

The Contribution of Religious Monuments to Local and Tourist Development

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Abstract

This article examines religious tourism in Greece and how it can contribute to the country's tourism development. Religious tourism is a growing sector in Greece and this is the reason why specific policies have now begun to be formulated in this field. multitude of religious monuments in Greece is a very important factor for the development of this form of tourism and gives the possibility of extending the tourist season throughout the year.

Keywords: culture, religious monuments, tourist development, Greece, local development.

1. Introduction

The concept of the divine and the sacred is completely connected to the human psyche and their search, at least the local one, is the driving force for religious journeys, since ancient times. Nowadays, the phenomenon of the movement of believers (or non-believers) in order to visit religious monuments and the economic, cultural and social consequences that this implies is called “religious tourism” and is a more specialized form of cultural tourism, as religion is one of the elements of a culture, the majority of religious monuments also have an aesthetic value and religious events are part of the broader category of cultural events (Rapti, 2011). Religious travel does not work in isolation but in combination with other wishes and needs of the tourist-traveler, such as accommodation, entertainment, gastronomy (Poulaki & Lagos, 2013), visiting other attractions and for this reason it is a multidimensional tourist a phenomenon that also affects other sectors of alternative tourism (Papakostidis, 2015).

Accepting that religious tourism is a more special manifestation of cultural tourism, it should be separated from pilgrimage tourism, as a broader category of it (Moiras, 2003), as it is structured exclusively around religious faith, the pilgrimage. Pilgrims move to places of worship motivated mainly by their religious faith, with the main purpose of connecting with the Divine (Rapti, 2011) and usually fulfilling a sacred wish or worshipping a religious relic. The pilgrim is not “distracted” from other activities in the place of his movement and does not seek his acquaintance with culture, gastronomy, people or nature during his journey. On the contrary, the religious tourist, moving between the simple tourist and the pilgrim, according to Robichaud (Moiras, 2003), combines other activities of cultural interest, which makes religious tourism a dynamically developing industry, with enormous economic benefits for a society.

2. The religious tourists

Religious tourists could be divided into four subcategories, according to the places of visitation: (a) tourists who visit places of purely religious interest, with little general attendance, (b) tourists who visit religious places, which contain both historical and cultural interest and attract a large number of tourists, (c) tourists who visit places where purely religious interest is combined with that for the art or style of the religious monument. The motive in this case is to visit monuments of high artistic value and not religious feeling, which may be completely lacking. The last category (d) includes tourists who are attracted to places where religious festivals take place, which are a pole of attraction both for those who attend them motivated by their religious faith and for those who participate detached from religious sentiment, as an action that contains sociological and cultural elements (Papakostidis, 2015).

In terms of their characteristics, religious tourists have great discrepancies regarding their age, profession, educational level and financial capabilities (Papakostidis, 2015), although the majority of them have a good education, medium to high income, spend large sums of money and belong to all ages, with the main one being 30-40 years old (Gouni, 2020). The above finding is also confirmed by Ojo and Busayo (2017), who identify the specificity of religious tourism in its ability to attract globally different tourist profiles.

Religious tourists are repeaters, a word used in tourism terminology to describe committed travelers who will seek to visit a religious tourist site more than once. This results in religious tourism having low resilience to economic and social upheavals, which occasionally affect the rest of tourism. Finally, religious tourists seek group travel (Gouni, 2020), which has as a consequence the specialization of many tourist agencies in religious tourism and the development of mass tourism oriented towards religious and pilgrimage tours (Rapti, 2011), thus creating a strong economic activity in the area of interest.

3. Contribution of religious tourism to tourism development

Religious tourism, precisely because of the motivation that activates it and the profile of the traveler who chooses it, is considered consistently profitable and particularly resilient, especially in times of crisis. According to the World Trade Organization (Lachlali, 2012), the worldwide turnover amounts to 15 billion euros, approximately 300 million tourists annually travel to religious destinations and approximately 3 billion people are potential religious travelers due to their religious orientation. These figures demonstrate that religious tourism is a bright field of glory for the regions that will decide to invest in this alternative form of tourism, as they will achieve economic and social development (Vardopoulos et al., 2023).

