



**International Conference on Religious Tourism:  
*Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host communities***

**Bethlehem, State of Palestine, 15-16 June 2015**

**Session 1: Understanding religious tourism - motivations and trends**

**Dr. Rami Isaac, Senior Lecturer in Tourism, NHTV Breda University,  
Netherlands and University of Bethlehem, Palestine**



**Bio:**

Born in Palestine, Rami Isaac did his undergraduate studies in The Netherlands, graduate studies in the U.K. and has earned his PhD from University of Groningen, in Spatial Sciences, in The Netherlands. He is currently a senior lecturer in tourism teaching at the undergraduate as well as postgraduate levels at the Academy for Tourism at the NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands. In addition, he is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management at Bethlehem University, Palestine.

He was the external assessor of Bethlehem TEMPUS (2004-2006) curriculum development project in Palestine in the field of pilgrimage, tourism and cultural industries. Currently he is the President of the Research Committee 50 on International Tourism, International Sociologist Association ISA (2014-2018). His research interests are in the area of tourism development and management, critical theory, heritage and political aspects of tourism. He has published numerous articles and books with chapters on tourism and political (in) stability, occupation, tourism and war, violence and transformational tourism.

**Abstract:**

Religious travel is not a new phenomenon. Religion has long been an integral motive for journey undertaking and is usually considered the oldest form of non-economic travel. Religious tourism is a significant and rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry. However, regardless of the name, the inference is

that this is a form of tourism that is driven by a given faith. As a sector, religious tourism is not well researched and documented.

The growth in religious tourism is thought to have two key drivers. First, while the number of people claiming to belong to a faith has not necessarily increased, Muslim and Christian populations are growing. Second, people are increasingly finding ways to integrate their beliefs into their lives, and consequently travelling for religious purposes is becoming more common as travel and religion become a combined activity. Here are a few things to consider in regards to the religious tourism market: First, the religious market has the advantage of appealing to people from all over the world, of all ages and nationalities. They tend to travel in groups; be aware that in unstable economic times, religious travel is often less prone to economic ups and downs; and then, connect secondary industries with your religious markets, such as culture, heritage and arts.

Tour operators are currently the central players in the inbound tourism value chain. However, these operators are primarily focused on serving the existing and established main market, namely pilgrimage tourism, and show very little initiative to branch out into, or cooperate in, the development by others of, alternative or complementary tourism products. Another factor to take into account it is the restricted circulation between Palestinian Territories.

Regarding the religious market in Palestine, a more diversified marketing of 'Destination Palestine' and the breadth of sites and activities available for visitors would lead to an increase in overall visitor numbers, more visits to more sites, and an increase in nights spent by existing visitors. Information on the viability of complementary products/markets is lacking, resulting in a lack of tour operators' initiatives to widen tourism offers.

Building on prior and on-going initiatives, it will be essential to develop alternative historical, cultural, religious and natural sites located all over the West Bank which are currently neglected. This development should involve the private sector as (co-)investors, (co-) developers and (co-)managers, through licensing, concessions, private ownership (coupled with public law obligations) and other legal tools.