



# Understanding conflicts at religious-tourism sites: The Baha'i World Center, Israel



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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a conflict stemming from the construction of a religious-tourism site – The Baha'i World Center, in Haifa, Israel and contributes to the literature on the relationship between religion, tourism, and conflict. We first propose a framing typology based on literature of conflicts, as well as analysis of empirical data, using Grounded Theory. We then apply the typology on the conflict around the construction of the Baha'i World Center in Haifa. Our main findings fall under three main themes, or super-frames: 'Process,' 'Values,' and 'Issues' – of which the 'Process super-frame' was found to have the dominant role in the Baha'i case study. Beyond that, we offer a method that may be useful in understanding the conflicts stemming from the construction of tourism at religious-tourism sites elsewhere and, at times, shed light on possible approaches to reframing disputes over tourism sites.

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## 1. Introduction

Religious-tourism sites such as cathedrals, temples, and mosques are currently attracting an increasing number of tourists worldwide, not only because of their spiritual significance but also because of the recreational, educational, and cultural purposes they fulfill (Francis, Williams, Annis, & Robbins, 2008; Shackley, 2001; Woodward, 2004). Not all religious sites are conceived as religious-tourism sites but many evolve as tourism attractions. Religious-tourism has been defined both as tourism to sites of current and/or past religious significance (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013) and as the visitation of religious settings considered relevant to one's own faith or the faith of others (Raj & Morpeth, 2007).

The establishment of new religious-tourism sites or enlargement of existing ones may cause disputes and clashes on political, cultural, and social levels. This article contributes to the literature on tourism in general and on religious-tourism in particular by exploring the relationship between tourism, politics, religion and conflict. Better understanding of such conflicts may also ultimately contribute to conflict mitigation. The research generates a typology of conflict perceptions that provide insight into disputes stemming from the construction of religious sites – many of which attract tourists.

Many studies of tourism impact are heavily contextualized in the specific attributes of given study areas and lack comparison with other areas and related case studies (Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2012). This study demarcates a different approach by proposing a framing typology

based on an empirical dataset and the literature of religion, politics and conflict. Theoretically, we propose applying frame analysis as a means of understanding the conflict surrounding the establishment of religious-tourism sites, many of which serve as tourism magnets. Framing is a powerful tool for conceptualizing situations and shaping perceptions. In recent years, framing has been the subject of growing interest in a variety of disciplines and fields, prompting Robert Goodin (2009) to include the concept in his list of candidates for "The Next Big Thing" in his Oxford Handbook of Political Science (Desrosiers, 2012). On a practical level, effectively preparing planners and decision makers for the establishment of new religious-tourism sites in the future requires a solid understanding of the main categories of issues involved. For now, however, few studies have applied this methodology in the field of tourism.

The significance of this study is thus threefold. First, it proposes a frame typology and analysis as a means of understanding conflicts surrounding religious-tourism sites, many of which become religious-tourism sites, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. Second, it contributes to the understanding of the Baha'i case study. Thus thirdly, it contributes to the body of religion, tourism and conflicts studies. We begin with a short literature review focusing on tourism conflicts in general and conflicts surrounding religious-tourism sites specifically, followed by a presentation of the Baha'i Center in Haifa. Next, we review the methodology and explain how the framing typology was developed. The findings section applies the typology to the Baha'i Center. The paper closes with a focused discussion of the case study, as well as a broader discussion and conclusion regarding the use of framing as a tool for deepening understanding of religious-tourism site conflicts.

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## 2. Conflicts in tourism

The study of conflict has received a lot of attention in the tourism arena in the last two decades. The conflicts explored in the tourism literature are typically social, cultural, and economic in nature and most have elements of all categories. Although the sources of a dispute may be more solidly grounded in one of the categories, differentiation in today's complex world is quite difficult (Dredge, 2010; Poria & Ashworth, 2009; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003; Singh, 1997; Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2013). In many tourism-focused communities, tourism development significantly influences social conflict. By bringing in more groups and subgroups, tourism development alters and complicates the scope and nature of conflicts, thereby influencing social structure and bringing about cultural change within local communities. The disputes that emerge typically revolve around the conflicting interests, values, and goals espoused by different stakeholders; by ethnic communities and outside developers (over the economic benefits of tourism); and by tourists and locals (over limited resources).

Cultural and economic conflicts generally imply some degree of incompatibility between individuals and between societies and local authorities (Robinson & Boniface, 1999; Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012). Lee, Riley, and Hampton (2010), for example, analyze the political involvement and relationships that influenced the progress of a specific tourist site in Korea. The study explores the dynamics of collaboration and shows how initial advantages can evolve into conflict and inertia over time. It also outlines the continuing discord among interested groups, investigates the relationships surrounding the development process, and demonstrates how perceptual differences come to be embedded. Dredge (2010) posits that place values, attachments, and meanings are constructed from the social, cultural, economic, ecological, and physical attributes of place. Individuals and groups value combinations of these attributes differently, giving rise to unique meanings and attachments to place. The strength of these meanings and attachments can be a source of intense conflict when the unique qualities of particular places are threatened. In tourist destinations, these place values and attachments are dynamic, continually being constituted and reconstituted in the memories and daily lives of local residents and tourists.

