Tourism and Religions
A Contribution to the Dialogue Among Religions, Cultures and Civilizations

Summary of the Report
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Summary of the Report

1. This document is a summary of the report prepared in the context of the Córdoba Conference (29-31 October 2007). The objectives of the said report are the following:
   a. on the one hand, to study the relationships between tourism and religions, with their pilgrimages and gatherings, in order to help harness tourism’s potential to stimulate and facilitate the dialogue among different civilizations; as well as to analyse the trends observed alongside religious tourism in the strict sense of the term, such as tourism with a larger recreational and spiritual component, in particular among young people, often having an ecumenical dimension aimed at getting to know the Other. Religious tourism can also be a powerful instrument for raising awareness regarding the importance of safeguarding one’s heritage and that of humanity. Chapter 1 of the report summarized here is aimed at better understanding the dimensions and destinations of religious tourism and the latter’s contribution to intercultural and interfaith dialogue.
   b. on the other hand, to provide examples of good practices to governments, religious authorities and tour operators regarding how to manage events as well as religious or spiritual sites and monuments within the framework of sustainable tourism development, in a way that optimizes benefits for local communities. Chapter 2 of the report analyses the conditions of the sustainable development of religious tourism in the context of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

2. Religious tourism is practiced to a considerable degree not only in the developed countries, but also in developing countries insofar as disposable income allows the upper and middle classes to travel. In this 21st century in search of values, religious and spiritual tourism can represent a great opportunity for men and women of all faiths, philosophies and religions. This being the case, in order to make it possible for the more numerous strata of the population to have access to it, its sustainable development should be pursued.

3. Religious tourism is becoming internationalized; whereas this kind of tourism was previously a largely domestic phenomenon, it now involves different nationalities and even—in certain destinations—different spiritualities and religions. The spectacular development of religious tourism destinations over the past thirty years has allowed pilgrimages to regain the prominence they
enjoyed in the past, making it possible for religious gatherings to attract tens of millions of persons and for pilgrimage routes and religious itineraries to once again play their role as links among peoples and nations. But lifestyles have changed, and many modern pilgrimages are now motivated by secular (education and culture) and touristic purposes.

4. What should characterize religious tourism is an ethic that shapes the behaviour of pilgrims and tourists; an ethic that turns them into agents of dialogue among civilizations and cultures. Pilgrimages and gatherings make it easier to weave together peaceful contact among peoples and encourage “solidarity tourism” in the fight against poverty and for the sustainable development of humanity. This is the reason why tourism is one of the most effective forms of participation in the dialogue among religions and cultures, as it clearly delineates their economic, ecological or cultural limits.

5. Nevertheless, various obstacles could stand in the way of the development of religious tourism in terms of freedom of movement and respect for human rights, such as the freedom to participate in religious gatherings in accordance with the obligations stipulated by the law without interfering against the public interest, or the dignity and respect of peoples. The issuance of passports and visas for these pilgrimages and religious gatherings should also be carried out within a framework that is as flexible as possible, whilst taking into account the fight against terrorism. Other rights should likewise be respected such as those that are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to heritage, respect for the authentic testimony formed by cultural and religious heritage in order to preserve and enrich the cultural diversity of the world.

6. Ecumenism is a trend that is being increasingly observed in religious tourism; the other trend that is favouring knowledge of other religions and cultures is that which is known as spiritual or spirituality tourism. Tourism destinations are conducive to interfaith and intercultural encounters and dialogue. Tourism infrastructure and facilities, the beauty and tranquillity of cultural monuments and nature sites facilitate such encounters. These ecumenical encounters, particularly among young people, should be encouraged within the framework of initiatives for interfaith and intercultural dialogue as well as for the Alliance of Civilizations.

