

## Article

# Reframing the Intersections of Pilgrimage, Religious Tourism, and Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Every year, hundreds of millions of people around the world travel to sacred places to worship and to learn. While the practice of pilgrimage has a long tradition and is an important part of many religious traditions and the spiritual development of individuals, some scholars have begun to question the sustainability of modern pilgrimage travel. Not only does pilgrimage, like other forms of mobility, contribute to the emission of greenhouse gases and waste accumulation, it also seems to be exempt from blame when it comes to the current environmental crisis. In addition, while mass religious gatherings have historically been tied to the transmission and spread of disease, the threat of pilgrims becoming infected while on pilgrimage has not historically been an inhibitor to religious mobility. Indeed, the demand for pilgrimage seems to increase during times of hardship and uncertainty. Given these inherent contradictions, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to question the notion of sustainability in the context of pilgrimage and religious tourism and discuss whether modern day pilgrimage and religious tourism can be structured and managed in a more sustainable manner. First, the authors discuss the existing academic literature on the positive and negative economics, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism. The authors then question the validity of certain tourism-environment models, including the ‘Tourism Area Life Cycle’ and ‘Carrying Capacity’, in the context of pilgrimage and religious tourism, particularly as they apply to pilgrimage and religious tourism destinations that do not typically show a decline in their visitor numbers. The authors then expand upon a conceptual model that can help scholars analyze the impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism on pilgrim-towns. The authors conclude by contending that future discussions regarding sustainability in the context of pilgrimage and religious tourism should include religious and cultural constructs of what constitutes the tangible and intangible forms of sacredness of a place.

**Keywords:** sustainability; pilgrimage; religious tourism; TALC (Tourism Area Life Cycle); pilgrim-towns



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## 1. Introduction

“No matter what, they will come!” The media reported statements such as this during the COVID-19 pandemic when asking priests, gurus, pastors, and other religious leaders across the world regarding the impact of minimal crowds on their religious sites. These religious leaders were referring to the fact that people were defying government and health mandates to stay at home and isolate and instead, travelling to sacred sites and cities to worship [1]. This defiance of mandates by pilgrims was often noted in negative tones by several media and academic articles (e.g., [2,3]). This was because large religious gatherings were viewed super-spreader activities that facilitated the spread of the COVID-19 virus, with pilgrims therefore being potential disease vectors (e.g., [4–6]). For instance, one such religious “pilgrimage” event was the “week of fasting” organized by “Porte Ouverte” (a mega-church in Mulhouse) in France and attended by more than 2200 persons. The

infected pilgrims from here then carried the virus to other parts of France and French-speaking world [7]. Many such large-scale transmissions were reported across the world.

The reason that pilgrims defied these government and health mandates was in part because religious sites and events were viewed as “landscapes of hope”—locations where people visited to find relief and mental, emotional, and spiritual comfort in times of distress, hardship, and uncertainty [8,9]. Since pilgrimage and religious tourism seem to be less affected by regional or world events, such as economic recessions, natural disasters, and pandemics, in comparison with other travel sectors, these travel niche markets seem to flourish in the face of other types of adversity [10] and be “recession proof” [11]. As such, these niche markets are expected to not see any long-term effects from the COVID-19 pandemic [12].

One of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic has been moved towards what is termed the “new normal” within the travel industry in terms of sustainability, social justice, and equity (e.g., [13,14]). However, discussions regarding this new normal have omitted pilgrimage and religious tourism and the voices of religious leaders within this new normal [12]. This is odd, considering that millions of people visit religious sites every year [10,15]. Indeed, those who participate in pilgrimage journeys in many cases utilize the same transportation infrastructure as tourists and create just as much waste as tourists [16,17]. As such, the use of prevalent tourism-environment models and concepts, such as “carrying capacity” and the “Tourism Area Life Cycle”, may not be applicable in the context of pilgrimage and religious tourism. While there are sometimes cyclical fluctuations in visitor numbers at religious sites, outside of pandemics such as COVID-19, sacred places and pilgrim-towns rarely show long-term declines in their visitor numbers [11,12].

