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The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: reflecting on definitions, motives and data

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Editorial : The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: reflecting on definitions, motives and data

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This discussion paper explores the topic of religious tourism and pilgrimage, examining it from a tourism industry perspective, reflecting on definitions, motivations and scale of the 'product' as reported at a global level. Mindful of the fact that international records of religious tourism are scant to say the least, this is an attempt to bring together definitions, classifications and data which come from a variety of sources. The paper draws together understandings from different religious traditions, presenting data and motivations on a variety of pilgrimage types. As the paper demonstrates, this 'niche' product is indeed enormous, and if industry projections are correct, is set to become an even more important element of international travel and tourism.

Key Words: religious tourism, pilgrimage, data, motivations.

Introduction - Religious Tourism

In a 2011 National Geographic article, Mann pondered the complex relationship between the origins of civilization and religion. While presenting his discussion, he proposed that from the very beginning of human settlement, pilgrimage has been a fundamental element of society:

Most of the world's great religious centers, past and present, have been destinations for pilgrimages - think of the Vatican, Mecca, Jerusalem, Bodh Gaya (where Buddha was enlightened), or Cahokia (the enormous Native American complex near St. Louis). They are monuments for spiritual travelers, who often came great distances, to gawk at and be stirred by [such sites] . . . What it suggests . . . is that the human sense of the sacred - and the human love of a good spectacle - may have given rise to civilization itself (Mann, 2011:40)

To this day, travel such as this for 'spiritual', linked to 'spectacle' motives has remained important, and in few countries is this more obvious than countries such as Italy, Israel, India, France and many others. Thus, religious / faith-based / spiritual tourism / pilgrimage is a significant and constant element of the tourism industry. Many industry-focused publications talk of how religious tourism is a 'rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry', however, this present paper is based on the understanding that this has always been a robust element of tourism, and perhaps its categorisation as 'niche' has limited the growth of this 'mass tourism' product. A broad range of reasons are presented for the growth in this sector. These are summarised in Box 1.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is clear in its enthusiasm for religious tourism, with Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, suggesting that 'religious tourism can be one of the most effective tools to foster inclusive and sustainable development'. In so doing, three main benefits of religious tourism are identified:

1. Religious tourism raises awareness of humanity´s common heritage and provides resources for preservation.

2. It can contribute to local development.

3. It builds cultural understanding.

However at the same time, the UNWTO highlight what they call 'crucial challenges' which include:

1. The preservation of religious sites and monuments.

2. Upholding respect for local traditions and religious practices.

3. The inclusive development of local communities. (Rifai, 2015)

Any consideration of religious tourism must work to maximise these benefits, while simultaneously ensuring that the challenges are effectively managed.

Table 1 : Factors influencing Growth in Religious Tourism	
Factor	**Influence**
Search for Authenticity	A drive from consumers for more authentic experience, such as immersing themselves in the spiritual and cultural traditions associated with specific religions and pilgrimage sites
Diversified Product Offering	The emergence of a more diverse tourist product as national tourist boards and tourism providers seek to extend the traditional tourism season
Increased Number of Travel Agents	More travel agents offering religious tourism, pilgrimages and church tours
Cheap Flights	More and cheaper intra-European flights, and more competitively-priced long-haul flights making travelling easier (particularly for Europeans)
Enforced Popularity of Domestic Travel	More choosing to travel in their own country due to the perceived threat of terrorism
Search for Unusual	A global culture where people seek more unusual holidays or more diversification within a single trip
Personal Belief	Religious trips regarded as a way of verifying personal beliefs and spirituality
Cultural Preservation	Recognition that religion and spirituality can help preserve cultures and traditions
Growth in Short Breaks	Changing work and leisure patterns with growth of short and frequent breaks
Media	High media profile given to many of the world's great pilgrimage sites and religious shrines
Search for Revenue Streams	Need to generate revenue to conserve religious and architectural heritage
Sustainable Drive	Global trend in the development of more sustainable tourism products
Expanding Market	A general expansion in the world tourist market
Internet	Widespread use of Internet, online booking and increasingly the use of smart technology and social media
	Derived from various sources including Mintel, 2012 & others

The management of this activity is even more challenging since, as Raj and Griffin (2015; 2017) suggest, within ever changing global social and political landscapes, religion has retained a significant place as a social movement with complexities of structure and function which pervade cultures and traditions.