Deery et al. (2012) holds that because the success of tourism in many regions is so dependent on the support of the local community, it is essential that tourism's impact on the host community be understood, monitored, and managed. When managing the impact of tourism on the local community, its impact must not exceed the limits that are deemed acceptable within the community. Institutionalization of the appropriate management strategies requires an understanding of how certain tourist behaviors and outcomes affect members of the local community. For example, a study on tourism development in Iran (Zamani-Farahani & Ghazali, 2012) provides information on the state of Islamic religiosity and socio-cultural impact on residents, and affords original insight into the interaction between Islamic religion and tourism. This information is of great value to the Iranian authorities, the tourism industry, academics, and local communities.

One perspective frequently employed to explain the socio-cultural impacts of tourism is Social Exchange Theory (Ap, 1992). This theory infers that local residents evaluate tourism according to the costs and benefits they expect to sustain in exchange for their involvement. As a result, when residents perceive that costs are outweighed by potential benefits, they have a positive attitude toward development (Ap, 1992; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009). Sirakaya, Teye, and Sonmez (2002), however, point out that Social Exchange Theory relies not only on the occurrence of an exchange but on its perceived relative fairness.

## 3. Conflicts surrounding religious-tourism sites

Whereas the study of conflict is addressed in the tourism arena, the conflicts surrounding religious-tourism destinations have received less

systematic attention. Religious-tourism sites offer tourists a wide variety of experiences and activities including religious services, choir performances, music recitals, and civic and religious ceremonies (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Studies also demonstrate that people visit sites of religious significance for a variety of reasons that may or may not be related to faith or spiritual needs (Hughes et al., 2013).

Over the past decade, religious-tourism sites have been the subject of intensive scholarly investigation. Some works examine specific sites and seek to better understand how they were demarcated or identified, who enjoys rights of access and ownership, what they mean to individuals and communities, and other questions central to site management (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Collins-Kreiner, Shmueli, & Ben-Gal, 2013; Kong, 1993, 2001, 2005; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Current religious-tourism research focuses on geographical, sociological, and management-related aspects of sites, and the attributes and motivations of site visitors. Studies also explore the relationship between the sites themselves and conflicts on the local, national, and international level (Digance, 2003; Hubert, 1994; Shackley, 2001).

In what way are religious-tourism sites distinct from other tourism sites? They have physical and symbolic dimensions and are geographically demarcated and associated with places to which one or more religious community attributes extraordinary religious significance or divine consecration. In recent years, they have also received considerable attention with regard to identity formation among minority groups, and scholars demonstrate how sacred venues serve as a nexus for identity formation, collective memory, self-empowerment, and resistance (Brace, Bailey, & Harvey, 2006; Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Friedland & Hecht, 2000; Kong, 1993, 2001, 2005; Napolitano, 2009; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Tweed, 1997).

Thus, in this work we try to examine the linkages between the development of religious-tourism sites as tourist attractions and which concepts alter the perception of conflict. Although Israel offers a highly charged setting for considering the conflicts of religious-tourism sites, conflicts over the religious politics of space are not limited only to the politically explosive locations. Indeed, religion and the expansion of religious-tourism sites throughout the built environment have long conflict-ridden histories around the world (Gatrell & Collins-Kreiner, 2006; Naylor & Ryan, 2002). This study aims to enhance understanding the relationship between religious-tourism sites and conflict through an in-depth examination of the Baha'i Center.

## 4. The Baha'i Center in Haifa

The study area is located in Israel's third largest city — Haifa, with its population of roughly 250,000. Historically, the city has been regarded as “more secular” in comparison to other Israeli cities. Indeed, Haifa is often understood by its residents as a multi-cultural city seldom associated with contemporary political, religious, or military conflict. Haifa is also home to the Baha'i World Centre, a World Heritage Site, which contains the administrative center for the international Baha'i community, the Shrine of the Bab, the Terrace Gardens, and other key sites.

The Baha'i Faith was founded by Baha'u'llah in 19th-century Persia. Baha'u'llah was exiled for his teachings from Persia to the Ottoman Empire and died while officially still a prisoner. After Baha'u'llah's death, under the leadership of his son, Abdu'l-Bahá, the religion spread from its Persian and Ottoman roots, and gained a footing in Europe and America, and was consolidated in Iran, where it suffers intense persecution. After the death of Abdu'l-Bahá, the leadership of the Baha'i community entered a new phase, evolving from a single individual to an administrative order with both elected bodies and appointed individuals (Sharon, 2005). Today there are probably more than 7 million Baha'is around the world in more than 200 countries and territories (The Baha'i World Center, 2014).

Centered on Mt. Carmel, the Baha'i's connection with Haifa began in the late 1800s. For Baha'i around the world, this site is of singular centrality as the site of the world center of their faith. It assumed unique

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