

The Significance of Religious Tourism

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International Cooperation, Information and Tourism and Anti-quinities), CEO of Jordan's Cement Company, Director of the Economic Mission to Washington and Director General of the Investment Promotion Corporation of Jordan. He was elected Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in January 2010.

One of the inherent quests of humankind is to discover new worlds, new cultures and new traditions. Particularly in times of confrontation, misunderstanding and misconceptions, tourism has shown to be a strong catalyst to promote intercultural exchanges and tolerance.

Among the many tourism segments, religious tourism is probably amongst the most powerful tools to enhance interfaith dialogue and fight prejudice. The link between these two concepts – religious tourism and tolerance – is particularly relevant in countries where multiple faiths coexist and those that have strongly promoted the

co-existence of all faiths for centuries.

Religious heritage is part of our identity, of our past, but it is also a key element of our future. UNWTO has long been advocating the relevance of religious tourism worldwide. The Conference on Religious Heritage and Tourism, organised by UNWTO in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands last year, was only one of the examples that showcase the role of tourism in bringing about understanding and reconciliation. These values were also emphasised at the first UNWTO International Conference on Religious Tourism that took place in Spain in 2014 and will surely emerge again in the second edition of this event taking place in Fatima, Portugal, in November 2017.

UNWTO estimates indicate that more than 300 million tourists visit the world's major religious sites, with around 600 million religious voyages one word globally. These numbers translate into an immense potential to make religious tourism an effective tool for social inclusion and sustainable development worldwide.

Yet, with this strong growth, we should also be aware of the high level of responsibility that we have to make tourism a more sustainable sector. Tourism has the potential to restore, protect and promote local heritage and communities, but it can also diminish and destroy both when poorly developed and managed.

The United Nations has declared 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This is a unique opportunity to foster awareness on this topic but also to boost initiatives that advance religious tourism in a way that is respectful of heritage and values. **F**

The Return of the Mahmal from Makkah to Cairo (wood engraving, 1893) represents earlier forms of religious tourism



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