7. Tourism puts people in contact with other lifestyles, other religions, other ways of seeing the world and its history. It is therefore important to ensure that it can be carried out under the best possible conditions of freedom of movement and respect for human rights, in particular for religious tourism. What is currently being observed is the following:

   a. a secularization of pilgrimages and travel for religious or spiritual purposes insofar as such travel must respond to the new expectations of people and of tourism clientele in a modern world that is more festive, more open and more free;

   b. these forms of tourism require increasingly more effective management and promotion, with intensive use of information and communication technologies, the pressing need to protect resources and the natural
and cultural environment within the framework of sustainable development.

8. The report is designed to address these issues. Obviously, it was impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of these sites and monuments as well as of all the destinations of pilgrimages and spiritual trips that exist in the world, but most of the religions and spiritualities of today’s world were examined. The three main forms of this type of tourism are examined in relation with their dimensions and the destinations where they are practiced:
   a. pilgrimages at destinations whose activity has become mainly touristic,
   b. religious and spiritual gatherings,
   c. itineraries and routes that lead to pilgrimage sites or to religious places, monuments and sanctuaries through rural spaces and territories that are consolidating themselves or are experiencing a revival.

9. Pilgrimages are undoubtedly the most common form of religious and spiritual tourism. Some religions incorporate pilgrimages in their practice, as is the case for Buddhists, Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Muslims, or Shintoists. In others, this practice does not exist, but their followers still travel to visit the sites that mark the history of their co-religionists. Today, pilgrimages are evolving:
   a. on the one hand, the practice is experiencing an extraordinary massification – certain pilgrimages are setting attendance records year after year,
   b. on the other hand, they include recreational and educational elements that respond to the expectations of people of the 21st century, young people in particular.

10. Religious festivals form part of all faiths and all traditions. Religious gatherings are capable of attracting hundreds of thousands or even millions of participants, tourists, residents and pilgrims. They are different from pilgrimages and are held to mark an event, or on the occasion of the visit of an important religious figure, an anniversary or a jubilee. At times, ecumenical gatherings are held. Lastly, most of the time they are just as festive as they are religious in character, especially in the case of youth-oriented gatherings. Their organization is generally complex. There is the risk of accidents, incidents, terrorist attacks, epidemics. The Hindu “Khumb Mela” is considered the largest religious gathering in the world.

11. Pilgrimage routes and religious itineraries have become tourism products to which authorities devote their full attention. They allow improvements and substantial benefits for all the communities along the way. Pilgrimages on foot, on bicycle, on horseback or any other mode of non-motorized transport on trails, whether they are carried out for religious, cultural or artistic purposes, are much more than mere excursions. They are prepared in advance and their duration is far longer than the travel time. They require physical and spiritual preparation which in itself forms part of the pilgrimage.
12. The most famous of these routes is the Way of St. James or “Camino de Santiago”. It has made it possible to highlight the theme of pilgrimage routes in Europe. This subject has been enriched through the creation of a more general framework in the context of the Council of Europe, “Pilgrim Routes”, with three objectives: to identify them, to mark them out using common signage, and to coordinate them with a cultural-events programme in cooperation with governmental, regional and local authorities as well as non-governmental entities.

13. The concept of a pilgrimage route and tourism itinerary, the “Abraham Path” was launched in the spring of 2007 by the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard University, as part of the projects aimed at the implementation of the United Nations' Alliance of Civilizations initiative. This initiative takes the form of a route, like the Silk Road or the Slave Route, that traces, through various countries in the Middle East, the steps of the prophet Abraham, who is the ancestor of the three main monotheistic religions. The idea is to enable the rehabilitation and the promotion of religious sites and pilgrimages in the Middle East.

14. Other elements should also be taken into consideration for the sustainable development of religious tourism:
   a. the measurement and the management of the flow of persons during mega-events,
   b. the maintenance and rehabilitation of religious and cultural monuments,
   c. the environmental protection of natural sites where large religious events are held,
   d. pilgrimage routes and itineraries,
   e. the health and safety of persons,
   f. the effective use of new information and communication technologies, and
   g. the promotion and marketing of new products and services related to this kind of tourism.

