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On Dragons and Elephants: Religion in Domestic and International Tourism in China and India

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This introductory essay explores some of the commonalities and differences that emerge from this thematic issue on religion and tourism in China and India. Economic growth has led to an explosion in domestic tourism activity in both countries, and the respective states are deeply involved in this development. The Indian state sees tourism as a means to create jobs, revenue and regional development. While this is also true for the Chinese state, the latter further treats tourism as a means to control and manage religion. In both countries, official tourism development can lead to complete makeovers of particular sites as beautification projects and tight regulation drives out informal economies and change the religious dynamics on the ground. The local management, be it formal or informal, affects not only where the money flows, but also how temples are visited and gods worshiped.

Buddhism related tourism plays a peculiar role in India, where the government employs it as a vehicle for articulating pan-Asian and even global aspirations. Asian Buddhists visit Indian Buddhist destinations in growing numbers. At the same time, Buddhist sites attract a steady stream of Western tourists who are most comfortable labelling themselves as spiritual travellers. For these travellers, the notion of 'tourism' threatens sources of authentic spirituality.

In China, tourism is contributing to a revival of religion, sometimes providing means for temple institutions to legitimate their religious activities. Self-professed secular domestic tourists in China routinely engage in short acts of veneration at Buddhist places of pilgrimage. In this respect, Han Chinese tourists appear not so different from their Hindu counterpart in India. Increasingly, Hindu visitors at sites of pilgrimage opt for short acts of worship, rather than long rituals. Travel guidebooks, however, paint different pictures: Chinese tourists are given practical advice and encouragement on the performance of rituals, and their representation of religion recalls orientalist tropes of Western guidebooks. Indian guidebooks, on their part, retain elements of traditional Hindu pilgrimage literature assuming that the reader has the required know-how of religious practices. The tourist imaginaries of the Global North, as expressed in English language guidebooks, still rest on Orientalist underpinnings when it comes to both India and China.

Key Words: India and China, Asia, religion and tourism, heritage, guidebooks

This collection of eight articles sprang out of a workshop exploring religion and tourism in the two Asian giants, India and China. While we as editors have our backgrounds in the study of religion, we invited scholars with backgrounds in different disciplines - including anthropology, area studies, geography, urban planning and sociology - to explore similar themes across the two countries. We are excited to present most of those papers in this Open Access journal, that recently featured a special issue titled *Pilgrimages in India: Celebrating journeys of plurality and sacredness* (McIntosh, Singhal and Das, 2016).

That issue highlighted various modes of travelling in India, with a final paper tracking pilgrimage ties between India and China (McIntosh, 2016). With the present thematic issue, we pick up this thread with a series of essays exploring religion in domestic and international tourism in China and India.

In this introductory essay, we will introduce the papers and provide some reflections on the articles, of which three discuss cases from China and four from India. This introduction aims at giving the reader a sense of some central commonalities and differences across the

social and cultural landscapes of India and China. The opening article by Noga Collins-Kreiner, however, is of a different nature. A prominent voice in the debate on the tourism-pilgrimage interface, Collins-Kreiner has worked on cases of religion-related travel in Israel and India. Her article (Collins-Kreiner, 2018) reviews the trajectory of scholarly debate concerning the pilgrimage-tourism nexus, thereby setting the stage for the explorations and case studies from the two countries which journalists like to call the dragon and the elephant. Collins-Kreiner's overview reveals the way in which scholarly discourse has oscillated between arguments in favor of differentiating pilgrimage/pilgrims and tourism/tourists as phenomena and de-differentiating the two. Several of the contributions in this collection move beyond or aim at other kinds of questions in the broader field of religion and tourism, signalling that scholars are finding new research avenues beyond the familiar 'is this tourism or pilgrimage?' or 'are they really pilgrims or tourists?'. However, why turn to China and India to explore the busy intersection of religion and tourism?

