

## **RELIGION – TRAVEL – YOUTH: AN APPROACH BASED ON AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper approaches the topic of religious tourism among young people, starting from theoretical aspects in the literature and continuing with the presentation of the main results of an empirical study conducted among young people in Bucharest, Romania, aged between 15 and 19. Religious travel is one of the oldest types of tourism in the world (some authors even state it is the oldest). This has been a means for people to try and discover themselves and divinity as well as to validate their faith. Given that it has stood the test of time, religious travel has taken on a much more complex role within tourism, including other aspects such as, for instance, curiosity and the desire to learn about elements belonging to other cultures. The research is based upon the completion of a questionnaire in the period March-April 2019, whose findings were centralised and used with the aim of fulfilling three objectives: O1 - Establishing the youth's perception of cultural and religious development and the role of religious travel; O2 - Identifying the respondents' level of interest in cultural and religious sights; O3 - Obtaining information regarding the requirements for organizing and undertaking a cultural and religious journey. The findings confirm the fact that religion and its resources are sufficiently appealing to the majority of young people, and form part of the tourism they practice or of their sightseeing intentions.*

**Keywords:** Religious tourism, youth tourism, culture, religious attractions

**JEL Classification:** L83, Z12, Z31

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### **Introduction**

People have forever been looking for answers to the questions that have troubled them: Who am I? What is my mission? What is happiness like? Sooner or later these questions may find explanations that are more or less satisfactory to the enquirers. The struggle to comprehend the self and the world around it is directly related to the complexity of human nature, since man has always had a thirst for faith, knowledge or science. Religion is a means for them to receive answers to their concerns. Religion is, among others, the personal, conscientious, free and permanent connection with divinity. This is manifested in prayer, liturgical acts, services, studying of the word of God, life in asceticism (monasticism), pilgrimages etc.

The term “religion” stems from Old French, or Latin religio(n-) ‘obligation, bond, reverence’, perhaps based on Latin religare or from Middle English “to bind” (originally in the sense ‘life under monastic vows’) (Oxford, 2019).

Spiritual experiences have resulted in the emergence of certain flows (which have subsequently become tourism flows) to sights, places or events with a religious meaning. Nowadays, the concept of religious tourism covers much more than the strictly spiritual aspect. It also includes the cultural component, based on the curiosity to see other elements that are different from those of one's own culture or religion. Another concept is the one of youth tourism, defined as “all tourism activities that are realized by young people whose age is between 15 and 29 years” (Horak & Weber, 2000).

The fact that religious tourism overlaps the youth tourism market has raised questions for some authors, as follows: “To what extent are the young interested in religious and cultural sights?”, “What are the reasons for which they visit such places?”, “What are the characteristics of a journey that

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includes cultural and religious sights?" These questions underlie the formulation of the research purpose and objectives. The aim of the scientific initiative is for the findings of the research to enhance the perspective on the connection between youths and religious tourism.

## 2. Religious tourism – some points of view regarding the concept

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts (Zimmermann, 2017). In the tourism activity, the cultural impact is very significant (Țigu & Țuclea, 2008). Cultural tourism is closely connected with the religious one, since the latter is a subdivision of the first (Rinschede, 1992). Cultural tourism in religious places must respect the religious significance, preserve the physical integrity of the religious entity/object and must not spiritually disturb the local community (Țală, 2012). Therefore, religious tourism is an essential component of cultural tourism and, the practice of the first, *nolensvolens*, is experienced by each tourist merely by visiting a sacred place (churches, religious monuments).

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines this type of tourism by making reference to "all travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes, excluding travel for professional purposes (e.g. priests travelling for work)". WTO states that attending wedding parties or funerals are generally classified under the heading of *Visiting Friends and Relatives*. However, in countries where these ceremonies have a strong religious connotation, it may be more appropriate to classify them under the heading *Religion and Pilgrimages* (WTO, 1995).

"Religious tourism includes a range of activities, such as pilgrimages, missionary travel, monastery/abbey retreats, faith-based camps/events, religious conferences and gatherings" (CBI, 2016). Religious tourists travel to fulfil their religious convictions and to meet God. In a 2011 *National Geographic* article, Mann analysed the complex relationship between religion and the origins of civilisation. He states that ever since the beginning of human settlement as social units, pilgrimage has been a fundamental element of society: "Most of the world's great religious centres, past and present, have been destinations for pilgrimages - think of the Vatican, Mecca, Jerusalem, Bodh Gaya (where Buddha was enlightened), or Cahokia [...]". Thus, religious, spiritual tourism or pilgrimages constitute consistent and significant elements of mass tourism (Mann, cited by Griffin & Razaq, 2017).