Definitions and Classifications

Much discussion has taken place between academics and organisations regarding the definition of this market segment. Regardless of the terminology, the inference is that this is a form of tourism driven by a given faith / set of beliefs. The following UNWTO definition focuses on the individual 'tourist' and their motivation:

Religion and pilgrimage tourism refers to all travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes, excluding travel for professional purposes (e.g. priests travelling for work). Attending wedding parties or funerals are generally classified under the heading of Visiting Friends and Relatives. However, in countries where these ceremonies have a strong religious connotation, it may be more appropriate to classify them under the heading Religion and Pilgrimages (UNWTO, 1995).

In their reports, Mintel try to broaden their definition of 'religious tourism' beyond the motivation of the individual to emphasize a range of activities undertaken during the visit:

International travel for the purposes of visiting sites, routes and festivals of religious significance, as well as travel where the primary purpose of visit is to participate in activities that have religious significance (such as conferences, conventions, retreats . . . camps, etc.). It excludes travel to ancient sites (such as Inca temples and the Pyramids), which despite having religious significance, are usually included within the cultural tourism segment (Mintel, 2012).

Blending these definitions together, removing some of the contentious exclusions by both organisations, and reflecting on the broad range of activities they encompass, produces a typology of religion based / pilgrimage tourism (see Table 2).

Table 2 : Breadth of Religious Tourism* Products	
Traditional Pilgrimage	The word 'pilgrimage' suggests that the participant is engaging in a journey to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.
Religious Tourism	Visiting religious 'tourist attractions' because they are sacred;
Church Tourism	Visiting houses/sites of prayer and shrines for cultural, historical, and architectural reasons – not for any religious motivation.
Religious Events	This category encompasses crusades, 'conventions', rallies, faith-based camps, meetings, and other religious events such as Holy Week processions or Passion plays. It involves religiously motivated activities. While some are annual occurrences, many 'events' are not site / location specific and are hosted in different locations on a regular basis.
Missionary & Voluntourism	This form of travel participation in voluntary work, usually for a church or charity organisation.
Retreat	Involving the likes of monastery visits and guest-stays – retreats comprise some form of introspective activity of meditation or prayer, usually to (re)connect with God. Retreat facilities range from Spartan to luxurious.
Student / Youth Activity	This sector of religious tourism has been an important element for generations- ranging from short-term outings to residential 'camps', these often involve fun and adventure in addition to spiritual instruction and personal development.
Faith-based Cruises	Recreational cruise tourism (ocean, river or lake based) can be combined with visits to various cultural, historical, religious, natural landscapes and other tourist facilities. This is a quickly expanding variation of the religious tourism market.
Religious Routes	Evolving from the tradition of journeying with a purpose along a pre-defined route to beg for favors, for forgiveness of wrongdoing, or, some other religious motive, religious trails / routes have become increasingly important and in recent decades have found expression in the likes of European Cultural Routes such as the Camino to Santiago or the Via Francigena.
Leisure / Fellowship Vacations/ getaways	A growing but ill-defined segment of religious tourism is taking part in activities of a non-religious nature with faith based fellowship / interest groups. Activities can be as diverse as day trips for theatre, adventure, hiking, education or socialising and are undertaken by every conceivable combination of participant from youth groups, to retirees, single gender to multi-generational mixed groups
Spiritual Pilgrimage	This segment involves visiting a place out of one's usual environment, with the intention of spiritual growth - this could be religious, but also includes non-religious, sacred or experiential intentions
Secular Pilgrimage	Opinions are divided on whether visiting a hero's grave (Elvis' Graceland / Jim Morrisson's grave in Paris); a site of environmental / human tragedy (Pompeii / Tsunami sites in Indian Ocean / Ground Zero in New York); a battlefield site (Monte Cassino / Cu Chi tunnels in Vietnam) or; an ancestral home (diaspora returning to their ethnic place of origin), can be considered as pilgrimage. However, increasingly, travel which purposely or inadvertently includes a meaningful, transformative experience, beyond the norm, that impacts an individual's belief system is being recognised as secular pilgrimage.
* For simplicity, throughout this paper the term 'religious tourism' is used, but it is fully recognized that this nomenclature is limited and masks subtle but significant variances in meaning between the many terms used for related activities.	

