

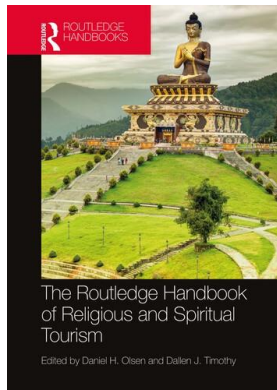
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RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Michael A. Di Giovine

Introduction: World heritage and sacred and secular travel

Sacred and secular travel seem to occupy opposite ends of the mobilities spectrum: While the former—especially pilgrimage—is often perceived as a “serious” voyage to hyper-meaningful destinations (Di Giovine & Choe 2020: 2), the latter is frequently thought of as a more superficial leisure-time activity, particularly when taking the form of mass tourism (Graburn 1977; Crick 1989). Pilgrimage sites may be considered places of transcendence and illumination, where the cosmological perfection of the sacred “irrupts” into the chaos of everyday life (Eliade 1959). In many cases, pilgrims themselves are often quick to note that their form of visitation is an anti-touristic practice and the antithesis of mass tourism (Di Giovine 2013, 2021). Yet both types of mobility move and inspire travelers, with pilgrimage, as one of the oldest and most significant forms of human mobility in history, sometimes moving millions at a time to participate in sacred rituals (Di Giovine & Elsner 2016), while according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism (including those of a religious nature) move over 1.2 billion people annually. Of this number, nearly half travel for cultural purposes, visiting destinations of historical, artistic, and scientific importance (UNWTO 2018: 9). Heritage sites are prime destinations for cultural tourists, as they are touchstones for communities’ identities and values and connect members through time and space (Harrison 2013; Di Giovine & Cowie 2014), and in the UNWTO’s survey nearly all respondents explicitly mentioned heritage sites in their definition of “cultural tourism” (UNWTO 2018: 9–10). The relatively recent phenomenon of World Heritage, which decouples sites of local importance and re-contextualizes them as places of “universal value” for the whole of humanity, has become particularly important destinations (UNWTO 2015: 26). At once sacralized (MacCannell 1976: 43–45) and heritagized (Harrison 2013: 79–84), they too are often understood to be hyper-meaningful, mobilizing not only millions of travelers per year but also ideas, imaginaries, and financial and intellectual resources for the purposes of preservation (Di Giovine 2009a). It is therefore little wonder that roughly a quarter of over one thousand unique cultural and natural World Heritage sites are designated for their spiritual or religious value (UNESCO n.d.), and many of the original properties on the World Heritage List were already well-established pilgrimage sites in Europe and Asia (UNESCO 1994a).

Thus, World Heritage sites occupy a liminal midpoint between the polarities of pilgrimage and tourism destinations: they are hyper-meaningful and hyper-valorized places that often assume a sacred air (in discourse if not in practice); they draw secular tourists and sacred visitors; and many are touchstones of identity formation irrespective of one's nationality. This dynamic, however, presents specific challenges to the identification, conservation, and utilization of sacred World Heritage sites, especially as diverse stakeholders imbue them with different meanings and engage in qualitatively different forms of interaction, including localized devotional practices, mass pilgrimage to a religion's sacred center to create solidarity, personal visitation to effect miraculous interventions, educational travel, missionary work, and cultural tourism (among other forms). It therefore becomes incumbent on scholars of spiritual and religious travel to understand World Heritage's processes, aims, stakeholder groups, and oft-conflicting meanings.

Serving as a reference guide for scholars and practitioners of both sacred tourism and heritage, this chapter explores the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) "flagship" World Heritage program (Rössler 2006; Rössler & Cameron 2013). It begins with the history of the concept of World Heritage and the development of its short-, medium-, and long-term goals, which, it is argued, are intimately tied to the particular challenges faced by sacred sites and their communities during the violent upheavals of the twentieth century. Drawing on an increasingly more robust scholarly literature on World Heritage, as well as primary source documents produced by UNESCO and its affiliates in the half-century since the program's foundation, the chapter details the process of nomination and inscription of previously local sites of spiritual (and secular) import into sites of "universal value." It then explores the ways in which sacred sites are recognized and valorized as World Heritage, before presenting some of the challenges and pitfalls of effectively identifying these places of a spiritual nature from the larger pool of World Heritage sites. The chapter concludes with an examination of the common critiques of World Heritage and the challenges inherent in preserving and managing sacred World Heritage sites, and a discussion of the ways in which UNESCO and its affiliates are beginning to address them.

World heritage: origin and intended outcomes

Established through the 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, World Heritage sites are places primarily of local or national importance which have been designated by UNESCO as possessing "outstanding universal value" that transcends the interests of specific communities. Considered the "heritage of humanity," they are highly valued for the ways in which they reveal cultural interchange and diversity and have withstood the destructive forces of humans and nature. The *Revised Operational Guidelines*—which outlines the Convention's policies and procedures—defines "outstanding universal value" as

cultural and/or natural significance, which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole.

(UNESCO 2005: 24)

The logic that a site of universalized value leads to a universalized sense of stewardship that transcends national interest adheres to the Convention text, in which "the States Parties to

this Convention recognize that such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate” (UNESCO 1972: 1).

