






Religious Heritage: Reconciliation between Spirituality and Cultural Concerns
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Religious Heritage: Reconciliation between Spirituality and Cultural Concerns

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Abstract

Religious heritage has a dual cultural and religious meaning and importance in society. It has a cultural value because it symbolises the history and art of a community, and a religious value because it represents a spiritual hub and home for a community of believers. This article analyses the challenges posed by this association between religious heritage —as both an economic and tourism resource— and cultural heritage. Methodologically, an observation, reflection and analysis of the challenges that are faced are proposed. The results reveal various initiatives for development, protection and enhancement. The discussion revolves around the importance of community involvement and the benefits this brings to various sectors, including economic activity, from the perspective of religious tourism as an aspect of tourism per se, in which a faith and its believers are elements that merit heritage conservation.

Keywords: Anthropology, Heritage, Religion, Religious tourism

Introduction

Religious heritage plays an essential role in people's identity, not only reinforcing a belief system, but also providing a sense of social and religious belonging. It can also stimulate social action, as it reminds us of our responsibilities to our culture.

Europe's shared history has bequeathed us a vast number of sites of worship notable for their outstanding architecture or other artistic elements, endowing us with a common heritage sensibility regardless of faith. Churches, temples, synagogues and other sites bear witness to this common European history and exhibit artistic, architectural and social trends that transcend borders. For various reasons, all these places have become "invaluable economic, social and cultural resources that should be preserved, used and interpreted for the benefit not only of local religious communities, but also of global society in general".

In this regard, it is pertinent to note that since the World Heritage Site (WHS) designation was created in 1973, a variety of reasons have been cited for nominating a site for World Heritage status, some of which have had almost nothing to do with either the conservation or the protection of an element, the two original reasons for establishing the list of World Heritage sites.

Sometimes, the main reason for designating a site (WHS) has been the desire to attract a large number of people —tourists— to a place, “who are then considered a double-edged sword” (Bandarin 2005). Although they generate “direct and indirect income, tourists can also have a negative impact on heritage” and, as Garrod and Fyall (2000) have observed, may detract from the objectives of protection and conservation.

In general, the words “World Heritage”, accompanied by the name UNESCO and its logo, are assumed to have a positive brand value that attracts tourists to the designated site. However, as noted in the literature, this alleged benefit has yet to be fully investigated. Leask (2006), for example, has indicated “the need for further research to elucidate the role of WHS designation in generating visitors and income”, while Fyall and Rakic (2006) have noted “the need to determine whether WHS designation actually leads to increased levels of visitors”. Nevertheless, the fact is that designation of certain religious elements as cultural heritage attracts visitors, whether believers or not, and gives rise to a number of issues that require analysis given the exponential growth of this phenomenon. The study objectives and method described below were formulated in response to the foregoing.

Objectives and method

The aim of the present study is to analyse religious heritage, and to study its facet as a social, economic and cultural resource, mainly in the form of religious tourism. The study method comprised a reflection from the perspective of social and heritage anthropology based on the observation of several interconnected processes that arise in disparate contexts which nevertheless share sufficient elements in common to enable an analysis and comparison. Analysing secondary research is also done. Sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, training, of the target population have been taken into account in the analysis, since it has been considered that they could affect the motivation, disposition, “habitus of the actors, agency and adjustment” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991).

For the treatment of qualitative data, the narrative thematic analysis of Riessman (2008) “was used to establish categories of analysis”, and “the coding was carried out inductively through a constant comparison” (Merriam, 1998), guided by the evaluations of Byram and Feng (2006) of the cultural experience, making an impact on the interest in knowing the forms and expressions of religiosity, of people’s lives, “the ability to change the perspective and cope with living a different experience, cultural knowledge, one’s own and foreign”, aspects related to spirituality, as well as knowledge about its processes.

To achieve this, first, we shall establish a conceptual framework for religious heritage and its connection with religion and spirituality. Then, we report the results of an observation and analysis of religious heritage tourism as a form of tourism that incorporates essential aspects of religion. We shall demonstrate the challenges and difficulties that confront religious heritage when attempting to meet the hopes and expectations of believers and tourists alike, with their sometimes conflicting interests, objectives and criteria. Having identified the challenges facing religious heritage, in the discussion section we shall establish categories of analysis that include the definition of religious and pilgrimage tourism as a fundamental element in the conservation

of this heritage; the association with partnerships; the repercussions in economic, social, cultural and heritage terms; and the issues regarding conservation. To finish, we shall draw some tentative conclusions.

