



## Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of Academic Tourism: An Analysis of Key Challenges

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### Abstract

Interreligious dialogue within the framework of academic tourism represents an effective mechanism of public diplomacy, endowed with a unique potential to promote global peace and mutual understanding. Nevertheless, this study identifies five fundamental challenges that hinder its efficacy. First is the phenomenon of the "touristification of dialogue", which reduces profound religious content to superficial experiential encounters. Second, the political instrumentalization of dialogue institutions by governments pursuing geopolitical agendas. Third, the infiltration of missionary movements disguised as academic programs. Fourth, favoritism in the distribution of academic opportunities. And fifth, the overemphasis on abstract themes at the expense of practical issues. The research proposes a comprehensive framework centered on three foundational pillars to enhance interreligious dialogue: 1) The design of multilayered oversight mechanisms emphasizing transparency of objectives and strengthening the ethical accountability of institutions engaged in this field, thereby minimizing political and ideological manipulation. 2) The establishment of ethical frameworks grounded in financial transparency, aimed at reducing dependence on political actors and enabling an independent space for scholarly engagement. 3) The promotion of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate theology, social sciences, and environmental studies to shift dialogues from abstract discussions toward concrete societal challenges such as social justice, climate change, and cultural coexistence. By synthesizing theory and practice, this study offers a pragmatic model that repositions interreligious dialogue from a theoretical construct into a tangible instrument for addressing global challenges.

**Keywords:** Interreligious Dialogue, Academic Tourism, Academic Exchanges, Public Diplomacy, Interdisciplinary Approaches.

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## Introduction

In the era of globalization, interreligious dialogue has evolved into a cornerstone of public diplomacy and peacebuilding research (Siyaha et al., 2023, p. 851). Academic tourism—providing a platform for face-to-face interaction among scholars, students, and researchers from diverse religious backgrounds—plays a distinctive role in facilitating interfaith engagement. However, recent empirical findings indicate that this potential is often undermined by structural and substantive complexities. For instance, university exchange programs designed to enhance scientific and cultural cooperation can devolve into instruments for advancing states' political agendas or promoting specific ideological narratives. Despite an extensive body of literature on the importance of interreligious dialogue, few studies have critically examined its shortcomings within the context of academic tourism. This research gap is noteworthy, especially as growing concerns emerge regarding the instrumental use of these platforms for non-academic and non-peaceful purposes. A particularly illustrative case is the criticism of the International Kaicid Center for its financial ties to Saudi Arabia and its silence on human-rights violations (Religions News Agency, 2021). Such examples underscore the need for a systematic and scholarly investigation into the barriers confronting interfaith dialogue. This study, therefore, seeks to address two central questions:

- 1) What malfunctions threaten interreligious dialogue in the context of academic tourism?
- 2) How can these challenges be mitigated through structural and procedural reforms?

## Literature Review

Interreligious dialogue has garnered growing attention over recent decades as an effective mechanism for cultural rapprochement and peacebuilding within social science and religious studies. Prior research highlights that, despite its theoretical and practical promise, it faces serious structural, methodological, and content-related obstacles:

✦ **Structural Issues:** Some political systems exploit interfaith dialogue to advance geopolitical agendas (Siyaha et al., 2023, p. 856). A prominent example is the International Kaicid Center, which, due to its financial links with Saudi Arabia, has been accused of turning a blind eye to human-rights abuses—a case that exemplifies the dual roles played by interreligious institutions on the global stage (Religions News Agency, 2021).

✦ **Methodological Inconsistencies:** The absence of universally accepted frameworks among different faiths has generated conflicting approaches. Some emphasize scriptural reasoning, while others prioritize shared human values

and mutual respect (Pope & Paulos, 2023, pp. 31–59). Hesitation from certain religious bodies—stemming from concerns about weakening core beliefs—represents an additional methodological challenge (Toran, 2004).

✦ **Content-Level Conflicts:** Deep theological disagreements, such as those between Catholicism and Sunni Islam, fundamentally impede collaboration and often position evangelism at odds with mutual understanding (Hamet, 2023, pp. 46–56; Mutalib & Ramli, 2023, pp. 1170–1179). Extremist ideologies and flawed policy-making further undermine dialogue initiatives—as seen in Bangladesh, where interfaith engagement has been weakened (Shahrin, 2023, pp. 165–184), and in Ukraine, where the Orthodox Church has reframed dialogue in response to geopolitical tensions (Kolahina-Stadenichenko, 2023, pp. 97–110).

