Religious Routes and Destinations: A polymorphic social approach

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Abstract

The social analysis on the religious routes and destinations is relatively poor and it evolved mainly with the form of parallel approaches of the "religious", the "cultural", and the "economic" perspectives of the touristic phenomena associated with the so-called religious factor. The current article presents an integrative social approach focusing on the interconnectedness dynamic of all factors involved in religious tourism in order not only to explain better the current developments in the field, but also to introduce a polymorphic theory on the touristic strategy and plan of action. The Greek religious routes, monuments and destinations are an example of the coexistence of the Greek Orthodox religious destinations with ancient cultural monuments and natural sight scenes. Such an example may function as a "polymorphic touristic continuum" that deserves the attention of the social analysis.

Keywords: Religious tourism, polymorphic strategic plan, social perspective

Introduction

Tourism is a long-lasting social activity which in its eco-systemic approach embraces social, cultural, economic and religious phenomena. It has become one of the most massive and dynamic characteristics of the second modernity. It has been changed through the cultural

transformations and at the same time it propelled the "metamorphosis"[1] of the world. It is now recognized as one of the most significant factors of economic development. Official European Statistics estimate that in 2012 "about 61.1% of the EU-28 population aged 15+ participated in tourism for personal purposes" a rate that is both stable and resilient even in the face of the severe economic crisis that the EU is going through.[2] The statistical data provided by international organizations reveal an extremely dense phenomenon of economic and social importance as huge sums are invested and transferred through tourism activities. The term "religious tourism", as a wide special category, includes not only activities such as attending religious services, but also pilgrimages, participation in local festivals, attending weddings or funerals, visiting in religiously significant sites etc (UNWTO, 1995). Under such a wide scope, it is difficult to accurately determine the relevant statistical data. Reports and researchers however make references on millions of religious travelers each year and involve billions of money exchange (Bywater,1994, Jackowski, 2000, Rotherham, 2007, UNWTO, 2016, Munro, 2020).

The touristic activities in Greece and particularly those related to the religious destinations, appear to have a steady growth. Of special interest is the fact that the relevant touristic activities are not limited to the summertime nor to the well-known Mediterranean 3S e.g. "sun, sand and sea" model. Greece is acknowledged as an attractive destination not only for pilgrims, but also for academic visitors, history and culture travelers, art and nature lovers, and especially for people who seek the authentic experience of a lifestyle that is characterized by "spirituality" and "ascetic ethos". Moreover, the various forms of tours and visits associated with the religious heritage and the Orthodox Tradition in Greece can be classified as one of the pillars of development at a micro-community level as they form a particularly dynamic field of initiatives. The religious motivated visiting in the country traces ancient and Byzantine monuments, artifacts, symbols, historical documents

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[1]   "Metamorphosis implies a much more radical transformation in which the old certainties of modern society are falling away and something quite new is emerging" (Beck 2016, 3).
[2]   Tourism Statistics, Eurostat, Statistics Explained, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tourism_statistics

and other materials, spolia, relics, holy sites together with assets of the Intangible Heritage[3].

Pilgrimage, religious visiting and tourism in post-traditional societies

Long and argumentative discussions have taken place among researches and academics framed by the effort to define the relationship between pilgrimage and religious tourism (Cohen 1998, Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018, Nyaupane et al. 2015, Oviedo et al. 2014, Santos 2002, Terzidou et al. 2018, Timothy and Olsen 2006), while recent approaches focus on the varieties of the visiting activities in religious sites and events (Griffin and Raj 2017, Palmer et al. 2012). Considering the case of Greece, one should note the particular character that the religiously motivated visits have. In most of the cases what we usually call religious tourism in Greece is actually a kind of pilgrimage tourism, which is constituted by individuals or parish groups who visit a monastery or a significant religious center, holy sites, hermitages, old churches and vivid in liturgical life communities. Not rarely, these communities host very old and significant icons, relics and other artifacts, all kinds of beautiful or even historical manifestations of faith, but these do not necessarily forge the core interests of the pilgrims. The pilgrims are mainly attracted by the "spirituality" of the sites. In this sense it is not a surprise that major pilgrim destinations such as Panagia in Tinos island (Terzidou, Scarles, Saunders, 2017) are relatively new and linked more with the sentimental bonds of faith than with the "historical paths" of Christianity. Furthermore, the link between local celebrations and church feasts creates a social and economic network in and around local communities and brings together people from various and even remote regions.