In this conceptual paper, the authors examine several academic approaches that attempt to operationalize the concept of sustainability and critique their usefulness and limitations in understanding sustainability in “pilgrim-towns”—a generic term used in this paper to designate a pilgrimage and religious tourism destination. After discussing the positive and negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism and reviewing the academics approaches noted above, the authors argue that conceptions of sustainability in a pilgrimage and religious tourism context must include religious and cultural constructs of what constitutes the sacredness of a place. The authors then expand upon a previously published model [18] that offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding sustainability issues in pilgrim-towns before concluding.

## 2. Approaches to the Study of Sustainability in Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism Studies

Scholars generally conceptualize and operationalize sustainability within what are referred to as the three pillars of sustainable travel: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. Using these pillars, several scholars, as noted below, have examined these impacts in assessing sustainability issues in pilgrim-towns.

Understanding the economic impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism has been an important focus in the academic literature (see [19,20]). Not only does pilgrimage and religious tourism provide an important revenue source for governments and communities at different scales, but also generate a variety of economic opportunities, ranging from pilgrim and religious tourist expenditures to entrepreneurship (e.g., [21–23]). The most important aspect of economic sustainability in pilgrim-towns is the presence of visitors, and in many cases, pilgrim-towns such as Lourdes, France and Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, exist mainly because of sacred sites that draw hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and religious tourists each year.

Ideally, economic sustainability is achieved when a large section of local community can participate in and benefit from the economic activities related to religious tourism. However, economic development is considered unsustainable when the benefits are unequally distributed among different stakeholders [24,25]. Gladstone [26] conceptualizes

economic sustainability as falling along a formal-informal axis based on the nature of employment, the characteristics of firms, and state legal regulations regarding labor, taxation, and industries. In many cases, informality is a hallmark of the pilgrimage economy, particularly in developing regions of the world, because it is the informal community of religious actors that provide the most essential services for pilgrims and religious tourists. This is particularly the case in instances where religious leaders, especially those who have hegemonic or ancestrally given rights, are a necessary part of the performance of religious rituals [21,26]. Shinde [10,21] argues that while the informal economy provides important services to visitors to pilgrim-towns, in many instances there needs to be a formalization of the pilgrimage economy and more primacy given to formal religious and tourism organizations. This is necessary to achieve more sustainable economic outcomes, as governments do not necessarily collect taxes from the informal pilgrimage sector to offset the negative social and environmental impacts that come with mass pilgrimage and religious tourism.

Unfortunately, the popularity of pilgrimage and religious tourism has in many cases led to the continuous building of new tourism infrastructure, which often erases traditional religious heritage landscapes and societal norms, damaging the “spirit of place” [27] for which a pilgrim-town is known [18,28,29]. As such, a strong economic base in pilgrim-towns does not necessarily guarantee the holistic sustainability of a pilgrim-town. Indeed, over reliance on pilgrimage and religious tourism can have devastating economic consequences, as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic when the economics of entire pilgrim-towns struggled with the sudden disappearance of pilgrims and religious tourists [1].

The socio-cultural impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism on pilgrim-towns are multi-layered [30,31]. For example, those who are directly dependent on the pilgrimage and religious tourism markets may see the impacts in their social standing, religious authority, and ability to offer religious and cultural services increase [21], leading to them gaining a higher status within their community. As such, they potentially can become the most significant stakeholders in discussions regarding planning for and managing pilgrimage and religious tourism in pilgrim-towns. Pilgrimage and religious tourism can also lead to the revitalization of intangible religious and cultural customs within a community, including religious cuisine, rituals, dances, buildings, local crafts, and stories (e.g., [32,33]). Indeed, catering to the specialized religious and social needs or requirements of visitors not only makes pilgrimage-town destinations more appealing to pilgrims and religious tourists, but also helps maintain the religious customs of the host community (e.g., [34,35]).

However, pilgrimage and religious tourism, like other tourism niche markets, can also lead to negative impacts in pilgrim-towns. For instance, the economic capitalization of religious heritage tourism can lead to the commodification and re-contextualization of religious icons, symbols, and rituals, which are subsequently valued for their market value rather than their use-value or utility [36,37]. This further leads to questions regarding religious authenticity and the ethics of religious commodification [37,38]. Examples of this commodification include the sale of sacred masks as tourist souvenirs in Bali, the modification of religious rituals in Tibet and Nepal to cater to the compressed itineraries of religious heritage tourists and favoring commercial transactions over hosting visitors at religious heritage sites [24,39,40].

