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Religious Events and their Impacts: A New Perspective for Religious Tourism

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At the 7th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference in Girona, Spain, in 2015, there was some discussion of religious events, particularly during presentation of a special track of papers on this theme. This led to questions as to how these events either differed from - or complemented - religious tourism? Alternatively, they could be considered from an events studies perspective, which again provoked questions as to their distinctiveness. Over the course of that conference, the idea took shape of having this special issue of the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*.

In recent years, the field of events studies has gone through some major changes. Against a background of rapidly increasing student enrolments and greater interest amongst researchers, there has been a swing towards researching the social impacts and meanings of events. Such a development moves us on from considering basic logistics and technical innovations. Instead, of just simply asking *how* people stage events, we are more often asking *why* they do so. As the co-editors of the *Routledge Advances in Events Research* Book Series, we have championed this changed perspective towards events. The result has been research that considers the relationships between events and societies in depth, including studies of the social impacts of events (Richards, de Brito and Wilks, 2013), commemorative events (Frost and Laing, 2013), community events (Jepson and Clarke, 2015), traditional rituals (Laing and Frost, 2015) and the social impacts and legacy of the Olympics, such as urban regeneration (Smith, 2012; 2016).

It is interesting to note that while religious events have received little attention of late, this has not always been the case. When scholars first started considering events in the 1980s, they started with a strong sociological focus and were very conscious of the role of religion in shaping how and why events were staged. Two examples illustrate this; both introductions to collections of articles. The first was by Falassi (1987). He introduced an anthology of writings about events by arguing that throughout history most events have

followed a *ritual structure*. This consisted of a series of common rites or components that were underpinned by our basic human needs and beliefs. Many of these rituals were religious in nature and were often clearly manifested at religious events. For instance, the first ritual of valorisation symbolically marked the event as different from normal time and space. In many cases, this valorisation was conducted by priests or lay persons in the name of religion and involved highly spiritual ceremonies. Similarly, the ritual of conspicuous display involved society's most precious heritage, such as religious icons or relics (Falassi, 1987).

The second was by Cannadine (1987). He introduced an edited volume on royal events, punning that, 'kings may no longer rule by divine right; but the divine rites of kings continue to beguile and enchant' (p.7). Religion, he argued, had been - and still was - integral to royal ceremonies. Coronations, for example, usually involved a religious validation and took place in temples or cathedrals. He pondered the importance of religion; concluding his introduction with a key question for future research. This was, 'how exactly, if at all, does ceremonial convert statements of fact about power on earth into statements of belief about power in heaven?' (Cannadine, 1987:17).

Unfortunately, while events studies became more prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, such questions faded into the background. Whereas Falassi and Cannadine examined events from sociological and historical backgrounds, the new events economies stimulated more pragmatic research from marketing and economics disciplines. It is only in recent years that scholars have started to return to religious events and rituals, though again this has typically been from the humanities perspective, as in the case of the study of folklore, ritual and dance by Barber (2013).

We want to introduce this special issue by posing three questions for future research about religious events. The first relates to sense of place. Some locations are well-known for hosting religious events, either because

they are holy or - more practically - they are urban centres distinguished by high populations and religious seats. From an events perspective, this suggests the concept of *Hallmark Events*, where an event is developed and hosted by a single place, and that place's image becomes entwined with that of the event. To what extent does this apply to religious events? In contrast, are some religious events highly portable, even placeless? The second question concerns the blurred distinction between pilgrimage and ritual events. Can we better understand pilgrimage by conceiving it from a different perspective, particularly as being an ephemeral event? Third, are issues of logistics and project management applicable to religious events, particularly to those involving mass numbers? As discussed at Girona, issues of risk management seem critical, to avoid tragedies such as the stampede or crowd crush that occurred during the 2015 Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. This special issue goes some way to answering some of these questions, but there is scope for more research, particularly in different international spheres.

There are five articles on the theme of religious events in this special issue, and all take a case study approach. The first, by Simon Curtis, explores the use of events by cathedrals, both as a way of boosting attendances and as a form of outreach. He focuses on five English cathedrals to illustrate various issues, notably the concept of *individual spiritual capital*, and how this can be fostered through the use of events.

The second article, by the Rev. Ruth Dowson, provides another English case study, the 'Cherish' Christian Women's Conference, which is analysed as an example of an event as a spiritual pilgrimage, but also illustrates the link between pilgrimage and *eventization*. The move from church premises to a commercial venue has not damaged the sense of community and spirituality, but rather has enabled the event to accommodate greater numbers and to continue to flourish.

This is followed by an article by Carlos Fernandes, Carla Melo and Marta Cardoso, which examines the tourism impact of cultural and religious seasonal events, through a case study of the Pilgrimage of Our Lady of the Agony (*Romaria de Nossa Senhora d'Agonia*), in the north of Portugal. Their findings demonstrate the difficulty faced by many regional events to attract international visitors and special interest tourists, as well as younger members of the community, but also the role played by repeat visitation in the sustainability of this event.

We then move to Italy, with Anna Trono's study of the 'Focara' of Sant'Antonio Abate (Bonfire of Saint Antony Abbot) in Novoli. While there has been a substantial investment of resources and funding in the event, this has not led to a commensurate leap in tourist numbers, nor revitalisation of the region. More work is needed to safeguard the continuity of this ritual but also to integrate it into the marketing of the region across the year, not just during the festival time.

The final study by Terenzinha Filgueiras de Pinho and Gilson de Lima Garófalo highlights the 'Candle of Nazareth' parade in Brazil, one of the most important Catholic religious events in the world, and examines development and staging. This article discusses its economic impact, but also the symbolism of the parade and its role within the local culture. Research in a non-European setting, such as this study, is important, in order to provide a more nuanced picture of religious events. We look forward to seeing more work on religious events that goes beyond traditional contexts.

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