The religious visitors' motives are often related to spirituality in its local/micro measures as people do not move so much on the traces of a historical-religious journey as they move to the feast of a local saint. In other cases, the visitors express their need to escape the daily routine in a remote and quiet monastery and among them it is not rare to see the

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[3] The core of this analysis is based on personal long-lasting ethnographic notes. The polymorphic thesis and parts of this analysis firstly presented on 2016 at the second Panhellenic Conference on Religious Tourism organized by the special Synodical "Pilgrimages" office of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece.

development of touristic infrastructure as a depart from the authentic spiritual experience. As noted in various visits (the participant observation was employed by the author in a non-typical form), one can often hear the visitors of the Holy Mount Athos expressing an inner/psychic distinction between "excursionists" and pilgrims. Nevertheless, touring and tourism as human activities can be interpreted in a variety of ways, both personal and social and what we currently call "religious tourism" – at least in its modern manifestations- is a new kind of touristic trend that includes mixed motivations and different levels of personal involvement. Some of the visitors are more interested in "seeing" religious sites while others are concentrated in "participating" in religious rituals, liturgies etc. In other words, the religious sites very often host people with varied understanding of their own social activity in a range from a clear "religious" or "cultural" (social) action to a mixed or even a blurred set of motives. At the same time, in the understanding of the "religious hosts and agents" (churches, religious communities) sharing the faith (e.g. sharing beliefs, explaining symbols etc) constitutes an important part of the overall touristic frame even in the touristic circumstances. As van Bühren et al. (2018) state: "the Catholic Church is convinced that tourist activities at religious sites cannot be considered only from an economic point of view. Rather, she considers it necessary to share the identity of her heritage artworks and religious events". One way or another, in the current phase of modernity a visit to a religious site integrates multiple religious, cultural and socioeconomic aspects of what is vaguely described as "Heritage" (See Scheme 1). At this point the term "heritage" denotes a collective point of reference and does not go into the discussion about the socio-political role that the process of a national heritage construction might have (Poria and Ashworth, 2009).
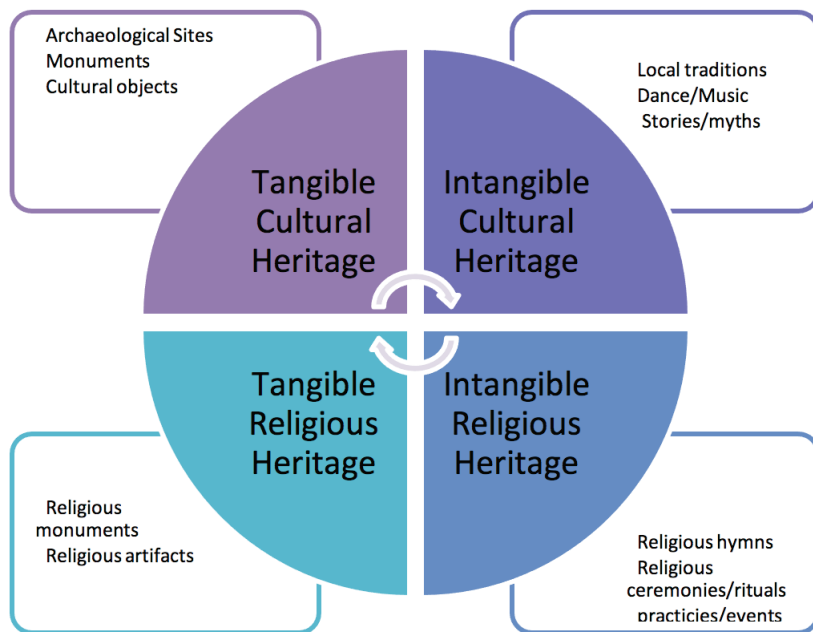
Scheme 1: Aspects of Cultural and Religious Heritage