China and India are by far the two most populous countries in the world. Together they make up for more than a third of the world's population. In recent decades, both have undergone major economic transformations, i.e., massive processes of liberalisation and growth, resulting in the emergence of a new middle class and consumer culture, at least in urban contexts. While India still has at least 30 per cent of its population living below the poverty line and remains among the less developed countries of the world in terms of per capita GDP, it now ranks as number three worldwide in terms of overall GDP; China has emerged as one of the leading economies of the world, even though the country in terms of per capita GDP only ranks at around number 70, if not below (depending on which source one uses). The economic development of China is prominently displayed in terms of tourism activities: China now ranks in the top four countries in the world for international tourist arrivals (behind France, the United States, and Spain), and as the number two country (behind the United States) for international tourism receipts (i.e., expenditure by international inbound tourists). Compared to China's 58.8 million international tourist arrivals (2015) - note that this figure does not include Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan -, India is lagging far behind with 8.0 million in 2015, even if this figure makes India the leading nation in South Asia.^[1] Nevertheless, according to a recent study by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in New Delhi, the tourism sector

contributes more to the Indian economy than the automobile sector and almost as much as the IT sector.^[2] Note that this refers to international tourism only. Even in China, tourism is a significant economic factor, as tourism is no longer a privilege of the wealthy but a standard practice among broader segments of the population.

Domestic tourists far outnumber international tourists in both China and India (and domestic tourism is addressed in several articles in this special issue). For 2010, the figure of 2.1 billion instances of domestic tourism has been recorded in China (Xiaom and Li, 2015). This figure must have increased since then. For the Indian state of Maharashtra, a study conducted by AC Nielsen-ORG-MARG in 2010 estimates that 98 percent of the 11.4 million annual tourist arrivals in that state are domestic visitors. For India as a whole, a survey of domestic tourism was undertaken by the National Sample Survey Office in 2008-9, which estimated that there were a total number of 783.5 million tourists in 2008 undertaking about 2.1 billion domestic trips.^[3] Close to two thirds of tourists travelled for social purposes such as visiting friends and relatives, attending weddings and other social events; 9 percent of rural tourists and 12 percent of urban tourists cited religion and pilgrimage as the main purpose for their overnight trips, and 6 percent and 11 percent for same day trips. Based on these numbers we can calculate that this would amount to some 473 million overnight and same day trips with religion / pilgrimage as the leading purpose. Leisure, holidays and recreation accounted for less than 5 per cent of stated tourist purposes. The last figure might seem startlingly low seen from the point of view of the West. At the same time, it is a powerful reminder that ways of traveling, including the language we use for determining motivations and purposes, are class and culture specific. Travelling for the sake of recreation demands a certain social legitimacy and sanctioning to become mass-culture. Moreover, it requires substantial discretionary income, and is therefore, from a global perspective, a privilege of the rich.

Tourists in search of 'spiritual' meaning and experiences constitute an important element of the

1. Figures taken from *UNWTO Tourism Highlights*, 2016 edition.

2. See http://www.ncaer.org/uploads/news/pdf/news_pdf_file_69.pdf (1.10.2016).

3. *Second Tourism Satellite Account for India, 2009-10*, prepared by National Council of Applied Economic Research (p4, 37). From the report is not clear if the total number of 'tourist trips' includes same day trips or only counts overnight trips or journeys more than 24 hours.

religion-tourism nexus. In Asia, these so-called spiritual tourists from the Global North seek out the, to them, exotic religious traditions and practices of the 'East'. Several of the contributions to this issue address this phenomenon, in particular François Thibeault's article on Westerners in India attracted to, or fascinated with Buddhism (Thibeault, 2018). Finally, we should not to forget that we as editors and a majority of the contributors, are white, male scholars originating from the Global North (5 out of 8). Still, it has been our hope that a collection of articles that take India and China as the starting point and focus could provide new insights and move the scholarly debate into new territory. For one thing, domestic tourism in India and China has received comparatively little attention (Gladstone, 2005:14), even though its magnitude and force is far too great to be overlooked in terms of its impact, not just on religion and culture, but also areas such as economy, ecology and politics to mention a few.