However, although these foundational documents seem to emphasize the safeguarding of tangible heritage, scholars (Di Giovine 2009a, 2010; Hall 2011; Jokilehto 2012; Meskell 2018) have argued that UNESCO’s intent is more far-reaching: awareness of, active engagement with, and preservation of these universally valorized properties may foster utopian ideals of “peace in the minds of men [sic],” UNESCO’s foundational principle (UNESCO 1945). Complementing the more formal, top-down diplomatic approaches of the United Nations, this is a grassroots method of cultivating peaceful intercultural communication.

UNESCO was born out of the horrors of the Second World War, which saw widespread destruction of important historic sites and landscapes. Many of these were monumental religious structures, such as synagogues in Berlin, cathedrals in Cologne and Dresden, and temples in Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. The looting of important artifacts (many of which were of religious subjects), both before and during the war, was also rampant despite several international Conventions concerning the illicit antiquities trade ratified in the early twentieth century. And importantly, the war brought the culmination of ethnoreligious persecution and scapegoating in the form of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. Raphael Lemkin, the architect of the United Nations’ *Convention on the Preservation and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948), specifically linked the destruction of tangible heritage and devotional sites as a common tactic of genocide—to erase a people requires erasing evidence of their existence through history—and, invoking not only the Jewish population of his native Poland but also the Ottoman Empire’s genocide against Christian Armenians around the First World War, urged “protecting both the bodily and cultural integrity of persecuted groups” (Bevan 2016: 209–210; see also Power 2002: 43). Lemkin was ultimately unsuccessful in inserting the safeguarding of cultural heritage into the Genocide Convention, although The Hague Conventions link heritage protection with humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions address the protection of civilians in warfare to include language limiting the unnecessary destruction of heritage properties in times of war (see Di Giovine 2020). The 1954 Hague Convention would later criminalize the destruction of cultural property, as would the 1996 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The decades following the Second World War saw more highly publicized destruction of cultural property. On the one hand, technological advances in warfare translated into even larger-scale damage to cultural (and religious) sites during the Cold War. For example, in 1970, U.S. President Richard Nixon was persuaded to halt the bombing of Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary [designated a World Heritage site in 1999¹—the sacred citadel of the ancient Hindu Cham people in central Vietnam—during the Vietnam War (Di Giovine 2009a: 229–230), though hostilities by both the Viet Cong and the Americans leveled much of the future World Heritage site of Huế [1993]. On the other hand, highly publicized natural and man-made environmental factors mobilized the international community to protect the mass cultural tourism sites of Abu Simbel, Egypt [1979] and Venice, Italy [1987]—both of which contain sacred elements. UNESCO successfully raised \$80 million from 40 nations and private donors to relocate Pharaoh Ramses II’s (1303–1213 BC) Nubian temples—brick by brick—to a man-made mountain in order to save them from destruction during the construction of the Aswan High Dam at the first cataract of the Nile. UNESCO called the process “a triumph of international solidarity” (UNESCO 1982) that revealed the strong emotional relationship that such heritage properties, and the prospect of their destruction, could exert on the international community.

Thanks in part to the efforts to save Abu Simbel in 1965, a Conference on International Cooperation, convened by US President Lyndon Johnson at the White House in Washington, DC, called for the creation of a World Heritage Trust to engage the international community in the preservation of exemplary sites “for the present and future of the entire world citizenry” (quoted in UNESCO 2008: 7; see Cameron and Rössler 2013: 4–8). The idea gained traction the following year, when UNESCO mobilized the international community to “Save Venice” after the historic flooding of Venice and Florence in 1966. In 1968, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) followed suit in adopting a similar framework for its membership. In 1970, US President Nixon, who was concerned with his environmental legacy, supported the adoption of an international plan of conservation that was similar to that of the US National Parks, in that land would be specially set aside and managed by a supra-local organization. These proposals were combined in 1972, when delegates to the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm called for a new Convention that could better ensure the safeguarding and management of cultural and natural properties. This became the World Heritage Convention, which created both a World Heritage Committee to oversee the general body of State-Party delegates to the Convention as well as a small World Heritage Fund comprised of mandatory donations from each member state.

Although the Convention is explicitly concerned with preservation, it gives the World Heritage Committee little direct power to safeguard a site. Rather, the State-Party agrees to assume the responsibility for preserving the property. However, the Committee has limited resources to act should the responsibility not be upheld. In the case of a State-Party’s dereliction of duty, the Committee’s main recourse is to inscribe a property on the List of World Heritage in Danger and eventual de-listing. An example of this occurred in 2009 when the Dresden Elbe Valley (2004)—a cultural landscape that includes a number of religious structures including a reconstructed Dresden Cathedral (which was destroyed at the end of the Second World War)—was delisted after the civic government built a series of modern bridges across the picturesque Elbe River.

Implicit in the Convention text, and in subsequent publications sponsored by UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre, are several interlinked short-, medium-, and long-term objectives (Di Giovine 2018b). The development and publication of the World Heritage List and the World Heritage in Danger List are “fundamentally acts of knowledge creation and dissemination”—short-term “awareness-raising campaigns [that] will inspire international conservation and tourism efforts in the medium-term” (Di Giovine 2018b: 2). While visiting and preserving a site go relatively hand-in-hand—after all, a well-preserved and well-managed site is often a more desirable destination, and tourism development is often invoked (many times misguidedly) as a vehicle for generating income earmarked for preservation—UNESCO has traditionally held an ambivalent stance towards tourism. The World Heritage Convention does not mention “tourism” (or pilgrimage) at all, and the phrase “tourist development projects” appears only among a list of possible threats that could provide the basis for placing an already-inscribed property on the World Heritage List in Danger (see UNESCO 1972: 6). The Convention was ratified shortly after the foundation of the United Nations’ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which emerged from the International Union of Tourism Officers and was (and continues to be) occupied with the promises of tourism development as a means of modernization and integration into global markets (see Jafari 1975). However, UNESCO’s own research at the time (de Kadt 1976) found that many of their positive predictions did not materialize. For example, tourism was benefiting international tour operators and development companies more than locals, did not stave off locals’ “flight