In addition, the use of religious heritage in tourism marketing and promotion can lead to tensions regarding the method of engagement in progressive socio-economic transformation that may violate religious convictions and societal norms and values [33], in turn leading to deteriorating resident attitudes towards tourism development and religious heritage tourists in general [41,42]. In addition, the social relationships between different constituents of a society will alter with increasing touristic activities [43]. For example, although religious actors benefit from visitor expenditures, they expect and rely on the local and regional governments for the building of sufficient infrastructural development [28]. For their part, outside of taxes, local governments have a greater accountability and responsibility towards community residents than visitors. As such, disagreements can emerge

between locals, government officials, and religious leaders over issues such as rapid change of land ownership and the conversion of agricultural lands for urban use. These disagreements can be intensified when outside stakeholders with a vested interest in pilgrimage and religious tourism development try to displace long-religious term lineages and attempt to influence the decision-making power of local stakeholders [16].

The most direct impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism on pilgrim-towns are on the natural and built environments. These aspects are an important component of the aesthetics and creation of a community of spiritual fulfilment in a pilgrim-town [44]. Pilgrimage and religious tourism development can exacerbate management challenges at religious sites, including an increase in general wear-and-tear, overcrowding, congestion, vandalism, noise pollution, and microclimatic change, among others [27,45]. Religious tourism also causes damage to fauna, particularly when religious sites are located inside of protected areas [46], and overcrowding at religious heritage sites leads to increasing air and water pollution, deforestation, especially in developing countries [16,18]. Offerings brought by pilgrims for ritual purposes are often left to be disposed of by local governments, and in many cases the waste management system of pilgrim-towns cannot handle this extra waste [16].

From this brief review, it can be argued that most studies that claim to have examined sustainability of religious tourism seem to have mainly examined one of the pillars—either social or economic or environmental. Seldom does one come across studies that have combined two or more of these pillars to more holistically understand sustainability in pilgrim-towns. To broaden this discussion, it is prudent to draw on the more popular models of studying sustainability based on tourism-environment interactions to see if these models can help scholars understand more holistically issues related to sustainability in pilgrim-towns.

### 3. Tourism Sustainability Models and Their Application to Pilgrim Towns

Tourism scholars have created several models to examine the issue of sustainability in the context of the three pillars noted above. Some of these models, chosen by the authors because they seemed to be a possible fit to understanding sustainability in pilgrim-towns are discussed below.

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) was a pioneering model proposed by Butler [47] to assess the stages of tourism development at a hypothetical tourism destination. According to this model, a destination goes through six distinct stages in its tourism development:

- *Exploration*: very few visitors, destination not very well known, little tourism development;
- *Involvement*: number of visitors increasing slowly, some residents providing tourism services; locals recognize the economic benefits of tourism development;
- *Development*: destination a recognized tourist attraction, investors and tourism companies are present; locals losing power in terms of control over tourism development;
- *Consolidation*: number of visitors higher than permanent residents; tourism is the dominant industry; unhappiness among locals not involved in tourism development; and
- *Stagnation*: maximum tourist capacity reached, the destination is too popular, and tourists go elsewhere for tourism purposes.

Once a destination has reached the stagnation stage, government and tourism officials can either rejuvenate the destination, putting new resources and marketing campaigns in place to make the destination a popular tourist destination again, or can allow the destination to decline, eventually leading the destination to lose its function as a tourist attraction.

While the TALC model has been important in the study of tourism planning and management, particularly in tourism settings based on natural ecosystems [48], the model has been critiqued for its reliance on visitor numbers and its oversimplification of the tourism development process. These critiques are the reason why this model is not the best model to use to understand sustainability issues in pilgrim-towns, as it cannot account for the fact that despite continuously increasing influx of visitors, pilgrim-towns generally do

not see a decline of visitors due to negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts, particularly those pilgrim towns located outside of Europe and North America.