In his research, Mintel (2012) try to broaden their definition of 'religious tourism' beyond the motivation of the individual to emphasize a range of activities undertaken during the religious tourist's visit. He mentions that religious tourism refers to "International travel for the purposes of visiting sites, [...] and festivals of religious significance", as well as participation „in activities that have religious significance (such as conferences, conventions [...])". It excludes travel to ancient sites (such as Inca temples and the Pyramids), which despite having religious significance, are usually included within the cultural tourism segment (Mintel, cited by Griffin & Razaq, 2017).

WTO pays increased attention to religious tourism: „Religious tourism can be one of the most effective tools to foster inclusive and sustainable development". In so doing, three main benefits of religious tourism are identified: 1. Religious tourism raises awareness of humanity's common heritage and provides resources for preservation. 2. It can contribute to local development. 3. It builds cultural understanding (Rifai, 2015). Therefore, this type of tourism helps communities become aware of the assets they own and that they must take care of. In the end, the benefit may be considerable and manifold (economic, social and cultural).

## 3. Research methodology, main results and discussion

This research aims at accrediting the idea that religious tourism is not only meant for people over 30, but that it is highly interesting for a younger population as well. The practice of religious tourism is a great opportunity to learn some religious notions, to enrich oneself spiritually or to enjoy a pleasant experience in a group of people sharing certain aspirations. In Europe, young religious tourists tend to have low budgets and most likely spend the night in simple accommodation. Faith-based hospices or youth hostels are popular among this group, and fellowship (meeting other young religious travellers)

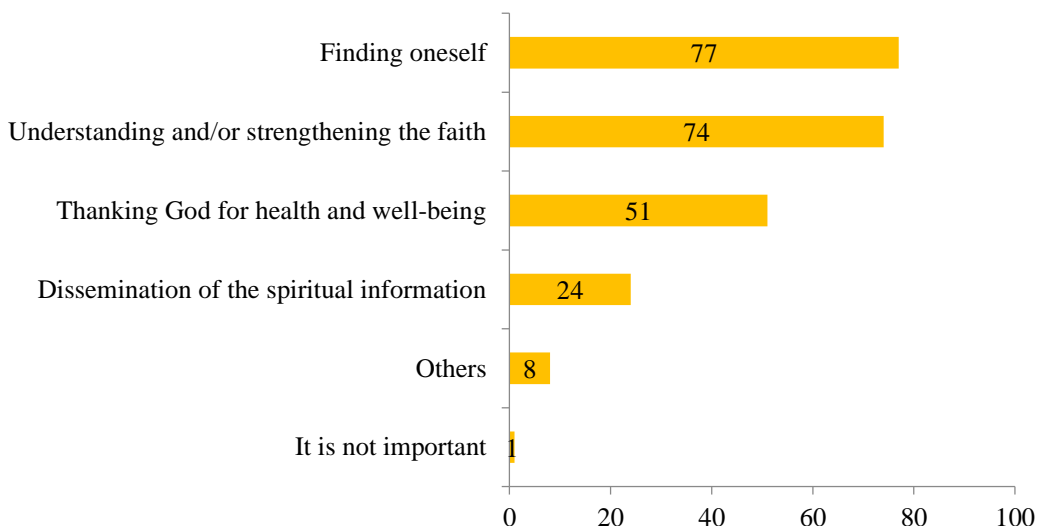
is important to them. Many join travel groups initiated by their church or other religious centre. They are greatly interested in religious culture (CBI, 2018).

The purpose of the research is to study the interest of young people in religious sights during travel as tourists. Internationally, “a large body of current research focuses on practical issues of motivation (Cohen, 2003; Collins Kreiner, 2004; Nieminen, 2012), satisfaction (Canoves & Prat Forga, 2016; Krešić, Mikulić & Miličević, 2012), religious tourist experiences (Bond, Packer & Ballantyne, 2014; Hughes, Bond & Ballantyne, 2013) and decision making models in religious travel (Henderson, 2010; Kunst, Tomljenović, Kranjčević, Krešić & Miličević, 2009; The Churches Conservation Trust and The Churches Tourism Association, 2006)” (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2017). However, regarding Romania, such research is sparse. Vorzsák & Guț (2009) conduct a survey whose main questions concern the resources available, the extent to which they are exploited, the most important problems they are up against, and perspectives of development envisaged. In 2010, Țircă et al. conducted a research aimed to identify aspects related to journeys, behaviours, activities and reasons of the visitors who chose these sacred places for their destination. Later, Bogan et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative research in Bucharest: the purpose was both to analyse the general characteristics of the religious and pilgrimage tourism consumer, as well as some special characteristics related to the intensity of the visits made in the places of worship, and the motivations to visit. The sample of respondents in all of these papers has been broader from the point of view of the age. Thus, this research covers a narrower segment, namely young people aged between 15 and 19. The main objectives of the research are as follows: O1 – Establishing the youth’s perception of cultural and religious development and the role of religious travel; O2 – Identifying the respondents’ level of interest in cultural and religious sights; O3 – Obtaining information regarding the requirements for organizing and undertaking a cultural and religious journey.