from the land” into crowded cities or abroad, and funds generated through tourism were not staying in the destination’s country. Meanwhile, early tourism theorists also argued that tourism creates inauthenticity, museumification, stress, and socio-cultural imbalance akin to imperialism (cf. MacCannell 1976; Nash 1977; Murphy 1985: 1, 3). This is particularly an issue when a living spiritual destination is heritagized—valued for its past historical properties without recognizing present communities’ contemporary uses (see Isnart & Cerezales 2020)—and thus is required by UNESCO to maintain historic elements that are not adaptable to the contemporary needs of devotees, as Joy (2012) shows in her study of the Grand Mosque in Djenné, Mali [1988].

It was only at the turn of the millennium that the Convention found resonances in the UN’s Millennium Development Project and the “sustainable tourism” turn of the mid-1990s (see Stronza 2001). In 2001, the World Heritage Committee founded what would become the World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Programme, whose aims would be to “engage in dialogue and actions with the tourism industry to determine how the industry may contribute to help safeguard these precious resources” (UNESCO 2001: 63, 2010). This led to more direct engagement with the UNWTO, and in 2015, representatives from the two organizations met in Siem Reap, Cambodia—the site of the great Angkor temple complexes [1992]—to discuss a “policy and governance framework necessary to foster a new collaboration model between tourism and culture” (Brooks et al. 2016: 12). This culminated in the joint issue of the *Siem Reap Declaration on Tourism and Culture* (UNESCO/UNWTO 2015), and a second joint meeting of the two organizations in Oman during the United Nation’s Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development in 2017.

In line with some globalization theories’ emphasis on individuality over that of collectivities, in which one’s imagination negotiates between individuals and “globally defined fields of possibility” that transcend traditional geopolitical borders (Appadurai 1996: 31; cf. Robertson 1992: 8), UNESCO seems to posit that “peace in the minds of men” can emerge through the reordering of individuals’ sense of place. Rather than identifying exclusively with sites of local or national interest, individuals may also entertain a “common recognition and identification with the world’s shared cultural heritage” as exemplified in these monuments (Di Giovine 2009a: 34) and enacted through collective participation in their preservation and touristic visitation. This notion is made most explicit in UNESCO’s 2001 *Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity*, which, defining culture as the “distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or group,” argued that “respect for the diversity of cultures...[and] an awareness of the unity of humankind, and of the development of intercultural exchanges...are among the best guarantees of international peace and security” (UNESCO 2002b: 1). Ratified shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, and the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas earlier that year, the Declaration further acknowledges that UNESCO’s “specific mandate” within the UN system was to “ensure the preservation and promotion of the fruitful diversity of cultures...as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature” (2002b: 1–2). Acknowledging that “diversity is the essence of identity” (Matsura 2002a: 3), the Declaration “makes it clear that each individual must acknowledge not only otherness in all its forms but also the plurality of his or her own identity, within societies that are themselves plural” (Matsura 2002a: i). By simultaneously celebrating the differences that mark human life and yet positing some unanimously recognizable (and valued) universal culture, UNESCO proposes a peaceful world system based on the structural unity of difference, which Di Giovine (2009a, 2010, 2018a) terms a world “heritage-scape.”

This ultimate objective is clearly utopian, and scholars with intimate connections to World Heritage decision-making at the bureaucratic level argue that UNESCO has “fallen short” of these goals, in part because of nationalistic and Eurocentric ideals (Smith 2006; Meskell 2018). Indeed, as early as 1994, UNESCO found that monumental religious sites, particularly in Europe, were over-represented, in part because they conformed more closely to Western aesthetic and political sensibilities. Indeed, the soaring cathedrals of Europe, filled with inestimably valued sculpture and paintings from Western-dictated art historical canons, were already embedded in national and international conceptualizations of monumentality with a majority of them already highly visited pilgrimage and tourism sites. Similar material religious and archaeological structures in the Near East, North Africa, and Asia also were represented, in part because they conformed to Western-accepted notions of “religion” and “art.” However, countries that had structures and landscapes that were less monumental, or valued for their immaterial and spiritual qualities, had a difficult time applying based on the established World Heritage criteria. This remains an issue for UNESCO despite the passing of its *Global Strategy for Representative, Balanced, and More Credible World Heritage List* (UNESCO 1994a) that directs the World Heritage Committee to broaden its notion of universal value, monumentality, and authenticity. Indeed, critics continue to show how World Heritage marginalizes indigenous and descendent communities (Colwell-Chanthaphanh & Ferguson 2007; Carter 2010; Di Giovine 2017), both in how their cultural and spiritual sites are defined under UNESCO’s rubric and in the ways through which they are (dis)engaged in decision-making, preservation, and tourism development processes.

