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IEREK Interdisciplinary Series for Sustainable Development

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Ahmed M. El-Kenawy · Riheb Hadji · Haroun Chenchouni ·
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Recent Advances in Environmental Science from the Euro-Mediterranean and Surrounding Regions

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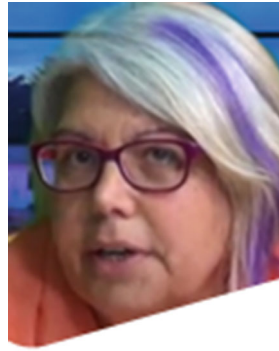
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Religious Tourism and Protection of Biodiversity

Fabio Balsamo

Abstract

The research will focus on the contribution of religious denominations in the implementation of sustainable forms of religious tourism, highlighting how religious tourism can become a tool for the protection of biodiversity and natural ecosystems. The paper will examine the legal instruments capable to support the effort of religious organisations in the management of protected natural areas and the most recent legal innovations concerning religious walks in the Italian legal system.

Keywords

Religious tourism · Religion and environmental · Environmental sustainability · Religious walks · Ecological transition

1 Introduction

Religious tourism is characterised by its intrinsic environmental sustainability compared to other forms of tourism.

It is no coincidence that the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in 2017, during the International Fatima Conference on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, emphasised the environmental sustainability of religious tourism, which can even appear as a form of ecotourism also in view of its mode of travel, many times characterised by walking itineraries that take place in close contact with nature (see Lo Giacco 2020). In this sense, the experience of the European Green Pilgrimage Network (EGPN) is remarkable. Based on a synergy with the various ‘pilgrimage towns’, the Network

promotes religious eco-tourism through the enhancement of small villages and the promotion of sustainable mobility.

The intrinsically eco-sustainable dimension of religious tourism does not mean, however, that with respect to these activities a further effort should not be made by religious actors to reduce its environmental impact.

2 Settings or Methods or Materials and Methods

The research will focus on the impact of the promotion of a ‘green religious tourism’ for the ecological challenges facing the planet with the aim to underline the importance of religious tourism as a tool for the protection of biodiversity.

It emerges by the doctrinal sources that religious denominations, as social actors engaged in the ‘custody of creation’, can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, enunciated in the UN 2030 Agenda, also through the reduction of the environmental impact of religious tourism. Consider, for example that the *Green Guide for Haji and Umrah*—that develops guidelines for the implementation of green forms of pilgrimage—pays specific attention to the reduction of water waste through the pursuit of the need to contain the water footprint of the individual pilgrim.

Religion organisations can also promote forms of green religious tourism thanks to the establishment and management of biodiversity protection sites also in collaboration with public authorities and/or private foundations. Religious communities are also involved in the phenomena of ‘legal anthropomorphisation’ of natural entities, especially rivers, as in the case of Whanganui River in New Zealand—sacred to the Maori and recognised as a living entity with full legal rights in 2017—and of Ganga and Yamuna rivers in India. Thus, thanks to this operation any damage done to the rivers recognised as legal entity can be penalised in the same way as damage brought to a person (Vazquez 2018).

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This research will examine some relevant experiences of ‘green religious tourism’ promoted by religious organisation and the legal instruments that can be used by religious actors to protect biodiversity and natural ecosystems. Finally, it will analyse the provisions concerning ‘religious walks’ in Italian legal system that can favour a further involvement of Third Sector religious entities in the promotion of eco-sustainable forms of religious tourism.

3 Results

The institution of protected natural areas managed by religious organisation can constitute a first instrument to protect natural ecosystems.

The institution of protected natural areas specifically dedicated to the protection of biodiversity, both animal and plant, is rooted, for example, in the Islamic context. In fact, the establishment of a protected natural area—*hima*—is very often justified precisely by the need to preserve the existence of specific animal or plant species. The first natural protected area in the Islamic context was established by the Prophet Muhammad himself near Medina, and today there are some emblematic examples of the revalorisation of the institution of the *hima* with the national network of protected areas in Lebanon (see Fronzoni 2023).

The management of protected natural areas can also involve religious denominations in collaboration with public authorities and/or private foundations. It’s the case of the project ‘A Garden to reconnect to the essential’ of the Augustinian Nuns of Corigliano—Rossano for the creation of a park-garden at their Monastery thanks to Intesa San Paolo’s ForFunding (see Gagliardi 2022). The initiative thus aims to concretely achieve a form of green religious tourism since the natural area is used to welcome tourists and pilgrims, attracted by the symbolic-religious and naturalistic value of the site. The park—designed and supervised by a team of agronomists—has in fact been created with a meticulous respect for biodiversity and native plant species, and it has been sponsored by ten private, public and religious bodies: the Archdiocese of Rossano-Cariati, the Municipality of Corigliano-Rossano, the Codex Diocesan Museum, the Sila and Pollino National Parks, the Italian Botanical Society, Unical—DiBest department, the Green Accord association of journalists, the Augustinian Monasteries of Italy Federation, the Order of Saint Augustine.

