern little town carved in plastic and plaster imitating stone, decorated with Roman moldings and vases, fake grass, and plants on the concrete ground. Small posters informing that the place is under camera surveillance are scattered all over the park.

The day at Holy Land Experience is arranged according to "performances," which are stagings of events based on The New Testament and contemporary adaptations of Biblical parables. These shows seamlessly blend old stories and period-like props with contemporary contexts. The space includes other tourist attractions as well, including the Scriptorium where, according to the flyer, one can find the world's fourth largest collection of Bibles (Feldman 2002; Radosh 2008); a replica of the cave where Christ was born, which opens to the Last Supper room on the other side; two big gift shops, a cafeteria, in addition to a coffee shop with packaged goods imported from Israel.

The stagings are performed both in the open air and inside buildings, on stages with state-of-the-art sound and lighting. The same actors who take part in the performances can be seen walking around the park throughout the day. They also greet the visitors in the morning when the park opens, and they mingle with them listening about the experience of visiting the park after the last show in the evening. The space is open to be freely explored; it is filled with various period-like amenities, such as a replica of Christ's tomb, a garden with plants from Israel, and an animated "hall of fame," with life-size paintings of individuals who played a major part in propagating the Bible throughout history, from Moses to Saint Augustine. To a certain extent the space of Holy Land Experience is a Christian fantasyland. Timothy Beal, a scholar in religious studies, calls it "Christian edutainment" (Beal 2005: 63), which requires both faith in God and a suspension of disbelief to "experience" the Holy Land, instead of a strolling inside plastic mockup.

A number of scholars have tried to uncover the different layers of Holy Land Experience in order to understand what "Holy Land," "experience," and "authenticity" signify in such an openly manufactured space. As such, Holy Land Experience neatly falls into the theoretical framework concerning consumer culture, such as Boorstin's (1992) famous concept of pseudo-event—which included tourism, an imitation of travel—deliberately manufactured, often for the purpose of media attention, or Baudrillard's (1983, 1994) hyperreality, augmented yet lacking proper meaning. Both these ideas contextualize Holy Land Experience as a simulation oversaturated with symbols, which promises religious "authentic experience." Interestingly, according to some of the visitors, it succeeds in doing so, as scholars of contemporary tourism point out (Mintz 2010; Urry and Larsen 2011). This is also noted by authors who have visited the park, including Beal (2005), Wharton (2006), Radosh (2008), Dykins Callahan (2010), and Stevenson (2013), albeit they often do so in an ironic manner, mocking the artificiality of the place.

Unlike the actors dressed in period clothing, staff members who wear everyday clothes perform maintenance tasks, which include painting marble-like veins on concrete stairs that lead to a replica of the Jerusalem Temple. This helps sustain the notion of a hyperreal authenticity (Baudrillard 1983, 1994; Wharton 2006): the space is clearly artificial yet the overload of fabricated details (e.g. painted marble veins and fake camel footprints) nonetheless creates convincing shortcuts for the visitors to immerse themselves in what they themselves describe as a spiritual experience. ("It's very moving," is a comment I heard from

several visitors.) This fakeness is not just merely inferior to the original located in the Middle East. Umberto Eco in his descriptions of art and entertainment spaces in the United States, which fit the context of Holy Land Experience particularly well, argues that an excess of hyperrealistic reproductions overflowed with meanings and set in a single place, may eliminate "any need for the original" itself (Eco 1986: 19). This idea is echoed in scholarship on tourism in general. For example, Boorstin claimed that "[t]he tourist looks for caricature (...). The tourist seldom likes the authentic (to him often unintelligible) product of the foreign culture; he prefers his own provincial expectations." (Boorstin 1992: 106) Thanks to its familiarity and accessibility, the fake replaces the original. Yet it is also real in its consequences, as the classic sociologists Thomas and Thomas (1928: 572) would put it. As can be observed at Holy Land Experience, this process is effective. The visitors are given the opportunity to share a religious experience within the artificial setting of Holy Land Experience, and when asked they gladly confirm this. Thus, based on their reactions, the simulated space acts as a deliberate set of props for entertainment-style yet nonetheless spiritual emotion. The remaining question is whether at Holy Land Experience entertainment is a tool for spirituality, or whether spirituality becomes yet another feature of entertainment?