Although existing scholarship broadly addresses the challenges facing interfaith dialogue, little attention has been given to specific settings—such as academic tourism. While some studies have analyzed financial and administrative dimensions of academic exchanges (Saldirabento et al., 2021), more complex phenomena remain understudied. Specifically, the “touristification” of dialogue—where depth is sacrificed for experience—and the emergence of exclusivity in academic participation demand further exploration.

This article fills this gap by focusing on five core dysfunctions:

- 1) The touristification of interreligious discourse;
- 2) Political instrumentalization of dialogue institutions;
- 3) Encroachment of missionary agendas;
- 4) Unequal access to academic opportunities; and
- 5) Overemphasis on abstract topics at the expense of concrete issues.

## Research Questions & Method

Adopting a qualitative design, this study investigates the structural and content-based challenges of interreligious dialogue within academic tourism. Data were collected through targeted documentary review, continuing until saturation—where no new insights emerged. Data were analyzed using conventional content analysis, with a focus on identifying recurring patterns and themes through a culturally contextual lens.

## Theoretical Framework

Early paradigms in tourism research were predominantly political and economic; however, since the 1980s, scholarship has evolved toward multidimensional analysis—incorporating cultural, social, and psychological dimensions (Farjirad & Aghajani, 2009, pp. 61–72). A phenomenological and semiotic approach to tourism research then emerged, centering human

experience and cultural symbolism. Postmodern theories have elevated the recognition of cultural plurality and hybridity (Geur, 2010), emphasizing flexible, localized understandings rather than uniform definitions. Meanwhile, sociocultural approaches have focused on tourists' experiences, social identity, and intercultural dynamics (King Zhong, 2006, pp. 7–9). The rise of sustainable tourism theory underscores the balanced integration of tourism development and environmental preservation. Within this conceptual paradigm, academic tourism occupies a distinct niche—driven by motivations, experiences, and socioeconomic impacts and connected to globalization-driven mobility and international collaboration (Quintela et al., 2022, pp. 209–223). University reputation and academic merit significantly influence student mobility tendencies. Studies—such as those examining Erasmus preferences in Porto—demonstrate that recognized scientific prestige guides student travel decisions (Quintela et al., 2022, pp. 209–223). Academic tourism is often associated with **cultural immersion**, an immersive experience where students engage directly with the host culture—its customs, language, traditions, and values (Stein, 2015, p. 2). This immersion enhances intercultural communication skills, diminishes biases, and promotes respect for cultural differences; it also enriches academic learning by integrating theoretical insights with real-world contexts (Teston Franco et al., 2022, pp. 26–31). This theoretical convergence—centered on cultural immersion, face-to-face interaction, and knowledge exchange—positions academic tourism as a potent context for interreligious dialogue. Postmodern pluralism and sustainable tourism, in particular, inform how this form of tourism can transition from abstract discourse into practical efforts for reducing religious misunderstandings, facilitating peace, and fostering interfaith harmony.

## 1. Academic Tourism

In tourism literature, *academic tourism* is classified as a subset of cultural and educational tourism, primarily aimed at knowledge acquisition, research, scholarly exchange, and formal education. This type of tourism traces its roots back to the scientific expeditions and exploratory journeys of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which explorers, archaeologists, and biologists undertook travel in pursuit of research and intellectual inquiry. These activities represent the earliest forms of what would later be conceptualized as scientific tourism. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the expansion of higher education institutions and the increasing frequency of scientific conferences, academic tourism assumed a more organized structure and has now evolved into a distinct branch within the broader tourism industry. In recent decades, this field has garnered serious academic attention within disciplines such as tourism studies, education, and cultural studies. Numerous studies have examined its role in facilitating

scientific, cultural, and economic development (Goodarzi, 2019: 125–135). Academic tourism is defined as a specific type of *responsible tourism* that involves temporary residence at institutions of higher education outside the individual's usual environment, typically lasting longer than one night and less than one year. Its primary objectives include pursuing academic degrees, engaging in research activities, attending training programs, or participating in language immersion courses. This concept encompasses the mobility of students, researchers, and faculty members, which may occur either domestically (within national boundaries) or internationally (across countries) (Rodríguez et al., 2013: 89–98). According to this definition, academic tourism is characterized by the following fundamental features:

**1) Academic Purpose:**

It is motivated by educational goals such as studying, conducting research, participating in scholarly exchanges, and formal instruction—not merely leisure or general tourism.

**2) Responsible Engagement:**

It is a form of responsible action involving stakeholders from the academic and tourism sectors, aiming to generate positive social and cultural outcomes.