The DPSIR (Driver-Pressure-State-Impact-Response) model was championed by the European Environment Agency for addressing many types of environmental issues. In the model, any human activities that cause a change (socio-economic, demographic, etc.) are considered as Driver and they exert pressure on the existing nature of the environment and has spatial-temporal dimensions. The pressures will change the state of the environment—often for worse—which is then considered as an impact. To mitigate the impacts, responses need to be articulated. Thus, a chain of causal relationships is established in the model through the five elements based in the premise that causes and impacts can be quantified in an ecosystem. The model helps to understand tourism impacts based on driving factors that lead to certain pressures on a destination and how the negative impacts can be addressed to achieve sustainability (for the application of this approach see [49]).

However, this model does not provide enough insight into how different stakeholders that are directly related to the impacts such as religious actors construct their responses and whether those responses address the impacts. Moreover, the model relies on quantifying impacts using formal systems. Both of these are crucial factors to consider in the case of religious tourism which operates at a humungous scale (massive numbers of people) and makes quantification challenging and often irrelevant. Religious tourism is driven by religious actors and informality, meaning limited involvement of government institutions, and therefore they are generally not interested in conducting rigorous studies about the state of the environment. Thus, DPSIR model has, if any, limited applicability to understand the complexities around environmental sustainability in religious tourism destinations.

The concept of Carrying Capacity has been considered as a key factor in the tourism and environment relationship [50]. Carrying capacity focuses on determining “the maximum number of users that can be supported without an unacceptable decline in the quality of the resource or of the visitor experience” [51]. This decline can be economic, socio-cultural, environmental, or psychological in nature [52]. Questions and concerns carrying capacities are most prominent in discussions regarding fragile ecosystems that support tourism, such as coastal tourism, marine tourism, and island tourism [53–55]. In mass tourism destinations, estimating carrying capacity has proven to be a challenge, but in heavily congested destinations such as Venice, Barcelona, and elsewhere, concerns about “overtourism” (e.g., [56]) have led to calls for “no tourism” or the “degrowth” of the tourism industry [57] through decreasing tourist visitation to alleviate resident concerns regarding overcrowding and wear and tear on destinations. This approach relies on quantifying visitor numbers and speculating their impacts on a finite land resource. However, these considerations have little meaning in religious tourism destinations: their tourism resource is the intangible notion of sacredness and divinity that is rooted in the spirit of the place, and this resource is beyond with the physical environment of the place. No pilgrim-town ever has shown decline in the number of visitors: the numbers of visitors keep growing with population increase, changing religiosity, and accessibility of tourism infrastructure. As such, this concept also falls short of explaining sustainability in religious tourism.

A more nuanced evaluation of the sustainability of tourism activities is offered by using the Ecological Footprint model, which measures specific types of impacts based on various ecosystem calculations and fixed notions of land use. Methodologically, this model aims to assess tourism impacts that are derived from five types of consumption activities: transportation, food, goods and services, and buildings [48]. Castellani and Sala [48] suggest that out of these five types of consumption, the three most significant types are the act of travel (transportation), the activities and services tourists utilize during their stay, and the construction of tourism and hospitality amenities. However, this model does not consider “the possibility of recovery [of a site/place/destination] after the end of its useful life” [48]. Thus, because of the inherent contradiction between the finiteness of the ecosystem (as framed in this model) and the cultural construction of a sacred site as a



permanent marker of religious practice that survives through generations, this model has limited capacity to explain deeper meanings of sustainability.

The LCA model has increasingly being applied to tourism destinations, as it seems to provide a more comprehensive assessment of environmental impacts related to specific activity. In essence, scholars who use this model ask the question, “How much change is too much change?” This model is based on several propositions, including:

- Human use of natural areas results in changes to the biophysical environment and the visitor experience;
- These changes, mainly negative, at some point become unacceptable to various stakeholders;
- Biophysical and social diversity is desirable;
- There is a tension between site preservation and visitor access;
- Management is necessary to keep human-induced impacts within determined limits of acceptable change [50].

This model is valuable in that it helps to identify and “improve environmental performance of specific phases/processes” [48]. It also “allows for the definition of end-of-life scenarios” where issues of recovery and rehabilitation [of sites] can be explored [48]. The connection of natural landscapes with value-based preservation makes this model more amenable to understand religious tourism in pilgrim-towns. However, the over emphasis on managing change runs against the drive to push religious tourism as it provides economic opportunities for the community. Many studies show the several disagreements stakeholders have in pilgrim-towns, which means that this model has limited applicability to fully grasp the issues around sustainability.