The First Performances: Jesus and the US Army

Boorstin described pseudo-events as happenings that are carefully choreographed, lack spontaneity, and lead to subsequent pseudo-events. According to the historian, this self-sufficient cycle leads to a feeling of timelessness, a perpetual present. At Holy Land Experience, the "choreography" of the theme park, which controls how visitors move around the place within a given timeframe, plays together with the constant repetition of Christ's death and resurrection—a significantly abridged version of the Christian calendar. At the park, the day begins at 10 am with a 10-minute long fountain show titled "Crystal Waters." It is held at a small pond close to the fence through which one can see the road and the cars passing outside. After the show is over, the visitors can meet the actors who walk by dressed in glittery cloaks. The performances at Holy Land Experience are about 30-minutes long, and the first one, titled "Woman at the Well," is presented on a small open-air stage made to look as if it were carved in stone. The audience, about forty people of all ages, is predominantly white, and according to Kristin Dombek's (2007) study on Evangelical theme parks, they are mostly conservative Protestant Christians. They sit down on faux-stone benches in front of the stage; as the show progresses, late visitors fill the remaining seats. The same stone-like benches can be found all around the park. On the stage, a woman dressed in period clothes sits next to a well, to give an account of her errors and wrong judgments, and her failed search for "the true messiah." After a while, she recognizes that the man who joined her by the well and has been listening to her story is, in fact, the messiah. Later, when she recounts the story to her two female friends, they joke, "Jesus told us he liked us better!" The audience reacts with loud laughter and clapping. Despite the stylized 1st century setting, the story sounds relatable. At the same time, it is a playful comedy, in which Christian faith meets mundane mischief.

While the first performance takes the audience into first century Middle East, the subsequent show brings them back to a stylized version of today's small-town United States. "Celebrate America" is presented inside the Shofar Auditorium nearby, a theater building named after the Old Testament horn, with seats for around three hundred people. The performance is a musical-style comedy of errors about preparations for a small-town celebration. The actors are dressed in white, blue and red, and the American flag motif dominates the stage. Interestingly, this is the only show which lacks direct references to religion, save for the song "God Bless America." Instead, the entire finale of the performance is dedicated to the US Army. In the culmination of the show, a long-gone son returns home from Iraq, just in time for the town celebration. In an attempt to undermine the fictitiousness of the staging—and what Stevenson (2013) in his book on contemporary Evangelicals in the US calls "re-experience"—the actors on the stage ask the audience to stand up from their seats if they have family members who have served in the army. Some of the viewers rise, and the actors step down from the stage to shake their hands and congratulate them. At the same time, two flat television screens on either sides of the stage show old black-and-white recordings of air bombings, possibly made during World War II. Through this mix of fiction and reality, acting and earnestness, the audience members—and their individual experiences—become part of the performance. The conversations between them and the actors continue also once the show is over; people share their experiences from the army, thanking each other "for their service to the nation," as I heard many times. This essentially patriotic performance is the only show at Holy Land Experience that does not directly relate to Christ. Instead, it emphasizes the role of America as the "blessed nation" and its exceptional role in the world, although the way this uniqueness is presented boils down to military force. However, given the noticeable number of visitors who claim to have members of the military in their families, this approach makes sense in shaping a notion of community between the viewers and the actors. Furthermore, this intertwining of Christian context, Americanness, and power reinforces the idea of the vital ties between the American nation and God.