**3) Sustainable Development Orientation:**

It operates within a sustainable development framework, ensuring that its economic, social, and environmental impacts are optimized and long-lasting.

**4) Cultural Sensitivity:**

It emphasizes awareness of cultural diversity and the varied experiences of scientific travelers as essential components in analysis and planning.

**5) Institutional Collaboration:**

It necessitates cooperation between higher education institutions, tourism organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to enhance effectiveness and maximize benefits.

Although academic tourism shares similarities with *scientific tourism*, the two should not be conflated. Scientific tourism refers to travel undertaken primarily for the purpose of scientific inquiry, participation in research projects, or engagement in scientific activities. This may include expeditions, research-based adventure travel, environmental volunteering, and other science-related endeavors (Bourlon & Torres, 2016: 3–6). Scientific tourism covers a broad range of activities accessible to the general public, including amateurs and volunteers, whereas academic tourism is more narrowly defined, pertaining specifically to professional and institutional travel by members of the academic community for scholarly and research purposes.

The distinctions between these two types of tourism can be summarized in the following comparative table:

Scientific Tourism	Academic Tourism	Key Characteristics
Acquiring scientific knowledge, participating in research, engaging in scientific experiments	Professional development, research, academic exchange, and formal education	Main Objective
General public, science enthusiasts, volunteers, researchers	Academic community: faculty, students, and researchers	Primary Audience
Scientific expeditions, citizen science, environmental projects, research-related travel	Academic study, research visits, participation in courses, conferences, workshops, and scholarly field trips	Types of Activities
May be recreational-scientific or research-oriented	Professional and work-related	Nature of Travel
Natural sites, laboratories, research centers	Universities, research institutes, academic institutions	Locations
Focus on scientific experience and research contribution	Responsible and sustainable, emphasizing institutional collaboration	Overall Approach

### **Malfunctions and Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue within the Framework of Academic Tourism**

The contemporary world is witnessing the emergence and proliferation of a wide range of phenomena, each carrying its own set of positive and negative dimensions. These phenomena—ranging from technological advancements to socio-cultural transformations—have produced profound, and at times contradictory, impacts on human life. Understanding this intrinsic duality and conducting comprehensive analyses of the benefits and drawbacks of such phenomena is essential for developing a more informed perception of the world and for making judicious decisions in response to them. A prime example of this duality is the process of globalization. While globalization has paved the way for unprecedented opportunities in global trade, international investment, and scientific-cultural exchange, it has simultaneously exacerbated economic inequalities, eroded local identities, and facilitated the cultural hegemony of certain dominant powers. These examples vividly illustrate that every significant social or technological phenomenon resembles a two-sided coin: although its advantages may be manifest, its potential risks and challenges must not be neglected. Recognizing this duality enables us to maximize benefits while formulating effective strategies to mitigate adverse consequences. Within this conceptual framework, **interreligious dialogue in the context of academic tourism**, although potentially providing a unique platform for enhancing interfaith understanding, promoting religious rapprochement, and cultivating a culture of peace, is not without its specific dysfunctions and challenges. These challenges necessitate thorough examination and critical reflection, especially by scholars specializing in this domain. Accordingly, the present study seeks to critically analyze the principal obstacles confronting interreligious dialogue as it unfolds within the scope of academic tourism.

### 1) The "Touristification" of Interreligious Dialogue

Travel, by opening a window to new cultures and experiences, offers an unparalleled opportunity for deeper awareness. Encountering individuals with diverse customs, traditions, and beliefs reveals the vast plurality of the human world and facilitates a more nuanced comprehension of both commonalities and differences. However, the assumption that travel alone guarantees such intercultural understanding is misleading. The travel experience in itself does not necessarily lead to transformation in perspectives or beliefs; each individual's experience is shaped by numerous contextual and personal factors. For instance, the experience of visiting a historical church differs fundamentally from that of engaging with a living religious community. Unfortunately, many researchers fail to account for these subtle distinctions (Raj & Griffin, 2015: 118). As Travis Levius aptly noted, "*It's a myth that travel opens minds; that's not what travel does. Travel doesn't automatically make you a better person.*" (National Geographic, 2020). In other words, travel does not inherently lead to deeper or more accurate understanding; rather, under certain conditions—such as superficial engagement with religious sites or fleeting conversations during tours—it may even foster shallowness or reinforce narrow perspectives. This phenomenon is conceptualized in the present research as **the "touristification" of interreligious dialogue**. In other words, when tourism is employed as a platform to facilitate interfaith dialogue, the foremost challenge lies in the potential reduction of dialogue to a mere touristic experience devoid of theological or philosophical depth. "Touristification" refers to the organization of interreligious dialogues, events, conferences, or programs framed as travel experiences, often lacking a focus on deep comprehension of religious doctrines, engagement with local faith communities, or genuine respect for religious beliefs. Participants may indeed attend academic sessions or visit religious sites, but their primary intent may lean more toward leisure or superficial cultural experience rather than serious inquiry into religious matters. The consequence of this approach is often the emergence of shallow dialogue, misrepresentation of theological concepts, and a distorted or trivialized understanding of religious belief systems. One of the primary concerns in this regard is the **risk of secularizing religion**. When religion is presented merely as a tourist attraction or a form of entertainment, its sacredness and spiritual gravitas diminish in the eyes of believers. This trend not only undermines authentic religious values but may also have detrimental effects on the preservation and transmission of spiritual heritage.