Pilgrimage Sites

Reflecting on the meaning of pilgrimage, and its effective management, Di Giovine and Elsner suggest that:

> tourism professionals must appreciate the multiplicity of heightened meanings, deep-yet-conflicting ideologies, and modes of interaction surrounding pilgrimage sites, which may conflict with the socioeconomic and political norms espoused by the tourism industry and other outside forces (2015:1).

Therefore, managing religious tourism requires a deep understanding of the experience sought, the site itself and the interaction between participant and site. A broad classification of such sites, suggests that:

> Pilgrimage shrines are built around tombs of holy people . . . historical sites associated with saints or prophets . . . places of apparition . . . and environmental formations or built structures that suggest divine interaction on earth . . . or to contain effigies of deities who manifest themselves to pilgrims (Di Giovine and Elsner, 2015:1).

In 1989, Nolan and Nolan (cited in McGettigan, 2003) identified a very practical threefold classification of Christian Pilgrimage sites in Europe (See Table 3). This is a useful means of examining the nature of a

	Table 3 : Classification of Christian Pilgrimage sites in Europe	
a) Pilgrim Shrines	Places that serve as the goal for pilgrim journeys. These can be:	
	Shrines of relatively low value as tourist attractions where the majority of visitors are either members of religious tour groups or consider themselves to be pilgrims.	
	Shrines of high value as tourist attractions where tourists tend to outnumber pilgrims	
	Shrines primarily noted for colourful pilgrimage events where pilgrimages are usually held on an annual or biannual basis.	
	Shrines combining touristic importance, pilgrimage festivals, and cultic significance which are visited throughout the year by large numbers of tourists and pilgrims.	
b) Religious Tourist Attractions	Places, usually ecclesiastical structures which are visited by secularly orientated tourists, recreationists and religious tour groups. They are not considered to be places of pilgrimage in their own right and include famous cathedrals and monastic establishments.	
c) Sites of Religious Festivals	Religious festivals and processions which are not thought of as pilgrimage occasions – including Holy Week and Corpus Christi processions, public Christmas or Easter celebrations etc. These are usually associated with churches, some of which are important as tourist attractions and historic monuments in their own right.	
	Source: Nolan and Nolan, 1989, cited in McGettigan, 2003	

religious site, and the related requirements and demands of the religious tourist.

Taking this approach a little further, Shackley's Classification of Sacred Sites (as discussed by Olsen, 2003) is also useful to identify the range of sacred sites at a global scale (see Table 4).

Motivation

Thus, a variety of activities and practices take place at a variety of sites, comprising of rituals, pilgrimage and tourism, based on sacred and profane motivations. Many researchers have examined this phenomenon (of religious tourism), to try and identify why it is that this expression of faith-linked travel has shown a dramatic increase in recent years – particularly when there is evidence of a global trend towards secularisation and a decline in religious attendance / adherence. It has been suggested that this is the very reason – while formal religious practices are less important to the individual, religious experiences are sought to give a person meaning and focus. Perhaps these activities even validate one's personal existence through the various