Witnessing pt. 1: The Passion of Jesus Christ

"Passion of Jesus Christ" is staged at noon. In a 2008 documentary titled "Religulous" its author, Bill Maher, a comedian and television host, used the performance to mock the supposed mindlessness of American religiosity. After numerous criticisms concerning the brutality of the Passion at Holy Land Experience—the beatings of Christ were disturbingly realistic—(see e.g. Radosh 2008), at the end of the aughts it was transformed into a less gory version, more suitable for families with young children who visit Holy Land Experience. In its present form, the show's main focus is laid on the tortures of Christ during the Stations of the Cross. During the performance one can understand the criticism of violence, because even now the actor performing the part is beaten with the sound of the whip so realistic it makes one wonder whether his pain is staged. As this is happening, another actor who plays Satan hovers over the stage in a black-and-red cape, laughing devilishly as if in an act of self-mockery. The performance, the first of the two Passion shows staged during the day, ends with the discovery of Christ's empty tomb. After the performance is finished the

audience, which had filled all the available seats, leaves the building in grim silence, visibly moved by the images of torture.[1]

After the first "Passion of Jesus Christ" is finished around 1pm, the visitors head towards the cafeteria for lunch. Called The Oasis Palms Café, a sunny, cheerful space—a striking contrast to the dark performance—offers typical fast-food fare, including hamburgers, tacos and fried chicken. The coffee shop nearby, small and cozy, sells coffee and cakes, as well as packaged snacks imported from Israel. The waiter there assures me and other people standing in line that they are "real, because they are from The Holy Land." Her comment seems to emphasize that the experience of flavors from Israel is as important as the visual attractions. When asked how these modern snacks relate to the food that was available two thousand years ago, she responds sternly, "this is the closest you can get," and adds that the same snacks can be bought in Israel, too.

Collections pt. 1: The Scriptorium

No more than ten people are allowed to enter the Scriptorium at the same time. According to a video playing on the screen above the entrance of the temple-like structure, it houses the fourth biggest collection of the Bibles in the world. One of the recorded donors explains that the idea behind the Scriptorium was to make a space that would not be "intellectual" but broadly available to diverse audiences.[2] The Scriptorium is something of a Bible-filled cave of wonders. The exhibition is divided into rooms which present the almost two-millennia-long story of writing and translating the Bible, from the times of the Old Testament to the present of preacher television channels. The collection includes hand-written and embroidered objects from the early Middle Ages, rare first printed editions (including a fragment of the Gutenberg Bible from 1455 and King James Bible from 1611; see also: Radosh 2008: 35), as well as modern translations. In each of the rooms a male voice-over recounts the history of the Bible, and his story is accompanied by different light and sound effects. In the rooms, automated life-size figures, which depict Bible copyists from different eras, move in synch with the voice-over, bringing to mind robots found in old-style toy stores. Doors to adjacent rooms open only after the voice-over finishes his monologue in the given room, which prevents the viewers from freely wandering around the place. The "grand finale" takes place in a round room, which is designed in the fashion of a Bible-writers' hall of fame: heavy red velvet curtains move sideways to reveal life-size paintings of the Holy Book's writers and interpreters hanging on the wall, while the narrator presents them in a tone resembling introductions of competitors in a television contest. A heavy-looking huge cross, nearly the size of the ceiling, hangs from above, and is accentuated by the loud, perhaps God-like, sounds of lightning and thunder coming from above. As Baudrillard would probably appreciate, inside the Scriptorium spiritual emotion is strengthened by mixing historical artefacts, the

[1] The "Passion" performances are usually presented outside but since it rained during my visit the show was moved to the Shofar Auditorium.

[2] Before being moved to Holy Land Experience, the collection was kept in Michigan, in the private residence of Robert Van Kampen, a stockbroker who had gathered the manuscripts (see e.g.: Feldman 2002: 18–19).

use of advanced light and sound technology, and easily understood pop cultural references.