Theoretical framework: religious heritage as cultural heritage

In the tourism tradition, travel for religious purposes has generally coincided with pilgrimages, usually to sites where “a miracle is believed to have occurred or is expected to occur in the future, with the religious goal”, as noted by Timothy and Boyd (2003), “of obtaining forgiveness for sins, praying or seeking a cure for illness” through the act of pilgrimage.

Vukonić (2002) has argued that “those travelling with the primary purpose of visiting sacred sites often include trips to neighbouring tourist sites, and vice versa”. For example, pilgrims to Fátima (Portugal) frequently visit an extensive repertoire of sites on the Atlantic Coast and historic towns in the interior. Likewise, Santiago de Compostela is often a stop on a variety of itineraries undertaken for multiple reasons, for example visiting the Romanesque heritage inland or the Spanish coastline bordering the Cantabrian Sea, or exploring the culture and gastronomy of those respective areas (Santos, 2002).

Thus, as pointed out by Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2010) who are followed in this part, due to what some authors have identified “as the commercialisation and growing economic importance of cultural heritage tourism” (Robinson & Novelli, 2005 Timothy & Boyd, 2003), “religious sites are being commodified and packaged for a particular tourist demand” (Olsen, 2006). As a result, religious sites are being visited for a wide range of reasons related, for example, “to architecture, landscape, socio-cultural interest” (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003) or “historical significance, none of which have anything to do with religion per se” (Vukonić, 2002).

As Smith (1992) has argued, “tourism and pilgrimage do not represent the opposite ends of a continuum” in which religious tourism constitutes a form of tourism located midway between pilgrimage and tourism. According to Ivars (2014), “the situation has changed and the aim now is to achieve a balance between religion and tourism”.

In the sphere of Christianity, such activities include “visits to sites notable for their art and architecture” (e.g. Chartres Cathedral in France) or “role in the Christian tradition” (e.g. the village of Nazareth in Israel), “attendance at Christian conferences and conventions” (often combined with various tourism activities, such as World Youth Days), “and visits to local communities” (e.g. to show solidarity and give encouragement to people who feel persecuted for their religion, in minority religion contexts).

Accordingly, “people can have what they consider to be spiritual experiences” without necessarily “holding religious beliefs” (Heelas, 1998). As a consequence, use of the term pilgrimage is also changing and broadening. Thus, modern society has expanded its definition of the sacred, giving rise to the creation of new sacred sites. Journeys to these sites are called pilgrimages in their own right, and are undertaken by people seeking what Morinis (1992) has defined as “a realm or a state that a person creates to embody an ideal that he or she values highly”.

We also have to consider the significance of Graburn (1983, 2012) for our work, in what this author has called tourism as a sacred journey. In the same vein, the secular pilgrimages treated in Morins' work (Crumrine and Morinis, 1991) are worth mentioning. Even the argument of Ebron (1999) of roots or heritage tourism by African Americans to Senegal and Gambia and Ghana, is extremely related as this author examines "how a site of history gets made into a successful tourist destination of a remembered past". Dubisch and Winkleman (2005) do something similar in their work on pilgrimage and healing, showing that even secular pilgrimages are undertaken for healing, what now is called enhancing wellness. Badone and Roseman (2010) explicitly problematize pilgrimage versus tourism and intersecting journeys. In the same manner Di Giovine (2013) does much the same and Di Giovine and Jaeyeon Choe (2019) "examine the many ways in which pilgrimage engages with sacredness", "delving beyond the officially recognized", and often "religiously conceived pilgrimage sites".

Given all the above, religious heritage tourism should be viewed as tourism that involves travelling to places and sites of religious, spiritual, cultural and secular interest, "including secular and religious pilgrimage as well as other forms of spiritual and sacred journey".

