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## Editorial: Conference Proceedings, Niche Market Formation for Faith-Based Tourism

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## Editorial: Conference Proceedings, Niche Market Formation for Faith-Based Tourism

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There were many reasons why the *International Conference on Niche Market Formation for Faith-Based Tourism: Issues and Policies in Faith-based Tourism Travel Business*, was held in Malta. Worldwide, the faith-based tourism market is experiencing substantial growth and pilgrimage centres of different religions have been reporting increasing pilgrim numbers. In the last decade or so, visitor numbers connected to faith-based tourism have increased rapidly, contributing to a growing economic sector, notwithstanding the global financial and economic crises of the early twenty-first century. It was estimated that in 2018 there were 1.4 billion tourists globally, of whom approximately one-third travelled for religious purposes (UNWTO WT Barometer 2019).

This would suggest that nearly one-third of the annual arrivals worldwide are linked to religious sites. However, this global growth of faith-based tourism and pilgrimage has hardly impinged on the structuring or niche-forming of inbound faith-based tourism to the Maltese archipelago, despite that in various periods of Maltese history, the islands were known as a pilgrim destination. While tourism is a vital pillar of the Maltese economy, notwithstanding its fully developed, tried and tested tourism infrastructure, up to now it has not managed to foster any significant faith-based tourism and to attract its share of pilgrimage tourists.

Stakeholders in Maltese religious, cultural and tourism, such as private enterprises, hotels, the Church, NGOs and tourism authorities, have not yet embarked on a common campaign to promote faith-based tourism. This conference provided a great opportunity for all stakeholders to discover the opportunities in this niche market.

Malta already welcomes a number of pilgrims and religious tourists, but this is mainly done through an uncoordinated effort, whereby Malta's assets remain heavily underutilised. There are more than 590 places of worship in Malta, but very few are open all day for visitors in a structured way. Malta is at present easily

accessible by often relatively inexpensive air connections. Moreover, Malta's vast potential, with 7,200 years of authenticity and rich local tradition, related to a distinctive historical, cultural and religious heritage, may present a broad appeal to many denominations, religions and philosophies of life.

The UNESCO World Heritage List mentions various sites and cities in Malta. However, it seems that all this wealth, access and progress has enticed little interest for faith-based tourism or pilgrimages from beyond the Maltese archipelago, and structured faith-based tourism and travel to Malta has remained a marginal affair. This is all more remarkable, since faith-based tourism and pilgrimage are quite resistant to financial and economic crises. In the present volatile world, a new and stable branch of tourism should be more than welcome. It is argued that it would be beneficial for Malta to make serious effort in the niche of faith-based tourism, in particular because it requires more a change of attitude and in how things are done, rather than massive investments in infrastructure.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* wishes to direct the attention to the many opportunities there are in this niche market for Malta. These range from economic benefits to changes in the way interpretation is carried out on site.

Oliver Cassar is a representative of the NGO volunteer organisations, in the field of local marching band clubs associated with patron-saints of villages. He looks at the contributions which volunteer organisations can make to faith-based tourism at a local level. His research also includes fraternities and chivalric orders. He questions if local voluntary organisations are sufficiently empowered to have a voice in the planning and policy-making processes, while insufficient communication between NGOs, other stakeholders and the authorities seems to result in misreading of goals and objectives. Nonetheless, the locals have sufficient potential to bring tradition and innovation to the local faith-based tourism product.

Julian Zarb researches community-based tourism, linking people through pilgrimages, *i.e.* bringing locals and foreign visitors together through the common aspects of religion, culture, hospitality and service. This hands-on practice is meant to intensify the quality of the local experience, rather than just noting visitor numbers. It also aims to increase the sense of ownership of the local stakeholders and to maintain their interest in the long run. As with the paper of Oliver Cassar, the question of consultation is raised and how the cycle of local initiative-dialogue-planning and policy can be realised.

The contribution of Marie Avellino-Stewart and Dane Munro deals with understanding and interpreting Neolithic temples and sacred landscapes in the context of an emerging faith-based tourism market in Malta, that of the New Religious Movements (NRM). This kind of pilgrimage aims at a full-sensory experience in the ancient temples of Malta. Such spiritual fulfilment includes both the inner and outer pilgrimage, while much depends on the tangibility and presence of vestige in and around the temple and the surrounding landscape. There are two aspects which are of a contested nature. It would be not advisable to open the temples for both NRM adherents and 'normal' tourist at the same time, as this might lead to conflicts in the same manner as when tourists are allowed to freely roam a church while a Holy Mass is being presented. The second contestation is in the interpretation of the temples to the public. In the interpretation centre of one of the temple sites, *Hāgar Qim* and *Mnajdra*, there is only an emphasis on the archaeological side of the matter, while a winning narrative regarding the spiritual side is absent.