Furthermore, although the *Global Strategy* also gives preference to serial and trans-boundary properties—those that span more than one geographically defined place or nation-states—in order to foster more international cooperation and peace, properties continue to be listed by country in which they are located geographically. This is the case as well for pilgrimage trails like the Routes of Santiago de Compostela—the *Camino Francés* and Routes of Northern Spain [1993], designated seven years after the endpoint, Santiago de Compostela [1985] was inscribed. Critics, however, point out that this continues to cause international competition and may exacerbate pre-existing political tensions. For example, the Khmer temple-mount of Preah Vihear, which straddles a contested border between Thailand and Cambodia, was listed as Cambodia’s property in 2008, leading to uprisings in Thailand that helped topple Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s regime and causing skirmishes between the two countries’ armies at the border. Because of its extremely contested nature, the Old City of Jerusalem [1981], the center of the Abrahamic tradition that is claimed by both Israel and Palestine, was proposed by Jordan and is the only property listed without a State-Party. But for changing political reasons, The Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and Bethlehem Pilgrimage [2012] in the still-contested West Bank of Jerusalem was inscribed under Palestine, providing the first formal international recognition of the country by UNESCO. This recognition caused the United States and Israel to withdraw from UNESCO and from contributing dues. Palestine has since inscribed two other properties, in part to show its autonomy and integration into the world stage.

Further arguing that the Convention is a toothless document that does not give UNESCO power over States-Parties (see O’Keefe 2004), critics also point to UNESCO’s inability to stave off the recent destruction of a number of religious sites such as the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan; Sufi shrines in Mali; Biblical sites in Nineveh sacred to Yazidi, Christians, and Shiite Muslims; Muslim sites in India by Hindu nationalists; and the ancient city of Palmyra—all of which were committed precisely because their highly valued status with

UNESCO would demonstrate their power to contest Euro–American hegemony and draw followers to their radical regimes (see Di Giovine & Garcia-Fuentes 2014: 2).

Process and criteria of inscription

A place of local interest (religious or otherwise) is converted into a site of “universal value” through a complex, political, and bureaucratic process that involves national and supra-national entities. With only a few notable exceptions, the process is initiated by a State-Party, a nation-state that is a signatory to the 1972 World Heritage Convention in good standing. Each State-Party compiles and consistently updates a Tentative List, an inventory of sites that it intends to nominate. Two exceptions to this process were highly vulnerable sacred sites in “failed states”: the Angkor Archaeological Park [1992] was designated after the United Nations took over the post-genocide transition of Cambodia, and the remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban were inscribed during the U.S. war in Afghanistan [2003].

Once a “property” is on the country’s Tentative List, a Nomination File can be opened. Compiled in collaboration with one or more of UNESCO’s expert advisory bodies, the Nomination File is a comprehensive set of documents that makes the case for the place’s outstanding universal value by showing how it meets one or more of the World Heritage Criteria established in the 1972 Convention text and identified in the first *Operational Guidelines*, passed in 1978. The World Heritage Criteria consists of a set of ten typologies, or idealized categories, which are used to evaluate, and offer the conditions for, a site’s inscription. While originally separate for cultural and natural sites, these criteria were merged in 2003 and went into effect in the 2005 *Revised Operational Guidelines*. The criteria’s wording is extremely important for assimilating disparate sites into a cohesive List and for crafting the universalizing narrative individual sites possess. Instead of indicating concrete categories, the criteria are purposefully vague, so as to be applicable to a wide variety of places across the globe. As Di Giovine (2018b: 3) argues,

Rather than *being* something definite, these sites are intended to *represent, exhibit, bear testimony to, exemplify*, or be *tangibly associated with* generalized forms, cultural traditions, ideas, and human abilities that are loosely defined and easily interpreted in multiple ways. They are, in a way, empty signs whose values and meanings can be filled in by different parties throughout time.

The criteria are as follows:

- 1 Represent a masterpiece of human creative genius.
- 2 Exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning, or landscape design.
- 3 Bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization that is living or which has disappeared.
- 4 Be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble, or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
- 5 Be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land use, or sea use which is representative of a culture (or cultures) or human interaction with the environment, especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.

- 6 Be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria).
- 7 Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.
- 8 Be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.
- 9 Be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, and communities of plants and animals
- 10 Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

The Nomination File also includes the technical and managerial aspects of the property; it documents the site's history and development, outlines its specific geopolitical boundaries and "buffer zones"—which, in the case of religious tourism destinations, may or may not include the actual pilgrimage route—and details its authenticity and integrity. Although authenticity and integrity are slippery terms (see, for example, De Cesari 2010; Labadi 2013: 113–126), for UNESCO they are technical qualities that ensure that the site's value is "truthfully and credibly expressed" through its form, design, the materials of its construction, and its functionality. Outlined in the Venice Charter (1964) and subsequently modified in the Nara Declaration of Authenticity (UNESCO 1994b) and the Cairns Charter (UNESCO 2000b), these technical qualities refer to the physical completeness of the site, its preservation, and the level of human intervention subsequent to the time period that the site represents (UNESCO 1978: 4). These later charters broaden the Eurocentric notion of authenticity as "original as opposed to counterfeit" (Bendix 1992: 104; Jokilehto 1999: 296; Labadi 2013: 114; Winter 2014) to acknowledge the very fluid and socially constructed nature of authenticity. For example, much to the chagrin of preservationists, Buddhist devotees in Laos' Luang Prabhang [1995] allow statuary and artwork to naturally decay as a metonym for the impermanence of life, and will also dismantle and repurpose centuries-old temples as a means of magnifying and transferring merit to a new living devotional structure (Karlström 2015). Nevertheless, emerging nation-states have frequently adopted these Western, cosmopolitan meanings and practices. The nomination documents for Mt. Wutai [2009] in China, for example, make explicit that while the sacred landscape and Buddhist temples have been changed over time, many remain identical to the time when they were built (Labadi 2013: 114).

