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Review of: Religious Tourism and the Environment

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Review of: Religious Tourism and the Environment

Shinde, K.A. & Olsen, D.H. (2020) *Religious Tourism and the Environment*, CABI, Oxfordshire, UK. 180 pages, £95 / €110 / \$130 (Hardcover) ISBN: 9781789241600

Despite increasing scholarly attention on the environmental impacts of tourism, there has been little research on the environmental impacts of religious tourism and pilgrimage. As the oldest form of tourism, millions of people continue to travel to sacred places across the globe each year. In addition, despite the continuous growth of religious festivals and ceremonies at sacred sites such as Kumbh Mela, India, the impact of religious tourism on the environment and its role in the sustainable development of destinations is under explored. *Religious Tourism and Environment* edited by Kiran A. Shinde and Daniel H. Olsen is an original edited book, which focuses on the interrelationships between religion, tourism and the environment. By way of 12 eclectic chapters by a cross disciplinary group of scholars, this volume significantly and meaningfully opens up the interrelationships through new conceptualisations and detailed case study analyses. The book includes interdisciplinary case studies with various methods such as lengthy ethnographies that explore religious tourism and the environment in diverse geographical locations in South Asia, the Middle East and Western Europe. The book seeks to demonstrate universal and common issues facing site managers, authorities and other stakeholders such as the host community. The book succeeds in providing an in-depth and holistic view of the relationships between religious tourism and the environment.

Chapter 1 sets the context for the book by reviewing the literature linking religion, tourism, and the environment. It successfully identifies gaps in the literature, and presents a conceptual model, which explains linkages between religion, tourism and the environment. Chapter 2 discusses environmental views held by various religious groups and the tensions between secular and religious modes of environmentalism. It helpfully illustrates how pilgrimage and religious tourism impacts natural sacred sites. Chapter 3, by Shinde, provides a comparative analysis of the environmental issues in six religious

tourism destinations in western India. The chapter offers a conceptual framework for environmental management studies in pilgrimage and religious tourism destinations. Chapter 4 by Joshua Nash, which is an examination of the Vrindavan Ecological Concept is a standout chapter, as it focuses on how deeper and more philosophical experiences with sacred places can lead to the creation of ‘human sanctuaries’ -

a place-state where humans can live in a vibrant, non-static, and peaceful consonance with themselves as individuals and in an intimate and loving partnership with the greater human society and with nature (p. 65).

Chapter 5 examines local residents’ perspectives of Nepal’s Khumbu (Mt Everest) region and the role of international tourism in (re)shaping residents’ perspectives of this sacred landscape. Chapter 6 discusses how the Lumbini Master Plan has integrated the surrounding environment in site development and the challenges facing by those governing the site implementing the plan and the impacts of tourism. The chapter concludes by recommending the strengthening of institutional links and integrated management processes with various stakeholders in Lumbini. Chapter 7 by Nour Farra Haddad is a fascinating chapter, which explores interfaith pilgrimages by examining how elements in the natural landscape, such as trees, water, and stones are used by pilgrims to perform shared religious rituals and to overcome political divides. Chapter 8 discusses the entangled relations between religion, nature, and ideology, and demonstrates the role that architecture and architectural interpretation play within meditation, utilising the *Sagrada Familia* as a case study. Chapter 9, by Olsen, discusses diseases and other health-related issues at mass religious gatherings, using the Hajj as an example. The chapter stresses how government, health, and religious officials seek to mitigate the spread of diseases and other health-related issues at religious mass gatherings. This is a timely chapter given the COVID

context. Chapter 10 examines how increasing numbers of pilgrims and tourists are threatening the environment of the Hajj, and how local and national government agencies are managing waste through various environmental interventions. It finds that environmental sustainability can only be achieved if religious institutions take more responsibility for environmental sustainability. Chapter 11 examines the physical, and spiritual impacts of earthquakes in Central Italy. While natural disasters such as earthquakes brought pain, they also led to renewed hope and inspiration, and sacred sites in those destinations became a means of transmitting spiritual teachings to a community in need. It also helped build a strong sense of community solidarity. Chapter 12 is a concluding chapter and reflects on some of the findings by the contributors about the interconnections between religious tourism and the environment. The chapter also highlights some of the complexities and tensions between the environment and religious tourism to sacred places.

Whilst the call for sustainability can be a sensitive topic for some stakeholders, the chapters demonstrate how the interrelationships between the natural or human-built environment and religions are highly complex because different stakeholders have different views and interpretations, and may not easily agree on solutions or change because of their beliefs. Applying environmental regulation to religious and pilgrimage sites are particularly challenging. Shinde (2011) notes how religious actors often invoke tradition to justify their use of environmental resources for religious practices, while claiming no responsibility for and management of environmental impacts. Many traditional and orthodox religious

communities also consider that tourists help transform religious rituals into commercial acts as pollutants of sacred space. As Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate, host communities may perceive the construction of hotels and tourist infrastructure as fundamentally altering the sacred landscape and sense of place. The absence of a strong formal governance structures to manage environmental impacts is a major concern running across several chapters.

Whilst the chapters emphasise the need for authorities to collaborate with religious institutions, there is little evidence provided as how this can be effectively achieved. Many of the chapters use categories such as religious tourists and pilgrims somewhat differently. In addition, some chapters use 'religious tourists' broadly without indicating whether the category includes spiritual tourists, cultural tourists and so forth. These elements should be explored in a future edition. While the book includes four chapters from South Asia, the research contexts could be more diverse and include more studies from Southeast Asia and East Asia, so as to include broader view points and belief systems related to the environment. Future research might also incorporate the social sustainability concept and attend to its complex relationship with economic sustainability.

Notwithstanding these observations, this book is a great jumping off point for postgraduate scholars and students in religious studies, tourism, and sustainability studies as well as those involved in local and national governance, religious organisations, tourism businesses and local communities.

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