

PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the importance of religious tourism in sustainable development and to find effective strategies through marketing optics and methodology. The issue of religious tourism is a topical one and not without controversy. Romanian tourism is currently facing many problems, such as: reduced turnover, very frequent changes in the legal framework, very rigid labor market, a deficient infrastructure in quantity and quality, repeated changes in the behavior of economic agents and population, an unfavorable economic environment. To achieve this goal, qualitative research was conducted among tourism producers, intermediaries and tourists in the Neamț region - one of the most important tourist areas in Romania and also an important region with religious and rural tourism destinations. The results showed that there is a special concern regarding religious tourism and could contribute to the local development of the area.

Keywords: religion; religious tourism; development; sustainability; local resources

JEL classification: M3, Z12

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Introduction

In Romania, religion returned to the attention of researchers from other fields than the theological in the years after 1989. If we were to quote the great demographer (Trebici, 1998) then it would be best to

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emphasize the following: "The variable religion is increasingly requested as an explanatory variable in the theories and models proposed by social psychology, sociology, and differential demography. It should not be missing from economic theories either, if we think of the classic study of the German economist and sociologist Max Weber (1856-1920), entitled Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism, which highlights the relationship between economics and religion. Tourism has many positive effects and directly and indirectly influences the economic development of areas with tourist objectives. Tourism can also contribute to the development of areas that are not rich in economic resources, but with natural and anthropoid resources. According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), tourism will follow four major development trends by 2030:

- development of old religious objectives / from the perspective of marketing policies;
- the development of new religious tourist attractions in which modern technologies play an important role;
- modernization of the current classical elements of the religious tourist potential;
- implementation of policies specific to the development of the existing potential;
- greater involvement of religious institutions.

The complexity of tourism processes determined by the influence of many factors of economic, social, psychological, administrative, requires an approach to the systemic vision based on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary treatment, highlighting the interrelationship between religious tourism and sustainable development. The diversity regarding the types of tourism, the existence of many factors with negative influence on the development of tourism in the mentioned area such as: infrastructure, specific training of staff with responsibilities in tourism, promotion of tourism products and services, requires a research based on scientific criteria and methods that take into account the specifics of the field.

Literature Review - *The Importance of Religion Tourism in the development of Neamț area*

With the integration into the European Union, European researchers have tried to highlight the strong impact that cultural tourism can have in

the new united Europe as well as the extraordinary benefits that this form of tourism can bring. We mention here the indispensable contributions of some European researchers, gathered under the direct guidance and care of Greg Richards (in *Cultural attractions and European Tourism*). In this paper are collected 13 studies, with a special value, real landmarks in the process of integration and circulation of Romanian tourism in Europe. Also, another direction of research goes towards the identification and analysis of the great pilgrimage centers of Europe and the world (Cohen, 1992).

However, in terms of religious tourism as a distinct element and as a separate branch in research, the contributions of specialists are increasingly diverse and numerous. It seems that the studies we have gone through, try a lot to highlight the extent of religious tourism and the possibilities of developing this type of tourism for certain geographical or cultural areas. We mention here the impressive collection of studies reunited under his coordination, entitled *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: an international perspective* (Raj & Morpeth, 2001). The studies included in this volume, which also reflect a globalizing spirit, offer different models, suggest ideas and, to a large extent, offer perspectives for researching the problem. The subject is treated in the same way in the volume signed by Dallen & Daniel (2006), which also contains a series of studies, organized by field, studies that offer a historical-philosophical (Nolan & Nolan, 1992) perspective of what we call today religious tourism (Dallen & Daniel, 2006). Another volume is one that can provide a necessary opening to the bases and beginnings of the development of this type of tourism (McKelvie, 2006).

One of the "leading" volumes in such research is the one signed by Collins-Kreiner & Kliot (2005), namely the work *Christian Tourism to the Holy Land* offers an image of religious tourism in the Holy Land, an important landmark in regard of religious tourism in other Christian countries. Crispin Spaine, under the auspices of "Leicester University Press", published in 2000 the volume *Godly things: museums, objects, and religion*, which tends to offer a new perspective on what religious objects mean as elements of attractiveness for people (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2005).

Various hypotheses have also been launched in the analysis of religious tourism (Swatos & Tomasi, 2002), in order to establish similarities or differences in terms of pilgrimage as a purely religious act or tourist action. It should be noted that the pilgrimage contributes to sustainable development, in that very few such activities are not entirely devoid of

economic purposes (Rinschede, 1992), (Stavrou, 2000). Considering that, besides the strictly religious motivation, the pilgrim also visits other objectives in the area, buys souvenirs, books, etc., thus participating in the economic activity (Fleischer, 2000).

