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ABILITY OF RELIGIOUS  
TOURIST DESTINATIONS TO  
STAY COMPETITIVE DESPITE  
ALL INSTABILITIES FROM  
VARIOUS REGIONS OF EUROPE.  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Empirical  
studies

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**Abstract**

*This paper will review the ability of religious tourist destinations to stay competitive, to attract visitors, to get their attention and convince them to return year after year, to remain culturally unique and to be in a constant balance with the environment despite all emerging problems, especially due to economic, social, political instabilities (namely the terrorist attacks occurred in recent years, and, last but not least, the movements of migrants who shattered the peace of Europe).*

## INTRODUCTION

Given the prospects opened for our country once with the success to be a member of the European Union and to fill a strategic position in the structure of NATO, it seems natural to know some aspects of the evolution of world tourism, to relate to it and to find the point where we are depending on the available opportunities, to the types of tourism that we can rely on permanently, but taking into account the competition on the markets of various tourism products. (Dube, L., Wingfield, S., 2008). The forecasts on the future of global tourism, based on exploiting the influence of various factors, anticipate its constant growth. (Dubois, P.L, Jolibert, A. 1994).

Anticipating these developments is based on the following assumptions:

- the sharp rise in world population and, implicitly, the increase in the number of travelers;
- economic growth and implications on revenue;
- increase of leisure time for holidays and weekends;
- development of means of transport;
- development of new emerging markets;
- problems arising from the degradation of the environment and natural resources.

Tourism activity, as a whole, is synthetically characterized by the index of overall world tourism movement, estimated in the specialized literature to over 5 billion travels (Eurostat data). Within it, according to statistics of U.N.W.T.O., 70-85% is domestic tourism and 25-30% international tourism. These developments are taken from data of economic analysts who assess the actual dimensions of the tourist movement based on the available collection sources of statistical information.

But, today, tourism statistics do not prove to be sufficiently comprehensive as they do not include the reports about tourism on their own, mixed rural tourism, religious tourism and pilgrimages, and no clear picture on the multiplier effect of tourism on the visited areas.

### **RELIGIOUS TOURISM, CONSIDERED IN TERMS OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITIES, RECORDED WORLDWIDE.**

As shown above, economic analysts calculate the size of tourist movement, based on data extracted from the available collection sources of statistical information. Such data, however, are incomplete and those shown above can be added to the decentralization of markets from various countries,

economic restructuring, inflation, new initiatives in tourism law, reorientation of group and individual interests, the new directions in the aggressive promotion of tourism on domestic markets and especially on the international market, events that had sensitive and chaotic effects on the socio-economic mechanisms and on individual behaviors globally.

And, as if they hadn't been enough, terrorist attacks and instability in some countries of Europe have profoundly changed the map of tourist destinations. In this regard, we mention the British website [express.co.uk](http://express.co.uk) which has ranked European countries depending on the risk of terrorist attack set by authorities in each state, and many of them switched from "being" among the most popular holiday destinations to a country under "terrorist threats". Spain is such an example, until recently one of the favorite destinations of tourists from around the world, now it is on the list of countries with a high level of terrorist activity.

The intervention of the Paris Government on the Islamic State following the attacks claimed by the terrorist organization has led to increased threats over France, which is also on the list of countries with an imminent hazard to tourists who choose to travel there. Based on statistics, Paris was affected the most in the first six months of 2016 as a 10-15% plunge was registered in the number of those who spent at least one night out in the city, as compared to the same period last year.

Moreover, the list of countries threatened by terrorism includes some of the strongest European economies, many of them being involved in the fight against ISIS or other similar organizations. Europe's largest economy, Germany, is colored in red on the [express.co.uk](http://express.co.uk) map, which means that the alert is maximum. Thus, following the relatively recent attacks, Germany has also made the top of countries to which people should think twice before planning holidays. The list of unsafe countries is completed by Great Britain, Belgium and Russia, also leading economies on the Old Continent. The list of unsafe countries is bound to include Turkey, this country being marked by terrorist threats and attacks, by the infighting between Turks and Kurds, but also by the latest major event, namely the failed coup in Ankara.

In this context, where can tourists travel anymore without worrying?

A lower level of terrorist threat is in Greece, one of the most popular summer destinations in Europe ([www.wrta.com](http://www.wrta.com)).

However, authorities in Athens advise tourists to be careful near institutions and shopping centers visited by tourists, where the latest attacks in 2013 and 2014 took place. Cyprus, Italy and Sweden were also included among countries with high risk

of attacks, while Portugal, Belarus, Ireland and Monaco registered a low level of terrorist activity, but residents and tourists should be cautious. One can notice that, the unfortunate latest events, which happened all over the world, in areas that once brought good money to tour operators, seem to radically transform the lines on the tourism map (ANAT).