Many religious sites in China and India (and in many other countries) have, in the age of global tourism, experienced an enormous increase in their number of visitors, which has sometimes led to serious ecological, economic, and social changes or even transformations of places. Increased exposure to tourism creates both problems and opportunities. Many people make it a point to visit religious sites when they visit friends and families, especially in their ancestral places, and they often seek to schedule their visits so as to coincide with religious festivals at these places. Tourism also contributes to change in religion by scheduling religious activities within formats defined by tourism. For instance, in India, organised package tours to heritage sites may provide specific slots in the program inviting religious activities such as worship or prayer. Moreover, as highlighted in the articles of Aukland (2018) and Shinde (2018), pilgrimage package tours tend to downplay traditional and time-consuming rituals and procedures in favour of speedy travel and comfortable journeying. In China, ethnic and religious minorities are visited in the context of tourism and in the case of Buddhist sites, as shown in the contributions by Robert Shepherd and Emmelie Korell, professed 'secular' tourists typically venerate the Buddha in short ritual acts (Shepherd, 2018; Korell, 2018). In India, a vibrant niche of Buddhism-related tourism has emerged, even though Indian Buddhism is nowadays a minority religion, mainly practiced by Dalits, who are hardly part of the Buddhism related tourism.

In India, the increase of tourism has been stimulated by economic changes coming as a result of economic

liberalisation since the early 1990s. This was also the period when so-called Hindu-nationalist groups affirmed their position in national politics. As argued by Meera Nanda (2009:109), this has implied an increase in state funding being channelled to upgrade and boost Hindu pilgrimage sites under the banner of promoting domestic tourism. Still, the official religious orientation of the country is constitutionally defined as 'secular' – an ambiguous and disputed term (e.g., Bhargava, 1998), which should not be confused with 'secularising'. As per the constitutional framework, Indian state politics does not aim to fight religion. Quite the contrary, the 'secular' state in India is one that is actively involving itself in the business of all the religions in the country, even if Hindu-nationalist politics tend to give Hinduism preferential treatment. In China, even though a certain range of religious traditions have enjoyed some amount of acceptance in the post-Mao era and religious ideas are sometimes drawn on as instances of legitimation, the state is actively trying to keep lived religion under control. Contrary to India, many sites traditionally linked to religious communities and traditions have been redeveloped, not in terms of their religious features, but rather as heritage sites.

During the past decade, a number of studies have been published on China and India respectively, but this is the first collection of articles that covers both countries. In the case of China an edited interdisciplinary collection was published under the title *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism, and the Chinese State* (Oakes and Sutton, 2010). The choice of the subtitle signals the paramount importance of the state in China. The editors conclude their introductory essay by saying that the papers in their volume present:

a case for tourism as a crucial framework within which to better understand both the 'revival' of religion in contemporary China as well as the state's efforts to usurp, authorize, and narrate that revival for its own purposes (Oakes and Sutton, 2010:21).

This conclusion would not apply to the case of India, given its different history, political structure and ideology. This current issue includes an essay in which scholar of religion Knut Aukland provides a comprehensive review of previous studies on the tourism-religion-nexus in India (Aukland, 2018). He explores the ways in which the Indian state is a seminal player in tourism that involves religious sites. Tourism policies in India reflect the hope that tourism can bring development in terms of increased jobs and revenue for

the state. As suggested above, the BJP government that came to power in 2014 with its Hindu-nationalist leanings is favouring Hindu tourist projects more actively than earlier governments. Still, the funding schemes for pilgrimage sites and tours meted out by the Ministry of Tourism also include non-Hindu destinations and pilgrimage routes. If the Chinese state uses tourism as a means to control religion, the Indian state uses it to appeal to vote banks by creating economic development and appease religious groups by investing in their holy sites. The case of Buddhism, however, serves the Indian government as a vehicle for articulating pan-Asian and even global aspirations. In contrast to China, tourism in India is not, it seems, contributing to a revival of religion - after all it was never suppressed by the state - though tourism is becoming an increasingly important medium for religion. By surveying the overlap and interplay between contemporary domestic tourism and Hindu pilgrimage, Aukland illustrates this development through a range of examples.

