



Conceptualization of Religious Tourism in the Republic of Croatia

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Abstract:

Purpose. Religious tourism requires a special approach to developing a tourist destination to meet the specific needs of believers and create a sustainable tourist community. Quality religious tourism should offer relevant and fulfilling content so that visitors can gain a deeper understanding of religious aspects and feel a connection with the spiritual, traditional, and cultural dimensions of the destination they are visiting.

Results. The lack of cooperation between tourist workers and religious institutions, represents a big problem since it makes it impossible to optimal and coordinate the creation of a tourist product, and the conceptualization of religious tourism. Absence of quality specialized and themed ones Because religious tourism in Croatia is so popular, there is an issue with its content. There is a single, widely recognized mold in which the content is created, but it would undoubtedly need to be modified because, in addition to the elderly, young people are becoming more and more interested in religious tourism; as a result, new content tailored to their age groups should be offered to them.

Conclusion. Strengthening cooperation with the local tourist community and strengthening promotion are key steps in the development of religious tourism. Establishing a joint strategy of the local and religious community and making investments are necessary for its further growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most scientists agree that the main motives that motivate people to go on a tourist trip are the escape from routine, the well-established rhythm of everyday life, that is, relaxation outside the usual environment, preservation of health and the desire for new experiences. In addition to the main reasons that are most often mentioned, there are also cultural, sports, entertainment and environmental reasons. Selective types of tourism, to which religious tourism also belongs, appear as part of the system of macro-strategic development in tourism. The difference between mass and selective tourism is mainly that the mass concept of tourism development has given up on noticing the individual, and selective tourism precisely recognizes the individual and turns only to him, so faith is a strong motivator of the tourist movement. People who practice a particular religion often find inspiration, support and meaning in life in their religious beliefs. So, following the above, the most important characteristic of selective tourism is placing tourists in the focus of research and shaping the offer and tourist products themselves according to the specific needs of tourists.

The growing interest in religious tourism, i.e. cultural tourism that contains elements of religious tourism, is the result of the increased demand for trips that allow tourists to learn about the cultural and spiritual traditions of the destination, as well as the growing interest in religion, although not

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necessarily so institutionalized. The motivation for religious and religious travel can be the need for education, to experience something new in culture and people, especially through interaction with others, and the need to nurture a relationship with God, a sense of existence and sharing to understand faiths. with others and communicate. An important reason is spiritual renewal, which is often a combination of spiritual and physical activity, staying in quiet places, meditation and silence. The importance of pilgrimage tourism as an economic, social and spatial phenomenon does not.

2. ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM RESOURCES

Religious tourism, according to [Jackowski and Smith \(1992\)](#), denotes travel that is driven by a desire to learn about spirituality. Religious tourism is defined by [Rinschede \(1992, p. 52\)](#) as travel to sacred locations that is at least partially driven by religious beliefs. According to the same author, religious tourists visit nearby sights (like cities) in addition to holy places, which suggests a close relationship between religious tourism, vacation tourism, and cultural tourism. [Rinschede \(1992\)](#) makes a distinction between short and longer religious trips based on the duration of stay. Furthermore, while longer religious journeys involve at least one overnight stay, shorter religious journeys are one-day affairs without an overnight stay (having the qualities of an excursion).

