

# Religious Tourism: Economic Value or an Empty Box?

Boris Vukonić\*

*Faculty of Economics, Zagreb*

**Abstract:** This article tries to explain and support the thesis that economic impacts of religion/tourism relationship should not be underestimated. Taking into account the fact that tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, it is almost impossible to examine religion and its specific relationships to tourism: economic, social and cultural. Based on theoretical research of scholars it can be said that the two phenomena - religion and tourism - have much too common. Today, it is hard to get away with the impression that in most places of pilgrimage the profane impacts of tourism are greater due to the religious reasons. Even in the so called 'hard-line' or conservative religions of the world, because of their strict observance of religious duties of their adherents, such benefits are no longer denied.

**JEL Classification:** L 83, Z 10

**Key Words:** Tourism, religion, pilgrimage, tourism development

Religious tourism is among the least explored tourist activities in the world of modern tourism. Somebody could say there is nothing strange in such statement, but still we can pose many other questions about the relationship between tourism and religion which need to be answered. Why has religious tourism remained at the margin of scientific interest in most of the developed tourist countries? What is the true impact of tourism on individual countries or geographic areas? What is the true impact of religious tourism on countries' economic, social or cultural development? What does religious tourism mean to the global tourism movement and to global tourism earnings?

Tourism outputs are not simple, so the influence of tourism cannot be ascribed to clear-cut sources. Tourism is, as the theory indicates, a synergic and synthetic term,

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\* Boris Vukonić is Professor of Economics and Dean at the Faculty of Economics, Zagreb.

comprising very different subject-matters and functions, and also contradictory interest; this stresses the need for an interdisciplinary approach in order to find an adequate theoretical base and scientific answers to the problems.

Although the tourist experts explore other aspects or non-economic consequences of tourism development, they concentrate primarily on research into the economic consequences and functions of tourism development. We are not able to consider religion and its relations to tourism neither strictly economic or strictly social or cultural sense, taking into account that tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. This approach is in accordance with the view that research should be adapted to the contradictions that are caused not only by tourism development but also by global development. Only through studying all aspects of tourism development can we be sure of a correct economic analysis of tourism. This approach also corresponds with the transformations which have occurred in economics, which is changing its own conventional viewpoints and developing new ideas based on the concepts of the technological, ecological, sociological and spatial development in which humanity lives and develops.

Theory of tourism has been a slave to the conventional and traditional, resting its analysis on definite standpoints which were established many years ago, in different general, social, economic or cultural conditions. As a rule, these opinions were formed on social or political rather than scientific principles and 'rules of behaviour'. Fresh views were not always welcome in the modern world and did not meet with understanding among those dealing with the theory and even practice of tourism. But, as it is even more dangerous, the standpoints from one country or social, economic and cultural environment have been generalised as a common rule for the whole world. It all looked more like a struggle for form as opposed to content.

Basically, we can repeat all these words in the case of the relationship between tourism and religion. Travels due to religious impulses are deeply rooted in the history of mankind as well as in the history of tourism. Their most frequent form - pilgrimages - are, indeed, thought to be the predecessors of the modern tourism phenomenon. The religious attribute does not take away, but rather confirms the basic characteristics of tourism, i.e. that it is a temporary non-lucrative change of residence due to some specific, but still explainable reasons that have their place among the various motives determining modern tourism. That is why pilgrimages and other similar travels are identified with the concept of religious (sacral) tourism, with, of course, the necessary accompanying explanations. An analysis of the spiritual frame of reference of this phenomenon ought to be brought into connection with the way it is understood in theory and especially from the religious point of view.

And finally, according to Hitrec (1990), religious tourism, so understood, should also be seen as having a role in the concept of a humanist perspective of the tourism of tomorrow. Although there is little scholarly evidence for the claim that even the word

'tourist' is etymologically derived from the Latin '*tornus*', referring to the obligation of pilgrims to visit shrines in Rome, the phenomenon of tourism is deeply rooted in its ancient and medieval models, and therefore deserves a detailed and even economic analysis. The entire phenomenon of tourism is easier to understand when seen from this perspective.