Table 4 : A Classification of Sacred Sites	
Types	**Examples**
Single nodal feature	Canterbury Cathedral (England), Emerald Buddha (Bangkok), Hagia Sophia (Istanbul)
Archaeological sites	Machu Picchu (Peru), ChichénItzá (Mexico)
Burial sites	Catacombs (Rome), Pyramids (Giza)
Detached temples / shrines	Borobudur (Indonesia), AnkgorWat (Cambodia), Amristar (India)
Whole towns	Rome (Italy), Jerusalem (Israel), Assisi (Italy), Varanasi (India), Bethlehem (Palestinian Authority)
Shrine/temple complexes	Lalibela (Ethiopia), Potala (Tibet), St. Katherine's Monastery (Egypt)
'Earth energy' sites	Nazca lines (Peru), Glastonbury (England)
Sacred mountains	Uluru (Australia), Mt. Everest (Nepal), Tai Shan (China), Mt. Athos (Greece), Mt. Fuji (Japan), Mt. Shasta (United States)
Sacred islands	Rapa Nui (Chile), Lindisfarne (England), Iona (Scotland), Mont-St-Michel (France)
Pilgrimage foci	Makkah (Saudi Arabia), Madinah (Saudi Arabia), Mt. Kailash (Tibet), Santiago de Compostela (Spain)
Secular pilgrimage	Robben Island (South Africa), Goree (Senegal), Holocaust Sites (e.g., Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland)
	Source: Shackley (2001: 2)

Figure 1 Market Profile

(Griffin, Gorman, O'Halloran & Stacey, 2008)
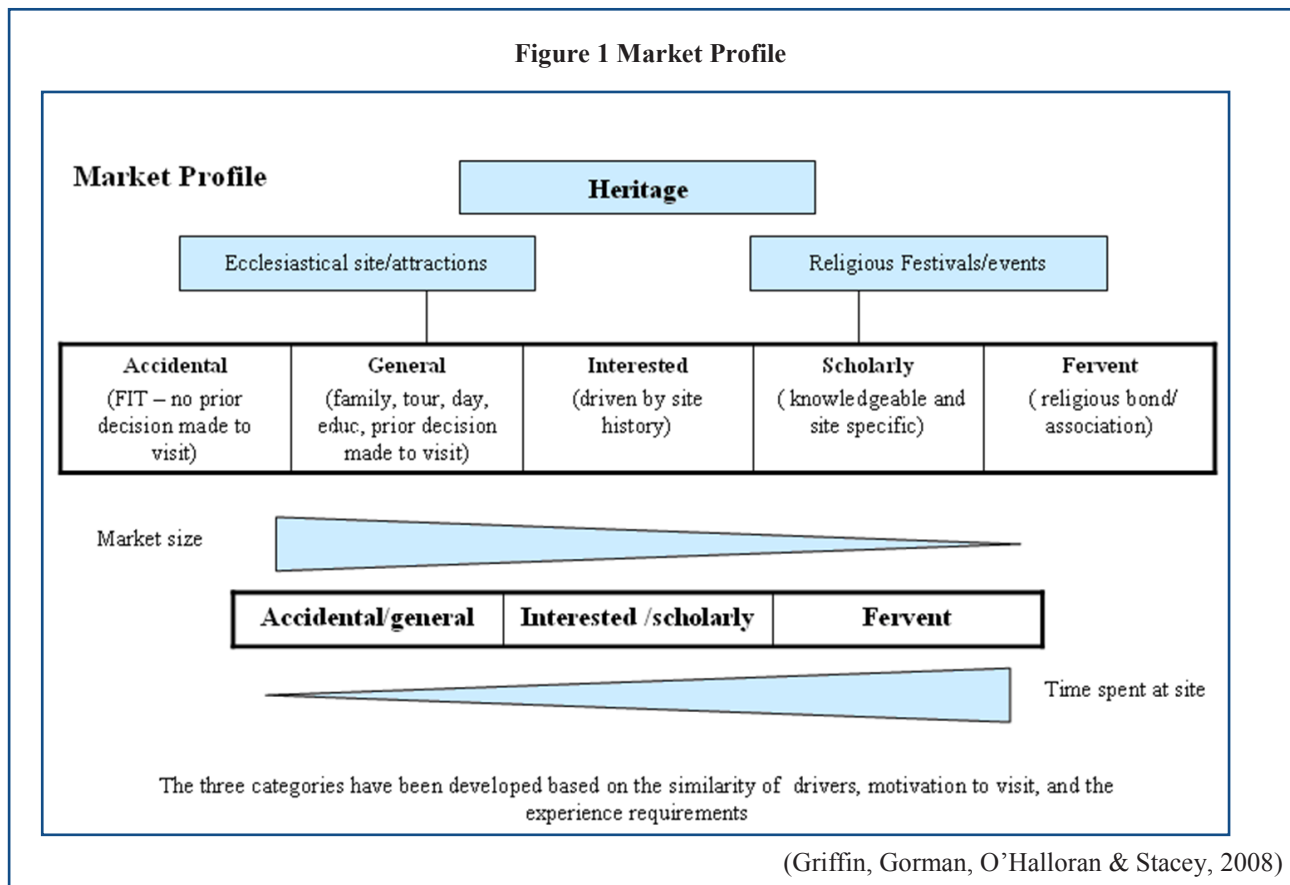
situations experienced over the course of a journey. This means the travel providers and site managers, must be acutely aware of this hunger and search for personal meaning.