As briefly touched upon above, the secular trajectories of the Indian and Chinese states are very different. In his contribution, anthropologist Robert Shepherd takes us up to the Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Wutai Shan in Northern China (some 375 kilometres or five driving hours West of Beijing) to explore some crucial political and cultural changes in recent decades that have turned a key site of Tibetan Buddhism into a tourism magnet with state-supervised popular religiosity as its core attraction. What does this tell us about the place of religion and tourism in China at 'a time when the Communist Party has officially postponed communism while remaining atheistic' (Shepherd, 2018)? Wutai Shan, historically known as one of four Buddhist pilgrimage mountains in China, attracted some four million visitors in 2011, the vast majority of them Han Chinese domestic tourists. In other words, the main share of visitors were not ethnic Mongolian or Tibetan pilgrims but Han Chinese who would typically not identify as being Buddhist. These domestic tourists overwhelmingly engage in pilgrimage-like religious activities, most typically *baifo* - venerating the Buddha. But, beyond popular religious practices, Wutai Shan is also part of a recent re-evaluation of Tibetan culture and Tibetans in China. Shepherd argues that alongside the policy shift from communism to cultural nationalism, the place of Tibet, Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism has undergone a transformation in popular Han Chinese culture - rather than 'superstitious,' Tibetans are increasingly portrayed as 'mysterious' and 'magical,' hence part of Wutai Shan's appeal as a destination.

Putting communism on hold, the Chinese state has altered its policy on religion, going from eradication to managing faith. In Wutai Shan this is achieved by reshaping sacred places into heritage sites, a process in which UNESCO's heritage policies align with the government's ambitions. In the UNESCO guidelines that aim to protect the materiality of heritage buildings, the Chinese state has found a convenient way to legitimize demolition and relocation of unwanted elements, be they homes, shops or guesthouses. Having removed such unwanted elements, reclaimed land is then transformed into generic heritage parks.

Turning to India, anthropologist David Geary shows how state intervention in Buddhist pilgrimage sites plays out in India by focusing on so-called tourism circuits defined as 'key conduits for interconnection where the movement of people can be managed, serviced and coordinated through a concentration of sites and infrastructure' (Geary, 2018). The Indian government is currently developing an official Buddhist Circuit to the most iconic sites pertaining to the Buddha's life. More than simply a national matter, Geary finds that overlapping concerns of religion and tourism are being activated by the creation of an official Buddhist Circuit through inter-Asian partnerships and bilateral aid agreements. He reveals how intra-Asian economic webs tie into the development of the Buddhist Circuit, demonstrating that the field of religion and tourism is also one of great economic relevance and sometimes diplomatic value. As Geary (2018) points out, 'India's robust religious tourism market . . . remains a vital part of its economic growth.' In collaboration with international players like the World Bank Group and Japanese investors, both the central and state-level governments in India are developing an iconic route of places the Buddha reportedly visited, as a commoditised itinerary.

Key consumer groups for this itinerary are not just Westerners, but also Asian tourists.^[4] In Geary's analysis, the current Indian government effort to create an official Buddhist Circuit is not just about creating jobs, revenue and development, but is also part of the Indian state's strategic investment in religion to articulate India's wider global nationalist aspirations. If Hindu tourist projects are aimed at domestic audiences, Buddhist projects point more to India's global interconnections and ambitions.

[4] Both Gaya has also the seen the influx of great number of Tibetan refugees and 'has become a popular meeting ground for the deterritorialised Tibetan refugee community' (Geary, 2017:119).

An interesting parallel development in China's Wutai Shan and India's Bodhgaya emerges in relation to the management of space. In the cases described by Shepherd and Geary, beautification projects and tight regulation drive out informal economies of local bazaars and guesthouses, changing also the religious profile as well. State intentions might be different, but similar results can be seen as what Shepherd (2018) calls 'the *renao* ('hot and noisy') thick realities of Buddhism-in-practice,' is gradually replaced by highly regulated and sanitised spaces. Professional tourism and heritage management and the drive to create spaces meeting a so-called international standard involve a kind of sanitation that does not benefit local residents and particularly not its poorer segments. Moreover, it changes religious dynamics on the ground.

The links between management and religious life on the ground is also discussed by geographer Kiran Shinde who investigates the way in which different forms of management arrangements shape not just religious affairs but also the economic, ecological, and social realities around shrines and temples (Shinde, 2018). By contrasting the state of affairs in the old pilgrimage town of Vrindavan (located some 150 kilometres South of New Delhi) and the more recent shrine of saint / fakir / satguru Sai Baba in Shirdi (some 250 kilometres North East of Mumbai), he shows how closely religious and managerial affairs are interwoven in producing different patterns of travel and visitor experience. Where the religious services and goods of Vrindavan are, at least in theory, up for anyone to provide, the Shirdi shrine is in the hands of a public trust collaborating with the state.