In order to achieve these objectives a research instrument was created, namely a questionnaire made up of 17 closed-ended questions: 15 of them were content-related and 2 demographic ones. When drawing up the questionnaire, the phrase “cultural and religious tourism” was used in order to avoid removing respondents from the topic of the research by using merely the concept of “cultural tourism” (much too broad) or directing them towards a potential overlap with pilgrimage by using the concept of “religious tourism” (narrower). When establishing the sample size, the attribute “intention to visit a cultural and religious sight in the next journey” was taken into account. Thus, 92% of the respondents answered “yes” to this question. By applying the formula used for assessment of attributes (Cătoiu et al., 1999) with a 0.05 confidence level (corresponding to a probability to guarantee the research findings of 95%) and a margin of error of  $\pm 5\%$ , the sample size obtained was of 113 persons. The online method was chosen for the completion of the questionnaire (via the isondaje.ro platform), since the youths’ preference for the online environment is well-known. Although 120 answers were registered, only 113 were validated.

Data centralisation has yielded the following results regarding the sample structure: 66.3% women and 33.6% men, i.e. the number of women was twice the number of men. In terms of belonging to a certain religion, 90.2% declared they were Orthodox, 4.5% Catholic and Protestant, 5.3% Atheist.

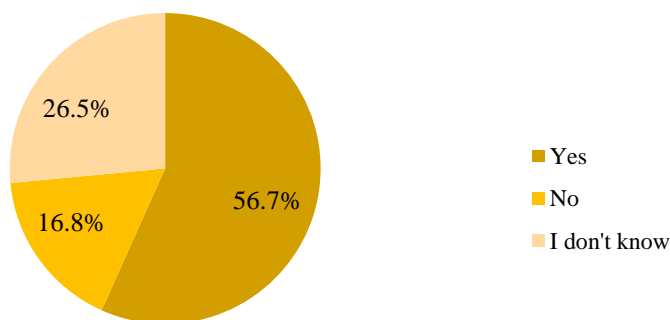
Regarding the *first objective* of the research, the findings show that 44.2% consider themselves religious persons, 47.8% only to a certain extent, while 8% do not think of themselves as religious at all. Cultural and religious development is regarded by the young as very important, since it obtained a score of 4.03 on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is the maximum). Religious travel is spiritually significant especially to find themselves (77 answers) and to understand and/or strengthen their faith (74 answers). Under the heading “others”, the following appeared: „historical phenomenon”, „discovery of man-made things for God’s glory”, „prayer, and closeness to God” or „discovery of spiritually charged places”. All results related to this aspect are presented in Figure no. 1. It should be mentioned that the question generated, on average, two answers per respondent.



**Figure no. 1: Reasons for which religious travel is important from a spiritual point of view**  
 Source: authors

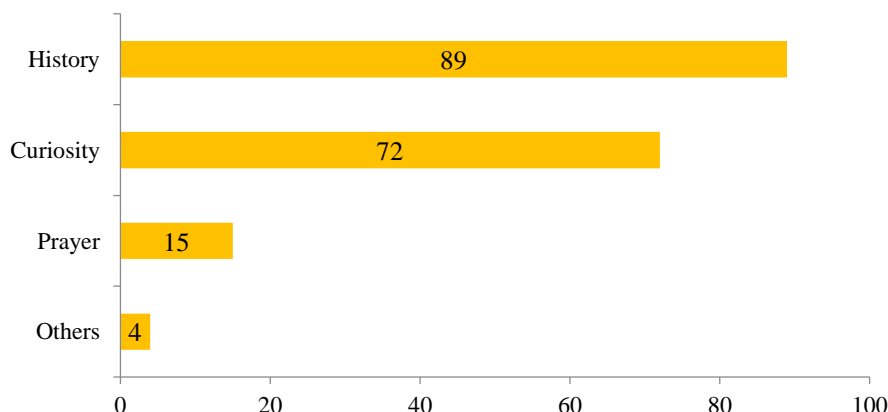
A first observation related to the *second objective* refers to the fact that all respondents, except for one person, had visited cultural and religious tourist attractions, while 92% stated that such sights would be included in their following trip. A second observation refers to the positioning of tourist attractions that have religious significance (cathedrals, monuments) in the field of “culture”: the score is 3.67 (where 5 is the maximum). Castles and palaces rank first among the preferences of young people (4.17), followed by museums and galleries with an interest score quite close to the one corresponding to religious tourist attractions (3.76). Cultural events rank last with a score of 3.27.