Religious sites present a wide variety of offerings ranging from services, music and other structured activities of a religious nature, to more secular visitor facilities such as museums and treasuries located within their beautiful historic buildings. At many places, visitors are encouraged to respect the sanctity of the site – to pause for reflection, light candles and engage in spiritual practice, while also being encouraged to climb the bell-tower or gaze in wonder at the aesthetic beauty of the architecture (often for a fee). Figure 1 is an attempt (derived from a project which was exploring the potential for religious sites as tourism attractions) at summarising the range of religious tourists. In developing this typology, Griffin *et al*. (2008), acknowledge the inherent fallacy of compartmentalising religious tourists, and thus, the model must be considered as a flexible and fluid continuum rather than a 'classification' tool. The three segments which have been identified are: accidental / general tourists; interested / scholarly tourists and; fervent tourists. These three groupings form the basis for segmenting the market and suggest a need to cater for each segment in a different manner. The value of

the site to the visitor will be fulfilled through the satisfaction of their requirements; however the wider experience needs to be considered in order to create added value. This wider experience may include stories, music, food etc associated with the area. To deliver this experience it is recommended that site and destination managers need to engage a broad range of stakeholders in developing, promoting and managing religious tourism.

While a generation ago academics and practitioners would have identified pilgrimage activity in strict, compartmentalised, prescriptive terms, it is now well accepted that terms and typologies are not mutually exclusive, with travellers moving seamlessly between the various classifications. Indeed, it is also understood that many visitors may drift fluidly between sacred and secular motivations. Thus, many organised pilgrimages to Italy visit the Catholic centres of Rome, Florence, Montecassino, Loreto, Turin, Padua, Venice Assisi or San Giovanni de Rotondo, but also provide a period of profane leisure time at the Amalfi or Rimini Coast.

The Religious Traveller

While data on religious tourists are difficult to access, a Menlo Consulting Group / Globus study is quoted by authors such as Wright (2012) and McCarthy, (2012)

Table 5 : Estimating the Global Scale of Religious Tourism – Examples of Visits to Special Events

100m – Kumbh Mela 2012-13 - mass Hindu pilgrimage where Hindus gather at the Ganges and river Godavari every 3 years - bathing for purification from sin is considered especially efficacious: 2001 – 70m; 2007 – 30m (Hindu) #

30m – Shrine to Ayyappan at Sabarimalai, India (Hindu -estimates for this vary with numbers up to 60 million being claimed) #

20m – Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico (Christian) #

15m - Arba'een, Karbala - visit shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, Iraq during rba'een -, Iraq (Muslim) (21m in 2012; c.15m in 2011; c.10-14m in 2010 & 2009; c.9m in 2008). #

13m – Harmandir Sahib / Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab (elsewhere cited as 30m) (Sikh) #

10m – Tirumala Venkateswara Temple, Tirupati / Bala-Ji, India (elsewhere cited as 30m) (Hindu) #

10m - Nanputuo Temple , Xiamen, China (Buddhist) #

8m - Annual feast of the Black Nazarene in Manila, Philippines in January 2012 (c.3m in 2008).