Results

The observation and analysis of the challenges facing religious heritage have revealed various issues. Although Europe contains a wide variety of forms of religious heritage and worship, a growing number of countries and faiths are experiencing a considerable decline in the number of worshippers. In some ways, this represents a threat to heritage, because a decreasing number of believers implies not only a loss of income, but also fewer people willing to caring for it altruistically. Places of worship are therefore being underused in cities and rural areas alike, and many have been sold or are at risk of being put to other uses unrelated to heritage or religion. Furthermore, many of the professionals engaged in heritage conservation are historians, architects or restorers with little experience of business or economic exploitation of such sites, and they may come into conflict with the interests of capital willing to invest in or restore this heritage without understanding its cultural or religious value or potential. The local authorities, administrators and legislators constitute a third source of friction, as they often lack references to international best practice projects that may inspire effective and context-appropriate action. Hence, the exchange of knowledge from religious and heritage perspectives is fundamental. In this respect, many European projects have been implemented through partnerships, using methods and tools to equip members of the public and professionals to act at local level with the aim of achieving a global impact. One example of this is the Alterheritage initiative (Drda Kühn, 2015). Countries as diverse as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium and Spain share the same problem common to many other European countries: they possess a magnificent legacy of religious heritage in rural and urban areas alike, but the use for which these sites were originally intended is in clear decline, resulting in underutilisation, neglect, deterioration and vandalism, placing at risk heritage that has served to define the history and identity of the communities concerned.

This problem highlights the need to ensure that such sites remain active and accessible for present and future generations, with the goal of conserving, using and developing cultural heritage to provide a general context in which tangible and intangible values are given equal importance.

One solution would be to explore the physical, legal, professional, conceptual and technical implications of designating churches as heritage sites, which would entail a shift from a spiritual to a cultural appreciation of their artistic merits.

Di Giovine (2008) calls for “a better integration of sustainability and ethics in the studies on interrelatedness of tourism and heritage”. Likewise, Smith (2006) suggests “people are more active and mindful in their use of heritage” so that links between material culture and identity are better identified and explored

The sustainable conservation and preservation of religious heritage or sites in rural areas presents a major challenge, which cultural tourism could be instrumental in overcoming. As a sub-category of cultural tourism, spiritual tourism could make a significant contribution to the conservation of religious sites. As noted by Drda-Kühn (2015), “tourism could play a crucial role in uncovering new possibilities for religious heritage sites, particularly those located in rural areas”. In this instance, adopting an integrated approach linking the resources of many different actors could be a factor for success, because among other things, sustainable conservation requires bringing together various people, skills and resources for the same purpose, namely preservation.

According to Rifai (2015), the promotion of religious tourism currently faces four major challenges: “the preservation of religious sites, respect for local traditions, the development of a sustainable local economy and, of course, ensuring a positive and enriching experience for visitors”. Any response to these challenges must include effective religious heritage management, because as a part of cultural heritage, such sites will receive large numbers of visitors whose travel expectations and objectives must be met while at the same time protecting the integrity of the sites and ensuring their maintenance and sustainability.

Stovel, Stanley-Price and Killick (2015) have argued that religious heritage is distinguished from secular heritage by its vitality, in other words by believers’ continuing lived experience of religious values, implying that this heritage has several added values compared to heritage in general. Thus, the values of living religious heritage are given priority over the historical or documentary values of other heritages, so that the main objective of its conservation is continuity itself, which in practice is supported by the ritual processes of religious ceremony.

Significantly, religious heritage and heritage in general also differ in that the values of the former are linked to a specific place, whereas the latter only acquires heritage values with distance and time. These differences may lead conservationists to consider different aspects when defining heritage values: in the case of religious heritage, they may be more interested in the values recognised by the religious community, while in that of secular heritage, they may want to identify the processes, the people involved and any other elements necessary to define these values. In this line Shinde and Olsen (2020) have pointed out how “the remarkable growth in religious tourism across the world has generated considerable interest in the impacts of this type of tourism”.

Other important factors to consider in heritage conservation include the fact that “religious heritage is perhaps the largest category of heritage to be found in many countries around the world”. Furthermore, the sphere of heritage coexists with that of the faith and religious practices specific to the heritage element, in turn leading to other aspects that require consideration, such

as “how to maintain heritage values in the face of changing functional needs” prompted by new developments in liturgical and religious practice. In addition, different faiths may share needs or heritage elements, and here, the sphere of heritage can serve as a catalyst to promote mutual understanding on a religious or underlying political level.

In this respect, the aforementioned fluctuating interest in religion, whether motivated by the increasing secularisation of society or some other reason, adds a further challenge as regards maintaining religious heritage.

This aspect is also affected by growing secular pressure in places with religious values. Many religious sites have become the object of purely touristic pilgrimage since being declared world heritage sites, or for other reasons. It is important to note here that sacred sites are those places where cosmological perfection irrupts into the human world. In this line of argument something can be sacred even if it is not religious, such a heritage object that holds extra special value for a community.

