

## *Tourism, Religion and Culture: Regional Development through Meaningful Tourism Experiences*

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From 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> October 2009 the University of Salento (Italy), in cooperation with the University of Bologna (Italy), the University of Haifa (Israel), the Ludwig Maximilian University of Monaco (Germany), as well as with SPHERA spin off (University of Salento) and ATLAS, hosted an outstanding international conference on “Tourism, Religion and Culture. Regional development through meaningful tourism experiences”.

Due to both the international structure and the globally-broad research field, a huge number of scholars from even 17 different Countries over the World took part in the Conference. They analysed specific and various issues on tourism, with the aim to develop territories especially through the promotion of their local cultural resources and religious identities.

As a superb organizer and a kind chairperson, Professor Anna Trono (University of Salento) gave the participants the opportunity to even visit Lecce and its Region, with particular reference to their sacred – or not – resources.

On Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> the introduction ceremony took place in the Basilica M. SS. del Rosario and was followed by a music performance in the Teatro Paisiello in the night.

During the whole day of Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> the workshop was into a luxury location, the ancient Castello Carlo V, a precious set that still bears witness of Lecce’s glorious and rich past. During lunch-time all participants moved to the last Convento dei Teatini, another important building where some local farm-producers had been collected for to promote their rural products – olive oil, mozzarellas, cherry tomatoes, and wine. The Comune di Poggiardo, 40km south from Lecce, hosted the day-after workshop. Poggiardo is a small town, with some important cultural resources dated back to even the pre-Greek and pre-Roman periods. The Conference, indeed, was in the Chiesa della Trasfigurazione di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo and in the Palazzo della Cultura.

Some of the most impressive reflections that emerged are here summarised. Religious and spiritual tourism have been mostly discussed from the so called “tourist-pilgrim” perspective. This is obviously correct, but it does not give us a complete and exhaustive vision of what religious and cultural tourism is and, consequently, of how it should be managed in a sustainable perspective. For this reason, the Conference examined the possibility that sacred and cultural aspects can leverage the regional development. It is a very subtle work. On the one hand, in fact, hosting cultural and religious tourism in socially and culturally sensitive environments might put tourism development in a sort of jeopardy. On the other hand, indeed, it is fundamental to find the nexus between regional development

and religious and spiritual tourism through the prism of sustainability and sustainable tourism principles.

The Conference offered examples and case studies meant to demonstrate the above mentioned possibility. An ever growing number of religious or natural sites have been rediscovered as bearers of a spiritual and cultural message, that is today becoming fundamental also for a human experience. Contemporary man needs and seeks an inner/spiritual growth, through specific “vacations for his/her own soul”.

For this reason, the three main plenary sessions were about *Religion and Culture: an Institutionalized Global Perspective; The Tour Operators' vocation to the Religious Tourism; Cultural and Religious Itineraries as Tools for the Regional Development*.

Academic researchers, churchmen, and tour operators argued that it is eventually both possible and fundamental that cultural development and spiritual development can cooperate for a local holistic development, both of territories and human experiences. The three plenary sessions were followed by more sub-sections: *Religious and Cultural Tourism: Economic Impact and Perspectives; Monasteries and Convents: Culture and Tourism; The Attitude of Religions to Tourism and Tourists; Sacred Presentations in the Modern Age; Religious Events and Sustainability; Transformation of Religious and Pilgrimage Sites into Cultural Experiences; Religion and Intercultural Experience; New Theoretical Advances in Cultural and Religious Tourism; Cultural and Religious Itineraries as a Vehicle for Regional Development; Religion and Heritage; Managing Sacred Places; Churches and Museums: Spiritual Management?*. As globally perceived, religious tourism thus becomes an important opportunity for the promotion of local products: cultural and economic resources present in the same area are parts of a unique development process, based on a synergistic and complementary system of cultural heritage and economic activities.

All the contributions are now edited in the Proceedings, that schematize and sum up the contents in three parts: *Religion and Heritage; Religion and Regional Development; Religion and Sustainability*.

Last but not least for importance, a final exhibition of posters and videos on tourism concluded the Conference: videos from the Salento's landscape to some religious itineraries through Southern and Mediterranean Countries gave the participants the possibility to reflect on the potential of tourism for developing not well developed areas, as the Salento Region, as a post-Conference excursion through Salento (Galatina, Santa Maria di Leuca and Otranto) has showed.

Best appreciations must be imputed to the Organization Committee, the Scientific Committee, and the donors and Institutions. The second involved the cooperation of a huge number of scholars from the most eminent Universities of the World: professor Fiorella Dallari (Bologna, Italy), professor Joel Mansfeld (Haifa, Israel), professor Alison McIntosh (Waikato, New Zealand), professor Jürgen Schmude (Munich, Germany), professor Kevin Griffin (Dublin, Ireland). A cooperation that was successful and that could be then imitated also for programming sustainable tourism itineraries based on religion and culture.