8m – Lourdes, France (Christian) #

8m – Western Wall , Jerusalem, Israel (or 6m) (Jewish/Christian) #

6.6m - Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, Brazil (elsewhere cited as 10m) (Christian) #

6m – Vrindavan, Braj (elsewhere 500k) (Hindu) #

5m – Dvaraka / Dwarka, Gujarat (Hindu) #

5m – Jasna Gora monastery, Czestochowa, Poland (Roman Catholic) #

4-5 m – Fatima, Portugal (Christian) #

4m - World Youth Day in Manila (every 2 years), Philippines 1995 c.4m attended the closing Mass; c.2.7m - WYD2000 in Rome; c.1.2m - WYD1997 in Paris; c.1.4. WYD2011 in Madrid; c.1m WYD1987 in Buenos Aires

3m - Qadiriyyah shrine in Kano. #

3m - Bengali gathering, called Bishwa Ijtema (World Gathering) of Tablighi Jamaat which attracts Islamic followers from around the world in Tongi near Dhaka.

3m – Hajj, Makkah, Saudi Arabia (Islamic) (including 1.8 million from overseas & c.0.75. unregistered pilgrims)

3m - Canterbury Cathedral – St. Thomas Becket (Christian)

2-3m attended the Iglesia ni Cristo's (INC) Grand Evangelical Mission at the Quirino Grandstand in Manila, Philippines.

2.1m – Wutai Shan (Daoist) #

2m - Basilica of St. Thérèse, Lisieux (Christian)

2m – Kadhmayn, Baghdad, Iraq (Islamic) #

c.1.5m second largest Tabligh Jamaat - Raiwind, Pakistan. Since 2011 Pakistan divided the Ijtema into two parts and total 1 million People attend the Ijtema.

1.5 million pilgrims – Santiago de Compostela, (180,000 receiving the compostela), Galicia, Spain (Christian) #

1-1.5m Knock, Co. Mayo

1 million Catholics gathered for the mass at Saint Peter's Square, to celebrate John Paul II's beatification on May 1, 2011; c.2.5 million participated in a beatification mass held by Pope John Paul II in Błonia Park, Kraków, Poland and an estimated 1.25 million people attended a Papal mass by Pope John Paul II in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, Ireland on 29 September 1979 - about one third of the population of Ireland.

1m – Montserrat, Spain#

1m - Sanctuary of Our Lady of Licheń in Licheń Stary, Poland (Christian)

1m – Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India (Hindu) #

1m – El Rocio , Cadiz, Spain (Roman Catholic) #

1m – Church of the Holy Sepulchre , Jerusalem (Christian) #

1m - Iasi, Moldavia - Saint Parascheva's Day

800,000 - Kevelaer, Germany

635,000 Amarnath Cave, Kashmir (Hindu) #

500,000+ – Taishan Temple, China (Daoist) #

300,000 – Hua Shan Temple, China (Daoist) #

300,000 – Quingcheng Shan (or Oingcheng Shan), China (Daoist) #

250,000 – Emei Shan, China (Daoist) #

250,000 – Iona, Inner Hebrides off the western coast of Scotland (Christian) #

200,000 – Huzhuan , Shandong, China (Roman Catholic) #

100,000+ – Taizé , Burgundy, France (Christian) #

100,000 – St Bishoy Monastery, Wadi El Natroun (Coptic Christian) #

100,000 – Walsingham Shrine of Our Lady Norfolk, England UKChristian) #

50,000 pilgrims – Malaudi celebrations, Lamu, Kenya (Muslim)