Other challenges concern the transformation of religious sites or objects into museum exhibits. For example, once these objects or sites are exhibited and interpreted in museums, what happens to their intrinsic religious values? How can these values be maintained in a museum, or following conservation interventions, in the sense of continuity of faith versus scientific conservation? How can such continuity be balanced against the work of conservation professionals to minimise any changes the heritage element may undergo? Here, a conflict arises between the traditional values of the religious community and the objectives of modern conservation criteria rooted in contemporary secular values.

Debate and discussion

A comparison of the results and the authoritative references on religious heritage concerning the aspects analysed suggests the following areas of debate.

Religious heritage tourism as tourism per se

The implications of all the phenomena analysed are considerable and should therefore be borne in mind in professional practice and academic and research treatment of the subject. The expansion of religious tourism, fuelled by an increasing offer of religious tourism experiences, has the potential to benefit, both culturally and geographically. The most direct consequence of this is that a number of religious heritage sites have been placed on the map, whether religious or not, has a direct impact on the economy.

As pointed out by Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2010) some of the few studies on economic impacts have examined “the economic benefits for the local population” (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonić, 2002), following on from Hudman and Jackson (1992), who argued that “towns, cities and regions with sacred sites benefit from the attractiveness of the site”. It is not only the tourism sector that benefits, but also others, most notably, for example, “the services sector engaged in meeting the needs of visitors” (Din, 1989).

Religious sites are major tourist attractions and sometimes fasten entire economies, as is the case, according to Olsen and Timothy (2006), of Santiago de Compostela, Medjugorje, Lourdes and Mecca, where "tourism is also often seen as a way of diversifying or rescuing a struggling economy". Jackowski and Smith (1992) have argued that religious tourism has the potential to become an important source of income and employment, citing the case of Poland, where "the damage caused by World War II and communist repression hindered the development of tourism infrastructure until the 1990s", when it became an economic benchmark for religious tourism.

Partnerships and their advantages

A common thread in destination product development has been the creation of networks through formalised partnerships. According to Svensson, Nordin and Flagestad (2005), these partnerships are composed of individuals and organisations from "a combination of public, business and civil groups who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships". These mutually beneficial alliances between organisations are also commonly referred to as networks or interest groups. Knoke and Kuklinski (1983) defined such networks as "a specific type of relationship connecting people, objects or events". Following on from this definition, Porter (1998) has described these groups as "geographic clusters of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field", linked by commonalities and complementarities. In this process, stakeholder interests may coincide or there may be conflicts between interests that continually redefine the nature of tourism development actions in the religious or other spheres.

Another challenge associated with the creation of such networks and clusters is that "the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved", such as "local government, local tourism organisations, industry or the community", are not always clearly defined or articulated. On the other hand, networks and clusters also shape opportunities to communicate, develop new ideas, "put ideas into practice and preserve community values and lifestyles", which in turn are "important attributes for the development of innovation and competitiveness", as noted by Dredge (2006). In addition, networks and clusters help companies to see themselves as co-partners, or even consortia, usually without formally becoming so, "thus increasing the willingness to cooperate and actively work towards the long-term benefits" (Novelli, Schmitz & Spencer, 2006). Consequently, "clusters and networks are vital for regional development", because "they enhance collaboration between the public and private sectors and the community. Furthermore, by cooperating locally, stakeholders" with regional or broader interests can compete globally.

Benefits in different sectors

According to Fleischer (2000), "the economic benefits associated with religious tourism are greater than those associated with other types of tourism". This is so not only because "pilgrims and other religious tourists appear to be avid buyers" of religious souvenirs, but also because "the development of religious tourism can enhance the maintenance and preservation of sacred sites", attractions and cultural heritage. This sector must seek others that provide them with livelihoods, which as González-González (2019) has indicated is no easy task because many aspire to be self-sufficient. Many religious sites are so already, because their caretakers or administrators are

usually priests or other religious officials without a specific salary for this function. Furthermore, as Fernández (2019) has observed, they are often used for a range of activities besides religious ones, which involves “maintaining architectural quality and staff and providing public services”, and they therefore need the income generated by tourists (Olsen, 2006). The benefits associated with tourism development, including religious tourism, “are not only economic in nature”. Tourism and religious tourism also “offer the opportunity to reduce prejudice”, and “bridge cultural differences through contact with other cultures” (Khamouna & Zeiger, 1995; Var, Ap & Van Doren, 1994).