15. Globalization has opened up religious tourism to a process of commercialization, transforming it into “marketable product” which it was not in its beginnings. Pilgrims in the olden days were exempt from taxes and toll levies; it was not necessary to pay to enter “houses of God”. This kind of tourism also involves overlapping markets: that of spirituality, that of physical and mental health, that of leisure activities, that of culture, that of short stays and city-breaks. Its demographic base is considerable. This realization of the potential of religious tourism is recent, as is its “launching into the market”. It leaves open enormous possibilities of growth for the tourism industry, especially if it is tied in with the determination to foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue as well as the Alliance of Civilizations, and if the principles of sustainable development are observed.
16. Because religious tourism is developing commercially in a very rapid manner, and because it corresponds to deep-seated motivations on the part of all humanity, it must deal with a series of operational problems that can have a negative impact on the sustainability of facilities, the areas travelled on, and above all, on heritage:

a. With regard to pilgrimage sites and destinations, the issues have to do with how to equip and maintain monuments—often ancient—that must be protected and rehabilitated, and the environmental protection of natural sites using access ways and traffic corridors in order to prevent congestion and in order not to exceed load capacities. Other issues include the management and promotion of these destinations, the development of a sustainable local economy, and respect for the traditions and customs of the host populations in a spirit of dialogue and encounter with the other.

b. As for large religious events and gatherings, the issues that must be addressed are handling and controlling flows and access, ensuring that participants are received and accommodated under good hygienic and public-health conditions (for example, in order to prevent the transmission of illnesses such as gastroenteritis, etc.), food services for participants that observe the dietary rules of their religion, the safety and security of persons and their property, assistance for the sick, for old people and for children who may get lost, and information and communication on the programme of the gathering (times of ceremonies, meals, types of meals according to religion and dietary traditions, etc.).

c. Lastly, pilgrimage routes and religious itineraries require well-coordinated partnerships among the communities along the way, host communities, tourism professionals and territorial development authorities.

17. How can religious tourism be characterized as “sustainable”? It has to foster the emergence of a virtuous cycle of local development in economic, environmental, social, cultural and ethical terms; it must participate in the preservation of local natural and cultural assets. It should not have an impact on climate change—which means using renewable energy as best and as economically as possible and avoiding polluting the atmosphere. Nearly all religious communities are in favour of tourism, because it is a means to generate income in order to sustain their members, to better inform their faithful and the public, to maintain and preserve sanctuaries and monuments, as well as their natural environment.

The UNWTO has developed a series of objectives in favour of sustainable tourism, among which the following can be underlined:

1) economic viability
2) local prosperity
3) employment quality
4) social equity
5) visitor fulfilment
6) local control
7) community wellbeing
8) cultural richness
9) physical integrity
10) resource efficiency
11) environmental purity

18. For religious tourism, the application of these concepts should be accompanied by better knowledge of its flows:
   a. How can the flow of pilgrims and visitors be measured?
   b. How can such flows be managed when you have to deal with hundreds of thousands or even millions of participants at major events and gatherings?

19. Insufficient information and/or the absence of reliable data regarding the volume, the dynamics and the characteristics of religious tourism flows represent one of the major obstacles to the development of tourism strategies on the part of local, regional or national public organizations and partners in the private and/or associative sector. There are yet few managers who have a comprehensive view of the issue, and still fewer who utilize the entire array of techniques that exist, which range from the regulation of flows in time and in space to expectation management. Flows at religious sites are mostly managed in the same way as those at cultural sites and the new information and communication technologies make it possible to find effective solutions for the sustainable management of tourist flows. For large gatherings, this is even more difficult.

20. In the face of this situation, two questions arise:
   a. Can sound planning and good management make it possible for more people to visit these religious sites whilst ensuring their long-term conservation?
   b. How can the maximum number of visitors at a place of pilgrimage or a religious monument be determined?