Furthermore, religious tourism is noted by [Iliev \(2020, pp.136–137\)](#) in relation to the interaction between mass tourism and niche (alternative) tourism. He claims that religious tourism is a distinct (alternative) type of travel that draws inspiration from aspects and characteristics of mass tourism. In this regard, he enumerates the characteristics and factors that give religious tourism the nature of mass tourism: its quick expansion, significant economic influence, volume of visitors, dense spatial concentration, and demand for mementos. However, the following traits of particular types of tourism predominate in religious tourism: small groups of travelers, spatial dispersion (spread of tourists), year-round travel (no seasonality), sustainability, market segmentation, high degree of authenticity, focus on experience, need for knowledge, and peaceful, considerate, and engaged travelers. While the potential for development is manifested through sports-recreational and rural tourism, which in turn are primarily defined by natural resources, the identification and analysis of key holy places in the context of religious tourism includes the observation of various destinations and places that have a special significance for believers. These places are defined by social resources. Given that a certain infrastructure has been developed over many years as a result of a large number of people being accepted in certain places, religious centers have historically evolved into commercial and cultural hubs. The tourism offer encompasses various segments, such as food and beverage, entertainment, cultural, lodging, and trade, among others, contingent on demand. All of these offerings contribute to the consumption of tourists. However, because they are an essential component of a country's culture and traditions, spiritual values (or religious values) have a special significance in the context of supply and demand in the tourism industry. Religious tourism does not rely solely on one market niche or market segment; rather, it shapes its offer in response to mass tourist demand and has its own unique tourist offer. As per [Liutikas \(2015\)](#), pilgrims usually travel for a variety of reasons, though sometimes they may have just one primary motivation. Without the traveler even realizing it, their motivations can shift from religious/pilgrimage to secular/tourist depending on the activities they participate in during the trip. While there are many similarities between pilgrimages and tourism, not every tourist is a pilgrim, and not every pilgrim is a tourist, as noted by [Murray and Graham \(1997\)](#) and [Hovi \(2010, p. 212\)](#). According to [Cerović et al. \(2021, p. 9\)](#), the pilgrim is a believer whose main reason for traveling is his faith, not just a tourist. The tourist is not a pilgrim; rather, he is a tourist with religious motivations if religion is his secondary motivation. Four primary

considerations need to be made when it comes to religious tourism: religious affiliation and the performance of religious rites; education and culture; professional occupation and income level; and the standard of infrastructure, or accessibility. Other factors that have a significant impact on the activities that tourists choose to do in their free time are similar languages, sharing a common culture, political stability, fashion, and inflation (Tala & Padurean, 2008). Those who work in the destination's management structure are frequently religious monks who regard themselves more as theologians or shrine guardians than as managers at all. For this reason, effective management of the sacred site depends on the cooperation of all parties involved. Unplanned and uncontrolled tourism development increases the risk of medium- and even long-term unsustainability when destination management is inadequate or nonexistent. The overall quality of a religious destination's tourism product must be closely monitored and managed to guarantee pilgrims a good experience and that locals are satisfied (Krešić et al., 2012).

3. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS CONTENT IN THE TOURIST OFFER IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

In the context of Croatian tourism, religious events through daily religious rites in Croatian sacred monuments or large traditional religious manifestations on the Adriatic and in the continental part of Croatia give the possibility of enhanced tourist valorization of the area where these take place, with a special emphasis on extending the tourist season and enriching tourist content. At the same time, tourism contributes to the discovery and revival of religious festivals as a specific cultural expression of the Croatian people (Geić, 2011).

As a country that abounds in historically and artistically extremely valuable sacred objects and already well-visited sanctuaries, Croatia has significant potential for developing religious tourism aimed at members of the Catholic faith. Croatian Marian sanctuaries play a special role in the development of religious tourism. Since these are predominantly one-day visits to certain Marian shrines, it is difficult to provide precise data on the number of visitors or pilgrims. Most of these visits take place during Christian holidays and special holidays, which, in terms of tourism, also gives them the character of seasonality. At the same time, three visits by Pope John Paul II. contribute to the recognition of Croatia as an interesting and important religious destination. Pilgrimage tourism could be one of the key reasons for overcoming the seasonal nature of Croatian tourism. Visiting sacred buildings can occur at any time of the year and does not have to be exclusively related to Christian holidays. Rich cultural and historical heritage and beautiful anthropogenic and natural beauty can be the keys to off-season tourism. Various tourist programs and contents can be designed with the cooperation of church authorities and local communities. It should be noted that each person, i.e. an individual, comes to any place because of their subjective curiosity and their interests. As for the experience of faith and travelling to a particular religious centre, socializing with the local population is also important for pilgrims. Often, on a pilgrimage, it is from the local population that certain legends related to the sanctuaries and sacred objects, customs and cultural habits of a certain region can be learned, as well as several other pieces of information that often cannot be read in brochures, tourist guides or other materials. There is also a popular proverb connected with this, which says: "Read tourist brochures but ask the host". On the side of contemporary tourist demand, religious tourism can be treated as a very significant marketing segment that has its own organizational forms (religious associations) and well-established habits of religious travel—pilgrimage. Based on these powerful incentives, original tourism tourist organizations (tour operators, agencies) create relevant content that, in collaboration with the tourism industry's players, provides, in addition to spiritual programs, all other content typical of modern tourism offer.