#### **Mitigation Strategies: From Tourism to Transformative Engagement**

To confront the challenge of touristified interreligious dialogue within academic tourism, **systematic and well-structured pre-departure planning** is

essential. These strategies must be grounded in intellectual preparation and the cultivation of participants' religious literacy. Several key recommendations are proposed:

**1) Preliminary Study:** Engaging in prior research about the destination religion(s)—including their historical development, core teachings, ritual practices, and contemporary challenges—enhances participants' foundational knowledge and equips them to formulate meaningful questions during dialogue sessions.

**2) Structured Dialogues:** Organizing structured conversations involving active participation from theologians, religious community members, and scholars of religion helps prevent interactions from devolving into superficial exchanges. Such dialogues should prioritize shared human values—such as peace, justice, and ethics—while maintaining respect for theological distinctions.

**3) Immersive Experiences:** Replacing symbolic or photo-driven site visits with long-term, interactive experiences—such as participation in worship rituals, interfaith workshops, or collaborative community service—facilitates a more holistic understanding of lived religion.

**4) Post-Travel Reflection:** Conducting collective debriefing sessions after travel—dedicated to critical reflection on experiences—can consolidate learning, address misunderstandings, and deepen interfaith insights.

A successful illustration of this integrative model can be found in the **CAS in Interreligious Studies (2022)**, organized by the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey under the theme “*Reconciliation and Healing in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.*” This six-week program—comprising three weeks of virtual learning followed by a three-week intensive residential component—employed four key strategies to counteract touristification:

- ✦ **Textual Study** of sacred scriptures prior to travel
- ✦ **Structured Dialogue** under the guidance of experienced faculty
- ✦ Practical Interfaith Workshops involving active participation
- ✦ **Purposeful Site Visits** to deepen theological understanding

Participants from five continents described the experience as transformative. As Mahmoud Nazari (a Muslim participant) remarked, “*The creative pedagogical methods and comparative religious study provided me with a new awareness of interfaith commonalities.*” Similarly, Marcel El-Zoghbi (a Christian participant) noted that “*Studying the scriptures of other religions offered me a deeper understanding of my own.*” (Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, 2022). The success of such initiatives underscores that, through **thoughtful design and implementation**, interreligious dialogue within academic tourism can transcend superficiality. It can become a profound vehicle for **critical learning, multidimensional interaction**, and ultimately, a powerful

instrument for **promoting mutual understanding, reducing prejudice, and advancing global peace.**

## 2. Political Instrumentalization by States

The strategic use of soft instruments to advance a country's public diplomacy objectives is a widespread and, in many cases, understandable phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that some powerful states may pursue more complex agendas under the guise of benevolent initiatives—chief among them being the exercise of **soft power**. Joseph Nye, a prominent political scientist, defines *soft power* as “*the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.*” This concept stands in contrast to *hard power*, which relies on economic and military instruments to compel compliance. The adjective “soft” implies a more palatable and benign form of power, yet one must not be deceived by this veneer of subtlety. Ultimately, soft power also constitutes a form of influence—and arguably, control. Underlying Nye's definition is the argument that “*if I can persuade you to do what I want, I do not need to force you.*” (Ackley, 2012: 32–48). In a similar vein, **religion**, as a socio-political phenomenon, may serve both as a source of threat and a means of conflict resolution. On one hand, religion has been misused to justify violence in various forms—including terrorism and sectarian conflict; on the other, it has also functioned as a powerful instrument for **reconciliation and peacemaking** in diverse contexts (Sayaha et al., 2023: 856). Consequently, *interreligious dialogue*, when designed on principles of mutual understanding and respect, holds considerable promise as an effective mechanism for fostering global peace. However, such initiatives—like many other intercultural efforts—are susceptible to **divergent interpretations** and **political appropriation**. Examination of international experiences in the domain of academic tourism and interfaith dialogue reveals that in specific cases, a gap may exist between the **declared intentions** of these programs and their **practical consequences**. This section analyzes two illustrative examples not as general indictments, but rather to shed light on the complexities and challenges that may emerge in the academic promotion of interfaith dialogue.

