

2016

Pilgrims in the Digital Age: a research manifesto

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Recommended Citation

deAscaniis, Silvia and Cantoni, Lorenzo (2016) "Pilgrims in the Digital Age: a research manifesto,"
International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 3.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7Z120>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol4/iss3/3>

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Pilgrims in the Digital Age: a research manifesto

Introduction

This Manifesto provides a summary of discussions undertaken during the expert workshop 'Pilgrims in the digital age. Towards a map of the overlapping area among eTourism, eReligion, eLearning', held in Lugano (Switzerland), September 18-19, 2015.

The main goal of the meeting was to draw a first map of the overlapping areas between eTourism, eReligion, eLearning, and to identify relevant research and development directions.

This Manifesto was drafted by dr. Silvia De Ascaniis and Prof. Dr. Lorenzo Cantoni, then it was subjected to several rounds of editing by all participants. Those who have endorsed it are listed in the signatures at the end.

In the following lines the organization of the workshop, the relevance of the topic, the approaches adopted to investigate the area as well as the key outputs of the discussions are presented.

The Expert Workshop

In the framework of the activities of the *UNESCO Chair in ICT to Develop and Promote Sustainable Tourism in World Heritage Sites*, and funded by the *Swiss National Science Foundation*, an expert workshop was organised in order to discuss the topic at stake. The following is the list of invited experts (in alphabetical order):

- **Asta Adukaite**, Faculty of Communication Sciences, USI - Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano (Switzerland)
- **Heidi Campbell**, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University (USA)
- **Lorenzo Cantoni**, Faculty of Communication Sciences, USI - Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano (Switzerland)
- **Stefania Cerutti**, Department of Business and Economic Studies, University of Eastern Piedmont, Novara (Italy).

- **Elisa Cristina**, Casa dei Padri Cultural and Training Centre, Armeno (Italy)
- **Silvia De Ascaniis**, Faculty of Communication Sciences, USI - Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano (Switzerland)
- **Maria Emilia Garbelli**, Department of Economics and Statistics, Università Bicocca, Milan (Italy)
- **Massimo Introvigne**, CESNUR - Centro Studi Sulle Nuove Religioni, Turin (Italy) and Pontifical Salesian University, Turin (Italy)
- **Giulio Lizzi**, independent researcher, Rome (Italy)
- **Rita Marchetti**, Department of Political Sciences, Università of Perugia (Italy)
- **Elena Marchiori**, Faculty of Communication Sciences, CESNUR, Lugano (Switzerland)
- **Emanuele Mele**, Faculty of Communication Sciences, CESNUR, Lugano (Switzerland)
- **Elisa Piva**, Department of Business and Economic Studies, University of Eastern Piedmont, Novara (Italy)
- **Erkki Sutinen**, Department of Computer Science, University of Turku (Finland)

The meeting started on the evening of Friday 18th September, with a brief presentation of its relevance, goals, structure and participants by Lorenzo Cantoni, who then introduced a panel of three experts:

Heidi Campbell, who is director of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies, has written over 60 articles and book chapters on religion and new media. Her research areas are: social shaping of technology, rhetoric of new media, and themes related to the intersection of media, religion and culture, with a special interest in the internet and digital, mobile culture;

Massimo Introvigne, who is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR). He is the author of tens of books and articles in the field of sociology of religion and was the main author of the *Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy*. In 2011 he was

Chairperson of Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination at OSCE: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. He is professor for sociology of religious movements at the Università Pontificia Salesiana (Turin, Italy);

Erkki Sutinen, who is a computer scientist doing research in the area of computer application design for education, communication and development (ICT4D), with particular interest in visualization and text analytics. He is also an ordained pastor at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, and has conducted research and development activities in the field of eTheology.

After informal conversations during dinner, the following day participants worked in two groups, led by Heidi Campbell and Erkki Sutinen, supported by Silvia De Ascaniis and Lorenzo Cantoni, respectively.

After the work in groups, a plenary session took place, where the key outputs were shared, discussed and organized.