In this context, the concepts of pilgrimages and religious tourism are used in the relevant literature in converging and divergent perspectives. Part of the literature is focused on the pilgrims' will to live an "inner experience", to better understand the inner meaning of their own travel, to communicate with their roots and spirituality in a place that has been indelibly marked by the presence of the Divine or by the dedicated life of esteemed figures of the faith community. These places usually frame a peaceful reflection and a non-conventional way of life and they are linked with relics and testimonies of the religious community, with believed miraculous icons, sacred objects and artifacts, places of martyrdom and ascetic experience. The pilgrimages are characterized by high emotional intensity and a two-fold meaning: They are actually considered as a journey to a place but also an inner journey to the depths of existence linked with religious and social practices such as a personal dedication, praying, fasting, votive offerings (τάματα), participation in

religious ceremonies etc. As Clift and Clift argue (1996), the archetype of pilgrimage mirrors an "outer action with inner meaning".

Other theorists focus more on the religious-cultural tourism as a social activity that can be better analyzed when contextualized with current turn of events of the touristic phenomena. In this case, the focus of interest is not so much on the need for an authentic spiritual experience in connection with a sacred monument as to its cultural and religious value. The latter is understood in terms of architecture, arts and hagiography, on the historical circumstances associated with the monument, the materials and the way of construction, the natural landscape, etc. Hence, it is not so much the inwardness of the place that attracts the interest of the visitor as its extroverted cultural influence. For this reason, the socio/cultural and religious tourists enjoy the historical context without necessarily wanting to get integrated into it.

Furthermore, new research is conducted exploring the field beyond the distinction between religious and secular tourism indicating that "post-secular tourism (re)construct pilgrimage places in novel ways, neither sacral nor secular, but rather a hybrid or combination of both – spaces that are neither explicitly modern/secular nor traditional/sacred" (Nilsson and Tesfahuney, 2017). The transformative dynamic of second modernity affected the ideas we have about tourism and pilgrimage and as a result new theories are developed focusing not so much on the pilgrimage as a standardized social phenomenon, but rather on the "pilgrimage process" of "a heterogeneous and contested nature" (Graham and Murray, 1997).

In any case, there are more and more data in the last years underlining that the concepts of pilgrimage and religious tourism are not so polarized (Bond et al. 2014, Collins-Kreiner 2010, Kim et al. 2019, Terzidou et al. 2017) as we might thought. In fact, modern tours can be mainly described as of a rather mixed nature that address a variety of human needs. From this perspective the pilgrimage tours can be triggered by the spiritual needs of a group of people. At the same time, they may serve cultural, educational and religious motives, by integrating parallel visits to places of wider interest, while planned experiences of moderate leisure and recreational tourism are by no means rare. Thus, it is not uncommon for a group of believers to visit a Greek Orthodox site, to have a pass through the monuments of the ancient cultural heritage

while enjoying gastronomic tourism and moments of recreational and even some relaxation in the beautiful Greek landscape. More than often a common case of a pathway to a Greek orthodox monastery includes options such as going outside the urban scenery, passing through antiquities, making use of a variety of tourist services, walking in the forest or up in a mountain right to the doors of a so far/so close non-routinized spiritual experience.