However, there are also “challenges and obstacles associated with the development of religious tourism”. In some areas, the demand for services by tourists and pilgrims has led to the “commercialisation of sacred sites” and “even of religious services themselves” (Simone-Charteris and Boyd, 2010). Olsen (2006) has further observed that “the convergence of religious/sacred and tourist/secular space has added complexity to traditional management practices at sacred sites”. The greatest challenge here is “maintaining a sense of place while meeting the needs of secular pilgrims and tourists” and “preserving the physical integrity of the site”.

Thus, the main challenge and obstacle “associated with the development of religious heritage tourism” is the confluence of interests in “how religious sites are preserved, managed and consumed” by both religious and secular tourists, as noted by Olsen (2006) and Shackley (2001). Those charged with guarding and protecting a site may be constrained or motivated by the views and beliefs of their religion. In this context, a tourism perspective may determine whether or not the caretakers of religious sites cooperate or not with non-religious stakeholders. In an attempt to increase tourism revenues, local governments or authorities may commodify religious sites and transform them into tourist sites, to be seen through the meanings that visitors and promotion agencies ascribe to them, but not others (Urry, 1990). This social construction of tourism (Young, 1999) influences “the management of religious sites and attractions” not only through marketing and commodification, but also “through maintenance and interpretation policies”.

Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind that the Intangible aspects that religious heritage tourism can produce such as valorisation, transmission of values and practices, language reclamation, preservation of important sacred sites, individual and community well-being, etc. In the same way, Olsen and Timothy (2021) focus on “other interesting facets like the supply and demand aspects of religious and spiritual tourism markets”, and examine issues related to the management side of these markets around the world such as religious theme parks, the UNESCO branding of religious heritage, gender and performance, popular culture, pilgrimage, environmental impacts, even fear and terrorism.

Just like other places endowed with cultural and historical significance, religious sites are repositories of history and memory and contain, as Yeoh and Kong (1996) put it, multiple layers of sedimented history and meaning, and “can therefore easily become the focus of competing interests” between different religious groups. As Gravari-Barbas (2018) points out “tourism has never worked better, faster, and more efficiently as a heritage-producing machine than now”, in the beginning of the 21st century. The tourism system “contribute to the production of a new heritage system” (heritage places, practices and actors) which functions according to its own needs and expectations, “in a world of free traffic, transactions and generalized mobilities”. In fact,

the religious heritage complex (Isnart and Cerezales, 2020) has always combined care for the past with conscious practices of heritage-making: heritage, religion and tourism interact in different ways and contexts all over the world.

Towards some conclusions

Given its fundamental “role in conveying, expressing and sustaining the faith” that gives “spiritual identity, meaning and purpose to human life”, living religious heritage is of specific importance. Consequently, tangible and intangible living religious heritage merits conservation because “it bears witness to the nature of the quest for the fundamental meaning of human existence”. To understand living religious heritage, it is necessary to recognise that its meaning essentially resides in the “significance of tangible religious objects, structures and sites”.

It is also necessary to realise that living religious heritage is at risk for several reasons, from a fluctuating “engagement in faith in different parts of the world”, to a “lack of understanding of the nature of religious heritage or the role of conservation in sustaining faith”, and “a lack of respect for the aspirations of religious communities”. The threats to living religious heritage are many and varied. Some may come from within the religion or the faith itself.

“Care of this heritage” is first and foremost the responsibility of the religious community, for whom it may be of local or global importance. “Conservation of living religious heritage” is ideally initiated by religious communities in collaboration with conservation professionals and other stakeholders, in the following ways: “recognising and promoting the importance of the caretaking role” that religious communities have played; “generating mutual understanding and genuine positive dialogue” about conservation decisions; and “reflecting the living nature of this heritage”, retaining objects of religious value in their faith context. This represents a “challenge for those seeking decisions” based on full “respect for the practices and values” that underpin the faith of religious communities, bearing in mind, as noted above, that “the goals of religious communities may be in conflict with the goals of conservation”. It is therefore important that rather than seeking to freeze expressions of faith at a particular point in time, conservation interventions should be aimed at guiding changes over time in ways that are reminiscent of past expressions. Such an approach would provide a conservation framework for retaining the qualities of heritage expressions and help ensure the survival of significant qualities, in the face of contemporary changes which are often difficult to assess.

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