Collections pt. 2: Christus Gardens

Life-size cardboard figures invite people inside the Christus Gardens located close by. The paper figures are photographed images of actors who perform at Holy Land Experience and, perhaps surprisingly, Tammy Faye, a hugely popular television preacher who died in 2007.[3] The name "Christus Gardens" is misleading, since the space is in fact a building with rooms, which exhibit scenes from the life of Christ. The tour begins with a random collection of contemporary yet baroque-looking paintings and Bibles in old, intricate covers. The subsequent rooms present life-size silicone figures depicting well-known images from the New Testament, including the nativity scene, Christ's teachings, and his death. All the scenes are bathed in blue and pink light, while short written descriptions of the scenes, set in a stylized Arabic font, are screened on the back walls from hanging projectors. The final scene in the exhibition, the resurrection, includes a life-size plaster white horse clad in a sparkly silver blanket and bridle, more a fairy tale than the New Testament. Still, what is particularly striking is that instead of the typical suffering long face of Christ found in most religious depictions, at Holy Land Experience the images of the Son of God bear strong masculine features, based on those of the actor who performs the part. The suffering Jesus is thus outshined by the image of a powerful superhero on a white horse, which alludes to an American-type brave cowboy rather than the Christian Good Shepard.

Witnessing pt. 2 and 3: The Last Supper and the Women Who Loved Jesus

According to the Holy Land Experience map, the Qumran Caves are a copy of the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls, including Old Testament manuscripts, were found. Inside the replica at Holy Land Experience, one can take part in a ten-minute long participatory show, titled "Holy Communion with Jesus." A poster outside the structure informs that the performance is a "real Mass"—again attempting to transcend fact and fiction, spirituality and entertainment—and only believers in God (presumably Christian) are allowed to participate. The performance is held in a small cave-like room with a big wooden table and stools around it. The actors gathered in the room bear solemn looks on their faces, making the visitors who come inside quickly fall silent. The table, the main feature in the otherwise bare space, is covered with fabric with a Middle-Eastern motif, and a bowl with plastic fruit is placed on top. Around a dozen people sit down at the table on the available seats, a clear allusion to the Last Supper.

The participants are given wooden cups the size of a thimble, and the actors pour dark grape juice into them; alcohol is not allowed on the premises. Next, they hand out bite-sized

[3] Faye was also famous for supporting gays, her love of heavy makeup, and Heritage USA, a now defunct Christian theme park which was one of the most popular vacation destinations in the United States in the 1980s (see: Martz, and Smith 1987).

pieces of matzo bread. A bearded man dressed in a stylized beige-and-brown cloak enters the room, and stands in front of the table. He then begins a monologue, during which he talks about the difficulty of doing the right things in life, and about being forced to choose between lesser evils. His talk—like that of the woman by the well in the first performance of the day—is easy to fill with one's own particular stories, whether in the first or in the twenty-first century. After a couple of minutes another bearded man enters the room, embraces the first one, and begins his part of the performance. It turns out to be the ritual of the Eucharist, and the man's appearance and gestures suggest he is playing the role of Christ. He picks up the matzo bread and recites, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He continues, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me," and drinks the juice from the wooden cup. People at the table follow, nodding at each other in silence and as if in a suspension of disbelief allowing them to confirm that they are witnessing an extraordinary spiritual event. After the staging of the Eucharist is over, another door opens for the people to leave. The staff tells them to keep the wooden cups, stressing that they are made of wood from Israel. As in the café, the physical closeness of objects to the real Holy Land makes them special, and closer to God, while people become "attendants" to a spiritual event, as Stevenson (2013: 55) put it, rather than merely visitors or even passive witnesses of happenings at an entertainment theme park.

The second-to-last performance in the day's schedule, "The Four Women Who Loved Jesus" centers on four Biblical women, Mary Magdalene among others, who "confess" to the audience how they learned to love Christ. Their stories emphasize "unconditional acceptance" and "love," saving oneself from the "false morality" of peers, and giving up "the sinful life." The women's accounts, well known to anyone familiar with the New Testament, are, again, presented in a personal and emotional manner. People in the audience cry and enthusiastically applaud the moral transformation of the characters, which was made possible thanks to God. In fact, it seems that what makes the performance relatable is the audience's passionate reaction to the contemporary adaptation of Biblical stories. What's more, the viewers' excitement is crucial to make the performance a communal experience, and not "just" a show to be watched. The actors in the performance emphasize that faith in God provides answers to all possible questions; reality is fundamentally black and white. Conversely, without faith one is hopelessly lost in desires, unable to make moral decisions. Thus, divine grace is presented as a choice not only obvious but almost pragmatic: why would one not choose clear answers to life? At Holy Land Experience the offered spirituality is saved from ambiguity, even if the space itself is overflowing with paradoxes.

