



Faith on the Road: A Short Theology of Travel and Justice
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"From his reflections on travel in the Scriptures to his experiences as a motorcyclist, Joerg Rieger invites us to see how travel changes more than our location – it can change our hearts and transform us from tourists to advocates for justice and peace."

– Brian D. McLaren, author, speaker and activist

Travel is Fatal to Prejudice

In his new book, Faith on the Road, Joerg Rieger explores how Christian faith reorients how we think about and practice traveling. "This book illustrates my ongoing concern with religion and power, reflecting on the misuse of power both in terms of the justification of a static status quo and forms of traveling, which reinforce ideas of superiority," writes Rieger. "The good news, on which this book concentrates, is that there are alternative uses of power, which have been embodied in Christianity through the ages. In all of my work, I am encouraging my readers to become part of this alternative movement of God in the world, which is too often missed by institutionalized religion." The excerpt that follows explores these ideas further.

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." These famous words were written by none other than Mark Twain. Few of us would disagree: Is not travel about broadening one's horizons and learning new things? I still remember my family's travels through Europe, which did much to broaden my horizons as a child. We visited many places where previous generations of my family never had the opportunity to go. The only opportunity my grandfathers had to travel out of the country was when they were sent to war as soldiers in Germany's armies, one to France in World War I and the other to Russia in World War II.

What is often overlooked, however, is that broadening one's horizons requires work. It does not happen by default. Twain's comments are found in his travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, which chronicles the failures of a group of travelers to push beyond prejudice and bigotry. For the most part, these failures have nothing to do with a lack of good intention on the part of the travelers. Things are more complex than that. Despite their best efforts, the travelers on a cruise through Europe and the Holy Land discover they do not care much about France, Italy and Spain.

Twain's humorous language is worth quoting: "We galloped through the Louvre, the Pitti, the Uffizi, the Vatican – all the galleries – and through the pictured and frescoed churches of Venice, Naples, and the cathedrals of Spain; some of us said that certain of the great works of the old masters were glorious creations of genius (we found it out in the guide-book, though we got hold of the wrong pictures sometimes) and the others said they were disgraceful old daubs." Twain's descriptions reflect the tensions within the family of my childhood as well: some of us found the artifacts of high culture boring, while others made valiant efforts to understand and appreciate. Even when afforded the opportunity to travel, not everyone can muster an attitude of amazement and awe for very long. Besides, many of us are beset with a nagging reminder that the great cathedrals and castles we are supposed to admire were built by the forced labor of our ancestors. In my family, it was my mother who helped me

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Joerg Rieger (PhD, Duke University) is Wendland-Cook Professor of Constructive Theology at Perkins School of Theology, SMU. An internationally recognized scholar and activist, he has engaged in questions of liberation, theology and economics for over two decades, addressing the relation of theology to public life. Rieger is the author of many books including *Occupy Religion* (with Kwok Pui-lan), *Grace under Pressure*, *Globalization and Theology*, *No Rising Tide*, *Christ and Empire*, *God and the Excluded* and *Remember the Poor*. He is also the coauthor of *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: New Perspectives in Politics and Religion* with Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung and Argentinian theologian Néstor Míguez. Rieger has lectured throughout the US as well as internationally. In the Dallas area, he is active in the religion and labor movement as a member of the steering committee of Jobs with Justice and a cofounder of the Workers' Rights Board.

understand some of these discrepancies – the guides for the most part never mentioned any of this.

The only place that finally gets Twain's group of tourists excited is the Holy Land. They feel strangely familiar with it, having been raised with the Bible:

We fell into raptures by the barren shores of Galilee; we pondered at Tabor and at Nazareth; we exploded into poetry over the questionable loveliness of Esdraelon; we meditated at Jezreel and Samaria over the missionary zeal of Jehu; we rioted – fairly rioted among the holy places of Jerusalem; we bathed in Jordan and the Dead Sea, reckless whether our accident-insurance policies were extra-hazardous or not, and brought away so many jugs of precious water from both places that all the country from Jericho to the mountains of Moab will suffer from drought this year.

When I was growing up, none of the members of my immediate family had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land, but we could not help but notice the kind of fetishism Twain describes. It seemed to have taken hold of many of our friends and relatives who made it there and back. I recall a number of stories about water from the Jordan River and bathing in the Dead Sea.

Twain's entertaining observations remind us of certain ways of relating to surroundings and to other people that not only are typical of certain types of tourism but also continue to pervade society in our own time. Even if we try to develop relationships, we find that our experiences of other people and other places, even the ones that seem raw and genuine, are filtered through the lenses of our preconceived ideas. Moreover, many of our ideas and beliefs are so deep-seated that they shape the way we relate to the world, often without our being aware of it.

After his group travels on from the Holy Land, according to Twain, nothing else interests the tourists – not even Egypt. Twain's experience demonstrates how religious beliefs travel with us and play a special role in shaping our relations to our environment and to other people. The disturbing truth is that such religious experiences shape us in ways that can be both detrimental and helpful.

– Taken from chapter two, *“Travel, Tourism and Migration: Experiences on the Road”*