Yet there is fluidity to this as well. France's Notre Dame cathedral is inscribed in the World Heritage site of Paris, Banks of the Seine [1991], which broadly reveals "the evolution of Paris and its history." Although explicitly identified as an "architectural masterpiece of the Middle Ages," the cathedral's juxtaposition with the Renaissance Pont Neuf, French classical Louvre, and the modern Eiffel Tower seems to allow for its statement of value to encompass not only its original Gothic construction but also a modern spire constructed in 1859 (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/600>). However, the spire and its medieval ceiling burned to the ground in the fire of 2019, and currently, authorities are debating whether it should be rebuilt in the same style or be radically different. These reconstruction decisions could affect its inscription. This is not to say that subsequent interventions cannot be made—especially

if they are restorative—but rather that these modifications ensure truthfulness and intactness after a catastrophic event. The Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi [2000] is a case in point. Designated not only for its centrality to the cult of the founder of the Franciscan Order (and Patron Saint of Italy), the Basilica is also inscribed for Giotto's renowned Renaissance fresco cycle, *The Life of St. Francis*—which is generally understood to signal the birth of Renaissance art (UNESCO 2000b)—as well as other works by Cimabue and Simone Martini, among others. However, during the central Italian earthquake of 1997, the Upper Basilica containing Giotto's frescoes was significantly damaged, rendering the entire structure unstable. Italian authorities were unusually swift and exacting in its reconstruction. In just three years, Giotto's frescoes were painstakingly reconstructed using original paint flecks from the ruins, and the entire building was earthquake-proofed with cutting-edge technology used by NASA (Gayford 1999). UNESCO lauded the art restoration effort's authenticity and integrity despite such major damage (ICOMOS 2000).

Once the Nomination File is complete, the appropriate Advisory Body will provide its own assessment. Comprised of expert-members who are international scholars and professionals with expertise in conservation, these NGOs are independent from the nation-state, although they may provide technical assistance to the State-Party during the file's compilation and will sometimes provide reactive monitoring after the site is designated. The International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) evaluates cultural heritage sites and their proposed management while the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) evaluates proposed natural sites. Should a site's material conservation need to be assessed—as, for example, the early Buddhist cave-paintings of Ajanta [1983] and Ellora [1983] in India—the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) will also be solicited for input. As Di Giovine argues (2009a: 199), their written report is less an act of evaluation as it is of idealization, for it effectively changes the property into an idealized material form of UNESCO's metanarrative of “unity in diversity.”

Once the File is complete, it is presented at the annual meeting of the World Heritage Committee, which is composed of a rotating group of 21 representatives of state-parties elected from the General Assembly. The Committee examines each nomination based on the technical evaluations and votes to inscribe or reject a property. They may also vote to defer judgment on a site, requesting additional information from the State-Party. Along with a site's inscription, the Committee confirms the textual wording of the site's designation, which is often a slight modification of the Advisory Body's statement of the site's “outstanding universal value.” The importance of this act should not be underestimated—it is often subject to politicking as other parties struggle to determine the site's specific narrative, which translates into the ways in which the site is conserved and packaged for touristic consumption (Harrison & Hitchcock 2005; Di Giovine 2009a, 2010; Harrison 2010). Finally, the World Heritage Committee inscribes the new World Heritage site's name and geographic location on the List, along with other similarly valorized places. Importantly, despite the recognition of their universal value, each site is listed under the country (or countries) which proposed its nomination and within whose geopolitical boundaries the sites physically lie.

Sacred world heritage sites and problems with religious categorization

According to UNESCO (n.d.), approximately 20% of the properties on the World Heritage List have “some sort of religious or spiritual connection.” However, it is often a difficult and

rather fruitless enterprise to definitively tease out these components, since the notion of the sacred itself is fluid, changeable, and “ambiguous” (Hobart & Zarcone 2017). Varying from group to group and even individual and individual, these sites gain and lose their devotional importance over time and do not necessarily need to be “authorized” by a religious authority to be a locus of devotion and hyper-meaningful travel (Di Giovine & Choe 2020). Furthermore, not all cultures perceive of religion as separate from daily life, or even separate from the natural environment. As such, not all spiritual sites conform to Western notions of monumentality. Finally, World Heritage sites in general may become loci of pilgrimage and hyper-meaningful travel even if not designated as spiritual or religious in nature. Roots or heritage travel to Ghana’s coastal slave forts and castles [1979]; or visits to Robben Island [1999], the site of anti-Apartheid Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment; or to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau [1979] have all been considered pilgrimages by theorists and travelers themselves (see Ebron 1999, Shackley 2001, Feldman 2008).