Stores, Karaoke, and Playgrounds

When not attending a performance or exploring the space, the visitors spend their time browsing in the park's souvenir shops. One is located close to the entrance, another is attached to the Scriptorium, while the biggest store is directly accessible from the Shofar Auditorium. In addition to the large number of religious publications, from Bibles to celebrity preacher self-help books, the stores offer a wide range of trinkets including mugs, plastic

and silver jewelry, t-shirts, bags with cross details, colorful travel water coolers, as well as organic cosmetics from the Dead Sea, the latter another sign of the assumed physical closeness to the original Holy Land. While the first two shops are styled to look like bookstores, the shop next to the Shofar Auditorium looks like a merge of fairy tale and Christmas. The space is flooded in blue and pink light, and the glow is reflected on mirror panels hanging on walls and crystal adornments scattered all over the place, creating an unreal, magical atmosphere. A white seven-foot tall plastic silver tree lit with small lights, a clear allusion to Christmas, adds a feeling of holiday celebration. Yet in stark contrast to the dreamy store, a huge three-dimensional model of first century Jerusalem, similar to those found in museums, fills an entire room directly connected both to the Shofar Auditorium and the souvenir shop. People walk around the structure, while a voice-over gives an imaginary tour of the city several times during the day.

Outside, Smile of a Child Adventure Land, an area created specifically for children, loosely based on Biblical motifs and fairy tales, is located close to the park's entrance. Save for the cafes, it is the most leisure-focused area in the park. The small space includes a playground—part jungle, part ocean—with plastic animals scattered around. The playground acts as an adaptation of Noah's Ark, but with the addition of life-size figures of Christ placed in random places, including one on a tree. In addition, a nativity scene with plastic figures in the size of the children is on display. The visitors can also stick their heads on top of headless Disney-like carton figures, often found in amusement parks. At Holy Land Experience it is a princess in a blue long dress, holding a red rose in her hands, and a knight in red armor, bearing a sword and shield, a gold lion standing on his hind legs drawn on his armed chest. Although the space is intended for small children, during my visit it was primarily occupied by adults. Furthermore, there, too, the mix of Biblical and fairy-tale motifs seems to merge faith and fable into one.

Witnessing pt. 4: The Passion with a Happy Ending

"We Shall Behold Him!" is the final show of the day; it is an extended version of the Passion performed at noon. The performance repeats the violent beatings shown in the morning, but continues with Christ's resurrection. At Holy Land Experience it is a white, gold and glitter musical-style grand finale with angels, musical-like dance routines and confetti falling from the ceiling. Christ is reborn with a million-dollar smile and a huge byzantine-looking glittery crown. The performance is loud and moving, and by the end of the show nearly half of the audience has tears pouring down their cheeks. It is spectacular as shows on Broadway and Las Vegas, but the spiritual theme makes the one at Holy Land Experience feel more profound: it is not merely about the viewers' excitement, but about the resurrection of Jesus, the pivotal moment of the New Testament. Interestingly, at the theme park it is presented mostly as a sensory experience. The audience appears to be seized by the loudness, the rapidly flashing lights, the dance, and the music. The performance concludes with "Miracles," which turn out to be four themes of open-group prayers: "Salvation," "Children," "Holy Spirit," and "Health." People gather under one of the four banners to pray, while the actor playing the resurrected Christ greets and embraces them. This act looks like one

last attempt to merge fiction with reality, the audience with the actors—all witnesses to the "re-experience" of the Bible, not just tourists inside a theme park. Finally, the manager of Holy Land Experience, a grey-haired man dressed in plain clothes, walks up the stage to thank the visitors for their participation, another personal touch to the performance of the Biblical resurrection. At six in the afternoon the show is over. The actors and visitors thank each other for coming and shake hands; people begin to leave the park. The same set of performances takes place at Holy Land Experience every day of the week except Sundays.