Considering that the pilgrimage itself, with all the necessary characteristics of travelling, i.e. overcoming a distance in space, should be only the means, and not the goal or aim for which it is undertaken, one may justifiably ask whether the means sometimes takes the place of the goal. That is to say, travels undertaken by the faithful not infrequently become ordinary secular travels, and shopping and other profane activities along the way round out, or even completely suppress, religious activities. It would not, however, be realistic to suppose that these and similar questions are being raised only today; quite the contrary. They have always been present, so that various religious authorities have often drawn attention to the too prominent profane admixtures and obvious negative characteristics which caused the hostility of the Reformation towards pilgrimages in general, especially of Martin Luther, J. Calvin and others.

From the sociological point of view, pilgrims have unquestionably contributed to the idea of unification within the same religion. In economic sense, they have contributed decisively to the prosperity of the places of pilgrimage and the immediate and greater area surrounding them - especially along the routes leading to them - as witnessed by the rich history of *hospices* and other forms of lodging built for pilgrims, many of whom were and remained just tourists in the true sense of the word! One need only remember the chronicles and books on travel providing not only literary but also factographical evidence of the economic strength of these gathering places of the faithful and of visitors, the wealth of artistic expression in cathedrals, churches, and the entire accompanying décor. These were, and still are, places with highly developed catering establishments, crafts, trade - not only in devotional objects - not to mention pilgrimage as a factor of cultural exchange throughout history. Moreover, 'a whole industry of entertainment, souvenirs and hotels' (J. Jukić, 1988) developed, and the consumer spirit spread to a sphere of which it is not imminently characteristics. Let us take an example. Over a 40-year period (1944-1984), the best known Catholic place of pilgrimage in Croatia, Marija Bistrica, was visited by a total of 7,723,000 pilgrims and tourists. If they spend only US\$10 daily and spend only one day in Marija Bistrica, it means that they have spent more than 77 million US dollars, i.e. almost 2 million per year!

In this sense, pilgrimages and similar movements undertaken by man in his unceasing existential 'need for holy and supernatural' as an expression and reflection of popular piety, in the modern atmosphere of secularisation and desacralisation, are acquiring numerous signs of profanity and are therefore difficult to distinguish from

'ordinary' tourism. There is no special justification for doing so, although some authors are expressly opposed to the very concept of religious tourism. Thus, for example, A. Lefeuvre (1984) points out that an unjustified epithet -religious - is attached to tourism, which in many cases does not deserve this epithet at all, whether the participants are 'real' tourists or 'real' pilgrims (Hitrec 1990). And finally, is typical tourism hiding behind pilgrimages, or even vice versa?

There is no doubt, the most visible connection between tourism and religions is the thousands of sacred buildings of interest to tourists are visited by them. It may be determined beyond dispute that two phenomena - religion and tourism - may easily be brought together by the act of consumption which they have in common. The ordinary tourist, travelling for rest, recreation and entertainment, leaving his stamp on modern mass tourism, consumes various goods and services, just like the pilgrim and anyone travelling from other motives, including the business traveller. Besides, even the first authors of tourism theory mentioned that the concept of a tourist has explicitly been extended to cover 'travelling for religious reasons' so that these travels, by the international consensus, are statistically counted as tourism.

Without enumerating other individuals, organisations and initiatives which have been very actively dealing with tourism for about last forty years, throwing light on it through a spiritual and religious prism, some common features of this activity should be pointed out. Above all, the emphasis on the 'non-material and non-economic aspects', i.e. those which do not put consumption into the foreground as the goal and effect of tourism movements. This consumption, indeed, is regularly criticised as *hedonistic indulgence*, moreover, as a corruption of the essentially humane nature of travelling and tourism, directly opposed to the religious way of looking at these phenomena.

## **The Economic Consequences of Religious Tourism**

If it was hard to discuss and support with arguments the size of the phenomenon of religious tourism because statistical data are insufficient and not readily available, then to speak of the economic aspects of religious tourism is almost impossible. That is why this article reflects author's views rather than actual data and indicators that might support the opinions put forward, as might be expected in a text dealing with such an exact subject matter as economic impacts.