In this field, in the last years some articles appeared in *Amfiteatrul economic*. Such approaches were probably hindered by the various reluctances that are still observed today between religious authority and secular approaches in the field (Sousa, 1993). Unfortunately, it is believed that such a contribution would somewhat change the view of what is seen today as a pilgrimage. But an economic point of view is valid, as long as phenomena occur in which significant financial capital is mixed. An important study that makes a synthetic and pragmatic discussion about religious tourism, with a broader inclination towards the realities of the Romanian space, is signed by two researchers of the University of Oradea (Bădulescu & Ban, 2005). This initiative was doubled by an article published in the magazine "Capital", which offers a certain vision on the problem, but not very comprehensive, being more of a look that aims to popularize religious tourism.

A number of local researchers understood the importance of studying this topic and started from religious aspects to interpret the realities from an economic point of view. It is worth mentioning here a study carried out by Țîrca, Stănciulescu, Chiș and Băncilă in which they question the abbots of monasteries in order to identify those aspects that make people come to a monastery (Chis et al., 2006).

Also, many researchers have focused on deepening the problems of religious tourism by trying interesting and innovative approaches to the analysis of this phenomenon. Even if some, especially those in our country, have a less direct and sharp attitude, researchers from other areas with different mentalities are, or seem, more pragmatic in saying things "by name". Thus, other contributions of Romanian researchers can be supplemented with studies of researchers from external scientific fields to outline an objectively viewed reality, *sine ira et studio* (according to the famous Latin principle). Of course we ask ourselves the questions: "Is it necessary for marketing to be integrated as a policy in religious organizations in Romania in the perspective of sustainable development?"; "Was marketing applied in the religious field knowingly?"; "What obstacles has this field encountered internationally, what obstacles does it face in Romania and what solutions can be found?"; "What are the

peculiarities of marketing in the field of religious tourism?"; "How can religious tourism, through its resources, contribute to the coagulation of a comprehensive plan for sustainable regional development" (Strâmbu, 2008).

Of course, the list of contributions in the field of marketing and religious tourism can continue because, as I said, many researchers have turned their attention in this direction. The authors support the application of marketing principles and strategies in the field of religious tourism in order to obtain the best results. Although the Church has begun to support - it is true that tacitly - marketing in religious tourism by setting up "pilgrimage centers", through collaborations with various tourism distribution companies, with airlines, the results are not commensurate.

Robin Grier, based on his hypotheses (Weber, 1993), demonstrates a direct link between Protestantism, on the one hand, and economic growth, on the other. Sabina Alkire warns about the negative impact the religious institution and religious leaders have when they oppose development.

Weber's hypotheses were re-evaluated by Barro & McCleary in a study conducted at a level of 59 countries with a different religious preponderance, emphasizing, on the one hand, the direct link between people's faith and economic growth and, on the other hand, the inverse link between the involvement of the Church as an organization and sustainable economic growth (Barro & McCleary, 2003).

Analysis of the tourist market in Neamț

Tourist flows in Neamț County

The degree of development reached by the religious tourism from Neamț County is given by the intensity of the tourist circulation having as objectives the resources of the church potential.

There are several obstacles in assessing the related tourist flows. The first is given by the lack of a rigorous matrix to quantify the eminently religious flow. In the statistical base of tourism in Romania, the tourist data generated by the visits motivated by the religious tourism component are included in the same with the trips for medical and other reasons. Then, the flows of visitors generated by religious tourism are difficult to assess due to the interference with cultural tourism, in which visiting religious sites is a component of the cultural tourism offer. Also, visits to religious sights can be short, only a few hours, and this transit tourism does not have stay data that can be quantified.

In the case of monastic tourism, the information of the tourist flow comes from the monasteries, where the tourist records are based on the number of tickets at the entrance and those at the museum. In Neamț County, the monastery complexes Neamț, Văratec, Agapia, Secu, Sihăstria, Sihla, Horaița, Petru-Vodă are also considered centers with artistic and cultural orientation, which determines their inclusion in the tourist flow generated by cultural tourism.

Another major problem of religious tourism in Neamț County is the seasonality. Although the influx of practitioners is closely related to the feasts of religious buildings, feasts distributed throughout the year, and religious holidays over the year we find that the tourist frequency has a peak in early spring, in the context of Easter and the warm period of the year.

The monasteries of Văratec, Agapia, Neamț, Secu, Sihăstria, Petru Voda attract, at the weekend and in the hot season, a large number of tourists, accommodated in the neighboring rural localities. Instead, the tourist competition from the neighboring regions (Suceava, Iași) influences the tourist circulation, which suffers during the Easter or winter holidays, when the receiving basin of religious tourism becomes mainly Bucovina.

