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COVID-19 and Social Distancing Implications for Religious Activities and Travel: The case of the Serbian Orthodox Church

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The COVID-19 pandemic affects people's everyday way of life. International tourism is one of the most affected activities today, since one of the key measures in the strategy of keeping control over the new pandemic is preventing closer human contact. This includes restricting and discouraging the movement of people towards tourism destinations. These measures have caused major problems for the tourism industry and no form of tourism has been spared. The COVID-19 outbreak, as a real threat to public life and health, has established a new measure as a mandatory condition in everyday life globally - called social distancing. This measure has various impacts on religious communities and a strong influence on how and under which circumstances religious travel and pilgrimages can take place - it means not only physical distancing but also excluding individuals or groups from participating in one another's lives. This paper focuses on social distancing from a religious perspective and its implications for religious activities and travel. Further, the paper points to the role of religious communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering both criticism and its role in saving lives. This paper examines social distancing measures' impact on everyday religious activities from the Church point of view. Taking the example of the Serbian Orthodox Church's standpoint and official announcements, the paper considers the important role and contribution of its religious community - several key elements have been singled out. Furthermore, this paper points out factors of the pandemic which affect the faithful and the Church - official decisions / announcements of the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as the influence of the anti-pandemic measures on religious activities and travel. The example also shows the 'strong point' of religion (religious community influence and strong mindset) which can be accepted or misunderstood as 'resistance' to the anti-pandemic measures.

Key Words: COVID-19, social distancing, religion, religious tourism and pilgrimage, Serbian Orthodox Church

Introduction

The rediscovery of pilgrimage to religious sites has changed thinking and beliefs in secular public space and introduced new forms of thinking to find spirituality and develop alternative religious movements (Raj, 2012). The UNWTO estimated in 2014 that 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's religious and sacred sites every year (UNWTO, 2014). The dynamic development of tourism, with the continuous increase in the number of tourists arrivals and expenditure, have made tourism one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2020), growing at a rate that is faster than world GDP (Binhan Oğuz, 2020).

The pandemic crisis caused by COVID-19 has presented many questions for modern tourism, especially ones linked to the fulfilment of key factors that affect people's

ability to travel. According to the UNWTO, in the first quarter of 2020, a decline of -22% was recorded in international tourist arrivals, where the most endangered region is Asia and the Pacific with a decline of -35% and Europe with -19%, followed by the regions of America, Africa, and the Middle East. According to UNWTO, a decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals can be expected in the range of 58% to 78% in 2020. (UNWTO, 2020). Based on the latest available data, international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) saw a decrease of 56% in the first five months of 2020 (UNWTO, 2020b). In 2020, over a billion fewer tourists will participate in international travel. It is estimated that between 100 and 120 million jobs (directly employed in tourism) are at risk. Furthermore, losses in tourism are estimated in the range of \$910 billion to \$1,200 in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020).

Tourism has faced many crises during its dynamic development over the last seventy years. Among many crises, the following had noticeable impacts on international tourism:

- Oil crisis in 1973,
- Deep recession in 1981-1982,
- Asian financial crisis, 1997
- September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States of America,
- SARS crisis in 2003,
- Impact of influenza A (H1N1) in 2008,
- Global economic crisis in 2009,
- Arab Spring crisis 2010-2012.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has affected world tourism much more drastically than any of these previous crises, by affecting the religious, work, and social life of the people (Husain, 2020). Gössling *et al.* (2020) drawing evidence from a wide literature search, emphasise that there have been several warnings from both tourism and health researchers as well as government agencies and institutions that pandemics posed a major threat to society and tourism. As they emphasise these ‘warnings’ of risk grew into a crisis which was primarily manifest as a pandemic but produced consequences that resulted in economic and social instability. The crisis also affected religious tourism and pilgrimage, making it impossible for religious tourists and pilgrims to travel to sacred sites. The effect is not only visible in this exceptional area of religious expression, but also in the impossibility of practicing the day to day expressions of faith. The main problem preventing the realisation of religious activities, religious travels, and pilgrimages is the overarching concept of ‘social distancing’.