Another extremely interesting observation is that approximately 57% of the young respondents would be interested in participating in a pilgrimage or in repeating the experience if they had had it before (figure no. 2).



**Figure no. 2: Interest in participating in a pilgrimage type of travel**  
 Source: authors

Regarding the interest in visiting religious items that do not belong to their own faith, the findings are illustrated in the figure below (figure no. 3):



**Figure no. 3: Reasons to visit religious sights/tourist attractions, other than those belonging to their own religion**

Source: authors

Thus, the highest frequency is registered for the reason “history, finding out information about the place” (89) and “curiosity” (72). 13% of the respondents have chosen “prayer”, and this shows openness for a new dimension of the religious phenomenon: that of the lack of obligation for a person to belong to a certain religion in order for them to be able to create a spiritual connection with divinity.

In order to accomplish the *third objective* of the research, three questions were asked. Regarding aspects related to the organisation of the travel, the four aspects proposed were described by the respondents as important, on average. The application of the Likert scale led to the following scores (where -2 is “not at all important”, and 2 “very important”): 1.29 for “desire for cultural, historical and religious knowledge”, 1.13 for “the quality of mass transportation”, 1.08 for “the ease of communication with the local population” and 1.04 for “accessibility of information”.

Regarding the budget they would be willing to allocate for a city-break in a European country, more than half of the respondents (57.5%) ticked the 100-250 euro interval. 31% chose the 251-400 euro interval. Only 9% would have less than 100 euros available, and 3.5% more than 400 euros.

Table no. 1 shows the hierarchy of the items of interest during the cultural and religious travel. The following data was obtained by using the rank-ordering method:

**Table no. 1 The hierarchy of the elements of interest during the cultural and religious travel**

	Rank	Score
Tourism infrastructure	I	261
Cultural events	II	272
Local traditions	III	324
Relaxation	IV	390
Safety	V	448

Source: authors

The scientific endeavour regarding the interest in cultural and religious travel of the Bucharest young tourists has allowed for some conclusions to be drawn as answer to the objectives initially set forth.

A first idea to be noticed is related to the high percentage (92%) of respondents declaring themselves as religious to a lower or higher extent. This accounts for the high level of interest in visiting destinations that include religious tourist attractions and even for going on pilgrimages. Religious

travel helps one find oneself and have a better understanding of faith. In a world that is turned upside down, where changes happen all the time and that is affected more often than not by a predominantly negative media impact, young people look for peace in spirituality. Thus, this type of travel may prove beneficial for tourists.

The second idea refers to religious items being placed behind other tourist attractions such as castles, palaces, museums or galleries. The latter ones are more appealing to young tourists, but the differences are low. As far as the interest in history and culture is concerned, it is indicated by more than 75% of the respondents, followed by curiosity, which is characteristic to youth.

The religious and cultural travel is naturally motivated by the thirst for cultural, historical and religious knowledge. But young people also pay attention to the quality of mass transportation, since they understand it is important for one to be able to travel in as short a period of time as possible. The statement is also supported by the ranking that places tourism infrastructure first. Thus, the young pay attention to what the destination can provide to them in this respect. The more and more varied possibilities of obtaining information prior to the purchase per se of the product may play a significant part in the final choice.

The research has highlighted a few potential elements of the profile of a young religious tourist from Bucharest: they are interested in the cultural and religious phenomenon (including other religions), eager to find themselves and have a better grasp of their own faith, cautious about tourism infrastructure, events and traditions, and willing to pay between 100 and 250 euros for a city-break.

## Conclusions

Via the information that was obtained and processed, the paper has achieved its goal, namely that of outlining aspects related to religious tourism among young people from Bucharest. The findings have shown that this type of tourism is not specific merely to people aged over 30, but also to young people interested in knowledge and cultural and spiritual development.

From the point of view of its usefulness, this scientific endeavour may be the basis of future studies, covering broader geographical areas: counties, regions or even the entire country. Likewise, an attempt may be made at validating the profile of the religious tourist as it issued in this research and completing it with other characteristics. Another suggestion would be the integration of open-ended questions in the questionnaire, thus allowing the respondents to express themselves freely. Or, the same methodology may be used for different age groups and the results may be compared, so as to establish whether there are any significant differences or not, and, if yes, what differences there are. The findings of the study may prove extremely useful for service providers and holiday organisers, given that they validate the interest of young people in religious tourism. Consequently, they can create products and services to answer the needs related to such travel.

The limitation of the research is rendered by the reduced size of the sample. Although the number of 113 was the result of using a scientific method accepted as such in marketing research, the authors are aware that a higher number of respondents would have been welcome.

In the end, we emphasise once more the strong connection between religious tourism and the young, a connection that may be “used” in many ways: spiritually, culturally and economically.

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