Today there are probably no orthodox theologians or other theorists who would deny the economic impacts of religious tourism. Although it seems, at least at first sight, incontestable that such impacts exist and, moreover, that they appear spontaneously without any special desire on our part, i.e., that they are quite evident, it is not easy to quantify them. The quantification process is the only valid method to

determine the real values of an economic phenomenon, or, in this case, an economic impact as a consequence of another phenomenon, i.e., religious tourism.

Where, or, better said, when should one look for the beginning of what are now called the economic impacts of religious tourism? To start with, the benefits for 11th- and 12th-century Christians of particular places of pilgrimage owing to indulgences. An indulgence could be obtained by contributions of money, so that some of these places started competing with one another in collecting holy relics or proclaiming various miracles, even highly improbable ones, to bolster their reputation among believers and attract as many pilgrims as possible. More pilgrims and more indulgences meant greater prosperity for the church and, of course, for the entire town. Believers had to be accommodated and catered for, they bought various objects as souvenirs of their stay in the place of pilgrimage, as well as other kinds of goods and food. This represented a constant source of income for the local population, so that many incredible miracles were said to have taken place among, as a rule, the lay population. This competition did not, of course, have a religious basis. Although religious reasons cannot be totally discounted, quite clearly it was dominated by profane, economic reasons.

Rome was probably the first world shrine which not only felt the economic impacts of pilgrimage, but undertook certain activities to increase that impact. We know from history about the proclamations of Pope Boniface VIII that throughout the entire Holy of 1300 believers arriving in the Basilica of SS Peter and Paul in Rome would be granted 'the fullest indulgence'. The condition for this was that the basilica should be visited for 30 days in a row. This was later reduced to 15 days of visits to the Basilica. The 15 remaining days were left to believers to use 'the other and profane pleasures' of which medieval Rome was full. It is thought that there were over two million such pilgrims every year. They left a fortune on the altar of the basilica of SS Peter and Paul, but also in other, far less holy places.

Interestingly, we owe another insight to the Middle Ages: the possibility of making economic use of pilgrimages. Foster writes,

'a new manufacture of objects and luxury products intended for the wealthy pilgrim emerged. The old, uncomfortable carts were replaced by comfortable carriages. Expensive clothes according to foreign fashions, jewellery and unusual souvenirs were on offer in 'boutiques' around the well known places of pilgrimage' (Foster, 1982).

How like the 20<sup>th</sup> century!

As early as in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in Le Puy, manufacture started of souvenir plaques for pilgrims with the profane motif of the 'Bourbon lilies'. This mixing of the religious and the profane has remained intact until today. It is reminiscent of the

badge sold in the US during the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1987, with the grotesque inscription '*I Love John Paul ... George and Ringo*' or a lawn sprinkler sold under the name '*Let us Spray!*'.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century the image of Veronica, who wiped Christ's agonised face with her handkerchief, was reproduced on paintings, handkerchiefs and caps which were on sale in places of pilgrimage, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century this image was found on the first postcards ever to see the light of the day. There was a big influx of pilgrims in Rome in the jubilee year of 1450, when, due to the enormous revenue coming into the Roman treasury, Pope Nicholas V decided to issue the jubilee gold coin, and, with the rest of the money, according to Norman Fraser, he embellished Rome with new buildings, bought some rare Greek and Latin manuscripts, and brought numerous scholars to Rome. It was probably under the impression of these eminently economic impacts of pilgrimage in jubilee years that Pope Paul II issued a bill (in 1470) establishing a jubilee year every 25 years. This custom still remains, and the reasons for it obviously remain the same.

It is hard to escape the impression today that in all the places of pilgrimage in the world, whether we like to admit it or not, the profane impact is more and more on a par with the religious impact. In religions that are more 'hard-line' or conservative in their requirements for the strict observance of all the religious duties of their adherents, such benefits are not mentioned as often, but they are no longer denied. It is more or less publicly admitted that the arrival of pilgrims in a certain region and a certain place represents a direct benefit for the local population.