Social Distancing in the Context of Religion

For travel and tourism, determinants of demand such as free time and available money for tourism expenditure are necessary. An important further factor (which heretofore has been overlooked by many) is freedom of movement -physical mobility of demand and conditions that enable the movement of tourism demand towards the destination-which this pandemic situation has unequivocally highlighted. With the restriction of mobility (as a basic characteristic of tourist demand) in the context of the prohibition of freedom of movement, international travel

has suffered a major blow that has drastically affected tourism. Even though in January 2020 the World Health Organisation indicated that freedom of movement should not be restricted as a result of the epidemic (World Health Organisation, 2020; Anzai *et al.*, 2020), many countries began to introduce travel restrictions, initially towards travellers from China (Anzai *et al.*, 2020) and later the trend spread to many countries where cases of the virus have been reported. Considering the measures of social distancing, the movement of tourists towards destinations has been postponed or cancelled. In the context of a COVID-19 crisis, mass public gatherings have been recognised as the main factor influencing the spread of the virus. Social distancing, as a response to the virus and the main strategic approach in the effort of controlling the pandemic, has influenced tourist travel and visits to the religious sites.

This approach does prevent the transmission of the virus, but, at the same time it makes everyday life significantly different and not easy to handle. In the broad context of religious practice, travel for pilgrimage, but also the ordinary common elements of religious faith - attending liturgies, and Holy Communion - are limited by preventative measures. Visits to religious sites as well as taking part in religious events and gatherings are limited under normal circumstances and only permitted under a new set of strict rules, or entirely cancelled. There are views that religious community-making directly impacts viral spread either by inhibiting or accelerating social transmission, depending on the specific religious group being considered (Wildman *et al.*, 2020).

These authors state that epidemiological models of viral spread do not take account of human factors such as religious ideologies and values. Human beings are complex, and the way religion weaves itself through the lattice of human life is incredibly intricate (Wildman *et al.*, 2020). This certainly leads to the conclusion that the need for social distancing in the time of the COVID -19 pandemic crisis is ‘unquestionable’. In the contemporary, COVID-19 context, social distancing is the term used when we refer to physical distancing. On the other hand, it could also mean excluding individuals or groups from participating in one another’s lives. This is a fundamental consideration when analysing religious tourism and travel as well as the activities of religious

tourists and pilgrims. In the context of practicing faith and participating in religious manifestations, this may have deeper consequences for contemporary religious and pilgrimage travel. Ebrahim, & Memish (2020) state that the emotional and mental challenges experienced by would-be pilgrims who are affected by the suspension are unquantifiable. Religious activities above all on the personal, social, and communal life of the faithful (Quadri, 2020). COVID-19 requires new decisions by the authorities which are mostly based on border closing and social distancing. This has led to social distancing of tourists from destinations, and at the still functioning destination, distances are regulated and enforced in all aspects of the industry, especially for: religious tourism, adventure tourism, farm tourism, and MICE tourism (Chang, McAleer & Ramos, 2020).

In the contemporary context of this pandemic crisis, a subject that needs to be considered is the needs and wants of the general population and more specifically of tourists. In the context of this paper, there is also a requirement to investigate the needs and wants of special narrower market segments such as religious tourists and pilgrims. Having that in mind, there is a need to consider the role of religious practice during the pandemic and its effect on the faithful, as the main consumers of religious tourism and pilgrimage travel.

On the other hand, there is a need to examine the response of religious communities to the new situation, which may include adjusting or refusing to accept the 'prescribed measures' of social distancing during the practice of religion. In the next part of this paper, special attention will be paid to religious communities' role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic measures and social distancing. Further, special reference is paid to the views of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The focus was on social distancing measures, but it is interesting to examine the arguments that specifically refer to the attitudes of the religious community and directly or indirectly manifest the needs and wants of religious tourists and the faithful themselves. In doing this, the paper considers Serbian measures preventing the COVID-19 pandemic which had a knock-on impact on the decisions of the Serbian Orthodox Church, especially during one of the biggest religious holidays in Serbia, Orthodox Easter.

The Role of Religious Communities in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A main question that emerges from the pandemic crisis is how religious events contribute to the spread of the virus among the faithful and thus, are religious communities the ones who take an active part in the fight against the virus. To consider this, it is also necessary to consider that the attitudes of the church can determine the behaviour of the faithful. Running in parallel to this, the various measures of the authorities can limit the usual practice of religious activities, as well as religious travel and pilgrimage, having an impact in a national and international context. Religion puts faith and God above nature and earthly events, where religious rules and the practice of faith by religious communities also has a well-established philosophical view of saving lives and fighting plagues.

It is unquestionable that tourism is deeply affected activity by the COVID-19 pandemic. This further leads to the conclusion that certain forms of mass tourism, due to the policy of social distancing, are the first to be hit by the generally adopted anti-pandemic measures, globally and in specific countries. Alternative forms of tourism are also not spared, especially those that involve activities that lead to the gathering of large numbers of people. Husain (2020) notes that religious tourism, becomes limited, mainly for the following reasons:

- Religious site visitors tend to travel with family members or in organised groups.
- Religious tourist trips are highly seasonal, influenced by the occurrence of holidays, ceremonies and work schedules.
- Pilgrims concentrate on the specific religious attractions in the religious destination.
- The core activity of most religious sites is congregational prayer and worship.