Inventing Spiritual "Authenticity"

After the final performance is finished, one can feel a sense of emotional community and spiritual elation among the audience. People's impassioned reactions to the show suggest that there may be something cathartic about the experience of witnessing, "re-experiencing" Biblical events, even if they are staged. In the name of faith, Holy Land Experience attempts to transcend the boundaries of time, space, and materiality, disregarding historical contexts, opting for a fundamentally contemporary, eclectic, pop-cultural, and entertainment-laced mix. In the performances, and at Holy Land Experience in general, despite the aim to provide the "real" experience, as the park's leaflet claims, the interpretation of the New Testament appears to escape time and space. It is a blend of physical (replicas of places, products from Israel), Biblical (staging stories from the New Testament), historical (the collection of Bibles at the Scriptorium), fable (the white horse at Christus Gardens, the fairy-tale characters on the playground), and contemporary entertainment (musical-like performances, Christ's portrayal as superhero). Faith in the Christian God is to be strengthened by a strong sensory experience, which is supposed to lead to an emotional one, rather than intellectual deliberation. Yet, at the same time, Holy Land Experience is a site which not only creates a substitute for the Holy Land, but also for theme-park entertainment. It is replica of both, since it offers neither the actual space, nor the carefree fun.

What appears particularly interesting at Holy Land Experience is that it offers a notion of a direct experience of spiritual presence in a space that looks more secular than sacred, and is located in the middle of America's most popular entertainment theme park strip. This is achieved in a place without any official religious affiliation—there are no pastors or priests at Holy Land Experience, although the actors are claimed to be ministers (see: Eckholm 2012).

At the same time, locating a place that claims to offer a spiritual Christian experience inside a major theme park area, all while applying the usual colorful, plastic theme-park "look," is a deliberate choice. This can be seen as an intentional adaptation of spiritual experience into a reality where entertainment is key. The visual appearance of Holy Land Experience is not only useful in attracting potential visitors, it also makes interpretations of the Bible and Christianity in general more familiar, by using the tools offered by the rules of entertainment: enchantment, surprise, spiritual emotionality, sensory experience, and grandeur. Holy Land Experience is visually arresting, yet probably not as recreational as other theme parks focused solely on providing entertainment. Yet this manufactured, and paradoxically more familiar, space may turn the spiritual experience into a more direct one,

in line with Boorstin's (1992) argument that the tourist does not understand and is scared of the complexities of foreign places.

The assumption made by the Holy Land Experience staff I talked to is that visitors—mostly white and, to a lesser extent, Latino and black, Americans—are religious. While they might go to have fun at Sea World tomorrow, they come to Holy Land Experience to learn about Jerusalem in the times of Christ, and to practice faith in an entertaining, leisurely setting. However fabricated the space, it provides aesthetic and intellectual shortcuts which, as the viewers gladly emphasize, lead to a spiritual experience they find authentic.

"Authentic Experiences"

Given the explicit artificiality of Holy Land Experience, the shows bring to mind the Aristotelian notion of theater mimesis where, unlike simple representations, conventional settings and gestures are able to create a direct, authentic experience (Aristotle 2008; see also: Stevenson 2013). The performances shown at Holy Land Experience are clearly inspired by popular American musicals and films, hence the sequins, dance choreography and a handsome, hyper-masculine version of Christ that could appear on the cover of "GQ" magazine. Holy Land Experience attempts to fit practically the entire space of Biblical Jerusalem on fifteen acres. In an interview, Rosenthal, the founder of the park stated, "all we've done is condense everything that's in the real Holy Land (...). You'd have to go about 30 miles to get from the Western Wall of the Great Temple to the Qumran Caves, but we've got it just about 75 yards away" (see: Goodheart 2001). In this excess, the increasing lack of space for reflection does not seem accidental. It is, rather, a deliberate choice made to attract people to spaces of religion while veiling much of religion's contemplative quality. Dan Hayden, the park's executive director argues in a somewhat Baudrillardesque manner, "The Holy Land Experience is like a historical novel, where the novel is not authentic but the history is." (Radosh 2008: 31) Within these reductions, Christian religion is boiled down to loud, gaudy aesthetics and emotional thrill, which the visitors appreciate.