Rev. Ruth Dowson has made two significant contributions. One is of *eventisation* and *venuefication* of sacred places, such as churches, and the second one emphasising the importance of the feminine in faith-based tourism, in particular centring on the persona of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Success in faith-based tourism is often measured according to healthy finances, which is a moot point for many churches and religious venues. Dowson's first study enlightens us how, and under what moral compass, one may rent out a church or venue for other than its original purposes, within and outside the realm of faith-based tourism and pilgrimage. A number of striking samples will hopefully act as a wake-up call for those in charge. The moral compass is extremely important, because the most lucrative ideas are often not applicable in churches, such as boxing matches.

Furthermore, at a micro-level, she indicates that miscommunication and castle-building are often stumbling blocks along the way of financial and managerial success for cash strapped religious entities.

Dowson's second paper asks if the Blessed Virgin Mary could be a connector between Roman-Catholic Malta and Anglican Britain. As an Anglican Minister, she has a profound insight in the diversity of the Church of England, which she describes as 'happy-clappy, arm-waving charismatics and conservative bible-carrying evangelicals living alongside incense-brandishing Anglo-Catholics and questioning liberals.' This article, a personal reflection, is seen through the hermeneutical lens, as she places human experience at the centre of her reflection process, underpinned by a strong personal motivation and self-identification as an 'insider.' The article is not 'all about Mary' but is built on the notion that identifying target markets for the niche of faith-based tourism and pilgrimage includes the realisation that not all worshipers (Anglicans in this case) share the same perspectives of faith (in this instance - Mary).

The paper by Darius Liutikas informs us about the current situation of managing pilgrimages in Lithuania, about which, he sketches some current issues. Darius introduces the concept of pilgrimages as valuistic journeys, which comprises both the traditional religious and the modern secular pilgrimage. This classification comprises numerous reasons and motives for people to engage in a journey. The most popular motivations in Lithuania are asking for God's Grace, for health, and expressing gratitude to Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary for graces received. Many participants see pilgrimage still as a spiritual quests and renewal. Only one per cent said it was for financial benefit. Other motivations were 'religious duty, for atoning sins and psychological comfort.' People visit places of origin (springs, wells, churches), circumstances of origin (cemeteries, tombs, places of apparition and miraculous images) objects of adoration (the Virgin Mary, Christ, Saints, Spiritual Authorities). Of special importance for the Lithuanians are the places where they can follow in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II and those special places where they can engage with the Virgin Mary. Both places are numerous. An overview of the management structure shows that the Church, NGOs and local parishes and communities are firmly in charge of incoming pilgrimages, in great contrast to Malta.

We may hope that the papers published in this special issue are able to inspire both Maltese and international researchers and stakeholders alike. There is still a long way to go, but with some satisfaction we can conclude that this conference has officially established and launched the Maltese niche for faith-based tourism. It is now up to the Maltese to expand and continue the process.

In addition to the papers presented in this Issue, a range of presentations from the seminar are also archived online at <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/>.

On the site, in addition to all abstracts from the event, one may find presentations by the following:

**Baldacchino, Godfrey:** Investigating the island trope in faith-based tourism (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/4/>).

**Cassar, George and Buttigieg, Noel:** Transforming a dark heritage building into a sensitive site: the faith-based message of the Inquisitor's Palace in Malta (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/6/>).

**Cassar, Maria Grazia:** Reflections on Tourism to Living Religious Heritage Sites in Malta (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/3/>).

**Clarke, Alan:** Sustainability, Stakeholders and Heritages (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day1/6/>).

**Clarke, Alan:** Hearing Voices: Stakeholders in Faith-Based Tourism (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/12/>).

**Liutikas, Darius:** Cemeteries as pilgrimage destination (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/11/>).

**Mayer, Reverend Stephan:** Pilgrimage on Malta? Impulse for a pilot-project (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day1/5/>).

**Vella, Leslie:** Establishing Malta's Potential as a Religious Tourism Destination: Pre-requisites for Developing & Promoting an Emerging Segment (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day1/8/>).

**Zammit, Maria Elena:** Seeking Spirituality in Malta's Prehistoric Past: Reflections on Visits to the Megalithic Temples (<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/day2/8/>).