Nevertheless, properties that are explicitly recognized by UNESCO for their spiritual or religious qualities most often fall under the first seven criteria reserved for cultural sites. Criterion i (“masterpiece of creative genius”) is most often invoked, thanks in part to the impetus amongst many societies to produce monumental religious structures that have lasted the tests of time, such as the great Catholic and Orthodox Christian cathedrals of Europe; intricately carved Hindu, Jain, Shinto and Buddhist temples of Asia; mosques in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia; pre-Colombian temple-citadels of the Maya, Aztecs, and Inca in Latin America; ancient petroglyphs in Africa, Central Asia, and Northern Europe; or the archaeological remains of ancient devotional sites in the Middle East and North Africa (many archaeological sites may alternatively be categorized under criterion iii). Criterion iv, which focuses on the technological skill of construction—also is used to designate a number of religious or spiritual sites, especially if they respond to particular movements in history, or if they show notable integration with the landscape, such as Bangladesh’s Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat [1985], which was created out of the “piety of Khan Jahan” and reveals a “perfect mastery of the techniques of planning” that allowed it to be situated in “the impenetrable mangrove swamps of the Sunderbans” (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/321>). Another site, Bolivia’s Jesuit missions of the Chiquitos [1993]—six mission settlements of Christianized natives designed by the Catholic Jesuit Order—were inscribed under this criterion for the ways in which the Jesuits were inspired by the “ideal cities” envisioned by Renaissance humanists and adapted for the landscape and indigenous practices (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/529>). This may also be combined with criterion v, especially when they are threatened by culture change. Thus, the Jesuit Missions were also inscribed for the vulnerability of its religious art “under the impact of changes that threatened the Chiquitos populations following the agrarian reforms of 1953” (ICOMOS 1990: 61).

Criterion vi has also been applied to spiritual or religious sites, though as the second sentence in the criterion intimates, this is a rather complicated typology because living traditions, beliefs, or ideas may not be readily evident in built material culture, and therefore is usually combined with another criterion that speaks to some recognizable or metonymic aesthetic quality. One European example is The Luther Memorials in Wittenberg and Eisleben [1996], which, coupled with criterion iv, concretize the watershed moments of the Protestant Reformation. Criterion vi is invoked by UNESCO, in that the site bears “unique testimony to the Protestant Reformation, one of the most significant events in the religious and political history of the world, and constitute exceptional examples of 19th-century historicism” (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/783>).

There are, however, other instances in which classifying a spiritual World Heritage site is difficult. Many properties are not singular constructions but “ensembles” (criterion ii), which include multiple spiritual or religious constructions mixed with civic structures. A case in point is *Cidade Velha, Historic Centre of Ribeira Grande* [2009], on the tiny island country of Cabo Verde off Western Africa, which was the first European colonial outpost in the tropics. Boasting two Catholic churches, among other structures, the site is not recognized for its spiritual qualities *per se*, but rather is recognized for its “considerable role in international trade associated with the development of European colonial domination towards Africa and America and the birth of Atlantic triangular trade” (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1310>). However, these ensembles also include the great urban centers of Europe, Asia, and the Americas, such as Venice and its Lagoon [1987], which includes the Byzantine St. Mark’s Cathedral and the Doges’ Palace, its many canals, and all of the other palazzi on some 118 islets; the imperial Vietnamese capital of Hué [1993], which includes the Perfume Pagoda and Buddhist temples on the picturesque Perfume River and also the Imperial Purple City, its military citadel, and the tombs of its emperors spread across a vast jungle; and the Historic Center of Morelia [1991], which was designated as “an outstanding example of urban development combining town planning theories of Spain and the Mesoamerican Experience.” The Historic Center of Morelia includes over 200 distinct sites of importance, including 21 churches and 20 civic constructions (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/585>). Thematic ensembles do not necessarily have to be located in close proximity to each other; these are called “serial properties,” such as The Twentieth Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright [2019], which includes not only his famous Guggenheim Museum in New York and residential constructions such as Falling Water in Pennsylvania but also the Unity Temple—a Unitarian church constructed in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. While the Frank Lloyd Wright serial property was designated only under criterion iii (“bear exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition”), another similar one, The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement [2016]—which encompasses sacred and secular buildings in six countries in three continents, including the modernist Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France—was categorized under criteria i, ii, and iv.

Another problem with identifying the spiritual nature of World Heritage sites is that many cultures do not distinguish between sacred and secular. “Religion” itself is a Western construct that was developed primarily in the colonial era to make sense of monumental places and spiritual practices in non-Western regions (Smith 1998: 270, 275–280). Even in the Western tradition, the religious and civic were often mixed. For example, the pan-Hellenic sanctuary of Delphi [1987], considered to be the “navel of the world,” was the religious center for ancient Greece, and ancient Athenians would undergo a yearly civic pilgrimage called *theoria* to hear the oracle of Apollo speak (Rutherford 2000). Likewise, Vatican City [1984] was (and continues to be) a political entity as well as the center of Roman Catholicism.

Although unique landforms often hold great spiritual value for many sacred travelers today, and have traditionally been places of cult devotion for many cultures throughout history (see Eliade 1959: 37–41), UNESCO has more difficulty in applying the last four criteria—developed for “natural” sites—to sacred places. Indeed, the criteria regarding natural sites rests on the materiality of the environment—such as geomorphic features, rare biota, or aesthetically unique landscapes—and do not include language on intangible qualities. Rather, they are coupled with one or more cultural criteria as a “mixed” site, revealing both human and natural interface. Papahānaumokuākea [2010], a set of several low-lying atolls in Hawaii, is a case in point. Although designated as “a very significant testimony of hotspot volcanism,”

as with other Polynesian cultures, it is precisely these continuous volcanic processes that have provided the spiritual component to these peoples, and at Papahānaumokuākea, UNESCO specifies that the islets are dotted with the “well preserved heiau shrines” that are not only associated with 3,000-year-old Polynesian marae-ahu culture but are living sites of pilgrimage today (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1326>). UNESCO has also recognized the spirituality of sites that nevertheless may not contain material cult structures, such as the Palau’s Rock Islands Southern Lagoon World Heritage site. In its inscription, UNESCO points out that the 445 uninhabited volcanic and limestone islands, with their “unique mushroom-like shapes in turquoise lagoons surrounded by coral reefs,” played an important role in the spirituality of the indigenous peoples “through oral traditions that record in legends, myths, dances, and proverbs, and traditional place names the land- and seascape of their former homes” (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1386>).