A current analysis of the touristic phenomena should not leave aside the social theory approach according to which the pilgrims as well as the tourists are ideal types describing a certain social action in the second modernity (Tsironis, 2018). In this sense Urry provocatively claimed (1990) "being a tourist is one of the defining characteristics of being 'modern'", while tourism has been developed as a "leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organised work. It is one manifestation of how work and leisure are organized as separate and regulated spheres of social practise". Under these terms a de-contextualized understanding of the related concepts ("pilgrim", "tourist" etc) will not help to decipher the characteristics of the religious touring in our societies.
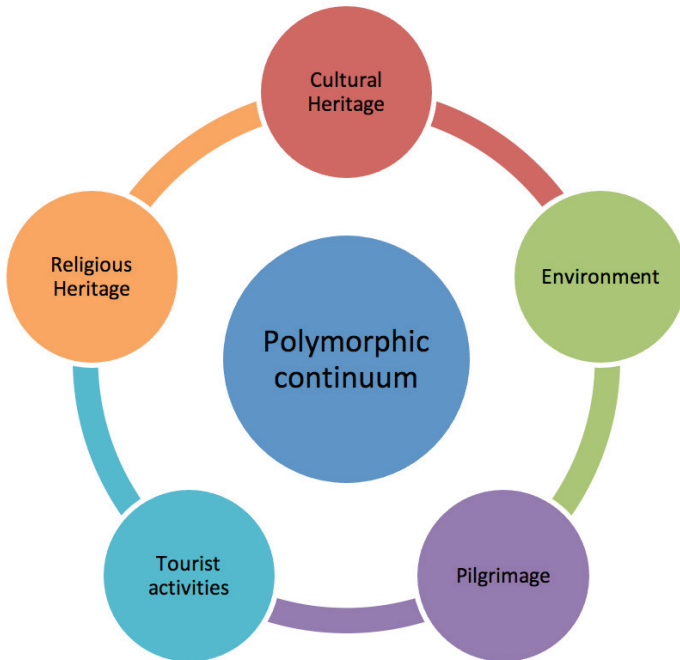
Have been said that, this analysis suggests that new ways of approaching the mobility of modern pilgrims and religious motivated visitors is necessary to better understand the nexus constructed by faith manifestations, religious and non-religious motivations, along with socio-economic attributes of the religious phenomena in the post-traditional societies (Giddens, 1994, Tsironis, 2003). Furthermore, the modern pilgrims (even if not intended) are also *de-facto* tourists: As they decide to make a spiritual visit in order to practice their faith, to remedy the perceived lack of center and meaning or even to escape from the monotony of their everyday life, they dedicate time, money, energy, they use all kind of touristic services and their gaze meets various touristic attractions.

The challenge of polymorphic tourism: the case of Greece

The religious monuments/attractions that are typically of aesthetic/artistic value and very often have a harmonious relationship with the environment and the historical continuity of the local communities, attract not only the faithful pilgrims, but also excursionists, artists,

environmentalists, tourists, researchers and academic groups with an interest in the language, the iconography, the architecture and the sculpture of these monuments. As the religious sites integrate religious and cultural values and have religious meaning and monumental value (Aulet and Vidal, 2018, Andriotis, 2009), the hypothesis that all aspects together form a multi-level experience to the visitors is justified and worth to be further examined. This way, the research interest turns from the aim to differentiate and classify the pilgrims and tourists in motivational categories to better understand the sites of interest as integrative and multilevel networks of human (religious, socio-cultural, touristic) action in modernity.

A visiting to a religious site engages touristic infrastructures, faith manifestations, cultural attributes and brings together people with varied -very often mixed- motives. More specifically, the coexistence of the Greek Orthodox religious destinations with ancient cultural monuments and natural sight scenes, form a "polymorphic touristic continuum" (scheme 2) that deserves the attention of the social analysis.
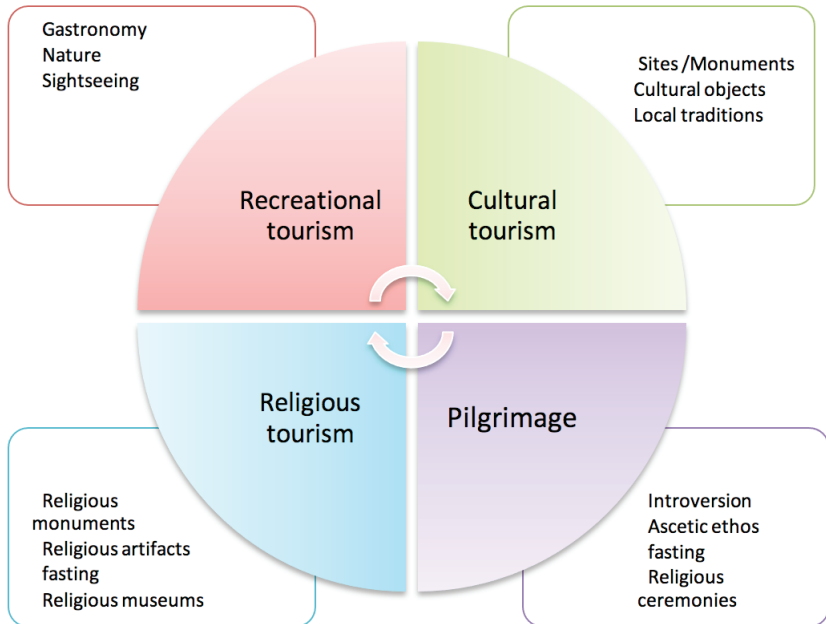