It could be concluded that the main problem facing religious communities and the practice of religion arises due to the gathering of large numbers of people in the one place.

Wildman *et al.* (2020) provide wide insight on the role of religious community in fighting the pandemic. They state:

Though recalcitrant religious congregations are accelerating viral transmission, it is notable that most religious groups are innovating in response to opposing demands of collective worship and social distancing (2020:116).

They also discuss that the question of whether religion is a force for help or harm is ill-formed, where we nevertheless might ask whether there are recurring features across the diversity of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Wildman *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, the same authors state that many religious communities are active in the fight against COVID-19, emphasising that the concept 'religion' does not carve human social behaviours neatly at any joint. The authors suggest that the question of whether religion is exacerbating the crisis, is a poorly formulated claim (Wildman *et al.*, 2020). There is also the position of the World Health Organization (WHO) on the role of religious communities, religious leaders, and believers themselves. WHO emphasises that religious leaders, faith-based organisations, and faith communities can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19 by sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19 (WHO, 2020):

Religious-inspired institutions can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices.

Religious leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need.

Religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.

During the introduction of protection measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, special attention was paid to the manner of carrying out ritual obligations and especially to the organisation of visits to temples and other religious places. In this context, religions should be a solution and not a problem (Djalante *et al.*, 2020). Shaw, Kim, & Hua (2020), by analysing behaviour in the pandemic in East Asia note that religious groups cooperated with government measures and calls by holding weekly worship online and postponing or cancelling large-scale religious events. One of the main supports by religious

groups is in that most of them refrained from large-scale gatherings by conducting online worship services (Shaw, Kim, & Hua, 2020)

The Approach of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Pilgrimages to Churches, monasteries and holy places of the Serbian Orthodox Church typically take place throughout the whole year and do not especially depend on religious holidays. Programs intended for religious tourists and pilgrims are also interesting for other tourists, whose motives for travel are not strictly religious but it could be one of its elements. Given that Serbia has cultural and historical resources directly related to religious heritage, which dates back to the Middle Ages, the Serbian Orthodox Church and its pilgrimage travel agency 'Dobročinstvo' (Benefaction) organise travel tours for pilgrims, faithful, and other tourists during religious holidays but also at other times of the year. In these places, and in accordance with the focus on religious and pilgrimage-based travel in this paper, the most common religious and pilgrimage sites included in these tours are shown (Table 1).

This table shows the most common places visited during pilgrimage in Serbia. Monasteries and churches represent the fundamental element of pilgrimage activities. They are mostly built in holy places. The table lists only some of the most common places that pilgrims visit. It should be emphasised that in addition to organised trips there are also individual religious and pilgrimage trips that are not part of the official organisation of pilgrimage travel agencies in Serbia.

During the trip, the faithful can visit monasteries and churches, attend group prayers, and have the possibility of individual prayers in monasteries. Of special importance are the relics of saints that attract believers and pilgrims strong in their faith, and when visiting these artefacts, various activities take place (for example: kissing the relics of Saint Bishop Nikolaj, dressing the relics of Saint Zosimus and Saint James of Tuman, as well as attending Divine Liturgies and Akathist). Such activities have been limited during social distancing, travel restrictions, and other COVID-19 related decisions, that were directly or indirectly related to the practice of faith and pilgrimage.