However, it is often difficult to tease out cultural and spiritual qualities of a site primarily valued for its natural landscape, especially by technical experts in material preservation. The Tasmanian Wilderness [1982] is a case in point. When Australia submitted its Nomination File, it made the argument—supported by archaeological evidence—that the natural landscape has been an important cultural and spiritual feature for Aboriginal groups. IUCN evaluated quite positively its natural qualities, but ICOMOS did not do the same for its intangible cultural dynamics. In its original evaluation (ICOMOS 1982: 1–2), the experts acknowledged evidence of changing land-use by aboriginal peoples, but that they “do not, in themselves, offer sufficient reason to inscribe this cultural property on the World Heritage List but simply constitute new positive evidence which supplement the already favorable report by IUCN.” ICOMOS subsequently re-evaluated the site twice more but continued to remain skeptical and urged managers to consult local Tasmanian aboriginal authorities for better documentation. It was nevertheless eventually inscribed under several cultural categories by UNESCO, testifying to the Committee’s acknowledgment that for many indigenous groups, it is difficult to map intangible spiritual practices of the past onto the tangible environment.

But more recently UNESCO and its advisory bodies have come to acknowledge that nature/culture and tangible/intangible dichotomies are themselves Western constructs, and many societies, especially indigenous groups, do not make such distinctions. There are many natural sites with little human intervention that hold great cultural importance to communities, such as the spiritual places like Uluru-Kata Tjuta [1987] in Australia or Mount Taishan [1987] in China, while built cultural sites are also often part of a wider natural environment, such as Meteora [1988] and Mount Athos [1988] in Greece or the sanctuary of Machu Picchu [1983] in Peru. Consequently, around the turn of the millennium, UNESCO largely eschewed this mixed categorization, preferring to apply the more fluid distinction of a “cultural landscape” (Rössler 2006; Mitchel, Rössler & Tricaud 2009), as applied to Göreme National Park and the Rock Sites of Ancient Cappadocia [1985] in Turkey, where early Christians in Anatolia sought refuge amongst its unique “fairy chimneys” landforms (tall, thin spires of rock also known as hoodoo) and carved cave-churches and homes into the mountains.

Ultimately, however, since the process is a political one, similar properties can be interpreted differently. For example, the Maloti-Drakensberg Park [2000], which spans South Africa and Lesotho, was inscribed for both its natural and cultural qualities. Not only does this site harbor a number of endangered endemic wildlife, such as the Cape and bearded vultures, and the Maloti minnow (a “critically endangered fish species only found in this park”), but also contains “spectacular...caves and rock-shelters with the largest and most

concentrated group of paintings in Africa south of the Sahara. They represent the spiritual life of the San [hunter-gatherer] people, who lived in this area over a period of 4,000 years” (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/985>). This differs from a similarly described site, Botswana’s Tsodilo [2001], that is also inhabited by the San people. Considered “the Louvre of the Desert” for its over 4,500 prehistoric rock-art images that are revered by local communities in the Kalahari Desert as an abode of the spirits, it is only classified as a cultural site despite the integral nature of the landscape, which is nevertheless vividly described in its documentation (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1021>).

A property’s understood sacred nature and religious affiliation may also change over time and is often subject to political control. Angkor Wat, for example, was originally constructed as a Hindu temple to Vishnu but was converted into a Buddhist temple by Jayavarman VII, a convert, 30 years later. Turkey’s Hagia Sofia is a more contemporary case in point. Originally constructed as the main cathedral of Orthodox Christian Byzantium, it was briefly a Roman Catholic church during the thirteenth-century Crusades before being re-appropriated as a mosque in the Ottoman era, wherein its golden mosaics were plastered over and its decorated marble floors covered with carpeting. In 1935, the secular Turkish government officially declared it a museum, uncovering the marble floor and removing the plaster over many Christian mosaics. In 1985, UNESCO inscribed it as the cornerstone of its Historic Areas of Istanbul World Heritage site, which fuses Byzantine, Ottoman, and other more modern urban features (religious and secular), and which is intended to reveal the interplay of various religious and cultural traditions over time. However, in 2020, the increasingly conservative Islamic government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan officially declared the Hagia Sofia a mosque once again amid great outcry from the international community, including UNESCO. Although the government assured UNESCO that the Christian elements would continue to be protected and visitation would be allowed outside of prayer times, UNESCO decried the unilateral decision and the potential that it would affect physical access to the site, the structure of the building, the site’s movable property, and the site’s management (Olsen & Emmett 2021).

