Chapter 5

“Beyond” Religious Tourism: The Case of Fez

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ABSTRACT

Fez, the spiritual capital of Morocco, is a popular destination for different kinds of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists: pilgrims, religious tourists and cultural tourists. This chapter, based on primary research, investigates the relationship between tourism and religion, focusing on the Festival of World Sacred Music (launched in 1994) and the Festival of Sufi Culture (established in 2006) and on the project on the restoration of the Sufi mosque Ain Al-Khail. The case of Fez shows how a tourism offer based on Islam can attract people of all faiths and create dialogue among them. Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to show that promoting and supporting the inclusive and tolerant Islamic nature of a destination does not imply excluding people of other faiths. Highlighting Islam’s natural inclination toward hospitality and travelling, the case of Fez shows how religiosity (and not just religion) can peacefully co-habit with tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is not a new focus of tourism studies. Although the literature on tourism has already addressed the relationship between religion and tourism (Battour, Ismail and Battor, 2011; Eid, 2013; Henderson, 2009; Jafari and Scott, 2013), several
aspects concerning this issue certainly warrant further investigation, particularly when it comes to Islam.

Indeed, the relationship between the Muslim faith and tourism, pilgrimages aside, has long been ignored (Battour, Ismail, and Battor, 2011; Din, 1989; Henderson, 2003; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010). Islam is not inherently opposed to tourism (Aziz, 1995; Henderson, 2003; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010). On the contrary, it is compatible with the Muslim faith to travel (Din, 1989). Further, Islam sees travelling as a way to disseminate the religion and peacefully spread its divine message (Sanad, Kassem and Scott, 2010). Similarly, Islam is not incompatible with the idea of a Muslim country hosting tourists from other civilizations or of other faiths. Nevertheless, for a long time, the tourism industry disregarded the needs of Muslims (as tourists) as well as Islamic prescriptions when developing tourism products. Only recently have these issues been receiving increasing attention. Muslim-oriented tourism, for instance, is currently an emerging, but still under-researched topic in the tourism literature, as is the way in which Islam can shape and influence tourism strategies. Also, religious tourism seems to be a relatively under-researched topic and hence the opportunities associated with this segment.

This study analyses the relationship between religion and tourism, taking Fez, the spiritual capital of Morocco (Istasse, 2013), as a case study. Hosting the shrine of Ahmad al-Tidjani, the founder of the Tidjaniyya order (a Sufi order founded in the 18th century), the Moroccan town has been attracting West African followers since pre-colonial time (Berriane, 2015; Triaud and David, 2000). Today, Fez still continues to perform its role as a site of pilgrimage. More recently, with Morocco becoming a popular destination for international tourists, the national and local authorities have tried to brand the city as a cultural tourism destination (Berriane, 2009) in line with the national strategy to enhance cultural tourism (Berriane, 2009). In this idea of culture, Islam plays a crucial role (Porter, 2000). The city’s main attraction is its old city, the Medina, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. After years of continuous degradation, in the 1990s, through projects supported by international donors (e.g. UNDP, World Bank), the image of the Medina started changing (Berriane, Aderghal, Idrissi Janati and Berriane, 2013). New cultural initiatives were put in place, such as the Festival of World Sacred Music (launched in 1994) and the Festival of Sufi Culture (in 2006) both attracting a large number of international tourists (Kapchan, 2008; Justice, 2015). Nowadays, Fez is indeed a popular destination for different kinds of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists: pilgrims, religious tourists and cultural tourists.

This chapter investigates the relationship between tourism and religion, focusing on the above mentioned festivals – and in particular on the Festival of Sufi Culture (under-researched compared to the Festival of World Sacred Music) – and on the project on the restoration of a Sufi mosque (the Mosque Ain Al-Khail). This study –
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