Vrindavan is transforming into a new kind of tourist space, Shinde argues, associated with leisure and religious consumption, as visitors on short-term multipurpose trips seek out the services offered by those religious actors who successfully use their entrepreneurial skills and socio-economic power. At the same time, an aggressive real-estate market is converting farmland into retirement homes for the well-off urban Delhites, or religious theme parks. With a lack of regulation, these developments are not supported by adequate infrastructure and environmental services, as both water supply and sewage arrangements become increasingly inadequate. While Vrindavan hosts a whole series of religious sites and temples, Shirdi has one main focal point: the tomb shrine, which is managed by the shrine trust. Besides providing board and lodgings, the trust decides the weekly ritual plan with appointed salaried priests, and maintains a highly regulated space around the shrine.

This contrasts with its surroundings, however, which display similar tendencies as seen in Vrindavan, with informal economies and unauthorised activities. In Shinde's view, the shrine board's effective management ensures a pleasant visitor experience at the shrine in Shirdi, whereas, Vrindavan's more informal structures often fail to do so. Moreover, the institutional vacuum in Vrindavan has paved the way for interesting religious responses to the ecological crisis. For example, religious gurus and organisations have started initiatives to create environmental awareness by recasting Krishna as a kind of proto-environmentalist.

While Indian gurus turn a deity into an environmentalist, a Chinese temple seeks the involvement of environmental activism to secure legitimacy to a fragile religious enterprise. In his article, anthropologist Adam Chau provides us with a tale of 'Temples and Trees,' relating how a Daoist temple situated in north-central China managed to tap into environmentalism to stimulate its own economy and outreach, in a time of rising ecological concerns in China. Together with a forestry engineer, the temple boss of the Black Dragon King (Heilongdawang) Temple initiated a reforestation and botanical project with the help of religious donations given to the Dragon King. With a green light from the authorities, the site became a temple-cum-arboretum that soon received national and even international attention, with media outlets eager to cover the story of the peasant intellectual turning 'superstition' into a beneficial tree-planting project. Describing the visit of environmentalist Beijingers to the site in 1998, Chau unpacks the coming together of popular religiosity, eco-tourism and environmentalism as various groups and agencies engaged in a 'mutual capture' of the other to further their respective agendas. Via non-religious institutional arrangements and practices, the Black Dragon temple thus found a fruitful path to legitimate its religious activities, as a growing number of state agencies became involved over time. Other Daoist temples soon followed suit.

In his contribution, François Thibeault presents us with a heterogeneous ensemble of Westerners who, mainly traveling on their own or with friends, stayed at Buddhist places in India (Thibeault, 2018). Some of these people did not even intend to immerse themselves into the Indian 'Buddhascape' (Goldberg, 2011) - a diverse landscape of places related to Buddhism created by different migratory actors. Instead, their interest in Buddhism first emerged through encounters with Buddhist places and people

during their trips. Others came to India to volunteer for NGOs. What unites these ‘travellers’, as most prefer calling themselves, is their rejection of labelling their current travels as instances of ‘tourism’. Many are not happy with the label ‘pilgrim’ either, since ‘pilgrimage’ evokes a notion of religion that they are uncomfortable with. They prefer ‘spirituality’ and see themselves as spiritual travellers. Many (but not all) of the people interviewed by Thibeault find India a deeply ‘spiritual’ country and would not regard Buddhism as a typical ‘religion’. In addition to trails of different Buddhist sites, they also visit places connected to Hinduism, Sikhism, or Jainism. Their mental map seems to operate with an opposition between tourism and spirituality where the former has the threatening potential of defiling the latter.

Thibeault, however, does not abandon the concepts of religion and tourism, but from a systems theory perspective, interprets his data as examples of interfaces between both systems. That people do not identify with either tourism or religion is read by Thibeault as an indication of the simultaneous reciprocal modelling of tourism and religion, where touring achieves legitimacy by being placed within a religious framework - a destination, for example, being perceived as a Buddhist site - and where religion is made subject to the logic of tourism, for example, when a Buddhist site operates as an attraction. Thibeault refers to these mutual processes as the religionification of tourism (e.g., where a tourist attraction like a famous *stupa* is visited as a religious site or its experience is framed as a spiritual encounter) and the touristification of religion (e.g., where a religious site appears as a tourist attraction or its experience is framed as sight-seeing) respectively.