The graph below (Figure No. 1) show the number of religiously motivated trips after the calendar month of departure, the duration of the trip and the main accommodation in 2019, according to statistical data on the website of the Regional Statistics Office Neamț (Guriță 2013, Guriță 2015 a, b & c).

Research of religious tourism in Neamț area, method and analysis

Research methods and techniques: SWOT analysis and questionnaire-based survey. SWOT analysis is needed to highlight the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks facing the region in question, from a heritage perspective.

The specific objectives of the research were:

1) Identification of marketing techniques appropriate to the specifics of tourism activities based on the results of research conducted last year (2020).

2) Researching the tourist potential in the Neamț area in correlation with the influencing factors.

3) Identifying solutions to ensure the future development of tourism in the Neamt area.

4) Analysis of the role of the knowledge-based society in the development of religious tourism in the North-East Region of Romania.

5) Making the information obtained from the research available to the decision-making bodies in the field.

The SWOT analysis of the potential of the North-East tourist area highlights the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats:

Table 1. SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Religious cultural tourism potential	Religious cultural tourism potential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • favorable geographical location in the heart of Moldova • a large number of places of cultural significance, sacred (religious), cultural and historical monuments • a territorial concentration of monasteries and hermitages with national recognition • hiking trails around Orthodox monasteries • the existence of museum collections of religious art • the existence of libraries with a rich and old book fund • miracle-working icons • calendar of feasts and commemorations • memorial houses in the vicinity of the monastic ensemble • the tomb of Veronica Micle - Văratec • workshops near monasteries • the church paintings of the painter Nicolae Grigorescu • the spiritual imprint left by famous clergymen - Father Cleopa, Father Iustin Pârvu 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • degradation of religious worship objectives • visiting program for a much more restrictive public • lack of specialized guidance • Insufficient financial investments for the preservation of religious heritage • most collections that enjoy religious cultural recognition are located in large cities • the collections from the rural area do not enjoy a great recognition, although in the patrimony they have special objects as value (see Agapia, Neamț etc.) • buildings in rural areas (villages and not monasteries) that house such collections are in a high degree of degradation • poor experience in organizing such events makes the combination of religious and secular not always welcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the region there is a close link between the religious dimension and the ethnofolkloric dimension. Thus in the area there is an ethnographic and folklore treasure of great originality formed by traditional fairs and folklore manifestations throughout the year; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neither the religious nor the secular attraction is highlighted, not respecting the minimum space necessary for each event;

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the region there is a close link between the religious dimension and the ethnofolkloric dimension. Thus in the area there is an ethnographic and folklore treasure of great originality formed by traditional fairs and folklore manifestations throughout the year; 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • if from a conceptual point of view we can speak of a close link between religious tourism and pilgrimage, from an operational point of view, this aspect is left in the subsidiary and unexploited as a specific resource; • an excessive secularization of the ethnofolkloric manifestations is tried, which distorts the original character of the manifestation, their removal from the cultural heritage of the localities;

Source: Author processing based on research data

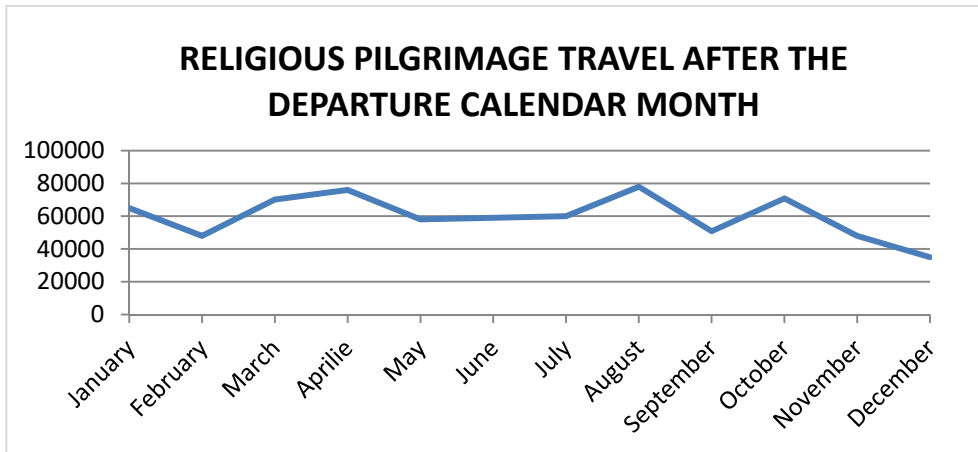


Figure 1. Travels for religious pilgrimage after the calendar month of departure.

Source: Author's processing based on data provided by the National Statistics Institute (NIS)

Results and discussions

In Romania, monasteries and churches register a large number of believer's visits on weekends and during important religious events (church feasts or remembrance of the holy faces who protected the place of worship).