The sacred character of some natural sites can also be a prerequisite for their protection through their inclusion in the list of UNESCO sites. This is the case, for example, of what has happened in Italy with the nine *Sacri Monti of Piedmont and Lombardy*, whose recognition was established in 2003 also in consideration of their symbolic spiritual significance.

The recognition of natural sacred sites, as well as the search for adequate protection instruments, presupposes a necessary cooperation between public and religious authorities for the management of these sites, whose interests invest both state and religious orders also with regard to their touristic valorisation. For example, with regard to the *Sacri Monti of Piedmont and Lombardy*, this need for collaboration between religious and public bodies emerges from the institution of a special Permanent Conference, within which all the actors involved in management are represented (Mi-bac, Regions, Dioceses, Municipalities, religious bodies). The Permanent Conference has the task of expressing opinions and proposals on matters and topics that it considers of particular interest for the UNESCO site and for the context in which the Sacred Mounts are inserted; it examines, also for cognitive or reconnaissance purposes only, problems connected with the UNESCO site, its relations with third parties, the quality and type of services offered and the planning of interventions; it verifies the implementation of the activities envisaged by the Unitary Management Plan. The Permanent Conference carries out its activities in coordination with the Permanent Operational Working Group.

The sacred character of some natural sites can be also emphasised thanks to the institutions of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. These Reserves are areas of terrestrial, coastal and marine ecosystems in which, through appropriate policies of management, the conservation of the biodiversity is associated with the sustainable use of natural resources for the benefit of local communities. Religious organisations can certainly contribute to the management of these areas too.

4 Discussion

The transformation of the religious tourism in an eco-sustainable way is now greatly encouraged in the current Italian legal system by the Italian Law no. 234 of 2021.

Its Article 1, paragraph 963 has established a special ‘Fund for Religious Routes’ for the relaunch and tourist promotion of the so-called religious walks and the recovery and enhancement of the properties that characterise them’. The Fund’s resources are intended to finance ‘actions for the relaunch and tourist promotion of religious walks, aimed at devising and implementing a coordinated communication strategy for the national religious walks tourism product’.

Among the subjects entitled to request the registration of an itinerary in the ‘Catalogue of Italian Religious Routes’, in addition to public bodies, there are also Third Sector bodies, including religious ones, and civilly recognised religious bodies that ‘with reference to one or more religious routes, they carry out destination management activities, the promotion of the route and its maintenance, as well as the issuing and management of credentials and testimonium’.

It must be noted that the Italian legislator's choice to identify these routes as 'religious' paths is not without significance, unlike what happened in the Council of Europe in 2017, when many itineraries of an eminently religious nature were recognised as European 'Cultural' Itineraries.

A further aspect worthy of interest is represented by the possibility for the tourist/traveller/pilgrim to acquire and use one or more documents (also in digital form) certifying the pilgrimage for the whole or part of the route (so-called testimonium and pilgrim credential). On this point, it seems to be necessary to argue that the issuance of certifications must be recognised in the Third Sector religious entities or in the civilly recognised religious entities. The issue of certification, in fact, since it is aimed at satisfying a religious interest of the faithful themselves should be the prerogative of the religious bodies involved in the organisation and management of the religious paths. However, the forms attached to the decree seem to allow the issuing of credential and testimonium or other corresponding documents only to the body that has applied the request to register the itinerary in the Catalogue of Religious Walks. That's why it is particularly important that Third Sector religious bodies and civilly recognised ecclesiastical bodies, rather than public territorial bodies, take steps to request the registration of a specific religious walk in this Catalogue.

The most interesting aspect deriving from the implementing decree dated 23.06.2022, however, is the provision of a specific regulatory definition of the concept of 'religious path'. According to the definition of religious path contained in Article 1, paragraph 2 of the implementing Ministerial Decree religious walks are 'excursion itineraries with a religious or spiritual theme, which can be covered exclusively or prevalently on foot or with other forms of slow and sustainable tourism, at an interregional and regional level'.

A significant fact immediately emerges from reading this provision. It is evident how in this definition the religious character of the walk is inextricably intertwined with its necessary environmental sustainability. In other words, according to the legal definition, only that itinerary with a religious or spiritual theme that is realised on foot or with other forms of slow and sustainable tourism integrates the concept of a religious walk. Sustainability thus becomes an indefectible element of the very concept of 'religious walk', with the consequence that a walk with a spiritual theme that is realised in a manner different from those indicated, or in any case not sustainable, cannot be considered a 'religious walk' for the purposes of its registration in the 'Cata-

logue of Italian religious walks'. In this way, the regulatory intervention seems to further enhance the references to sustainable mobility or soft mobility contained in the various regional legislations and considered characteristic of this form of religious tourism.

5 Conclusions

This approach undoubtedly enhances the intrinsically eco-sustainable nature of religious walks and seems justified by the need to allocate these additional resources provided by the *Fund for Religious Walks* exclusively for those forms of religious tourism that are genuinely projected towards an environmental protection and a reduction in the environmental impact of human activities.

In conclusion, this provision may thus further stimulate religious denominations, and specifically Third Sector religious bodies, to continue their efforts towards the implementation of an increasingly eco-sustainable religious tourism, such as religious walks.

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