Romania is also on the list of reviewed destinations, being placed among countries with a low risk of terrorist attacks. The safest European countries where tourists can spend holidays without the stress of a possible terrorist attack are Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Iceland or Latvia, where they can find worth visiting historical sites, medieval castles and other surprises offered by these places ([www.economie.hotnews.ro](http://www.economie.hotnews.ro)).

Beside these critical issues, there is the massive movement of migrants, dangerously threatening the collapse of Schengen area which has established free movement in the EU and has been deemed one of the fundamental pillars of the EU (<http://stirileprotv.ro>).

#### **RELIGIOUS TOURISM - AMBASSADOR OF PEACE AND A BRIDGE BETWEEN ALL WORLD COUNTRIES.**

In the past 60 years, tourism has constantly expanded and diversified, becoming one of the most dynamic and largest economic sectors globally. 2015 was the most successful year for tourism, according to the data released by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Despite several regional shocks, tourism has constantly grown since 2015. The international tourist arrivals have surged from 25 million globally in 1950 up to 278 million in 1980, reaching 1,133 billion in 2014. Similarly, international tourism receipts have had an upward trend, from USD 2 billion in 1950 up to USD 1245 billion in 2014. .

Long-term forecasts show that international tourist arrivals will grow by 3.3% per year between 2010 and 2030 worldwide, to peak at 1.8 billion at the end of the reviewed period, according to the UNWTO. The most favored destinations, from this point of view, include the emerging countries which, between 2010 and 2030, will witness growth of more than 4.4% in international arrivals, amid increasing market share of these areas, from 30% in 1980 up to 45% in 2014. The estimates predict a tourist market share of 57% by 2030 for developing countries.

According to Tourism Towards 2030, the number of international arrivals worldwide is estimated to grow by 3.3% between 2010-2030, although the growth rate will decrease in time from 3.8% today down to 2.9% in 2030. In absolute terms,

international tourist arrivals will surge by roughly 43 million per year, as compared to the previous period under review, namely 1995-2010. ([express.co.uk](http://express.co.uk)). Based on this forecast, the total number of tourists will reach 1.4 billion in 2020 and 1.8 billion in 2030 and the most dynamic growth rates will occur in emerging economies such as Asia, Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa, all these ranking ahead of destinations with advanced economies. (Towards Tourism, 2010).

As a matter of fact, the strongest estimated development will occur in the Asia-Pacific region, where arrivals are expected to reach 535 million tourists, up by 331 million, i.e. 4.9% per year by 2030 ([www.trendshrb.ro](http://www.trendshrb.ro)).

The increasingly frequent question is: how have those problems the mankind is facing affected religious tourism?

The religious tourism is known to be a form of tourism that has been for centuries and which still retains some traits, in terms of the pilgrimage itself, but has evolved enormously.

Religious tourism appears in the second stage of tourism evolution, also called the pseudo-tourism stage, which coincides with the early and mid-medieval period until the Renaissance. Religious pilgrimages were heading towards Rome and Jerusalem for Christians, Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia for Muslims Lhasa and sanctuaries in India and Indochina for Buddhists, Mount Fuji for the Japanese (Culliton, J, 1959).

Religious tourism is that type of tourism that aims at visiting religious buildings with spiritual implications. The notion of religious was developed from understanding the motivations of tourists (Snak, O, Baron P, 2010). The difference between this form of tourism and others consists in the religious motivation of tourists. The forms of religious tourism are diverse: visits to holy places; religious pilgrimages and, lately, religious camps for youth.

Nowadays, religious tourism involves a high level of tourists' education and culture that allow them to appreciate the cultural-religious attractions in terms of architecture, construction, value, spiritual significance and art content. Pilgrimages based on religious traditions from various countries (the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca), or those linked to specific events and manifestations (relics of saints, miracle-working icons) are still in place.

Religious tourism is a complex phenomenon that is continually changing and diversifying, but still retaining its basic element which has consecrated it: religion.

If we convert this industry into "dollars", then, pilgrimage, religious trips, meetings, conferences and religious camps are, within this industry, separate segments of multi - billions of dollars.

Nowadays, religious tourism has come to be a distinct segment of the global tourism market, gradually turning into a vast industry. According to the World Religious Travel Association (WRTA), 600 million religious camps have been established, where more than 8 million volunteers were involved in setting-up projects, including more than 120,000 churches.