The emotional aspect of Christian spirituality encouraged at Holy Land Experience resonates with Thomas Luhmann's (2005) and Peter Berger's (1999) arguments about the exceptionality of contemporary American Christianity, with its privatized and impassioned approach. On a general level, it includes shortcuts of an imagined—or invented, using Anderson's (1983) term—history of religion, which is linked to the nation-state, in order to make strong claims about the present. The show, "Celebrate America," is the most vivid example of this approach. The reinvented history is presented as self-evident, and modernity, too, is interpreted using this particular logic, familiar and easily understandable to those acquainted with Christianity, particularly its Evangelical version (see: Beal 2005). Within this religious realm, non-religious elements such as theme-park-style entertainment are used as visual cues to impose new, invented meanings of the religious past. An example of this is the mixing of replicas of Old Testament sites with contemporary snacks from Israel. They reinforce the idea of the importance of history and geographic

space, even if it is a fabricated one. The idea is much in line with the argument of the social thinker, Maurice Halbwachs, according to whom "the past does not recur as such, (...) everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1980: 39–40). If the invented past gains an independent value as a central point of reference for the present, creating a yesteryear to fit today's needs becomes particularly significant. In a way, Holy Land Experience points both at the ambiguity and at the power of the past in the present. While it is centered on the historical evidence of spiritual presence, what is shown are material artifacts and replicas, since the past, as the historian Pierre Nora claims, "can now be constructed out of virtually anything" (Nora 1998: 12). However, even if in this context Halbwachs's and Nora's arguments strike as "simulacral," the meanings implied in the space of the theme park are carefully constructed. Holy Land Experience uses the concept of theme parks to reformulate it in a spiritually-focused manner, hence the adoption of leisure and imitation as familiar props for religious elation (see: Ritzer and Liska 1997; Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 2005; Urry and Larsen 2011). Simultaneously, while in its flyers the theme park advertises an "authentic experience" of a historical time and place (see: Wharton 2006), at the same time it emphasizes specific connections with the present, including US military actions abroad and the country's amicable relations with Israel—the latter particularly important for Evangelicals, as Beal (2005) stresses. Although what is to be "authentically experienced" is supposedly the spiritual elation that was felt by the witnesses of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, this form of spirituality is a contemporary concept, deeply imbedded in US history of religious spirituality and contemporary entertainment. Thus, the American theme park uses condensed versions of the past to offer a contemporary religious and national ideology.

Borrowing Arjun Appadurai's (1996) term *culturalism*, at Holy Land Experience one can notice that this populist, strategic involvement in history aimed at influencing the present is linked with Christianity and with the nation-state. However, the strong emphasis laid on this connection may be a sign that the present is far more ambiguous than the park's simplified imagery and black-and-white answers suggest. Interestingly, Victor Turner (1974) emphasizes that stylized rituals become particularly significant in times of uncertainty. At the theme park, the culturalist strategy is a deliberate choice posing as common-sense, everyday certitude. The invented past is mythologized in a controlled environment where other interpretations are cut off by a single, powerful imposed set of meanings. At the same time, however, this environment is sensitive to outside customs and interpretations, which are carefully allowed in as long as they can be made part of the dominant interpretation. Fast food and standard tourist souvenirs are an example of this approach.

Holy Land Experience claims to fight for the power of Christianity in a world of entertainment and consumption. Hence, on the one hand, Christianity's traditional, established status is used to justify its significance. On the other hand, the theme park serves as an example of attempts made to translate Christianity into present-day customs and lifestyles—beginning with the park's location. Promising direct access to the "authentic" divinity of the Biblical past raises the question whether contemporary spirituality is merely an emotional, sensory replica, yearning for an imagined "authenticity" of the past. The "authentic

experience" offered at Holy Land Experience is an illustration of this ambiguity: is it entertainment-based spirituality or spiritualized entertainment?[4]

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[4] Another example of the tensions between fact and fiction at Holy Land Experience is more recent and much more mundane: the theme park's financial troubles have led to a major sale of furniture, props, and statues from the park (Brinkmann 2016).

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