'We are not advocating any sort of *Hajj* "tourism" or negligence toward the rules of the *Hajj*, but human safety is above all other considerations' (Hukić, 1983).

However, almost all religions without exception strongly oppose theses that are put forward from time to time (especially on the profane side) expressing the suspicion that material profit has superseded the religious aspect of holy places, and that some (or many) of the places that have recently been put on the list of places of pilgrimage have done so for material reasons and to provide profit for the local population and the local church. There have been cases in Catholicism where the official church itself has attempted to distance itself from various 'miracles' and even to pronounce them tricks. Such judgements have also been made by the Catholic church in former Yugoslavia.

We may still remember a major religious event-the exposition of the holy sindon in the cathedral of Turin (1978) - the holy shroud in which, according to Christian tradition, the body of Jesus Christ was wrapped after being taken from the cross and laid in the tomb. The holy sindon was brought to Italy from France in 1578 and from

that time half of it was owned by the Italian royal family of Savoy and half by the Holy See. The last Italian King Umberto left it in his last will to the Holy See, which is now the sole owner of the relic. Recent scientific research has shown that the sindon is most probably medieval in origin and does not date back to the time of Christ. A special science, sindonology, will continue to deal with the phenomenon of this well-known relic.

The exposition of the holy sindon attracted a flood of believers from Italy and other parts of the world. According to unofficial estimates, on that occasion about 60,000 believers arrived in Turin daily to visit the cathedral and see one of the most valuable (but also one of the most controversial) religious relics of Christianity. Although there is no unanimous opinion on the authenticity of the sindon among theologians, its exposition in the Turin cathedral prompted mass industrial production of various souvenirs and other objects. This is simply a characteristic example of other similar events where the religious organiser loses control over the manufacture of objects sold in the name of religion and as religious souvenirs. The sale of such objects in fact profanes the religious meaning of the events and transforms them into fairs bereft of moderation and good taste. That is why theologians try to distance themselves from discussions about the economic impacts of religious events, to avoid identifying their standpoint and the interest of the church with the profaned content that is being offered and sold in front of religious buildings, and even in their vestibules.

An interesting case is that of Lourdes, where the church has managed to remove all commercial contents from the entire zone of the main religious facilities (including the well-known cave of the apparition), thus making them available exclusively for religious contents (prayer, contemplation, large gathering, processions, etc.).

If the areas of life are defined in which the economic impacts of the arrival of believers to places of pilgrimage are manifested, one might say laconically that they include all areas of life and all branches of the economy, as is the case with tourism in general. The term 'tourism' has not been used here so far, nor has 'religious tourism' been mentioned, but simply the arrival of believers and the impacts of their arrival on the economic level, in order to stress that any arrival of believers in a place of pilgrimage has an economic impact.

The attempt to support with arguments and to quantify these obvious facts is another matter. It would, of course, be interesting to be able to demonstrate the size of the impact. The example of Lourdes is useful, not only because of the importance and reputation of this place of pilgrimage, but also as there are certain data available that can be used as a proof of this impact (Lourdes, 1988).

Among the numerical data, the total supply (availability) of accommodation capacities in Lourdes amounts to as many as 378 facilities, hotels and board and lodgings, including two four-star hotels and 16 three-star hotels. There are 15 other hotels in the vicinity, of a somewhat lower category. In the town there are eight banks,

18 big service garages, 20 camping sites, 28 restaurants in the town itself plus 17 in the surrounding countryside, as well as 94 coffee bars in the town. Every year about 700 special trains arrive in Lourdes with believers from almost all parts of Europe, and about 5,000 planes land every year at the airport situated between Lourdes and Tarbes. The population of Lourdes is growing constantly. In the year 1858, the year in which the Virgin appeared to a 14-year-old girl, Bernadette Soubirous (18 apparitions recorded after the first one held on 11 February 1858), Lourdes had 4135 inhabitants. This number rose to 10,000 in 1932, and according to the census of 1982 Lourdes had 17,619 inhabitants. If we compare this population growth with that of some neighbouring places, such as Baguères, Séméac, or Vic-en-Bigorre, which had approximately the same number of inhabitants as Lourdes in 1858, we can see that their average population growth amounted to about 25 per cent. Had Lourdes remained a small town like those in its vicinity, it would have had 5000 inhabitants today, three times less than the number recorded in the census. These are indicative data showing the economic prosperity of the town under the influence of the arrival of pilgrims.