There has been an increase in the number of religious tourist guides, brochures, leaflets etc., there has been a huge growth in tourism programs and camps offered by churches and religious organizations. Worldwide, 10 out of 1000 travel agents sell religious tours and numerous tour operators elaborate religious tourist circuits, 1 out of 4 tourists is interested in religious tourism.

One can notice that, despite all economic, political and even religion problems worldwide, which have been highlighted in this review, the watchful eye of those who know how to make a profit out of practically anything saw West's need for pilgrimage, but diverted it quickly to tourism, so that, in Fatima or Jerusalem, for instance, the sacred is shamelessly bought and sold.

One can rent a cross and a crown of thorns in the Holy Land and the tourist can take photographs carrying and wearing them, or can buy a postcard of Jesus winking. One can even buy sausages picturing the Savior on the label, as well as bottles with tears of Virgin Mary or generous pieces of wood from the Holy Cross. In terms of sacredness, the West buys and sells anything, while the Christian East still seems to keep the authentic spirit of holiness of certain places, places or people (Enea C, 2016).

As compared with the West, things in Romania are better in terms of religious tourism and pilgrimages. The monasteries in Romania are often visited by tourists, which has led to a considerable increase in the number of churches in the recent years. In this regard, we mention the religious youth camps (the Association of Christian - Orthodox Students in Romania organizes pilgrimages to monasteries across the country, groups of students from Bucharest and other universities can participate in pilgrimages to Mount Athos), circuits to visit important churches (circuit of monasteries in Bucovina, Moldavia, Dobrogea); religious destinations, where religious events are held (Christmas and Year's end celebrations in Maramures or Bucovina); cultural-religious institutions (monasteries of Moldavia, Muntenia, Oltenia, Transylvania and the Catholic cathedrals in Șumuleu, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca); religious sanctuaries (Dacian sanctuary from the Dacian Sarmisegetuza in the Orastie Mountains); holy graves, as places of pilgrimage (the tomb of St. Parascheva in Iasi, the remains of the first Christian martyrs from the Cocos monastery in Northern

Dobrogea, the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca). (Enea C, 2016).

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern pilgrimage is deemed to be a pact between tourism industry and religion. (Sousa, D., 1993). Proponents of the fundamental differences between tourism and religious pilgrimage bring up the major dissensions. Pilgrimage is seen as a journey to holy places, religious meetings or manifestations. (Dale, G Oliver, H. 2005). In church's opinion, pilgrimage aims not only mental influence by offering peace of mind, spiritual fulfillment, but it implies that one way of achieving this state is flagellation of the body. The journey itself to holy places should be a penance, a suffering necessary to achieve a certain spiritual level. As a result, comfort, relaxation, entertainment and other forms of distraction would not be included in pilgrimage. Thus deemed, the pilgrimage has little in common with tourism. Tourism based on a religious motivation is much promoted by travel agencies, but we wonder if this type of tourism can be performed without the actual participation of those from the "destinations" concerned. Most of the times, the Church prefers to organize these pilgrimages on its own, the group is accompanied by a priest who performs specific activities during the travel: prayers, debates on spiritual topics, etc. Even a certificate attesting the travel is given at the end of a tour made entirely by "Church rules". In such case, collateral activities are reduced to a minimum and we wonder whether this approach can be called tourism. Yet, on the other hand, tourism has always been considered as a form of sacred or spiritual journey. One must leave, get out of the day-to-day environment to find the inner self. (www.uia.org, 2016). Traveling by any means represents detachment, experimentation which influences and often brings changes.

From some points of view, tourism and religion do not have much in common. Given the intrinsic objectives of tourism and religion, attracting tourists should be a common goal. Religious marketing, as "real" as the one in tourism, even if it less known, should blend with the latter to satisfy the multiple categories of tourists. A careful management of religious destinations could bring benefits both to tour operators and religious institutions (Stevens, R.E.; Loudon, D.; Wrenn, B.; Cole, H. 2007).

To highlight the importance of religious tourism, Forbes magazine has brought together the impressive visitor numbers in 20 the most wanted religious destinations in the world. (Page, S.J., 2003). Although the places attract millions of people, the tombs, churches, temples, mosques or other holy places attract tourists for quite diverse reasons.

Every year, huge groups of tourists visit the tombs of saints or prophets or take part in annual celebrations in those holy places. Reportedly about 20 million people visit annually the tomb of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, the place where it is believed that Virgin Mary appeared to a poor peasant in the sixteenth century. The 1999 Vatican Council Report claims that it is the most visited Catholic tomb in the world. In Sabarimala, a pilgrimage center in Southern India, the estimated number of tourists ranges from 5 million to as high as 60 million people annually (Rodgers, J., 2001). Luxury and modern transportation differentiate the modern pilgrimage from trips made by believers in the past on foot on long distances to pay homage to gods. "The travel was more important than the destination in the past. In fact, the basis underlying pilgrimage, whether the belief, was the idea of travel rather than the destination."