Religious tourism sites make an effort to link Marian shrines to their other tourist attractions. Every such location has a legend of its own, though. Although these legends frequently overlap and are similar to one another, they serve as a major basis for the growth of both the supply and demand for religious travel. A region's supply and demand for tourists are closely correlated with its churches and sculptures honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary, which are integral to the area's cultural and historical legacy. Many folk customs arise that become ingrained in a particular region's traditional heritage, often based on legends and stories that are passed down from generation to generation. The stakeholders in a destination's tourism offer bear a significant portion of the responsibility when a particular legend or story gains traditional recognition. To draw as many tourists as possible to their location, they have to advertise a particular tourism offer. While they frequently compete with one another, the carriers of the tourism offer have the responsibility of standing out on the market for travellers with their cutting-edge travel offerings. Even though it appears that all Marian sanctuaries offer the same or a similar experience for tourists, there are some distinctions when you examine them more closely. Specific tourist offerings are limited to specific areas of each holy place. The production of artisan souvenirs, the facilities, the standard of accommodation, the friendliness, the way guests are received, and the food that is usually only served in one place all add to the richness, diversity, and recognition of the religious tourism experience in Marian sanctuaries.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For "conceptualizing religious tourism in the Republic of Croatia," primary research was conducted using the structured interview method, and a questionnaire was compiled for this purpose. The research aimed to find out the opinions and attitudes of the representatives of the religious communities of the Miraculous Lady of Sinj in the City of Sinj, in the Sanctuary of the Mother of God Trsatska, and in the Sanctuary of Maria Bistrica to get the opinions and attitudes of the representatives of the religious communities who will give grounded and relevant answers about the state of religious tourism in the Republic of Croatia. In the context of research on the state of religious tourism in the Republic of Croatia, the selection of provincials as participants in the in-depth interview was logical. Provincials, as leaders of religious communities, possess a unique combination of spiritual authority, managerial responsibility and experience in dealing with the challenges arising from the development of religious tourism. Their role in the Church and the wider social context makes them a key source of information on the state, potential and problems of religious tourism in Croatia. Provincials are the highest authorities within their religious communities and a key figure in the preservation of spiritual heritage. Their many years of experience in leading communities allow them to precisely articulate how religious tourism affects the preservation of religious identity, the development of local communities through interaction with pilgrims, and the promotion and understanding of cultural values. Following the above, research questions were asked of religious representatives in this in-depth interview:

- Research questions regarding the role and importance of religious places in your community:
How do religious places shape the identity and tradition of the community/shrine?
- Research questions regarding the development of religious tourism:
 - *How has religious tourism evolved in the community over the past decades?*
 - *What key initiatives or projects contributed to the development of religious tourism?*
- Research questions regarding the positive consequences of religious tourism:
 - *How does religious tourism contribute to a community's economy?*
 - *How does religious tourism promote cultural diversity and understanding among visitors?*
- Research questions regarding the negative consequences of religious tourism:
 - *What are the main challenges or negative consequences that religious tourism brings to the community?*

- *How do you deal with issues such as over-commercialization, mass tourism or the loss of authenticity of religious sites?*
- Research questions regarding the perspective of the development of religious tourism:
 - *How do you see the future of religious tourism in the community/shrines?*

When asked about the future of religious tourism development, the provincials gave the following answers:

Provincial from the shrine of Our Lady of Sinj:

“I believe that the key to the future of religious tourism is preserving the spiritual identity and authenticity of the shrines. Regardless of the development of tourism and the increased number of visitors, shrines must remain, first and foremost, spiritual places, where people come for pilgrimage and prayer. It is important not to turn shrines into commercial attractions, but to respect the primary role of the shrine, which is a place of faith and spiritual renewal.”

