

Religious tourism

Projects and activities of the Institute for Tourism, Zagreb

Among the wide range of motives that have always inspired masses to travel, the religious ones are the oldest. According to the international statistical definition, tourism trips include those motivated by recreation in the narrow sense, as well as many others, even for religious reasons. Over the last few decades, this migration began to occupy the attention of tourism researchers who theoretically and empirically explore it faced with the basic dilemma about the term. Specifically, in the context of studying the ambiguous interrelationship between tourism and religion, there arises a doubt about the correctness of the colloquial expression religious tourism. It is also a matter of the essence of the phenomenon which, after World War Two, gradually began to grow and fit in the mainstream of the global tourist flows, caused by a number of motivators in the material and spiritual spheres. Specifically, religious communities, especially those seeing tourism as a sort of a sign of the times and characteristics of the modern age, often avoid to call travelling motivated by faith, primarily the pilgrimages, religious tourism. This is understandable, because they do not want to emphasize the secular aspect of these journeys, only the spiritual aspect.

Traditional researchers are inclined to take this view of the phenomenon, too, because they see tourism as an eminently hedonistic phenomenon, while journeys inspired by spiritual motives are still more focused on penance, asceticism, prayer, meditation and renunciation of the profane. Regardless of the aforementioned terminological debate, the essence

of the problem is not controversial, as evidenced by the rich literature in various languages (the Internet includes more than twenty thousand references). However, all agree that there is no any sharp demarcation and that in every faith-motivated travel and stay there are many other elements, at least those that connect all the passengers, and the act of consumption is the most important among them. Without further analysis, it can be fully justified to adopt the opinion that pilgrims could be considered tourists motivated by faith and pilgrimage a form of tourism. In the literature, we encounter the opposite claim as well, namely, that tourism is a form of pilgrimage, which is a stronghold of thesis about tourism as a collective ritual, or tourist attractions as religious attractions.

Undoubtedly, religious tourism is one of the very dynamic segments of the world tourism market that is now, faced with the onslaught of globalization and increased destination competition, largely specific. These travels are the contact area of religion, culture and tourism economy, which points to their complexity and multiple sensitivities, particularly in terms of predicting the desired development. As for the possibility of the current statistical coverage of these types of passengers, there are serious difficulties, and even problems within certain religious communities. Some of them, especially the traditional ones, have data for some places, while others do not provide even an approximate assessment. Thus, travels within Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam, are permanent uncertainty

and partial data may only be provided by a few specialized organizers of such trips. However, some illustrative quantitative indicators will still be presented here.

Sociologists, defining pilgrimage as an eminently collective act, indicate the widespread occurrence of these travels, particularly in large centres of the Christian world concerning the Marian Shrine Lourdes (since 1858), Fatima (since 1917), Czestochowa, Guadalupe, Lujan, Goa and many others. Although subject to seasonal fluctuations, these destinations record several million visits that culminate on religious holidays. The actual accommodation and supporting services have evolved on an unprecedented scale from traditional inns (hospices) established mainly by religious communities (e.g., Knights Hospitaller).

Of course, all these destinations do not only attract believers but also a number of curious people, tourists, passers-by and visitors who only look for a cultural or adventure experience. That is one of the main reasons of the inability to precisely differentiate between the typically religious and other visitors, as well as of the potential conflicts in the management of these destinations. The right measure should be found, i.e. a balance between religious and profane interests to avoid as much as possible conflicts that are potentially always present and subject of special scientific research. We should not forget that this involves the sites of exceptional historical, artistic and general cultural importance containing enormous heritage of priceless value requiring maximum protection. On the other hand, diverse practical marketing tools are used for the popularization of religious sites. Religious organizations promote these trips, too,

and more: they introduce new, original offers. As an illustration, there are some monasteries in West and Central Europe that organize stays for foreign visitors in their communities, with specific spiritual programs (e.g. in Austria the Klosterreich programs, and in Germany, the Netherlands and Croatia (Lužnica).

The political control of these places is very important as well, because they are very sensitive to tensions, especially in multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities (examples: the Holy Land, the Middle East). The available estimates of the number of participants in the contemporary religious migration (of course, those outside the context of exile, which is not subject to these considerations) mention 220-250 million people of whom around 60-70 percent, or about 150 million, are related to various Christian churches and denominations. Furthermore, in Europe alone, about 30 million Christians, mostly Catholics, use part of their annual vacation or holidays to go on pilgrimage to holy places (Kania 1999). In 2008, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions, Lourdes was visited by nine million pilgrims, and the Mexican Guadalupe in the two peak days alone was visited by six million visitors. Croatian national Marian Shrine of Marija Bistrica, whose name has been mentioned through eight centuries, records seven hundred thousands visitors annually. It is clear that pilgrimage, symbolizing man as a traveller (*homo viator*), is now a universal phenomenon, which is reflected not only in the multi-layered faith experience but also in the change of residence and staying at specific destinations. These shrines, as an integral part of tradition and culture with various religious activities, are

colossal civilization values of mankind. Despite the pronounced trend to secularization, the reaffirmation of spirituality and religion is present everywhere, and this is an additional opportunity for religious tourism in all its numerous forms and manifestations.

Finally, we should be familiar with the views of the religious communities concerning the phenomenon. Established religious communities, especially the traditional churches in recent decades, often passed relevant judgments about tourism as a universal phenomenon of modern times. This primarily applies to the Christian churches, the Catholic Church and the churches emerged from the Reformation. On the one hand, they rely on theological and spiritual determinants of tourism, and on the other hand they rely on the pastoral care for travellers and tourists and all kinds of migrants as well. In the general evaluation of tourism they start from the Catholic social teaching and its principles: solidarity, respect for human rights, justice and care for the poor. They are aware of the danger of uncontrolled growth of tourism for the sights, including the religious ones, which are often subject to physical pressure from visitors, especially during the season. Tourism, however, is also seen as a new Areopagus of evangelization, an

opportunity and a challenge that must be utilized both at the pilgrimage centres and in general.

Other major but hierarchically disorganized religions have, generally, not passed official documents on tourism, which does not mean that they have not been dealing with it, and this also applies to Islam. At the ecumenical level, there are also documents published by the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Generally, it can be argued that in practice most religious communities have no difficulties with the use of the phrase religious tourism, identifying it with the concept of pilgrimage. However, there is not always the awareness of the importance and role of religious communities as custodians and administrators of the holy places and facilities, which is often a prerequisite to their conservation through tourist valorisation. This requirement has become a necessity in addition to the basic one - concern for adequate pastoral work, i.e. provision of religious services to visitors during their stay in the local community. This migration inspired by religious/ethical elements are appropriate to promote sustainable tourism based on ecological awareness of all the participants, including the general culture of travel and the humanization of these migrations at large.

T. Hitrec