Relevance of the Topic

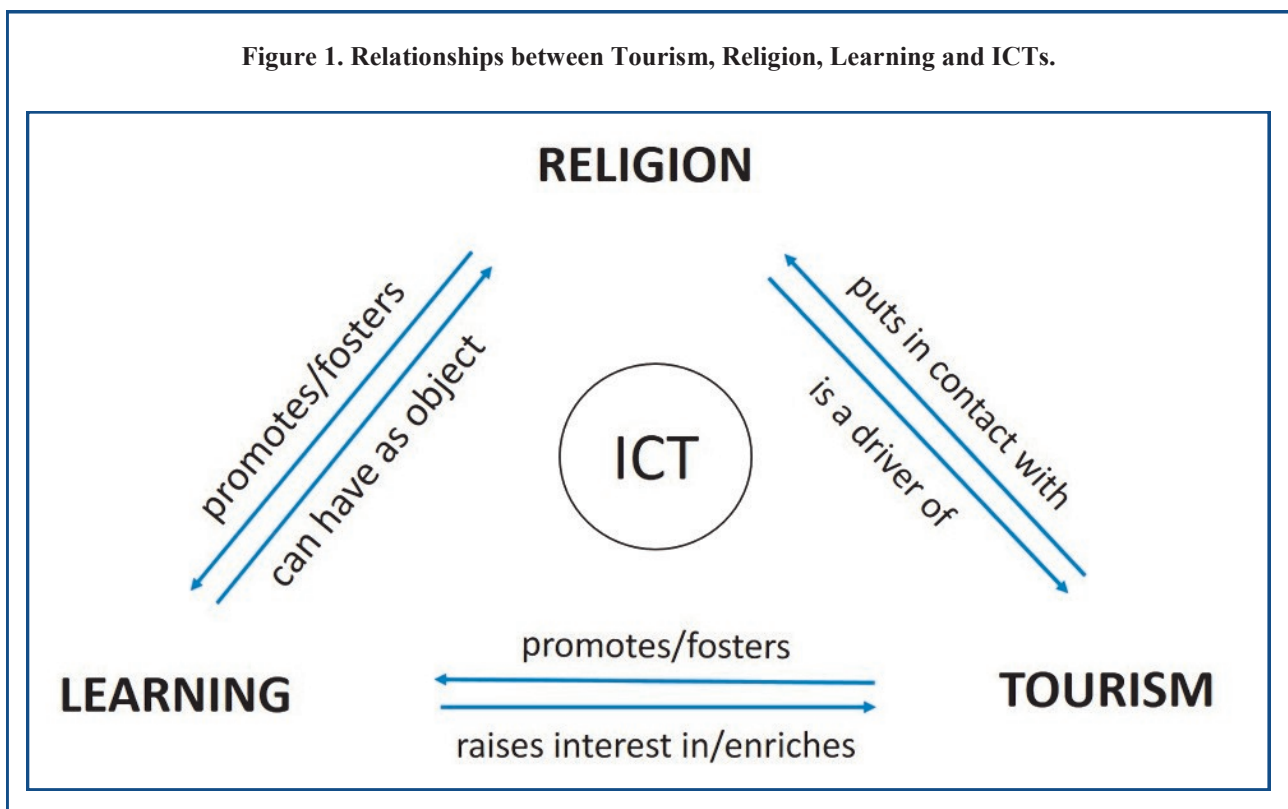
Tourism represents one of the largest economic sectors, as well as being an activity shared and loved by most people in the developed world: since 2012 the UN World Tourism Organization has calculated that

annually, more than one billion people cross a border for touristic purposes. Tourism is a moment of freedom, when one can cultivate interests and make new cultural experiences. An important driver of tourism is **Religion**, both for worshipping and for knowledge reasons. Since a wide part of artistic and cultural heritage is connected with religion, then, a visit to an artistic / cultural site connected with a specific cult might easily become mediator of a religious experience. The UNESCO website reports that:

approximately 20 percent of the properties inscribed on the World Heritage List have some sort of religious or spiritual connection. These properties to be found in most countries around the world constitute the largest single category on the List.

A visit to a religious site constitutes an intense, mostly informal, **Learning** experience, both for believers, who can have a better and deeper understanding of their faith, as well as for visitors driven by different reasons than the religious one, who have the chance to encounter cultures, lifestyles, and human communities with their peculiar customs and story. Figure 1 represents the relationships between the three concerned areas, and this model has ICT at its core. The various ICTs, in fact, have deep connection with all three areas: they are increasingly used in the pre-, during- and post-travel phases, they can support the

Figure 1. Relationships between Tourism, Religion, Learning and ICTs.



religious experience and they are a key factor to enhance informal learning.

As an example of the deep relationships between tourism, religion, learning and ICTs, the Catholic Jubilee of Mercy (8.12.2015 - 20.11.2016) can be mentioned here. This is a large religious event, extraordinarily indicted by Pope Francis, which is expected to gather in Rome millions of visitors. Both visitors driven by their religious beliefs and those visiting Rome driven by different motivations will have the possibility to join the activities organized for the Jubilee, such as festivals, celebrations, exhibitions, as well as to meet representatives of religious communities; this way learning about the Catholic faith and traditions. The Holy See, in Rome is setting up a number of digital technologies to promote the event and to support pilgrims' experience, among them an official website and dedicated channels on the most used social media platforms. Pilgrims and all other travellers, in addition, will likely make use of digital technologies specifically developed to support and enhance tourism and hospitality experiences, like platforms for sharing online travel reviews, booking services, mobile applications, location-based services, and the like. Thanks to these technologies, they will (informally) learn about Italy and Rome, as well as about the Jubilee and the Christian Catholic religion. To investigate these ICT-related dynamics is an opportunity not only to understand how digital technologies support, influence and mould religious, learning and tourism practices and experiences, but it might also cast light on social changes happening thanks to the Internet and its mobile 24/7 access.