Provincial of the Church of Our Lady of Trsat:

“I believe that the shrine of Our Lady of Trsat has great potential and should be promoted at the international level, whose historical and spiritual heritage will thus become more recognizable. Stronger cooperation with shrines in other European and world countries could lead to a greater number of pilgrims and visitors, which would enable a higher quality development of the shrine.”

Provincial Shrine of Our Lady of Bistrica:

“Everyone is talking about sustainable tourism and the sanctuary of Our Lady of Bistrica has the opportunity to develop the sanctuary and its surroundings according to the principle of sustainable tourism. I believe that this is the right path for its own development, and that means a balanced approach in which the development of tourist infrastructure and services will be adapted to the spiritual and ecological needs of the sanctuary. In this sense, investments in infrastructure are important, but not in a way that could disrupt the spiritual atmosphere or the environment. The development of the sanctuary is only possible with respect for the principles of respect, preservation and balance of spiritual needs in the first place, preservation of tradition and the environment, and only then with development that will bring economic benefits. Moderation is important!”

The conversation with representatives of religious communities is important for the future development of religious tourism for several reasons:

- *Cultural heritage and authenticity:* Representatives of religious communities have a deep understanding of the cultural and spiritual significance of their shrines and places of pilgrimage. Through talking with them, he gained an insight into the authentic aspects of religious tourism and a sense of the necessity of securing and preserving the integrity and spiritual value of these locations.
- *Preserving tradition:* Religious tourism often involves traditional rites, ritual practices, and customs. Cooperation with representatives of religious communities helped the authors of the paper identify, preserve, and respect these traditions, ensuring that tourism is developed in a way that respects their authenticity and importance.

- *Ethical issues:* Religious tourism can raise several ethical issues, including respect for sacred sites, cultural norms, and the privacy of religious communities. Through a conversation with representatives of these communities, their concerns and values were determined, as was ensuring that tourist activities are carried out ethically and respectfully.
- *Economic benefits:* Religious tourism provides economic benefits to local communities, which religious representatives are also aware of, but it is important to ensure that these benefits are evenly distributed and that the economic rights and needs of religious communities are respected. Through the dialogue with the representatives, ways were identified that tourism can sustainably support the local economy.
- *Promotion of understanding and tolerance:* Religious tourism can serve as a bridge for intercultural exchange and understanding. A conversation with representatives of religious communities is necessary because it encourages the involvement of religious stakeholders can encourage dialogue, and promote tolerance and respect for diversity among visitors and the local population.

How would you describe the believers you meet who come on pilgrimage?

Provincial from the shrine of Our Lady of Sinj:

"In my opinion, the believers who come on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Sinj are people who are deeply connected to spiritual and religious values, and their journey is less touristic and more about a spiritual encounter. They have a strong sense of devotion and respect for the tradition of the shrine. And, interestingly, they have been coming for many years!"

Provincial of the Church of Our Lady of Trsat:

"Recently, more and more young believers have been coming who are looking for spiritual support, but also want to connect their faith with a modern approach, that is, connect it with travel and getting to know the oloica. Many of them are looking for a place for personal meditation and reflection, while at the same time using modern technology to enhance their pilgrimage experience, such as mobile applications for guiding through the shrine or a virtual tour. These young believers, although less traditional in their approach to faith, also feel a strong connection to Trsat and are looking for spiritual inspiration, but in a somewhat more modern way!"