a) The King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)

According to its official website, **KAICIID** is an intergovernmental organization governed by a multi-religious board comprising representatives from major world faiths. Throughout the year, the Centre organizes intensive programs and educational workshops in the field of interreligious dialogue. These initiatives bring together youth, emerging leaders, and religious scholars from various nationalities to exchange ideas, knowledge, and experiences.

KAICIID's vision promotes a world characterized by mutual respect, understanding, cooperation, justice, peace, and reconciliation, and it explicitly opposes the instrumentalization of religion for purposes of oppression, violence, or conflict. However, the Centre has at times been the subject of **global criticism** due to its **financial ties to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** and its **alleged silence on human rights violations** (Religions News Agency, 2021). The **Republic of Austria**, where KAICIID was initially headquartered, accused the organization of **failing to uphold its declared mission** and **remaining silent on fundamental human rights issues**. This official stance by Austria, as the former host country, is particularly significant. In an interview with the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*, then-Chancellor **Werner Faymann** stated:

*"This Centre is in no way fulfilling its mandate of fostering dialogue and remains silent on essential human rights issues. We will not tolerate this. It is now clear to me that we must withdraw from cooperation with this institution."* (Reuters, 2015)

Subsequently, in **2021**, KAICIID was **relocated to Lisbon, Portugal**. This relocation suggests that the Austrian government had come to perceive KAICIID as an entity aligned with the **political objectives of Saudi Arabia**, prompting the Centre's departure from Vienna. Nonetheless, KAICIID continues its efforts to build trust and demonstrate genuine commitment to interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence. While this study does not pass judgment on KAICIID, it is essential to recognize that **interreligious dialogue initiatives may be subject to state appropriation and political instrumentalization**. The potential for such dialogues to be deployed as instruments of soft power underscores the necessity of **critical scrutiny** and **institutional transparency** in their design and implementation.

b) The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) promotes international academic exchange by offering a wide array of educational and research support programs for students and young scholars from across the globe (DAAD Website, 2025). As an instrument of Germany's science diplomacy, DAAD operates within the broader framework of the country's foreign policy objectives through academic and cultural initiatives. However, the nature of these programs—from student exchanges to the establishment of educational infrastructures abroad—can be more accurately analyzed within the framework of "soft power" rather than equal collaboration. An analysis of DAAD's activities reveals that the organization employs scientific and cultural tools to implement a strategy of "attraction and assimilation." This approach enables Germany to achieve its geopolitical objectives under the guise of scientific neutrality, a practice widely recognized in International Relations theory as soft

power (Adick, 2016: 14). Despite DAAD's positive role in fostering academic exchange, the organization has occasionally overstepped its institutional mandate, fueling tensions, particularly in the Middle East. For instance, following the death of an Iranian citizen in 2023 (1402 Hijri-Shamsi), DAAD adopted a strongly critical stance against Iran and suspended its activities in the country. This move was perceived in Iran as political interference and provoked dissatisfaction. In response, Iran's Ministry of Science called on DAAD to adhere to the principles of bilateral scientific cooperation and refrain from engaging in politically charged issues (IRNA News Agency, 2022 [1401]). Another example is DAAD's contradictory response to developments in Palestine: while the organization condemned the Hamas attack in October 2024 (DAAD Website, 2025), it remained silent on the large-scale destruction and civilian casualties in Gaza. As a prominent scientific institution, DAAD's political positioning directly affects the implementation of educational and research projects. Interviews conducted with several scholars residing in Germany (who requested anonymity) revealed that many researchers feel compelled to align their findings and academic positions with German government policies in order to maintain financial support and professional standing. This situation fosters an atmosphere of self-censorship and fear within the academic community, which may significantly compromise academic freedom and hinder genuine scientific progress. Two examples of international programs relevant to this study were presented to highlight that interfaith dialogue and academic exchange, despite offering numerous advantages, are often fraught with challenges and cannot be viewed uncritically. When properly oriented toward mutual understanding, respect, and solidarity among followers of different faiths, interfaith dialogue in the context of academic tourism can serve as a valuable instrument for promoting global peace and stability. However, political actors may exploit this framework as a vehicle for exerting influence, promoting specific ideologies, and manipulating public opinion—potentially generating division, conflict, and threats to peace and security. To prevent the misuse of interfaith dialogue in academic tourism, a responsible and ethical approach is essential. This includes preventive measures such as the education and empowerment of stakeholders, including researchers, professors, students, and academic exchange program coordinators. These individuals must be familiarized with the core values and objectives of interfaith dialogue, be aware of potential risks of exploitation, and learn practical strategies to counter such misuse. Furthermore, promoting a culture of constructive dialogue and mutual respect among actors in this field is of critical importance. In addition, support for independent academic research on interfaith dialogue and academic tourism can deepen our understanding of these phenomena and provide effective