Two Research and Development Directions

The group work aimed at exploring and drawing a research map of what had already been done in the area of interest - themes, questions, methods, exemplar studies and best practices. On this base, new research projects and collaborations can be designed. Two different yet complementary directions were taken by the two groups of experts:

- (i) **a social sciences approach**, which focused on the strategies that could be implemented to investigate the role and potential of ICTs in experiences where tourism, religion and learning overlap;
- (ii) **an engineering approach**, which focused on the ICT tools that could be designed / prototyped / tested to support and measure such experiences.

First direction: a social sciences approach

This group was constituted by H. Campbell (group leader), S. De Ascaniis (group assistant), E. Cristina, G. Lizzi, R. Marchetti, E. Mele and E. Piva.

The group worked in a systematic way: first, a question was raised, then experts worked in pairs, then each pair reported to the group on the key elements which emerged in their conversation. Such key elements were annotated on a flip chart, and finally the group leader summarized the most relevant findings for each question.

The following three questions were raised:

- *Where have we been?* Research, common trends, questions tackled until now (according to the members' knowledge) in the area of interest
- *Where are we now?* Key methods, best or frequent practices and examples
- *Where could we go (in research)?*

For each question, key outputs are reported in the following lines.

Where have we been?

Among the **research issues** considered so far in the overlapping areas of eTourism, eReligion and eLearning concern, we can mention

- (i) commercialization and commodification of religious sites and religious heritage;
- (ii) sustainability of tourism at religious / heritage sites;
- (iii) renewal, restoration and re-launch of old pilgrimage routes;
- (iv) digital systems to enhance pilgrimage experiences, such as GIS-systems, QR codes etc. along routes;
- (v) online pilgrimage as a substitute or supplement to *en-route* pilgrimage.

Trends observed in this area have had two main foci:

- (i) a focus on the visit / pilgrimage experience, where ICTs are seen as facilitators of such encounters because they make access to information easier and wider;
- (ii) a focus on the visitor / pilgrim, where ICTs are seen as a support for self-reflection and experience sharing.

Aspects which have received the *most attention* in investigation, are:

- (i) User Generated Content about religious and pilgrimage sites;
- (ii) communication patterns arising among pilgrims and religious tourists.

Where are we now?

Qualitative research methods have, so far, been the most used. Among them, in particular:

- (i) case studies;
- (ii) interviews with institutional authorities and with visitors;
- (iii) text analysis of user generated content.

Quantitative research methods are mostly applied to analyse geographic data and online content. In particular:

- (i) analysis of tourists flows through GIS data mapping;
- (ii) keywords and sentiment analysis of social media content;
- (iii) GPS mapping of heritage;
- (iv) mobile applications used to gather data (e.g. bracelets that measure body temperature and relate it to emotions).

Among the *best or most frequent practices* employed, are:

- (i) attempts to design, develop and measure the effectiveness of digital tools to support pilgrims' experience along selected parts of a route (e.g. GPS data from the Tuscan part of via Francigena);
- (ii) development of portals for online communication, to share and gather information about local religious communities (example: ParrocchieSulWeb.it);
- (iii) development of online magazines concerning religious tourism & pilgrimage (example: luoghiecamminidifede.it), to gain advantage from the digital hybridization of pre-existing paper magazines.

Where could we go (in research)?

Research actions are needed to further investigate areas such as:

- (i) identifying tools / software to analyse textual data as well as visual data;
- (ii) consider storytelling as a research method in order to explore visitor / pilgrim experiences.

Existing *resources and knowledge* need to be organized, in particular:

- (i) documenting research methods;
- (ii) collecting, categorizing and comparing case studies;
- (iii) compiling a list of researchers working on different issues;
- (iv) identifying and categorising existing mobile applications;
- (v) mapping pilgrimage routes recently re-considered or re-launched.