A different example of the touristification of religion is the treatment of religious sites in travel guidebooks. In her article, China studies scholar Emilie Korell allows us to peek into the way in which six Chinese and English language guidebooks respectively present the Tibetan Ganden Sumtseling Monastery (Korell, 2018). The monastery is located in the southwest of China, and has become a tourist magnet in the area. It is located in the province officially named Shangri-La in 2002, courting orientalist fantasies to promote tourism in the region (Stausberg, 2011:125-27). Dating back to the 17th century, today the site includes all the typical services of a tourist attraction: ticket office, restaurant, hotel and a souvenir shop. A population of around 700 monks tend to both religious and touristic affairs of the site.

Chinese travel writing dates back to antiquity, but the guidebooks of today’s China very much look like their Western counterparts. The way Chinese and English guidebooks present the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, on the other hand, diverges in interesting ways. Chinese guidebooks display a much greater interest in the historical aspects of the site, some presenting a narrative of cooperation and close ties between China and Tibet. In stark contrast, the *Lonely Planet China* discusses Tibetan independence. More surprising are the differences in the way in which religion and its relation to tourism / tourists are treated. In Korell’s analysis, Western guidebooks display the concern that tourism and tourists might disturb the monks and religious authenticity of the monastery, whereas Chinese guidebooks expect monks and monastery to be available for the curious visitor. Moreover, Chinese titles include a richer Tibetan vocabulary and explicitly animate visitors to seek out monks and engage in religious ritual to secure good fortune. Finally, Korell finds that all the guidebooks activate orientalist tropes in their portrayal of Tibetan Buddhism and the monastery.

The latter point has also been made in studies of Lonely Planet editions on India (Bhattacharyya, 1997; Kraft, 2007): the tourist imaginaries of the Global North still rest on Orientalist underpinnings when it comes to India and China. The studies by Shepherd (2018) and Korell (2018) show that this is also true for the touristic appraisal of Tibet for Han Chinese tourists. It is interesting to note that contemporary guidebooks inspire both domestic tourists in China and Western tourists in India to engage in religious practices: the Chinese tourist is told not to miss out on securing good luck through simple rituals, whereas the Western tourist going to ‘spiritual hotspots’ like Rishikesh and Dharamsala is told that if they go ‘dipping into the sacred, an array of sacrosanct sites and spiritual encounters beckon’ (quoted in Kraft, 2007:238). Compared to guidebooks aimed at domestic tourists in India, it appears as if the Han Chinese tourist is more akin to his / her Western equivalent than to her / his Indian counterpart. Scholars investigating pilgrimage guidebooks aimed at domestic tourists in India, in Hindi, have found that elements of the traditional travel genre (the *mahatmyas*) are blended with that of the modern guidebook (Aukland, 2017; Pinkney, 2014). This hybrid form does not seem to feature in Korell’s presentation of the Chinese titles even if travel writing has a long history in China. Indian guidebooks for domestic tourists sometimes present mythological narratives as historical events. Thus, we find that Hindi and English medium

guidebooks present Hinduism very differently in India in the case of a prominent Himalayan pilgrimage route (Aukland, 2017). This is not so with Buddhism in the case of the Tibetan Ganden Sumtseling Monastery in China (Korell, 2018). In contrast to the Indian case, domestic and international tourist representations of Buddhism share many similarities in China. Orientalist themes are prominent in both Chinese and English guidebooks on Tibetan Buddhism in China, and English guidebooks on Hinduism in India. These differences warn us that even if we desire to step beyond Western prototypes in the study of tourism, we must not revert to stereotypical and Orientalist distinctions between 'Asia' and 'the West.' The differences in the way the Chinese and Indian guidebooks treat religious sites reflect the different societal and political states of religion and its lived realities in these two countries; for example it would be superfluous to advise Hindu travellers in India to perform auspicious rituals in a Shiva temple, as they would in many cases do this anyway. Han Chinese tourists, on the other hand, might need encouragement and practical instructions. Yet, in both countries, tourism serves as an arena where people encounter religion while providing a framework for religious sites, groups, and entrepreneurs to extend their outreach to people, be they believers or not (Stausberg, 2011).

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