Another important conclusion may be drawn here: pilgrimage and religious tourism also affect the population in the place of pilgrimage and its immediate vicinity. This influence consists first of all in employment opportunities, which leads to a total demographic growth of the settlement. Almost all shrines, including the largest, demonstrate this fact unambiguously. Loreto in Italy was not a settlement at all before the apparition, and today it is a small town with 10,500 inhabitants. Today Mecca has 400,000 inhabitants, and Varanasi has 600,000. It is interesting that Mecca, like Medina and Hidda, has developed into a cosmopolitan city in the Islamic world. Although pilgrims come for a brief sojourn, many stay for good, frequently because they cannot afford the journey home. In the early 1960s 19 per cent of the inhabitants of Mecca did not have Saudi Arabian citizenship. According to Rinschede, who studied several internationally famous shrines, the basic reasons for this population growth should be sought in the influx of various kinds of artisans and workers who thought they might find work servicing pilgrims.

European shrines are mostly built according to a town plan. Thus the centre of the settlement is strictly separate from the open space intended for the gathering of pilgrims. All the required services, shops, catering establishments, tourist agencies, the railway station and the coach station, parking lots, etc., are located apart from the space intended for the gathering of pilgrims. In this way little commercial towns have arisen as integral parts of the settlement and shrine. Some of the pilgrims stay at hotels and other accommodation facilities that occupies large space in the settlement, but they are located apart from the shrine itself and the open space intended for the gathering of pilgrims, and are not in direct contact with it. In 1987, Lourdes had 370 hotels, Fatima had 37, and Mecca only 4 (pilgrims there usually stay in a temporary



tent settlement or out in the open). At the same time, there were over 300 shops in Lourdes, while Fatima had 192 shops.

Czestochowa in Poland had to suffer an enormous economic loss for many years, in view of the fact that there were only 500 hotel beds available for four to five million visitors per year! That is why pilgrims stayed at the shrine not longer than one day. According to statistical data, only 5-25 per cent of the visitors could find accommodation in the settlement, and this reduced, beyond any doubt, the possible economic impacts for the inhabitants of Czestochowa (Jackowski and Smith 1992). Czestochowa is a good example of how a strong pilgrimage centre can affect the economic development of the broader area and even a country. There are 50 road routes radiating from this shrine, connecting settlements on the Polish border. A network of 19 motorways connects 170 lesser shrines devoted to the Virgin in Poland with Czestochowa. Thus pilgrims may visit more than one shrine if they wish. From the economic point of view, this leads, to the presumption that various kinds of economic potential, along the above mentioned road routes will develop (trade, catering, services, petrol stations, etc.), and that in the future these shrines will have a far greater economic significance for Poland and its economy.

There are other statistical data leading to the same conclusion. For example, in 1986 the cable railway to Beout was used by about 25,000 visitors to Lourdes, while the funicular railway to Picd Jer was used by 67,000 visitors to Lourdes. The Pyrenees Museum was visited by 125,000 people and the Museum de Cire by about 183,000. The public baths were visited by over 100,000 people in that year, and the cave of Bethlehem was visited by almost 300,000 people. From April to the end of October in the same year, 1986, a total of 7,643,000 letters and postcards were sent into the world from the local post office. As long ago as in 1930, Professor Pierre Lasserre wrote, in his interesting geographical study of Lourdes,

‘Without pilgrims (not intending to discount the efforts of the appropriate organs and promoters of Pyrenean tourism and winter sports) the tourism industry of Lourdes would have recently been equal to zero (or would at least have been very modest). Lourdes owes its life and its prosperity to pilgrims’ (Lourdes, 1974).