Scheme 2: The polymorphic touristic continuum

This analysis suggests that the focus on the polymorphic continuum paves the way to the development of a polymorphic strategic plan designed to serve and regulate the actual conditions of pilgrimage and religious visiting in Greece and elsewhere. The polymorphic proposal is by nature qualitative rather than quantitative as it doesn't aim to uncontrolled growth of the incoming tourism, but to re-arrange and re-configure the existing situation within a strategic plan. This plan is based on a) combining visiting options linked with religious monuments/ sites and b) setting rules and principles at the functional level (working hours, proper infrastructures, interrelation between sites, monuments and activities). The visitors' needs assessment is not caged in separate motivational categories, but rather focused on the plurality of motives of modern tourists and the variety of experiences the religious sites may offer. Based on the polymorphic strategy a diversified circle of functionality could be designed regulating the different types of motivation and visiting activities, e.g.: different age groups, different social groups (families, parishes, pilgrims, lonely travelers, etc). Another functional basis could be established on the special interests (liturgical life, ascetic living, interest in architecture, environment etc). All these should not necessarily form a kind of sealed options. On the contrary, their interconnection might serve an enriched experience such as religious-educational tourism, religious-cultural tourism, eco- religious tourism etc.

In the frame of a polymorphic plan (scheme 3), not only the monuments, the relics and the artifacts, but also the Intangible Heritage, including the beliefs, the values, and the lifestyle of the local communities together with the Art, the legends, the liturgical texts and chants can be integrated. Activities -beyond faith practices- that may be generated are walking, participating in fairs and local community events, recreational and alternative touring and other choices related to healing, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, study visits etc.

In this sense, cultivating a collaborative culture is crucial. Only the coordination of actions and the synergy among community, religious institutions/ church and public bodies, trade unions and local organizations, political, economic and social agents can bear fruit in a polymorphic plan. Co-operation in conjunction with the interconnection of all levels of tourism organization may ensure the maximization and the optimization of the results. The strongest point of the polymorphic

design suggestion is the opening of pilgrimage tours throughout the year and the enrichment of the planned activities with multiple visiting options. Given all the above, a polymorphic strategic planning focuses on religious heritage, protect the sacred character of the sites, maintains the aims of the sustainable development, enforces local and international cooperation, and develops the prospects of a functional synergy between pilgrimage visits and other forms of tourist activities.

Gastronomy
Nature
Sightseeing

Sites / Monuments
Cultural objects
Local traditions

Recreational tourism

Cultural tourism

Religious tourism

Pilgrimage

Religious monuments
Religious artifacts
fasting
Religious museums

Introversion
Ascetic ethos
fasting
Religious ceremonies

Scheme 3: Aspects of Polymorphic Tourism

Despite the fact that the cultural and the religious heritage is of fundamental importance for the Greek touristic industry, the organized pilgrimages and the religious tourism remain to a great extent an underdeveloped field of activities based on personal networking, short-term initiatives and lack of clustering touristic concepts.