43,000 – Lumbhini, Nepal (Buddhist) #

20-25,000 – Etchmiadzin (Armenian Apostolic Christian) #

20,000 - Croagh Patrick Ireland (Christian)

10,000 – Qufu , Shandong, China (Confucianism) #

8,000 – Lough Derg, Donegal, Ireland (elsewhere 30,000) (Roman Catholic) #

2,500 – St Albans, UK (Christian)#

Table is based primarily on data drawn from the ARC (2014) estimate of world figures (marked with '#') but data are supplemented with information from a broad range of media and academic research.

which suggests that in the USA the majority of religious tourists are well-educated with 60+% possessing a degree or postgraduate qualification, 50+% have a household income of $75,000+, 70+% are married and there is interest across a diverse range of ages , with 1/3 each in the 18-34, 35-54 and 55+ brackets. Another positive for tourism promotion is that groups of 30-40 people are the mainstay of market.

This demographic of visitor spends more per trip than the average tourist, and while they are interested in value, price is rarely their top priority. As a result they are eager to pay for "eye-catching" extras. Another feature is that these visitors are not brand loyal, but are among the most loyal and resilient of all travellers, being less influenced by financial recessions, or other ebbs and flows in tourism demand. These travellers want to travel together to provide fellowship and community as well as to enrich their lives and their religion. Destinations which can fulfil these desires, are well positioned to develop and expand their religious tourism offering.

Scale

According to Mintel (2005; 2012), as a sector, religious tourism is not well researched and documented. Few reliable statistics are available regarding its size and value within the tourism sector as a whole, mainly because only a few countries measure tourist arrivals using a classification that refers to 'religion' or 'pilgrimage'. In most cases, religious tourists are combined with 'other leisure' visitors, with most European countries classifying inbound tourists into:

Figure 2 : UNWTO recognition for Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage - Mr Taleb Rifai (Secretary General, UNWTO) speaking in Portugal, November 2017

leisure / holiday; other leisure; and business / conference. There are some exceptions, mainly destinations where religious tourism is highly popular such as Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Another common problem with the measurement of religious tourism relates to the inconsistent definitions of the religious tourist. Many statistics do not clearly identify whether they include international or domestic religious tourists. As recently as November 2017, at an International Conference on Religious Tourism in Fatima, Portugal, Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) was still reiterated following:

> UNWTO estimates that about 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites every year, with approximately six hundred million national and international religious voyages in the world.

This number of circa 300 million visitors per year has been cited by the UNWTO and many other agencies for the best part of a decade, despite every indicator of volume suggesting active growth in the sector. One American source (a number of years ago) estimated religious tourism to be an $18-billion global industry, stating that In North America alone, it is estimated at $10 billion. In addition, one in four North American travellers are currently interested in "spiritual vacations."

An interesting group called ARC (Alliance of Religions and Conservation) claims that "It is impossible to get fully accurate figures for the number of pilgrims to most sites" because in many places, records are not necessarily kept. However, ARC estimates that more than 200 million people go on pilgrimage every year – with the duration of the trip varying from hours to days, and sometimes pilgrims "leave home for many months". It is clearly evident that this 200m figure is incredibly conservative, since it only includes numbers visiting 38 of the world's largest pilgrimage sites.

Conclusion

As can be seen in the discussion above, Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage are substantial motives for the global movement of people. Whether this travel is for purely religious motives, or whether pilgrimage is influenced by some secular desires, or even if the journey is undertaken for entirely profane motives is not being discussed in this reflection. The main issue being highlighted here is the breadth and intensity of this form of religion-linked travel, which goes largely

unnoticed by national and international tourism agencies. The 2017 UNWTO religious tourism conference in Fatima, which was mentioned above provided a refreshing insight into the growing recognition of this sector by national and international agencies, however, the authors set down a challenge to agencies, organisations, academics and sites to begin collecting and collating data on their visitors, and on the experiences they are offering, so that we can begin to fully understand and appreciate the scale of this most fascinating forms of travel.

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