solutions to mitigate potential abuses.

### 3. The Presence of Missionary Currents in Universities

Preaching and missionary activity have deep historical roots in both Islam and Christianity, originating from their respective sacred texts—the Qur'an and the Bible. These practices underscore each religion's commitment to spreading its teachings. For instance, a hadith from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) states: *"The best among my Ummah is the one who invites others toward God and brings people closer to Him."* (Kanz al-Ummāl, Hadith 28779). Similarly, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus (PBUH) instructs his disciples: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* (Matthew 28:19). While Islamic preaching typically centers on direct and overt invitation to the faith and the explanation of religious principles, Christian missiology has evolved into a more structured and academically institutionalized discipline. The growing proliferation of missionary activities in the Western world led to the emergence of missiology as an academic field, which gained significant scholarly recognition and is now taught in universities worldwide. Although missiology entered academia later than other theological disciplines, it has witnessed substantial advancement within the broader history of Christian theology (Worster, 2014: 879–893). Historically, both Islam and Christianity have utilized diverse methods to disseminate their beliefs and attract followers—ranging from direct evangelism to more subtle forms of outreach embedded in cultural and social activities. The Church has adopted both approaches. However, in non-Christian societies, missionary engagement is often viewed with suspicion, as it is perceived to have covert proselytizing intentions. Robert Woodberry examined the role of Christian missionaries in promoting Western education, particularly in East Asia, and demonstrated that missionary schools served as vehicles for Christian influence. These schools increased demand for Western-style education through the training of teachers, although concerns over religious proselytization led to state-imposed restrictions. Nonetheless, many of the first faculty members of public universities in East Asia were graduates of such missionary institutions (Woodberry, 2007: 99–120). Following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church emphasized its missionary mandate while also acknowledging the value of interreligious dialogue. Some scholars argue that this shift was a strategic repositioning aimed at advancing the Church's missionary agenda, particularly in Muslim societies (Sanei, 2021 [1400]: 109–126). Consequently, interfaith dialogue—particularly in the context of academic tourism, with its emphasis on friendly and interactive encounters—may serve as a subtle yet effective platform for religious propagation and missionary activity. In this

setting, close interactions and cultural exchange provide opportunities to introduce and promote religious beliefs and values. The offering of scholarships and financial incentives to students and researchers not only encourages participation in dialogue programs but also acts as a vehicle of soft influence—especially among young academics who are in formative intellectual and ideological stages. Therefore, the potential for misuse of this platform for missionary purposes warrants careful scrutiny to ensure that the primary objectives of interfaith dialogue—mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence—are preserved.

#### **4. Privileged Mobility and the Illusion of Idealized Travel**

Tourism and travel are often intertwined with our mental imagery of grand and romantic experiences. The glossy pages of travel magazines and advertisements by tourism agencies exhibit idyllic visuals of golden beaches, magnificent historical monuments, breathtaking landscapes, and smiling locals, drawing us into a world where each day resembles a new, thrilling adventure. Nevertheless, the lived experience of travel—particularly international travel—often presents a stark contrast to these idealized depictions. Alongside beauty and wonder, international travel entails numerous challenges, which can be categorized into three main domains:

**1- Personal Challenges:** Financial constraints, homesickness, cultural adaptation, language barriers, and health-related concerns are among the foremost personal difficulties encountered by international travelers. Solo travel can be especially taxing, particularly for first-time travelers venturing abroad. Adapting to new cultural norms, unfamiliar lifestyles, and social customs can be overwhelming. Furthermore, language barriers hinder effective communication with locals and access to essential services. The high cost of travel—fluctuating currency exchange rates, airfare, accommodation, food, transportation, and other incidental expenses—can significantly burden travelers, especially those visiting developed nations.