21. The client base of religious tourism is undergoing a change. Before, the client base consisted of senior nationals, young people in groups, and families with children. Today, it is becoming increasingly international; the duration of stays is becoming shorter and religious tourists are using specialized agencies more and more, as well as information and communication technologies. All ages and social groups are participating.
   a. Destinations have become internationalized with the advent of globalization, lower transport costs, group rates and online information and appeals from religious and spiritual associations. Certain religious tourism destinations now receive more foreigners than nationals.
Nevertheless, the internationalization of religious tourism could be held back by measures that restrain international travel, such as the reduction of freedom of movement in the context of the fight against terrorism and immigration. The proliferation of visa requirements and their selective nature, the toughening of immigration rules, the constraints imposed on the stays of foreign students... all of these are measures taken by governments that—although not targeted at tourism per se—are not without negative impacts on tourism activity.

b. The potential offered by religious tourism gives a growing role to the commercial tourism sector. The demand is all the more difficult to grasp owing to the absence of specific information regarding the true motivations of pilgrim-tourists. Specialized agencies are being created or are reorienting their activities around religious and spiritual tourism. International associations of this commercial sector are forming mainly by means of online social networks, whose objectives beyond the marketing and promotion of religious tourism within the framework of tourism ethics will have to be confirmed in the future.

c. Issues relative to safety and security, assistance and insurance for religious travel and pilgrimages are taking on greater importance than ever with the development of these markets. Assistance for pilgrims has existed in all religious traditions, along with assistance for the sick and the poor. Assistance for handicapped persons is mandated by law in the majority of developed countries. Religious authorities have long provided special services for the seriously ill or handicapped who go on pilgrimage in the hope of a cure or a miracle. Particular attention should be given to Muslim pilgrimages which require insurance in the form of “takaful”, which means “guaranteeing each other”, and that such insurance observe Islamic jurisprudence and Sharia principles. This type of insurance is conceptually different from the more common forms of insurance policies.

d. The accommodation of pilgrims and visitors has evolved a great deal over the past century: from great simplicity to luxury hotels. These accommodations should contribute to the sustainable development of religious and spiritual tourism at the destinations. Their quality should be supervised by regional, national or foreign bodies.

e. One of the areas where religious tourism requires the application of very strict rules is undoubtedly that of food, that is to say, the different families and types of food and the way they are prepared and cooked. Nowadays, this is taken very seriously by transport operators, restaurateurs, hoteliers and other accommodation establishments, cruise operators, tour operators, and this goes beyond food services for religious tourism.

f. Information and communication technologies have been fully embraced in the field of pilgrimages and religious tourism. It should not be forgotten that until the 19th century, international communications depended heavily on pilgrims who would visit other regions and other countries, thus enabling information exchange and dialogue among cultures. Today, all pilgrimage destinations, all religious gatherings, all
itineraries promoted by local authorities and their religious and touristic partners have their corresponding website on the Internet. The arrival of Web 2.0 will lend even greater sophistication to the promotion and development of religious tourism on the Internet.

22. Certain tourism destinations have adopted or are in the process of adopting plans or strategies for the sustainable tourism development of their religious heritage, in accordance with their resources and potential. Tourism offices are establishing divisions whose mission is to better coordinate potential religious tourism partners, especially in the commercial sector. Their strategies increasingly include advanced marketing techniques concerning image, branding, promotion, and merchandising. Religious tourism destinations are also reinforcing their internal and external partnerships:
   a. internally, by gathering together tourism actors with the goal of raising their awareness of the potential of religious tourism;
   b. externally, by forming networks whose purpose is to make their promotion more effective, or to serve as forums for the exchange of experiences and good practices.

23. The most noticeable contribution of religious heritage to local development lies in its capacity to attract tourists and its positive effects on revenues and employment. In order to avoid any weakening of this contribution, it must be ensured that tourists are given preference over same-day visitors, and price-formation mechanisms should be controlled, which entails controlling land use and commitments of moderation on the part of service providers. Can this be done for religious heritage? Is this the choice of religious authorities and non-profit associations that want to attract the maximum number of pilgrims and faithful? There exists resistance to this, and consensual solutions should be found through discussion and partnerships.

