CONCLUSIONS

The International Conference on “Tourism, Religions and the Dialogue of Cultures”, held in Cordoba from 29 to 31 October, was attended by some 250 participants representing over 80 countries and several international organizations, an indication of the interest and attention generated by the relation between religion – one of the oldest features of our civilization –, tourism – a global phenomenon which has become an integral part of modern societies –, and the dialogue of cultures – a response to rising intolerance, hostile attitudes and global instability.

The Conference had set two objectives: to analyze the relationships between tourism and religions with a view to stimulate and facilitate dialogue among civilizations, cultures and faiths, and to offer orientations and recommendations for the sustainable development of religious tourism.

It was evidently difficult to collect and analyze in any exhaustive manner the wealth of information and experience shared by the speakers of the Conference. These conclusions therefore only pretend to summarize in a succinct manner the main issues that surfaced from the conference.

The need to view the phenomenon of tourism in a broader perspective by highlighting its social, cultural and ethical dimensions was underlined in the opening session. The complex relationship between the development of tourism and the dialogue between faiths and cultures finds its basis in the fact that tourism shares with religions and civilizations values such as tolerance and respect of diversity, as well as rediscovery of oneself and of the others.
The Conference then explored the various dimensions of the relationship between tourism and inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue; studied national examples of religious tourism, including cross-country pilgrimages, spiritual routes and networks; and discussed the sustainability and management challenges of religious tourism destinations.

The first session stressed the importance of tourism as a cornerstone of pluralism and as an effective way of bridging the divides, taking into account the importance and relevance of the UN initiative on the Alliance of Civilizations. The significance of cultural routes, coupled with their religious and spiritual component, and their potential of contributing to the enrichment of dialogue of cultures was also highlighted.

The panel emphasized the features of tourism as an occasion for solidarity, a search for human values, a factor for management of diversity, an exposure to new realities and a complement for self-education and learning.

The second session explored the cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding of common human values and reviewed initiatives like the Abraham Path, inspired by the common patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the “Network of Holy Cities”, which includes Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela. Both endeavours pursue the sustainable use of the cultural and religious heritage and the reconciliation of tourism, cultural and religious activity with every-day-life of local citizens.

The panel highlighted the immense variety of religious tourism destinations, the diversity and specificity of sanctuaries and sacred sites. It further underscored the necessity to consider pilgrimages as a factor of integration of societies and the commitment for peace as an indispensable condition for engaging in a “journey of faith”. The value and significance of the co-existence of mosques, churches, synagogues, temples and other places of worship in a same city and the invaluable cultural richness and spirituality that religious tourism brings for host community and visitors were also stressed.

The third session focused on the importance of promoting sustainable development of religious destinations, faced with increasing numbers of pilgrims and tourists participating in religious or spiritual gatherings, through sound congestion management of sites and places of worship, and improved safeguard and conservation of religious heritage. Examples of best practices included the Canterbury Cathedral (United Kingdom) and the historic city of Kairouan (Tunisia), as well as a multi-confessional effort in Canada which generated a unique partnership for the conservation of religious heritage.

The panel stressed: a) the need to develop a dynamic relationship between religious and cultural heritage values in order to serve the interests of residents, tourists and the religious community; b) the importance of maintaining the authenticity and the core feature of religious sites and cultural routes; c) the importance of dissemination of information on
intangible heritage and ancient traditions aimed at bringing visitors closer to the values and spirituality of the host community.

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In conclusion, the participants encouraged UNWTO to explore the possibility of undertaking further research and initiatives on the main issues surfaced during the works of the Conference, namely:

1. The role of tourism in bridging the cultural as well as the economic divide in an increasingly globalized world.

2. The growing role of the tourism sector as an effective development tool and a peace builder.

3. The links between religious and cultural tourism and their role in positively addressing global challenges and the Millennium Development Goals.

4. The application and implementation of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, whose principles should inspire all forms of religious and cultural tourism.

5. The importance of collecting and disseminating best practices as well as to provide policy and practical tools to improve the management and sustainability of religious and cultural destinations.

In the pursuit of these aims, the participants encourage UNWTO to develop effective partnerships with relevant international and regional organizations.

Cordoba, 31 October 2007