While speaking of religious tourism Israel’s example (1984) is a very characteristic one. The great increase in tourist turnover recorded by Israel in the last decades of this century is due to a great extent to the arrival of believers in many holy places located on it’s territory. Although they are aware of this fact, there are no separate statistics in Israel recording the arrival of believers. According to some estimates by the Ministry of Tourism, about half of the Christians visiting Israel go there for religious reasons, while this figure is about 6 per cent of the visitors who are Jews and about 20 per cent

of the Muslims and other visitors. In this way we arrive at a figure of about 450,000 visitors. According to estimates by the same Ministry about spending by foreign tourists (in the year, 1983), the average spending per one journey and person, including transport to Israel (which is most often performed by the Israeli airline EL AL), amounts to about US\$960. These estimates finally lead to an approximate figure of US\$432 million as the foreign exchange revenue of Israel from visitors who arrive in Israel for religious reasons.

The data mentioned concerning the costs for pilgrims arriving for the *Hajj* in Mecca, Medina, Arefat and Mina are also indicative. In these places the cost of a sojourn, i.e., of accommodation, the entry tax and transfers amounted to about US\$ 1000 in 1983. Twenty years before these costs amounted to about US\$ 100 per person, that is, ten times less. This proves that pilgrimage involves serious financial expenditure for pilgrims and that these are a major source of revenue in places of pilgrimage. In this sense, pilgrimage should be viewed in the same way as every other, profane phenomenon that is not immune to the constant increase in the cost of living and to the changes taking place in the economic environment. Thus the above mentioned increase in the cost of the *Hajj* per person after 1962 amounted to approximately the same figure as the increase in the price of petroleum in Saudi Arabia in the same period. The increased revenue of this country has led, on the one hand, to an improvement in the general living conditions of the local population, and, on the other hand, to higher prices of numerous services, foodstuffs, etc. The increased revenue has also created the conditions for many urban improvements in everyday life such as air conditioning, expensive accommodation, more comfortable means of transport, etc., which has again increased the cost of these services (Hukić, 1983).

Quite clearly, if we are to expect a certain economic impact from religious tourism, and especially from pilgrimage, we need to have the appropriate infrastructure, which we might call a 'tourism infrastructure'. We are using this term because it expresses more fully the type and size of capacities making up this infrastructure required to meet all the needs of religious tourists. These include various kinds of accommodation and other catering establishments, shops and entertainment facilities (suitable as regards the religion and the place in which they are located). For example, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia spent more than US\$100 million to extend the mosque (Abdul-Rauf, 1962). A complete new network of roads has been built between Mecca and Arefat, and a completely new, grandiose airport has been built in Jidda, requiring enormous funds and the activities of many domestic and foreign companies for its construction.

The enormous mass of people, Muslim believers and vehicles concentrated at particular periods of time in Mecca and other pilgrimage centres required the regulation of the movement of people and of the traffic flow. That is why a special

closed-circuit television network has been installed in Saudi Arabia to monitor, control and influence the direction of the masses of believers and their vehicles. Helicopter or health services can be called when needed. The *Hajj* is filmed by television cameras and transmitted by satellite to over 40 countries. Prayers are broadcast on the radio, especially at peak times, in seven languages. Of course, commercial use is made of the television and radio broadcasts, especially the television programmes.

Of course, apart from the religious domain, all this is based on the profane domain, the area the economy and economic impacts caused by the arrival and sojourn of believers. Very often 'religious considerations' and religious teaching are ignored and attempts are made to use the large-scale presence of believers in the same way, or in a way very similar to the way this is done in traditional tourism. In Christian, especially Catholic pilgrimage centres the religious 'border' was crossed long ago in all possible forms of the commercialisation of the religious feelings of visitors. The same has happened in Islam, which retained a strict attitude toward the infiltration of commercial contents into these centres for a long time. Economic motives and ways of thinking and acting are increasingly finding inroads, though still rather devious ones. How else can we account for the fact that a night in Mina, a village which grows into a town at the time of the *Hajj*, costs over US\$100 in the peak period?

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