24. For both destinations and religious tourism operators, training is and will continue to be a decisive element for the sustainable development of religious and spiritual tourism. This training includes broader aspects going beyond just the management and development of tourism and hotel establishments or cultural heritage facilities. Universities and seminaries should be able to include religious and cultural tourism in Theology and History of Religion programmes, in particular, in the context of intercultural management, in order to deal with multiple nationalities and faiths.

25. Studies and research carried out in the future on religious tourism by tourism administrations should be designed in accordance with the good practices developed by the UNWTO for analysing the planning, management and logistics of large religious gatherings and events, present cases of good practices for their sustainable management and to avoid congestion and overloading. Food and public health are among the most sensitive issues and should not be overlooked.
26. Owing to its dimensions and diverse forms (pilgrimages, gatherings, visits to sanctuaries, spiritual journeys, etc.), religious tourism presents economic and social challenges for territories. Local communities should benefit from it.
   a. One challenge is to reconcile the commercial needs of the tourism industry with the spiritual and religious needs of pilgrimages and the faithful, while respecting the physical integrity of religious sites and their religious significance.
   b. Another has to do with modulating entry rights and finding the revenues that will ensure the sustainability of a sanctuary or a monument as well as the welfare of the communities that manage them.

27. Marketing and management bodies of destinations involved in religious tourism are in the process of adopting strategies to protect and to better manage their religious heritage, in accordance with their resources and potential. Their marketing efforts increasingly include internal and external partnerships and ethical principles to allow as many people as possible to take part in pilgrimages and religious gatherings, taking their cue mainly from the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET). These efforts should also lead to better training on religious tourism through heritage education and the emergence of good practices that foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

28. Partnerships between the world of tourism and closely related sectors such as agriculture and handicrafts are all the more indispensable, given the need to create touristic and heritage networks in order to create new products and services, new infrastructure and facilities, etc. It is only through the creation of networks that it will be possible to avoid leakages and the non-utilization of the sustainable resources of a territory, such as its agriculture and handicrafts.

29. Thus, tourism is and should be recognized as an instrument for dialogue among cultures and religions. Religious and spiritual tourism can be a powerful lever for peace and sustainable development. The dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations constitutes an opportunity for tourism. As a formidable instrument for modernization and for fighting against the “clash of ignorances”, if it is planned in a sustainable manner and with the purpose of poverty reduction in a spirit of responsibility and solidarity, tourism can contribute to better knowledge of religious diversity as well as of cultural diversity, which are now enshrined in an International Convention.

Conclusions and recommendations

30. In conclusion, tourism can play a pre-eminent role in the dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations, and serve as a catalyst for numerous projects and programmes; it is not possible to bring people together without freedom to travel, freedom of movement and without respecting human rights.
31. The need to develop religious tourism and other forms of tourism that facilitate encounters and dialogue should lead administrative authorities to make border formalities as flexible as possible while ensuring the safety and security of persons and their property and without hindering the fight against terrorism.

32. The content of programmes, circuits, trips and stays under the rubric of religious, spiritual or “dialogue” tourism should avoid all stereotyping, incitement to racism, xenophobia or to extremist nationalism and terrorism. Internet sites linked to religious and spiritual tourism should respect ethical guidelines that could be established following the principles set forth by the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET). All forms of tourism in favour of rapprochement, dialogue and ecumenism should be encouraged and be guided by the GCET.

33. Religious tourism requires that more adequate studies be carried out in order to gain a better grasp of its dimensions, forms, management and impacts on monuments, sites and territories. A more precise definition of religious tourism and of spiritual tourism should be sought in order to make it possible to use the same concepts and the same measures. The preparation of a guide on good practices in the field of religious tourism should be considered. There is a need for better collection, compilation and international harmonization of statistics on religious tourism. Lastly, research and analysis of religious tourism would entail the creation of a network of researchers and academics, as well as of tourism professionals for the analysis of its supply and demand.