Another noteworthy approach is the Vicious Circle model by Russo [58] that is generally used to examine sustainability within heritage cities. This model is an extension of the TALC model, where heritage cities entering the “decline stage” find that the city core is incapable of accommodating additional tourism growth. To counteract this decline, destination marketing may focus on attracting day-trippers. To ensure that these day-trippers do not produce increased tourist congestion in the city center, many governments will enlarge the tourism region withing a city beyond its heritage core, allowing visitors to be dispersed to cheaper “selling points” throughout the destination. This expansion of the tourism region will eventually spatially shift tourism activities from the city center to peripheral areas. However, this expansion raises several questions, including when this expansion of tourist activities will end, and what effects this continued expansion will have on the aesthetic quality of the city as a whole and the residents of the city.

This process of “relocation” takes place only partly in pilgrim-towns, where the sacred core of the pilgrim-town is often surrounded by many landscape elements that are also considered sacred, giving rise to the idea of wider “sacred territory” within the destination proper [59]. Thus, the sacred geography of a place is more diffused and has the capacity to disperse pilgrims and religious tourists once they visit the sacred core. However, as the number of pilgrims and religious tourists increases, the physical and spiritual landscape of a pilgrim-town can change as investment by government and outside investors begin to build attractions and amenities from center to outwards. Consequently, one could think of the “vicious circle” as an essential aspect of sustaining the sacred landscape in a pilgrim town, where old structures give way to new places of worship and thus new attractions for visitors.

#### 4. Religious/Meta-Physical Constructs of Sustainability

While the various sustainability models discussed above do have their uses in better understanding and helping government, local, and external stakeholders to achieve sustainability in pilgrim-towns, these models lack not only a holistic conceptualization of the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism, but also the integration of cultural and religious/meta-physical constructs and theologies to discussion of sustainability. As Tanner and Mitchell [60] note, “Religious experiences which come from arriving in the sacred space are not related to the glories of nature or

cultural aesthetics. . . . The reason must be sought in the mind and heart of individuals rather than in the objective value of places themselves”.

A discussion of various cultural and religious/meta-physical constructs and theologies related to religious forms of travel has been published by several scholars [36,61]. Here, the authors draw upon the fact that visitors and residents who perform religious rituals often seem to be absolved of the negative impacts they create by visiting pilgrim-towns [28,30,62]. For example, pilgrimage and religious tourism, like other forms of mobility, contribute to the emission of greenhouse gases, congestion, and waste accumulation. However, pilgrims and some religious tourists seem to be exempt by government, religious, and local stakeholders from blame when it comes to the negative impacts of their travel (see [17,18]). This may be because in the same way that the motivations of “travelers” engage in “a morally superior alternative that does not create the same problems as touris[ts]” [63], the motivations of pilgrims and religious tourists are often viewed as more altruistic, noble, devotional, and authentic as compared to the motivations of other travelers/tourists (see [64]). As such, pilgrimage and religious tourism is often considered a “soft” form of tourism—an alternative form of travel that leads to “mutual understand[ing] between the local population and their guests” while “not endanger[ing] the cultural identity of the host region and. . . tak[ing] care of the environment as best as possible” [65]. While many religious sites receive millions of visitors a year, pilgrims and religious tourists are sometimes seen as somewhat “gentler” travelers, being more ethical and sensitive towards local cultures, religious traditions, and the natural environment, and more willing to enter into inter-religious dialogue as such [66,67].

In addition, Shinde [16] and Qurashi [17] have demonstrated that not only are pilgrims viewed as being exempt from environmental blame, but many pilgrims feel that they are not responsible for the direct and indirect environmental problems that they create for the same reasonings [18]. For example, as Qurashi [17] notes, even though Islamic scripture and teachings promote sustainable interactions with the natural and built environment, pilgrims to the Hajj place the responsibility for environmental sustainability on the local government and residents, believing that their religious travels exempt them from acting in a more sustainable manner or taking responsibility for their behaviors. This view of Hajj pilgrims being excused for their unsustainable practices is reinforced by the fact that, like above they are viewed by residents as being motivated by religious or spiritual reasons, and as such they should be absolved of any environmental responsibility because they are doing God’s will. In this case, it is again local governments that are ultimately responsible for ensuring sustainability issues within pilgrim-towns [16].

