

Book Review

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Religious Tourism and the Environment

by: K.A. Shinde and D.H. Olsen (Editors)

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It is probably just coincidence that this book was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when tourism is almost non-existent worldwide, with unprecedented effects on jobs and businesses. However, this crisis is an opportunity to rethink tourism development, particularly on the sensitive links between tourism and the environment. Kiran A. Shinde and Daniel H. Olsen's *Religious Tourism and the Environment* provides current insights on the environmental issues in tourism by examining the intersections between tourism, the environment, and religion, three phenomena that have been strongly intertwined since ancient times. Consisting of 12 chapters, this book can be summarised into two themes: environment as a resource or generator of religious tourism and environment as a recipient impact of religious tourism.

Written by the editors, Chapter 1 sets the scene by briefly reviewing published studies between religion, tourism, and the environment, while Chapter 2 by Daniel H. Olsen comprehensively narrates the different types of natural sacred sites and the impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism on these sites. These introductory chapters objectively position the book within existing religion, tourism and environment paradigms and discourses, and invite readers to reflect on the environment not only as a generator but also a recipient of negative impacts of religious tourism. The book shows how the environment can both reinforce and challenge, often at the same time, religious tourism.

Chapter 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11 demonstrate how the natural landscape is an essential element for religious and spiritual growth in most religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. In Chapter 4, Joshua Nash takes a philosophical perspective, looking at the idea of Vrindavan in India as a sacred place that inspires religion-spirituality-ecology connections. The focus here is how these connections can lead to the creation of human sanctuaries within the framework of the Vrindavan Ecological Concept (VEC). Interestingly, instead of blaming the pilgrims as the main source of negative environmental impacts, this chapter argues perceptions about environmental degradation from a religion perspective should also be considered. Chapter 5 by Sanjay Nepal, Yang Mu and Po-Hsin Lai examines the local residents' perspectives of sacred landscapes in Nepal's Khumbu and the role of tourism in shaping residents' perspectives of this sacred landscape. This chapter prompted me to reflect on my own cultural belief

(as a Malaysian who believes Mount Kinabalu is a sacred mountain), and relate with the same challenges experienced by the local community (e.g., increasing commercialisation and westernisation of sacred place). This chapter emphasises that tourism has not compromised local beliefs and practices. Rather, it has shifted them to adapt to a changing world.

In Chapter 7, although the focus is on how sacred places can be utilised to overcome politics, Nour Farra-Haddad discusses some of the natural features (e.g., trees, stones and waters) in shared religious rituals of pilgrimages in Lebanon. The chapter highlights how natural features are catalysers of interfaith experiences, which lead to deep and lasting interfaith dialogue. Chapter 8 by Josep-Maria Garcia-Fuentes takes a slightly different vein by highlighting how aspects of the natural environment (Mount Montserrat in Spain) influence the construction of pilgrimage sites (Antoni Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona). This chapter highlights the intertwined relationship between religion, nature, and ideologies behind human-built sacred sites. In Chapter 11, Michael Di Giovine and Elisa Ascious look at the physical and spiritual after-effects of earthquakes and how the affected communities dealt with destroyed significant religious tourism destinations. The authors conclude that one of the social outcomes of these devastating events was the development of a strong sense of community and solidarity, which lead to the idea of reconceptualising religious tourism to be more integrative of food, culture and landscape, rather than religion *per se*. As such, the chapter provides an interesting discussion of how devastating events have revealed an opportunity for more diversified, smaller, and authentic tourism experiences.

Chapter 3, 6, 9 and 10 discuss how the environment is the recipient of negative impacts of religious tourism. In Chapter 3, to decode the complexities of managing the natural and human-built environment, Kiran Shinde conducts a comparative analysis of environmental issues in six pilgrim-towns in India and proposes a conceptual framework for environmental analysis in sacred sites. These cases illustrate how rises in pilgrims and religious tourism visitation have led to increased negative environmental impacts. In the context of increasing environmental awareness, Chapter 6 by Anouk Lafortune-Bernard, Rajendra Suwal, Kai Weise and Robin Coningham, demonstrates the challenges facing site managers at the Lumbini World Heritage Site in Nepal to integrate the surrounding environment in the site development. This chapter provides evidence of complications in balancing the social, economic and environmental impacts of sacred sites. In Chapter 9, Daniel Olsen takes a slightly different perspective of negative environmental outcomes when he discusses disease and other health-related issues that arise at mass religious gatherings, specifically the *Hajj*. This chapter discusses the fundamental determinants of the close interrelationships between medicine, health, pilgrimage, and religious tourism, and explores the role of the complex networks of the government, health and religious officials in preventing health risks at mass religious gatherings. In Chapter 10, using *Hajj* pilgrimage as a case study, Jahanzeb Qurashi notes several key areas (with an emphasis on waste management) related to the *Hajj* and environmental damage. The author presents the concept of green *Hajj* as an ideal practice to improve the environmental sustainability of *Hajj* and reflects on some of the difficulties in implementing the concept.

Chapter 12 provides a summary of the previous chapters. Additionally, in this chapter the editors conclude the book with thought-provoking discussions on future studies on tourism, religion and the environment.

The editors themselves acknowledge a limitation of the book's geographical focus. However, they have done a great job of compiling the first collection of materials from countries where pilgrimage and religious tourism are widely recognised. It is also great to see the religious diversity of the book, reinforcing the idea that religious tourism studies should be/is a field open to any type of faith. Unfortunately, there is a struggle within the chapters for the main component of the book title: 'religious tourism'. The unevenness of the contributions does not allow the reader to assess whether we are dealing with religious tourism, with many chapters devoted to discussions of pilgrimage. Despite the editors having emphasised that a pilgrim is a tourist, they also acknowledged the different attitudes of tourists and pilgrims towards sacred places (Chapter 1 and 2). Consequently, the book feels like it has an identity crisis. It would have been useful for the editors to have also considered the impacts of religious tourism *per se* on the environment, beyond the pilgrimage paradigm. In doing so, this would have allowed an examination of potential differences or similarities of impacts on the environment by pilgrimage and religious tourism.

Overall, this book will be a valuable text, providing an overview of the interdependent forces of religion, tourism, and the environment. In particular, it covers the main issues central to the complex relationship between these three phenomena and raises the most up-to-date questions of post-COVID-19 travel such as how to balance environmental protection and salvation. Therefore, this book is appropriate for tourism undergraduates, graduate, researchers and tourism practitioners.