According to the same sources, Muslims today may reserve 5-star travel packages, and believers can travel by luxury cruises to Greece so they can walk in the footsteps of St. Paul. Religious trips have become more convenient. Every religion does this", said Dallen Timothy. However, despite travel's appearance of pilgrimage is much diminished, Holly Hayes says that this does not necessarily mean that the essence of pilgrimage has been lost in these modern times. (www.travel.com) "If a medieval pilgrim had been able to travel by plane, it's hard to believe that he would have refused. This is largely because the most important thing is actually the destination, to be closer to what is holy and supernatural".

Statistics show that (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>):

- Cologne Cathedral, Germany - records about six million tourists annually.
- Lourdes, France - 5 million tourists
- The tomb of Imam Hussein, Karbala, Iraq - between three and seven million pilgrims
- Assisi, Italy / St. Francis Basilica - between 4 and 5 million visitors
- Jasna Gora, Czestochowa, Poland - between four and five million tourists
- Fatima, Portugal - 4 million tourists annually.
- Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia - 4 million visitors
- Jerusalem, Israel - about 1.5 million tourists
- Varanasi, India - one million tourists
- Bodh Gaya / Mahabodhi temple complex, India - one million visitors.

Romania, unfortunately or not (depending on the point of view) is a country with a strong religious tradition. The Orthodox Church (the dominant one) gets a share of the state budget and has a lot of followers.

The only tourism segment which has not been affected by crisis is religious tourism, the number of Romanians who go on pilgrimage in domestic

tourism has been constant in the recent years. Moreover, international religious travels have increased, according to travel agencies and Patriarchate officials. (www.adrnordest.ro, 2015).

Despite comments of the most skeptical, religious tourism is increasingly growing, taking considerable proportions: thousands of people from around the world, not only from our country, for instance, come to pray at the relics of Saint Parascheva at the Iasi Metropolitan Church. This is a relatively new trend, but which cannot be stopped as it is practiced on a large scale. The same happens in the case of Father Arsenie Boca, in Prislop, the line of Christians waiting at the grave of "Transylvania's Saint" is always made up of dozens of people, day and night, whether the temperature is +30 degrees or -30 degrees. On the other hand, this somewhat excessive humility resulted in an exaggerated tendency to market religions, we would even dare to say that not only religious products such as icons or spiritual books are marketed, but also monastic wine, tzuika, cheese, etc.

Yet, beyond these controversies, our country enjoys a true history of religion, monasteries of hundreds of years old being destination for many of us on regular basis. It is a breath of peace, serenity, splendor and beauty of life that we can only taste when we are in a secluded monastery in the mountains, with angels that we fully feel though we do not see.

Due to current concerns of heads of monasteries, namely abbots and abbesses, to improve religious tourism services, it has gained a well-defined position on the tourism market, being a growing form of tourism due to the increasing number of Romanian and foreign tourists, but also young people with a higher independence and high level of culture; the existence of a remarkable cultural and religious heritage nationally and globally; religious tourism has the advantage that it can be combined with any other form of tourism (systemic vision), such as urban tourism, rural tourism, coastal and even the spa tourism; the religious journeys have two trends:

- those based on tourist motivation as sole purpose and

- those which blend this motivation with the cultural one (the multitude of motivations reflects better the complexity of the modern person);

In terms of services, more and more monasteries and places of worship get involved in tourism activity or provide free or low-price accommodation, as well as meals; religious tourism largely depends on the general infrastructure, some tourist attractions being less accessible.

Cultural and religious tourism is only a small part of the revenues made in tourism in Romania. Also, Romania has a large movable and immovable heritage which is basis for the development of

cultural and religious tourism (Strâmbu-Dima, A., 2008). Cultural and religious heritage is one of Romania's degradable resources, having a huge potential for development. Yet, the strategy and methodology for the development of cultural and religious tourism is deficient. (Stăncioiu A.F., 2000). Turning these heritage places into tourist attractions means making partnerships, finding integrated solutions for community and, last but not least, obtaining financing.

The undertaken review shows that that the only tourist activity which records an impressive but constant number of tourists from one year to another is the religious and pilgrimage tourism, regardless of religion or confession, and it can be deemed as the only "ambassador of peace in the world".

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