A perplexing question then arises regarding this disconnect between the unsustainable actions of pilgrims and religious tourists and the religious theologies they purport to follow regarding environmental conservation and sustainability. How do pilgrims and religious tourists reconcile these contradictory beliefs and actions that lead to environmental problems in pilgrim-towns? As Shinde and Olsen [18] note,

Religious actors often invoke tradition to justify their use of environmental resources for religious practices while claiming no responsibility for the management of its impacts. Such dissonance produces an environment of neglect and apathy, shifting the responsibilities of environmental management to government entities that may not have the financial or technical resources to do so.

Part of the answer may be related to cultural subjectivity with regards to perceptions of the natural and built environment. In examining the environmental discourses surrounding the pilgrim-town of Vrindavan in India, which received over 12 million visitors annually, Shinde [62] argues that there are several competing discourses amongst stakeholders, such as religious actors, government agencies, and local communities, who blame each other for the changes in the natural and built environment. Shinde explains that the religious culture prevalent in Vrindavan “shapes [the] attitudes and worldviews of [different] groups, which are then used in articulating environmental problems and contesting environmental responsibility” [62]. According to cultural theory [68], different actors develop “storylines

[that] clearly express the preferences of a significant proportion of populace in defining a problem and finding a solution to it" [62]. Similar to the way cultural theory is applied to climate change discourse (e.g., [69,70]), Shinde [62] suggests four dominant themes that come out of these competing discourses: denial, indifference, helplessness, and stewardship. Shinde further observes that:

‘Denial’ and ‘indifference’ are common with those engaged in the cultural economy of pilgrimage rituals as they use the language of transcendence framed through myths, religious ideologies, and ritual practices. Others operating outside religious domain readily recognize [the negative] environmental impacts but feel ‘helpless’[,] and only a few demonstrate environmental stewardship.

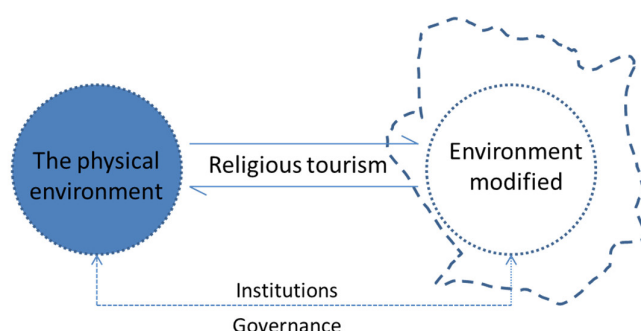
The shifting of environmental responsibility from pilgrims and religious tourists to other stakeholders adds to the larger problem of how sacred destinations are governed. Governments at various scales are responsible for providing with basic infrastructure for residents. While visitors contribute to the economy, much of that economic input goes to the private sector, or, in the case of pilgrim-towns, the religious sector. As such, particularly in cases where the informal pilgrimage economy is driven by social exchanges between hosts (religious service providers and specialists) and guests dominate [21], little economic value from pilgrimage and religious tourism is accrued to the government. In many cases, particularly in developing regions of the world, the lack of resources, conflicts with private businesses and religious leaders, and hesitation to implement any regulatory measures that will inhibit economic growth, governments often lack the political will to address many of the sustainability concerns outlined [28,30]. In more formal economic systems where religious organizations are in control of shrines and the pilgrimage economy, because religious organizations are established with the mandate of providing services for visitors, infrastructural issues related to religious sites are taken care of religious organizations, leading to more muted land limited environmental impacts on pilgrim-towns [18]. Yet in this case, the concentration of power and resources within religious organizations can lead to issues related to social displacement and the alienation of the local community from the pilgrimage economy [16].