Provincial Shrine of Our Lady of Bistrica:

"The faithful who come to the shrine of Our Lady of Bistrica, like other religious tourists, come with deep spiritual motives, but their motivation and demographic structure differ with regard to the significance of the shrine, its history and location. Among the faithful who regularly visit the shrine of Our Lady of Bistrica, many are devout pilgrims who come every year, especially during major holidays such as the Assumption, August 15, or the feast of Our Lady of Bistrica. These believers come with deep faith and gratitude towards Our Lady of Bistrica, who, according to their beliefs, helped them in life's difficulties!"

The answers are all valid and complete and can be summarized in the following items:

The way believers perceive religious tourism - believers were the first tourists who made pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Rome, and it is not easy to classify them in any category. Religious

tourists can be divided into three categories: the first is the one in which pilgrims visit places seeking experiences of the living God, peace, joy and love. At the foundation of every pilgrimage is the longing for God, but there are also other motivations: fulfilling vows, hearing prayers and intentions, etc., visiting the shrine and participating in the Eucharist. The second category, apart from the primary ones, is looking for additional content such as local gastronomy and accommodation, and the third category of pilgrims is also looking for additional content such as natural or cultural sights, events or similar content. The term religious tourism itself is still not fully defined because the term religious tourism is also in use or is considered a part of cultural tourism.

Categories of content that need to be offered to visitors to achieve the quality of a religious destination - Pilgrims are primarily looking for an answer and comfort to the prayers and vows they come to a certain shrine with, so this would be the first category of pilgrims. The second category, in addition to the primary one, is looking for peace, security, quality, simple, and adequate accommodation, because precisely such accommodation facilities can improve the quality of a religious destination. They are also looking for a restaurant with local gastronomy. The third category is those who, in addition to primary and secondary, want to further explore the destination they came to, get to know cultural and/or natural sights and participate in events or similar activities that a certain destination has to offer.

Suggestions for the improvement of religious tourism - for the majority of respondents, the concept of religious tourism can be defined as an important part and potential of the tourist offer, as a phenomenon that presents culture and historical heritage, as part of a special tourist product that must be better shaped and offered as part of the tourist offers. At the same time, it is emphasized that it is necessary to protect the faithful first and thus show tourists what our strength is - better to present ourselves as part of the national and religious culture. Most respondents think that religious tourism should not be combined with pilgrimages.

Negative consequences generated by a large number of visitors in a religious destination - average Croatian sanctuaries where an in-depth interview with representatives of religious communities was conducted almost cite the same negative consequences, religious tourism takes place with an infrastructure that is set to certain parameters. With the increasing number of pilgrims arriving, problems stand out, such as traffic jams, the lack of previously mentioned parking spaces, or public toilets and infrastructure adapted to people with disabilities. Namely, during the novena and the Feast of Our Lady of Sinj / the Shrine of Our Lady of Trsat / the Feast of Maria Bistrica, tens of thousands of believers participate in holy masses, confessions, Communion is and the main procession on the Feast itself. At that time of high attendance, all institutions and services work to maintain the city and its streets, to make it passable, clean, and accessible, as well as the on-call services of the Health Center, Firefighters, Police Station, security guards, and utility workers, so that everyone has adequate care during the stay. If such a large number of visitors were more frequent, it could be impossible to provide and ensure the same conditions without engaging additional services, therefore one should think about the sustainability of the destination through the available carrying capacity.

Economic benefits in the function of increasing the quality of life of the local population - the majority of respondents believe that they are witnessing a time when tourism is becoming one of our most important economic branches and that the tourist offer in the form of sun and sea, although still the most represented, is no longer a sufficient form of tourism. With the development of a diverse tourist offer, the segment of religious tourism is also very significant. The Republic of Croatia has over 1,559 parishes (data from the Office for Church Statistics at the Secretariat of the Croatian

Bishops' Conference for the year 2000), this is a huge potential that can contribute to development in every segment. It is logical that the local population also wants to have an economic benefit by offering their services and products, as well as appropriate accompanying content.