The operational value of identifying spiritual and religious sites

Despite the difficulties in identifying spiritual or religious World Heritage sites, UNESCO nevertheless finds it operationally useful in addressing the very discrepancies enumerated above. Doing so orients the World Heritage Centre and its advisory bodies to be more sensitive to places that are hyper-meaningful to communities and to strive towards better inclusivity in designating properties that may not conform to Western ideals of authenticity, integrity, and monumentality. There have been several initiatives starting with the *Global Strategy* (UNESCO 1994a) and the Budapest Declaration (UNESCO 2002a), which encouraged under-represented groups to participate and promised UNESCO’s greater empowerment of local communities. The *Nara Document on Authenticity* (UNESCO 1994b), furthermore, recognized that authenticity should encompass the intangible “spirit of the place”—a term that was enshrined in the *Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place* by ICOMOS in 2008. Indeed, advisory bodies have been active in identifying the special nature of sacred places as they are ultimately responsible for making technical assessments and interventions. In 2003, ICCROM held a Forum on the Conservation of Living Religious Heritage, and two years later ICOMOS’ General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the “establishment of an International Thematic Programme for Religious Heritage” (UNESCO n.d.). ICOMOS followed with another resolution in 2011 on the *Protection and*

Enhancement of Sacred Heritage Sites, Buildings and Landscapes, and in 2008, IUCN issued the *UNESCO MAB/IUCN Guidelines for the Conservation and Management of Sacred Natural Sites*, which corresponds “to the areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities” (McLeod et al. 2008). This interest was elevated to the international level around the same time, when in 2010 the United Nations General Assembly brought together religious authorities, States-Parties, site managers, and experts at an international seminar on the role of religious communities in the management of World Heritage properties. The resulting *Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO 2011) recognized the value of spiritual sites for local communities, the role played by religious communities (in conjunction with national authorities and international experts) to create, maintain and use sacred places, and the importance of dialogue between religious authorities and all stakeholders. Furthermore, The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations itself has also issued its Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites, many of which are World Heritage properties (see United Nations 2019). Finally, UNESCO has supported the creation of several international expert-networks to study the unique challenges of spiritual World Heritage sites. ICOMOS formally created the Scientific Committee for Places of Religion and Ritual (PRERICO); IUCN also created the IUCN-WCPA’s Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas; and UNESCO has a Steering Group on Heritage of Religious Interest made up of appointed members from both these advisory bodies (UNESCO n.d.).

Conclusion

This chapter has defined and outlined UNESCO’s World Heritage program, paying particular attention to the roles in which religious and spiritual sites, broadly conceived, have been conceptualized, utilized, and disputed. Although nearly 300 World Heritage properties are formally classified as religious or spiritual sites, it is a difficult and ever-evolving process to adequately represent the breadth of sacred sites and their associated pilgrimage trails. On the one hand, the World Heritage Convention has been criticized for its innate political structure, as well as its Eurocentric nature, especially in how it dichotomizes sacred/secular, nature/culture, religion/spirituality, and materiality/immateriality. On the other hand, many of the most important and highly visited pilgrimage sites have been left off the List. This sometimes stems from political issues between state and local government, such as with India’s Varanasi; or from conflict and warfare—such as in Karbala, Iraq, the sacred center for Shiite Muslims; or because of a lack of interest or incentive on the part of the nation-state, such as with Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia; or because of the lack of will on the part of the religious community, as with the sacred Shinto shrines of Ise in Japan.

Although UNESCO acknowledges the importance of visitation to these living spiritual sites (both through pilgrimage and international tourism), it has historically treated these practices as preservation challenges rather than opportunities. These opportunities may include economic development—though this should not be taken for granted—but also more intangible aspects of well-being, such as empowerment and valorization (Di Giovine 2009b, 2017). Indeed, as pilgrimage and religious travel is one of the oldest forms of mobility in the world (Di Giovine & Elsner 2016), it has shaped peoples, places, and the environment itself. Thus, as ICCROM points out, sites of living religious and spiritual heritage “are indeed the oldest protected areas of the planet” (qtd. UNESCO, n.d.), and, UNESCO believes, if harnessed properly, may foster peaceful coexistence through the safeguarding of cultural and natural diversity.

Yet there continue to be challenges within UNESCO's utopian project, and sacred sites pose some of the greatest obstacles. Through the political nature and structure of the World Heritage process, indigenous and religious communities may be marginalized, left out, or feel that they stand to lose more than they gain. It is incumbent to not only include these community stakeholders in decision-making processes before and after inscription but to allow them to present oral histories and alternative narratives that may run counter to those crafted by technocrats and professionals. Furthermore, technical emphasis on preservation and Eurocentric notions of authenticity may also prohibit living devotional sites from changing and adapting with the times, placing undue burdens on local communities. Finally, sacred sites are some of the most contested places in the world (see Eade & Sallnow 1991)—hyper-meaningful places that serve as touchstones of identity politics. On the one hand, multiple groups may compete for control over the same site, such as Jerusalem and Angkor (and Varanasi), while on the other hand, their highly valued status makes them vulnerable to looting and other destructive forces that enact violence not only on the property itself but also on those communities who lay claim to them.

Nevertheless, religious and spiritual World Heritage sites inspire millions of travelers each year, many of whom visit for cultural or historical reasons. Likewise, historical World Heritage sites not included for spiritual reasons may nonetheless be sacralized by travelers, being hyper-meaningful places of “secular pilgrimage” (Digance 2006, Margry 2008). This is a testament to the effectiveness of UNESCO's World Heritage Program, the value-laden imaginaries it promulgates, and its ability to adapt to changing sensibilities and geopolitical challenges, even if its ultimate goal of fostering peace remains elusive.

Note

- 1 As the years in which particular properties were designated can provide further contextualization of the evolution of the World Heritage process, particularly as it relates to changing conceptualizations of the nature and role of the spiritual in these heritage sites, I have henceforth included the dates of their inscription in brackets after each exemplary property mentioned in this text.

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