## 5. Reframing the Notion of Sustainability

The authors argue that sustainability should be reframed as the ability of a place to sustain its sacredness or “sense of place” [27] and the ability of people—both visitors and residents—to observe and/or participate in rituals related to the sacred. However, the question arises as to how to best understand sustainability in the context of pilgrimage, religious tourism, and sacred places in a more holistic manner, incorporating the three pillars of travel as discussed above. In this vein, Shinde and Olsen [18] proposed a basic model for understanding the ecosystem of pilgrim-towns (see Figure 1). In this model, they argued that sacred places are “specific environments that connect elements of nature with sacred values using belief systems, mythology, cosmology, history, and culture involving religious faiths” and thus contain a “unique spirit of place” that attracts visitors who wish to partake in divine experiences [18]. Due to their importance as landscapes of hope and salvation, the act of travelling to “these sacred and religious places in and of itself becomes the cause of change in their physical and spiritual nature” [18]. They argue that the resulting transformation or change that comes from pilgrim and religious tourist visitation depends largely on the ways in which religious and governmental institutions—as arbiters of growth strategies and therefore the environmental state of a pilgrim-town—mediate visitor experiences with the sacred. This mediation process is dialectical and leads to a continuous dialogue and shift relationship between the people who visit pilgrim-towns, the people that live there, and the institutions that manage the sacred [18]. As such, the model highlights the importance of institutions that mediate the sacred and are responsible for policy-making and environmental sustainability because of their role in pilgrim-town governance. The model also implicitly suggests that active religious practices in a

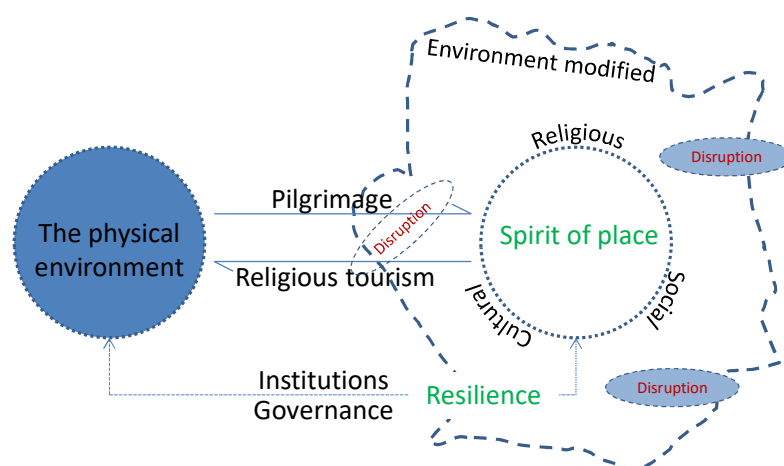


pilgrim-town will generate a different set of sustainability issues in a pilgrim-town versus a tourism destination.



**Figure 1.** A conceptual model of the relationships between religion, tourism, and the environment proposed by Shinde and Olsen [18]. Reprinted with permission from CAB International- Religious Tourism and the Environment (2020).

While the focus on institutions in this model helps scholars and stakeholders better understand the ways in which sustainability is addressed in pilgrim-towns and by whom, based on the critical review presented in the previous sections, the authors propose to revise their model. The revision is also prompted by the need to include two additions, both of which account for major disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic: “disruption” and “resilience” (see Figure 2). Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or a similar disaster or event at various scales can severely affect the ability of different types of institutions to perform their normative roles, which can lead to the disruption of movement to and rituals performed in pilgrim-towns [71] as well as the pilgrimage economy at these destinations [72]. For instance, many media articles contained photographs of empty sacred sites due to government restrictions on movement [12]. In some cases, with special permission, symbolic pilgrimages, such as the one performed at the 2021 Hajj (limited to one thousand pilgrims), were staged to give spiritual and moral support to believers around the world [72,73]. However, most pilgrim-towns survived, at least economically, because many religious communities of them quickly adapted to the lack of visitors. For example, virtual prayers and pilgrimages and live streaming of rituals led to increased virtual visitation to religious sites, which at some level also increased donations to religious organizations [12]. As soon as travel restrictions were lifted, pilgrims and religious tourists flocked to pilgrim-towns, particularly in Asia. For example, despite efforts to curtail the number of pilgrims attending the famous Char-Dham Yatra in north India and the 2021 Kumbha Mela, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims showed up to participate in these mass religious events [74].