**2- Geopolitical Challenges:** Visa restrictions, travel bans, and political tensions introduce additional layers of complexity to international mobility. Securing a visa for some destinations is often a convoluted, time-consuming, and costly process. In certain cases, geopolitical instability or diplomatic conflicts may render visa acquisition difficult or even impossible. Travel restrictions may also limit the entry of nationals from particular countries, posing serious limitations on international movement. In such environments, political tensions can heighten security risks and adversely affect the travel experience.

**3- Global Structural Challenges:** Adverse climate conditions, natural

disasters, disease outbreaks, insecurity, and cultural disparities are global challenges that disrupt international travel. These factors limit various forms of tourism, particularly academic tourism.

Given their often-limited budgets and institutional support, **academic tourists** are disproportionately affected by such challenges. They frequently lack access to strong transnational networks or substantial financial resources. Consequently, interfaith dialogue within the context of academic tourism is often restricted to individuals from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, citizens of specific countries, or those with established academic affiliations. As a result, interfaith engagement becomes an exclusive and limited practice, failing to reflect the diversity and inclusion that are central to its ethos. In other words, these constraints undermine the inclusivity of interfaith dialogue by marginalizing participants from underrepresented communities. As Breen (2012: 82–102) argues, **academic tourism may be understood as a form of "temporary privileged migration"**, accessible primarily to those with higher financial capacities and institutional advantage. Accordingly, interfaith dialogue within this space is shaped by socioeconomic privilege, thereby narrowing its transformative and democratic potential.

## 5. Misplaced Emphasis on Irrelevant Topics

A major challenge facing interfaith dialogue within academic tourism is its frequent focus on abstract or non-essential subjects, rather than addressing real-world concerns. This tendency not only reduces the attractiveness of such dialogues but also significantly impairs their effectiveness and societal relevance. In practice, many academic discussions tend to revolve around topics that lack tangible connection to the lived experiences of ordinary people. This misalignment may be attributed to several structural and institutional factors:

**1) Disconnection Between Academia and Society:** The insufficient linkage between academic institutions and societal needs has resulted in a general lack of awareness among scholars and students regarding the actual challenges faced by communities. As a result, topics addressed in academic settings may be detached from the everyday concerns of citizens.

**2) Dominance of Theoretical Orientation:** Higher education systems in several countries have traditionally emphasized theoretical and abstract discourse. While this intellectual tradition has its merits, it often detracts from a practical focus on societal challenges and the development of applicable solutions. Particularly in Iran, numerous academic projects, research endeavors, and theses have concentrated on conceptually rich yet practically insignificant subjects.

**3) Absence of Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Interfaith dialogue is

inherently multifaceted and complex, requiring interdisciplinary engagement. However, academic programs are often confined within disciplinary silos, resulting in a limited understanding of the phenomenon and neglect of its various dimensions.

A 2021 report by the **Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly** emphasizes that, despite Iran's high volume of scientific output, the **social, cultural, and economic impact of academic research remains limited**. The report attributes this weakness to the absence of problem-oriented research and a disproportionate focus on publication metrics rather than beneficial knowledge. Similarly, a 2023 follow-up report underscores the inefficacy of university research in addressing national issues, identifying a lack of mission-oriented and community-driven agendas as core problems (Islamic Consultative Assembly Research Center, 2021; 2023). This epistemological detachment negatively affects interfaith dialogue in academic tourism, diverting attention toward esoteric or irrelevant themes that hold little significance for the broader public. This tendency results in several negative outcomes: dialogues become uninspiring and disjointed from societal realities, they fail to foster meaningful change, and they overlook pressing issues that warrant collective engagement. For interfaith dialogue to achieve its intended objectives within the context of academic tourism, it must move beyond abstract principles and engage directly with concrete societal challenges. The selection of **practical, socially relevant topics** enhances both the attractiveness and effectiveness of these discussions. Such an approach helps bridge the gap between academia and public life, encouraging broader participation and enabling the translation of ideas into actionable initiatives.

This shift toward pragmatic engagement is crucial for several reasons:

**1) Contemporary societies face urgent challenges** such as new atheism, environmental injustice, the spread of violence, and human rights violations. Interfaith dialogue can serve as a vital platform for the exchange of ideas and the formulation of collaborative responses.