For this reason, although the visits to monasteries is a frequent and well-known phenomenon in Greece, some of the most famous religious itineraries such as "the Footsteps of St. Paul the Apostle in Greece" or the Balkan route of the Saints Cyril and Methodius are mainly orientated

to foreigners and they lack strategic, comprehensive and long term planning.

Currently the St Paul's route is gaining attention at an international level. It recently became a candidate route for certification by the Council of Europe, while key touristic agents are getting active in this field and public and non-governmental organizations are moving towards new perceptions. New branding proposals of international, multi denominational even multi-faith or simply historical interest are coming forth. Thus, the concept of the "the footsteps of the Apostle Paul" may be used as an example of a possible polymorphic touristic plan in Greece as it is based on retracing the travels of Saint Paul in his Mission in Greece and follows a long route across the country from N. Greece to Korinthos (Samothrace - Kavala (Neapoli)- Philippi- [Amphipolis/Apollonia]- Thessaloniki- Veria- Athens- Corinth).

Within a polymorphic framework, the steps of the Apostle Paul, the world of antiquity and the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Art, the environmental and the alternative touristic activities can meet a comprehensive plan of sustainable tourism. Pilgrims and other visitors could be offered a variety of spiritually and culturally sensitive, respectful and enriched options.

Concluding remarks and implications for future religious tourism planning

Visits as well as any tourist activity can cause major problems along with development opportunities. The degradation of the environment, the transformation of tradition into folklore, the cultural encroachment on tourist motives and the lack of creativity and new directions, the one-dimensional direction of the local economy in short-term profits and "tourist" services jeopardize the balance and functionality of the whole organization of the local community.

The role of the social analysis in explaining the emerging touristic phenomena in the field of religious and spiritual journeys is significant, especially in retracing the traditional and the modern ways of spiritual visiting and touring, in shedding light to the social and ethical considerations and in underlining the major social challenges generated by the developing religious tourism trend. More specifically, the current analysis aims to study in an interdisciplinary way the spectrum of religious,

spiritual, cultural tourism and pilgrimage and especially their polymorphic character. It examines the ways in which sustainable touristic development affects a variety of cultural, religious, economic and social aspects of the modern world. It explores the interconnections between religious and cultural heritage with the sustainable development of local communities and it focuses on multidimensional strategies of touristic planning. Conclusively, this analysis deliberates a new approach in religious tourism described as "polymorphic strategy".

A polymorphic strategy on religious tourism is not seeking to offer practical advice on how to quantitatively increase the incoming tourists, but rather to regulate randomness and lack of organization in the existing situation, to safeguard the eco/ social/economic sustainability of the religious sites and to keep them open to multi-motivated visitors and dynamic touristic agencies. The polymorphic framework suggests the possibility of multilayered tours and visits that allow a more integral development. In any case, the motives and goals of modern travel excursions are almost never one-dimensional (Božic et al. 2016, Griffin and Raj 2017). Educational centers and universities can make a decisive contribution to the cultivation of the field of education in / for tourism and the interconnection of the academic world and society by giving prestige and efficiency to tourism planning.

The proposed model may be best tested at first in destinations -such as those situated in Greece- where historical layers of history meet in significant centers of religious and cultural interest. Greece is an ideal place to implement a polymorphic strategic plan. The country is a particularly attractive destination for pilgrimages, religious visits, tours, and touristic activities of religious, cultural, historical, gastronomical, environmental etc character. The obvious challenges are: a) to create a polymorphic strategy having multi-destination and multi-motive patterns as its integral parts and b) to develop a pluralistic concept that is able to maintain the spiritual character of the visits and to develop a modern, sustainable, eco- and community friendly touristic strategy.

It is important to underline that more empirical research is needed in the near future so that the polymorphic proposal will be efficiently tested. Furthermore, its key attributes need to be explored and assessed in real life conditions through pilot projects. Further examination of the polymorphic proposal will bring to the fore new challenges, issues

and developmental perspectives in the field of the religious tourism and organized pilgrimages in second modernity.

Acknowledgements

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