The impact of religious tourism on the economic and social growth of a religious destination - the development of any form of tourism contributes to and affects the economic and social growth of the destination, and accordingly religious tourism. Of course, with the aim of sustainability, not to mix the commercial with the spiritual dimension, because here it should be noted that the spiritual dimension is primary, and all the good that results from it can bring benefit to the whole community, encourage the development of new content, employment of new staff and in ultimately improving the standards of the local population.

Table 1. Suggestions from the provincial governor regarding the development of religious tourism to the APH method

Scope of application of improvement proposals	Suggestions for improvement	Description / Priority Rank
<i>Infrastructure</i>	<i>Modernization of facilities</i>	
	<i>Improving accessibility</i>	<i>Install access paths for people with disabilities - urgent procedure</i>
<i>Cooperation with other sanctuaries</i>	<i>Exchange of experiences with European and world saints</i>	<i>The exchange of experiences between sanctuaries can be ranked according to various criteria that reflect the specific needs, resources and goals of each sanctuary. One of the key factors influencing the ranking is the importance of the cultural and religious traditions of each sanctuary.</i>
<i>Enrichment of the offer</i>	<i>Development of cultural and spiritual contents Various rites and rituals</i>	<i>Holding church music concerts, art exhibitions and theatre performances inspired by religious themes can be an attractive way to promote cultural values. Incorporating art into the daily activities of religious communities allows believers and tourists to experience and practice their faith through creative and aesthetic expressions.</i>
<i>Spiritual and cultural exchange</i>	<i>Establishing cultural programs and festivals Connecting with other religious communities</i>	<i>Launch cultural festivals that combine religious</i>

Source: Own research

The Roman Catholic Church and the monks of the Marian shrines are the majority opinion, so it must be true that all religious communities agree that the rise of religious tourism should be emphasized more and that most religious and sacred buildings should be opened more frequently and adapted to the needs and wishes of tourists. This is supported by the fact that 20 responses came from the perspectives of three different religious communities. Modern Stimu tourists seeking spiritual balance and tranquillity must be the focus of religious tourism. All respondents think that to improve the quality of their tourism offer and subsequently increase tourist consumption as part of sustainable tourism development, it would be better to educate the local population in a wider context and to better network with local authorities and institutions in the presentation of sacred heritage and religious events. To ensure that all members of the local community participate, religious tourism must be conducted with mutual respect and freedom from political, administrative, and religious authorities. Important figures from the hotel, cultural, and business sectors should also be involved. Families, adolescents, "civil servants" in the religious community, staff members of tourist hotels, tour guides, and administrators of regional and public services. Admins need to feel compelled to represent "open" projects to do this.

5. CONCLUSION

Religious tourism can overcome the seasonality of destinations because it has the potential to attract visitors throughout the year. In this way, it enables dispersion, i.e. a more even distribution of tourist demand and consumption. In designing a religious tourist product, it is possible (and necessary) to cooperate with other holders of the tourist offer in order to create a recognizable, unique and authentic product, which, depending on the occasion, combines religious, cultural, gastronomic heritage, as well as sports events and health aspects. The economic value of religious tourism derived from tourist consumption is reflected in the economic growth and development of religious tourism destinations, the creation of new jobs and the retention of existing ones, the development of infrastructure and the attraction of investments.

Investments and the return of invested funds through the consumption of visitors can have a positive effect on the development of less developed rural areas, as well as on the revitalization of existing, but inadequately used or neglected religious buildings. The preservation and revitalization of religious buildings, as well as the preservation and respect of local traditions and religious customs, contributes to efforts to create a sustainable (economic) society and gives religious tourism the character of sustainability. The repurposing of religious buildings or their use for the needs of religious tourism, especially in rural areas, can create new employment opportunities and reduce the emigration of the young population from such areas. The potential of religious tourism destinations is also visible in the merging of history and future through the use of virtual and augmented reality digital technologies, to create educational materials adapted to new generations of visitors to religious content.

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