**2) Engagement with current societal issues** increases the relevance and appeal of interfaith dialogues for diverse audiences, thereby promoting inclusivity and expanding the scope of participation.

**3) Identifying practical solutions to tangible issues** can significantly enhance the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue. This, in turn, may contribute to the strengthening of peace, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence among followers of different religions.

## Conclusion and Analysis

In recent decades, interfaith dialogue has emerged as one of the fundamental

pillars of public diplomacy, especially within the emerging framework of academic tourism. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the role of academic tourism has not yet been systematically and comprehensively examined within the literature on interreligious dialogue. The present study, as one of the first analytical efforts in this field, seeks to highlight this existing research gap and to pave the way for future inquiries by offering a theoretical and analytical framework. Through an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, this research, while affirming the findings of previous studies concerning general challenges in the field of interfaith dialogue, reveals new and specific dimensions of such interactions within the context of academic tourism. Academic tourism, as a unique platform, possesses distinct advantages that set it apart from other forms of interfaith engagement. On one hand, it provides direct and unmediated exposure to diverse academic, cultural, and religious environments; on the other hand, it creates an interdisciplinary space conducive to deep and multifaceted dialogue, encompassing theological, anthropological, and sociological approaches. The increasing trend of interreligious academic collaboration, the expansion of joint scholarly travels, and the development of cultural exchanges within educational programs all attest to the assertion that academic tourism, beyond its pedagogical function, has evolved into a remarkable domain for fostering mutual understanding and expanding the frontiers of dialogue. Nevertheless, the effective utilization of this valuable potential necessitates a thorough and holistic understanding of the challenges and obstacles involved. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of reliable sources and documents, this study has identified five key challenges, each of which can significantly impact the effectiveness of interfaith encounters. First is the tendency to reduce dialogues to superficial and performative levels, thereby diminishing their depth and authenticity. Second is the instrumentalization of dialogue by political institutions, which may pursue specific ideological or propagandistic agendas. Third is the infiltration of proselytizing and missionary approaches that disrupt the balance of conversation. Fourth is the prevalence of exclusivism and particularism, which hinders broad-based participation. Fifth is the neglect of contemporary issues in dialogue content, which leads to a disconnect with everyday concerns. These challenges not only undermine the efficiency of interfaith initiatives but, in some cases, may even exacerbate cultural and religious disparities. Transforming these challenges into constructive opportunities requires a delicate and well-calibrated balance among three foundational elements: religious authenticity, which safeguards the integrity and values of faith traditions; academic rigor, which ensures a scholarly and analytical approach; and cultural fairness, which fosters an appreciation of diversity and pluralism. Successful experiences in this field have demonstrated

that effective programs are those that simultaneously and harmoniously integrate these three elements. In this regard, the role of academic and scholarly institutions is pivotal and decisive. Through the design of specialized and goal-oriented educational programs, the training of professional and competent facilitators, and the establishment of sustainable communication networks, these institutions can play a significant role in enhancing the quality and efficacy of interfaith dialogues. Academic and research institutions, religious leaders and intellectuals, as well as cultural policymakers and planners, must adopt a strategic and forward-looking perspective in recognizing academic tourism as an exceptional and unparalleled opportunity for strengthening and deepening interfaith dialogue on a global scale. The design and implementation of well-informed and expert-driven programs, the creation of conditions for equitable and balanced participation of all dialogue parties, and the firm avoidance of ideological or political exploitation can contribute to reinforcing this platform based on the principles of mutual respect, pursuit of truth, and cultural justice. Furthermore, the expansion and advancement of deep, methodologically rigorous comparative research in this area can pave the way for the development of indigenous yet globally resonant models that address the specific needs of various societies while adhering to international standards of interfaith engagement. The future of interreligious dialogue hinges on the collective acceptance of the fundamental principle that religions, not as instruments of power or domination, but as shared and invaluable treasures of humanity, can and must serve the promotion of peace, understanding, and global solidarity. Realizing this noble vision requires a firm resolve and collective will that transcends geographical boundaries and ideological constraints. The expansion of interfaith discourse within the framework of academic tourism is not merely a methodological innovation but rather an essential and indispensable necessity in today's complex and pluralistic world. With the full support and cooperation of universities and academic centers, religious institutions, and relevant international organizations, academic tourism can become an effective and influential mechanism for cultivating peace, generating meaning, and fostering global participation. Only under such conditions can we attain a sustainable and balanced model of interreligious dialogue that not only capitalizes on the unparalleled capacities of academic tourism but also remains safeguarded against its potential pitfalls and vulnerabilities.

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