According to Polyzos (2017), among the most important socio-economic changes brought about by religious tourism in an area are (a) the increase in income from tourism for those directly or indirectly involved in it (b) the increase in employment, due to the new opportunities created (c) the increase in government revenue through tourist traffic and the consequent taxation of increased transactions, (d) the increase in revenue from holy pilgrimages and (e) the cultural development of the region, through the exchange of cultural elements between locals and visitors but also through the improvement of the offered religious tourism product, with the aim of further attracting tourists.

The contribution of religious tourism is felt more in areas that are disadvantaged in terms of tourism, compared to large urban centers (Polyzos, 2010). They are usually located in the periphery, have low growth rates, low average per capita income, high unemployment rates and a declining productive base (Terzidou et al., 2008). These regions, however, which have natural beauty and religious resources – which is very likely due to the dispersion of religious monuments throughout Greece – could invest in the development of religious tourism, given that this type of

destination has a direction from urban centers to the periphery (Mitoula & Maniou, 2020). They should, therefore, act in the direction of recording and promoting the religious monuments in their area, increasing the size of religious flows and highlighting religious holidays, with the aim of creating an attractive tourist product that will connect religious tourism and with other types of special forms of tourism, such as cultural, gastronomic or nature tourism. The goal should be to increase the visitor's daily consumption expenditure, increase the length of stay and reduce the seasonality of the phenomenon (Terzidou et al., 2008).

In addition to the economic dimension of the contribution of religious tourism to a (developing) region, its contribution to the sustainable development of the region should not be underestimated (Lachlali, 2012). Economic development, through this alternative form of tourism, will simultaneously ensure the protection of the environment with the ultimate goal of maintaining sustainability. Religious tourism is a mild form of tourism development, which emphasizes the protection of the environment, maintaining a state of balance between the elements – economic and social – that make up a social structure. A necessary condition is the preparation of a strategic plan for tourism development, in order to make rational use of the existing religious, cultural and environmental resources. Of course, the form of religious tourism does not in itself guarantee sustainability but should be combined with practices, such as maintaining a maximum number of visitors that can catalyze in the area, the use of mild forms of energy and the use of food products that they are produced in the area with crops on the smallest possible scale (Lachlali, 2012).

4. Religious tourism in Greece

Characteristics of religious tourism in Greece Religious tourism in Greece is inextricably linked to the Orthodox faith, given that the Greeks, compared to other peoples, demonstrate high rates of religiosity as they declare themselves Orthodox Christians. This connection of the country with this particular faith, as early as the Byzantine years, contributed decisively to the creation of a multitude of religious monuments in all regions of Greece without exception (Manola & Trikalitis 2021), forming a diverse mosaic of churches, monasteries, metochias, hermitages, pilgrimages and chapels, the which constitute a network of religious resources suitable for the development of religious tourism. The holy images, wall paintings, mosaics and architectural creation compose a religious wealth of unparalleled religious and historical value, which is visited by both believers and tourists with historical and cultural interests (Moiras, 2018). Also, the Christian holidays are a pole of attraction and a reason for the movement of tourists (mainly domestic) to the places where they take place (Manola & Papagrigoriou, 2020).

Indicative of this wealth is the enumeration by the World Tourism Organization of a total of 280 areas of religious interest in Greece (Rapti, 2011), although only 6 of them have been designated by UNESCO as world heritage sites: Mount Athos, the early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki, Meteora, Mystras, the Daphni Monastery in Chaidari, the Monastery of Saint Loukas in Boeotia and the New Monastery of Chios on the island of the same name, the Monastery of Agios Ioannis the Theologians in Patmos and the Cave of the Apocalypse in Patmos (Panagiou, 2020).

However, there are many pilgrimages, which, although they are not included in the UNESCO monuments, mainly due to lack of visibility and due to unorganized actions on the part of the state in the direction of their recognition, are not at all inferior to religious and historical value. Examples include: the Holy Monastery of Eikosifonissa in Drama, the Virgin Mary Sumela in Veria, the Virgin Mary of Tinos, the Holy Monastery of Leimonos in Mytilini, the Monasteries of Agia Lavra and the Great Cave in Kalavryta, Virgin Mary Kosmosoteira in Evros, Arkadi in Rethymno etc. The list is inexhaustible, with at least 889 religious monuments recorded in Greek territory (Antosidou, 2015).