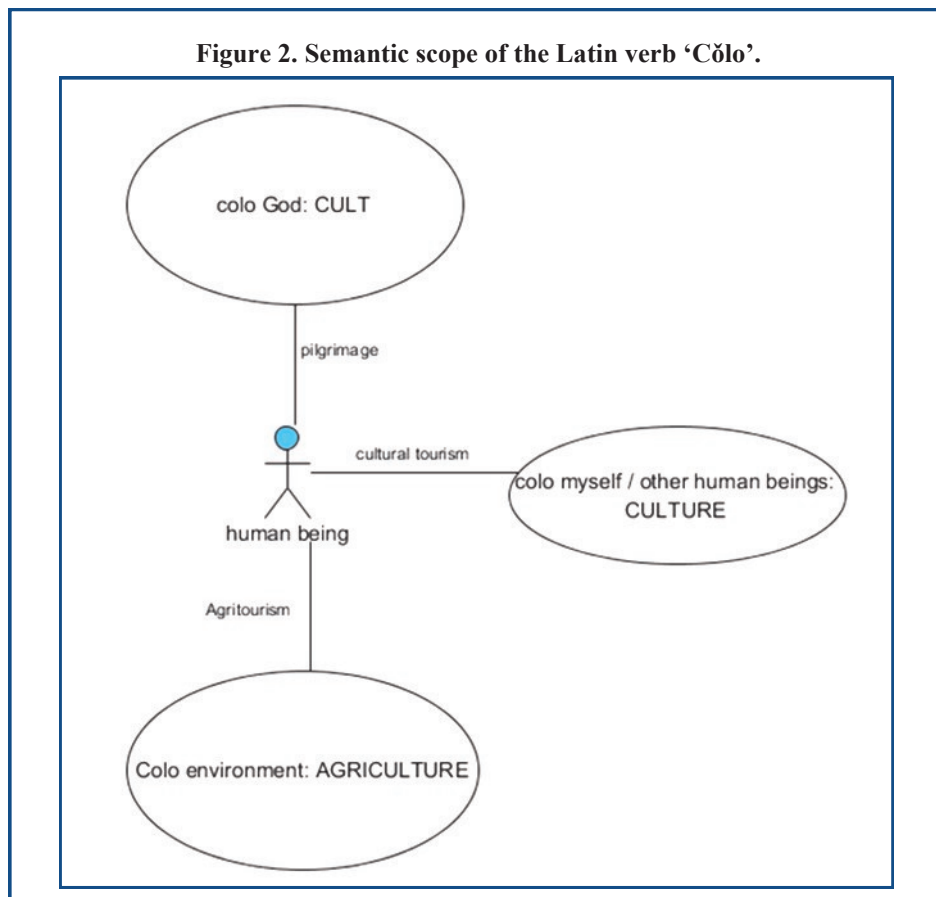
In terms of action, in the short term it is important to enhance the *online presence* of religious sites.

Second Direction: an engineering approach

This group was constituted by E. Sutinen (group leader), L. Cantoni (group assistant), A. Adukaite, S. Cerutti, M. Garbelli, E. Marchiori

The group, through several iterations of individual contributions and plenary discussions, elaborated ideas about ICT projects / products that might enhance or support visitor / pilgrim experiences, and could support further research in the concerned area. Hereafter some of them:

- objects to signal that someone is doing a certain action (e.g. mobile phone cover signalling that someone is using the smart phone to pray while in a religious building);
- software to track and show behaviour change during a religious/pilgrimage experience (e.g. a mobile digital faith companion to annotate or register daily experiences);
- pop-ups / reminders of worshipping action to be done at a certain place and time, or of a piece of knowledge available at a certain spot;
- crowd-sourcing of stories related to experiences at religious places;
- Tamagotchi type signalling of one's faith 'status';
- create P2P virtual communities for related experience sharing;
- 'church navigator', especially for churches rich in art;
- pilgrimage story book;
- ICT for spiritual eco-tourism;
- faith, geo and info matcher, to enable people to find the most suitable destinations/travel companions.



A conceptual base for the analysis of the various layers involved in the project ideas can be provided by the semantics of the word 'culture', which represents the common aspect shared by the three areas of interest, as shown in Figure 2.

The English word *culture* comes from the Latin word *cultūra*, - derived from the verb *colere* which means 'to cultivate'. When the verb refers to the land or the country, it meant to cultivate the soil (*agri-culture*). When it is used to refer to human beings, it indicates the nurturing and education of the human intellect and its skills (*culture* in the most common sense). The past participle of the verb *colere* is *cultus*, translated into the English word *cult*, which illustrates the act of worshipping God.

In its modern connotation, these different meanings are combined in the concept of *culture*: the methods employed to cultivate the soil developed over time according to the practices of different human communities; human intellect and skills need to be constantly cultivated with education and training in order to become civilized adults, exactly as plants need to be constantly nurtured to grow and bear fruit; the spiritual dimension deeply influences all the other aspects of human life.

Conclusions

Religious tourism is an under-researched sector within tourism studies, while the impact of tourism on religious experience is an underestimated aspect in religious studies; this leads to a low consideration of the learning opportunities opened by visits to religious sites or given by tourism practices to the religious experience. In addition to this, considered the widespread presence and extensive use of ICTs in every human activity, they can be taken as the lookout post from which one can observe social phenomena.

We hope that this brief *Manifesto* will help researchers in the concerned fields to further explore and unveil such an exciting and promising area of research and development.

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