Throughout the year, the distribution of the number of tourists is fluctuating, with peaks of increase in the number of trips in April, the Easter holiday, but also in October, where the feast of St. Parascheva registered in 2020 a record number of people who worshiped the relics

– 100,000 believers. Notable in the warm season in August when the trips of many groups of domestic or foreign visitors are recorded.

The analysis of the number of trips shows the need to support religious tourism in the cold season by designing integrated tourist products or tourist packages that are interesting to use in the off-season.

Findings regarding religious tourism in Neamț County

In conducting this study, we used the questionnaire-based survey to delimit certain aspects of religious tourism in Neamț County by:

- the tourist's vision on the manifestation of religious tourism
- identifying the specific motivations of the religious tourism demand
- the requirements of the consumer of services of religious tourism
- quality standards in religious tourism

A total of 189 direct questionnaires were completed, in the vicinity of the places of worship in Neamț County – Neamț Monastery, Văratec, Agapia, Secu and Petru Vodă - of which following filter questions, only 138 valid answers were validated and recorded.

The degree of uniqueness of a tourist attraction contributes significantly to the decision of a tourist to visit it. The attractive attributes of a place of worship impose it in the tourist's attention: the architectural elements, the movable and immovable heritage, the uniqueness of the landscape in which it is located, the fame of the founder and of the personalities who linked their names to this place, historical, cultural and religious nature that are hosted by it or the complementary religious/cultural attractions. Accessibility becomes an attractive criterion in the context in which it reveals the quality and diversity of access and accommodation and catering infrastructure - own and neighboring.

The attractive potential of the previously analyzed religious objectives can be capitalized by setting up museums or exhibitions inside religious buildings that do not now have such facilities. It is a useful way to provide attractive and additional information to potential visitors about the peculiarities of the building, about the historical figures that marked its existence. An efficient and professional tourist experience will aim to equip these museums with audio guides in international languages, but also to provide specialized guides, with skills and knowledge in the field, to meet the desire to inform visitors.

The miraculous icons as found in a number of monasteries in the area are of great interest to tourists and pilgrims.

We aimed and managed to validate the following hypotheses as presented in Table 2:

Table 2. The results of the questionnaire: validated hypotheses

1. The interviewed persons will visit Neamț County for religious tourism purposes.
2. The profile of the tourist is outlined by the following characteristics: predominantly female, elderly (over 65 years old), from rural areas, with average incomes.
3. Most tourists use the car when traveling to the tourist destination, they stay at boardinghouses for a stay of 1-3 days.
4. The motivations underlying the choice of a religious destination are of a spiritual, religious nature, to the detriment of the reasons related to the cultural manifestation of religious tourism.
5. In the case of monasteries and religious tourism, the spiritual-religious aspects have a special importance and a greater role than the economic part of the tourism activity.

Conclusions

The scientific approach presented in this paper can be summarized in the following conclusions:

- ✓ in the area of Neamț County there are opportunities and a remarkable attractive potential for the development of competitive religious tourism;
- ✓ the spatial distribution of the religious tourist objectives from Neamț County highlights a concentration of them in the area of Vânători-Neamț National Park;
- ✓ the infrastructure in the area requires a series of modernization and adaptation measures to satisfy the current tourist movement;
- ✓ identification of visitors' requirements for meeting a standard of tourist services (tourist motivations, infrastructure, accommodation, meals).

Tourists come to Neamț County on the one hand, to relate to the divinity, to manifest their faith, and on the other hand to know the history of the place and cultural contact. The combination of the two dimensions – religious and cultural – must be capitalized in the directions of tourism development of the area.

Analyzing the needs of consumers, it is encouraged to practice cultural-religious tourism by visiting museums within monastic ensembles, visiting memorial houses near Sihăstria and Agapia, but also supplementing with tourist routes along the historical cultural objectives in German cities.

The aim is for the Neamț County to consolidate as a tourist destination by diversifying the tourist product policy. Competitive tourist packages and routes, targeted at the age segments of tourists and accessible throughout the year must be designed to increase the flow of tourists and extend the average length of stay of tourists in the tourist destination.

In organizing the promotion activity, it is useful to apply the product strategy - selling church objects, visiting museums and church exhibitions, designing packages and tourist routes, organizing accommodation and meals in well-arranged places during a pandemic. The focus has been shifted from sustainability to the pandemic (Barbier & Burgess, 2020). the premises of the monastic ensembles - with an adequate price and distributed on a clientele market that is of interest.

Religious tourism will be in continuous growth, ascent and diversification if it is aimed at: meeting the tourist motivations of various segments of tourists; capitalizing on the desire for knowledge, the cultural component, the desire for social or spiritual interaction; the manifestation of a sustainable tourism that would protect the integrity of religious spaces and that would bring benefits to the local and church community.

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