**Figure 2.** Revised model for understanding sustainability in sacred places.

The resilience potential that a pilgrim-town have in the face of disruptions such as pandemics and natural disasters, therefore, depends on the resilience of the institutions, which can be defined as their capacity to absorb the impacts and bounce back disruptions. While disruptions affect the ability of institutions to perform their normative roles and that causes widespread disruption [71], strong, resilient institutions can help pilgrim-towns rebound quickly to pre-disruption levels of development. For example, religious institutions exert significant religious authority within the socio-cultural milieu of a pilgrim-town. In addition, while the pandemic disrupted the material movement of pilgrimage and religious tourism, it did not change the views that people had regarding the sacrality of pilgrim-towns. Indeed, as “landscapes of hope”, pilgrim-towns were seen as beacons of light in a world drowning in despair and sorrow. The religious, cultural, and social interactions among the local community who is the custodian of the place and with the pilgrims and devotees reinforce the sacredness and divine image of the place. This constitutes the sacred core and the spirit of the place. As such, physical disruptions cannot change the cultural imagination of a sacred place, and this is truly where its resilience lies. Therefore, it is only a matter of time when resilient religious institutions, through beliefs and practices, will adapt to the new circumstances and reproduce, albeit, in some different forms, the very nature of sanctity of the place which will continue to attract pilgrims and tourists alike. In that sense, disruptions allow for new ways of producing the place while regenerating the old traditions and practices that are relevant to the image of the place.

At the same time, disruptions should be used as opportunities for institutions to rethink and reset the goals and strategies of pilgrim-towns, in the same vein as calls for a “new normal” by tourism industry experts as noted above. If virtual pilgrimage and rituals, utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic, become more of a norm, then the negative impacts of pilgrimage and religious tourism can at some level be minimized. However, since pilgrimage and religious tourism was one of the first tourism niche markets to rebound to pre-pandemic levels [75], the need to be “in place” may be stronger than the needs to experience the sacred in the virtual realm. As well, Tussyadiah et al. [76] suggest that taking virtual journeys to sacred sites actual creates a greater demand to visit these sites in person.

## 6. Conclusions

Raj and Griffin [77] suggest that “corporeal considerations [of monetary and materialistic impacts] should be playing a secondary role to the spiritual, social, and self-development functions of religious sites”. Having reviewed the prevailing approaches to understand sustainability of religious tourism and pilgrim-towns, the authors also argue for including cultural and religious understandings of sustainability in order to better understand how sustainability works in pilgrim-towns. In doing so, scholars can better articulate the roles of governments and religious institutions regarding achieving sustainable development in pilgrim-towns. For example, one could argue that government agencies should focus on regulating visitor flows while religious institutions should focus on providing the spiritual and religious experiences that the visitors are seeking. At the same time, there needs to be more work on the synergism that can occur when religious institutions are more involved in discussions regarding local and regional pilgrimage and religious tourism development.

The conceptualization presented in this paper applies best to the pilgrim-towns that have a continuous and regular flow of visitors and thereby a robust pilgrimage economy and that causes severe impacts. It is likely that the generalizations in the model may only be partially relevant to many other contexts such as places where religious practice is in decline or being supplanted by more secular visitors, where ideologies and actions of religious institutions are formally incorporated governance systems, or where destinations are situated within a wider network of tourist destinations. Notwithstanding these limitations, the suggested model provides an alternative way of thinking about sustainability in places that are rich in religious and cultural heritage.

The integration of cultural and religious constructs and theologies into discussions of sustainability is even more pressing considering the difficulty in finding studies on sustainability that examine more than one of the pillars of sustainability within the context of pilgrimage and religious tourism. Moreover, based on the discussion above, it is hard to apply the popular academic models and approaches to measuring and promoting sustainability in pilgrim-towns and other pilgrimage and religious tourism destinations. Even Russo's Vicious Circle model seems to present a very pessimistic view of pilgrim-towns. Most tourist destinations continue to experience a considerable influx of visitors year after year, and yet somehow, they can absorb these visitors within their limited physical capacities. Pilgrim-towns like the Vatican, Lourdes, Mecca, Fatima, Vrindavan, Shirdi, and others receive hundreds of thousands of visitors a year. Moreover, as Russo [66] observes, "attractions in heritage cities are hardly reproducible and remarkably concentrated". One of the reasons for the continuing popularity of these places is that their physical environments somehow seem to be disconnected with the meta-physical environment. As such, pilgrim-towns exist within a physical and a meta-physical ecosystem. It is the latter ecosystem, in addition to the concepts of disruption and resilience, that lead to a more robust and holistic understanding of sustainability issues in pilgrim-towns.

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