The majority of religious tourists in Greece (about 85%, according to the Association of Tourist and Travel Agencies in Greece (HATTA) are Greek Orthodox Christians, precisely because the connection of faith with religious monuments is particularly strong. Also, Greeks abroad visit religious monuments, according to data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Greek Orthodox Church, mainly during the periods of major Christian holidays, when they visit Greece and the feeling of taste and connection with the roots is particularly strong. The largest percentage of foreign religious tourists, as is to be expected, comes from Orthodox countries, mainly from Russia (Lachlali, 2012).

Regarding the time of visit, the largest movement of religious tourists is found in the summer (Polyzos, 2017), as it is combined with vacations and increases due to the religious holidays that, due to the climate, mainly take place during the summer months. Also, because religious trips are usually short, they usually take place during “three-day” holidays. This seasonality could be bent, as there are religious festivals and holidays throughout the year and most religious pilgrimages are not associated with a specific time period. After all, religious belief as a motivation for the development of religious tourism does not have a specific time of manifestation.

5. The Church of Greece and its attitude towards religious tourism

Greece, as mentioned above, has an excellent cultural and religious background, in order to develop religious tourism dynamically. This cannot go unnoticed by the Church of Greece, rather the ecclesiastical world must actively participate in the organization and promotion of the country’s religious monuments.

In this direction, the “Synodical Office for Monitoring European Issues” was founded and operated in Brussels and in the year 2000 (Derezoglou, 2020) by decision of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, the Synodical Office of Pilgrimages. According to the newest statute with number 281/2015, “the Church of Greece wished to highlight the religious, historical, cultural and ecological wealth stored in the Holy Tabernacles of our Faith, i.e., the Holy Monasteries and other Holy Pilgrimages of our Fatherland, constitutes instead of the Holy Synod a service unit at the level of an Office with the name “Synodical Office of Pilgrimage Tours of the Church of Greece.” The purpose of this Synodal Office is the organization and promotion, inside and outside Greece, of pilgrimage tours and the development of all forms of tourism of religious interest, for the promotion of the various sacred religious Monuments and Holy Monasteries (Manola & Teliopoulou, 2023) and Pilgrimages of the Church of Greece and for the benefit and spiritual edification of the visitors.

This Office has developed action regarding the recording of most (if not all) of the religious monuments of the Orthodox tradition in the country and proceeded to publish books and guides of pilgrimage content, and in collaborations with travel agencies, in order to become it is possible to organize religious tourism at local (Manola et al., 2020), interregional and national level and to develop this type of tourism on the basis of alternative forms. Also, characteristic is the attempt to connect religious tourism with religious gastronomy, which has been developed in recent years mainly through the recipes of Agios Georgios.

The Church of Greece, through the above office, seeks to create partnerships with Christian churches, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, abroad. For example, in 2014 it was agreed to set up a joint Commission-Working Group between the Synodal Office of Pilgrimage Tours of the Church of Greece and the Roman Catholic Tourism Organization OPERA ROMANA PELLEGRINAGGI of the Vatican with the aim of shaping trips of religious interest in Greece, the organization of exhibitions at the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church for the Holy Pilgrimages in Greece and the cooperation with domestic travel agencies.

As far as the recording and promotion actions are concerned, since 2019 the Church has been participating in a transnational program entitled “Highlighting and Dissemination of the cultural heritage through the development and institutional strengthening of Religious Tourism in the island region of Greece and Cyprus.” It concerns the recording and digitization of all Holy Monasteries, Monuments and Pilgrimages of the Northern Aegean islands. The Church of Greece also enters into partnerships with other bodies, such as the Association of Tourist and Travel Agencies in Greece (HATTA). In 2015, a “Joint Committee for Study and Actions” was established, with the aim of the coordinated highlighting and promotion of religious monuments, increasing the number of visitors and facilitating the access of pilgrims. Finally, the Synodal Office of Pilgrimage Tours of the Church of Greece regularly organizes conferences on religious tourism, the topics of which are published on its website.

6. Conclusion

Religious tourism in Greece could be a dynamic factor in increasing tourist demand, strengthening local societies, even the least developed ones, due to the diffusion of religious monuments throughout the Greek area. Precisely for this reason, in the last period of time the local government seems to be strongly interested in this type of tourism.

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