Table 1: Most Common Programs Including Religious and Pilgrimage Sites in Serbia

| Pilgrimage program | Religious and pilgrimage sites | Religious and pilgrimage activities |
|--|--|--|
| Ava Justin Ćeljijski The Annunciation in the Monastery of Ćelije The Holy Father's paths Saint Bishop Nikolaj | The Monastery of Ćelije, Bogovađa Monastery, and Lelić Monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy, group, and individual prayers, kissing the relics of Saint Bishop Nikolaj |
| Vrela Homolja | Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Gornjak Monastery, and Votovnica Monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy |
| Ibar Valley | Sopoćani Monastery, Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery, The Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, Gradac Monastery, Studenica Monastery, Žiča Monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy |
| Jadar and Rađevina | Čokešina Monastery, Tronoša Monastery, and the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary | Monastery tours, group, and individual prayers |
| Lešje | Lešje Monastery, Monastery of St. Petka, and Miljkov Monastery dedicated to Presentation of the Holy Theotokos | Attending the Divine Liturgy |
| Dressing of the relics of Saint Zosimus and Saint James of Tuman | Tumane Monastery, Nimnik monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy, Dressing of the relics of Saint Zosimus and Saint James of Tuman, Akathist to the Saints, Prayer for Health |
| Aleksandrovac Monasteries | Veluč Monastery, Rudenica Monastery, Drenča Monastery, Naupara Monastery | Monastery tours, group, and individual prayers |
| Kosovo and Metohija Monasteries | Banjska Monastery, Gračanica Monastery, Holy Virgin of Ljeviš Monastery, The Sveti Arhangelj Monastery, The Zociste Monastery, Visoki Dečani Monastery, The Monastery of the Patriarchate of Peč | Monastery tours, group, and individual prayers |
| Monasteries around Stalać | Monastery of St. Luke, the Church of Protection of Our Most Holy Mother of God, Monastery of St Roman | Attending the Divine Liturgy |
| Moravian Serbia | Kalenić Monastery, Ljubostinja Monastery, Lazarica Church, Ravanica Monastery, Manasija Monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy |
| Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God Holliday - Ćunis | The church of Protection of Our Most Holy Mother of God | Attending the solemn evening vigil in honour of the feast of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God, Akathist Hymn & Holy Anointing |
| Feast of the Three Handed on Fruška Gora | The Velika Remeta Monastery, Krušedol Monastery, Grgeteg Monastery, and Novo Hopovo Monastery | Attending the Divine Liturgy and Akathist |

Source: Analysis is based on the religious and pilgrimage tour programs offered by the pilgrimage travel agency of the Serbian Orthodox Church 'Dobročinstvo'. Analysis and conclusions are derived from: dobrocinstvo.rs, 2020. *Ходоцаиша у земљи*

The appearance of COVID-19 in Serbia forced preventive measures to suppress the virus. On March 15, 2020 a state of emergency was declared throughout the country. The measures primarily followed the closure of schools, universities and a ban on gatherings in large groups, primarily mass gatherings.

Three days later, following the pandemic situation in the world and the current situation in the country, new decisions were made regarding the introduction of a curfew. Later, the appearance of the first death was followed by the official proclamation of an epidemic of greater epidemiological significance, on March 20. On March 27, the *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, published the conclusions of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on recommendations to religious communities and churches. Although in the form of recommendations, this decision referred to the restriction of religious events and liturgies, visits to religious facilities, which directly influenced the way of practicing religion during the pandemic (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije, br. 43/2020):

Churches and religious communities are advised:

- *To perform religious rites in religious buildings and in the open without the presence of believers*
- *That religious rite during burial be performed in the presence of a small number of people, respecting all preventive measures prescribed for the effective suppression of infectious diseases and the protection of human life and health.*

At the same time, the pilgrimage travel agency of the Serbian Orthodox community, 'Dobročinstvo', announced that all pilgrimages planned for March and April were postponed until further notice. Measures to protect against the epidemic were reflected in the postponement of all activities related to religious travel and pilgrimages attended by the faithful of the Serbian Orthodox Church. A particularly important impact of such measures was evident during the liturgies, but the greatest concern among the believers and the church itself was caused by the impossibility of worship and Holy Communion in the presence of believers during the celebration of Orthodox Easter. In Table 2 the main constraints driven by government decisions and their

adoption by the Serbian Orthodox Church are shown. Also, the effect of those measures as well as their strong impacts on religious practice and religious travel are shown. The conclusions in Table 2 are based on a broad analysis of official statements by the Serbian Orthodox Church during the COVID-19 pandemic (Spc.rs., 2020. Statements). These conclusions refer to the official statements of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church and His Holiness the Serbian Patriarch and are the result of the views of the church of the dialogue between the representatives of the authorities and the Church.

From Table 2, it can be concluded that the Serbian Orthodox Church accepted measures of 'social distancing' and appealed to members of the religious community to adhere to the measures.

The prohibition of mass gathering was accepted, and the religious community adjusted to the recommendations in such a way that decisions were made to only allow services with no more than five people. This is followed by the fact that even outdoor worship services were planned without the presence of believers. The measures especially referred to elderly believers - those faithful older than 65 did not have the opportunity to leave their homes during most of the state of emergency. The contribution of the religious community to the fight against COVID-19, by maintaining 'social distancing' was embodied in enabling the monitoring of divine services on television or online. The issue of Holy Communion was very present during the biggest holiday, Orthodox Easter. A gathering around the largest shrines or travelling for Holy Communion was prevented. There were noticeable requests from members of the religious community to temporarily suspend the ban on movement during this great holiday so that believers could attend the holy act of communion. Having in mind the taken measures it was impossible to abolish the ban on movement during the curfew for pilgrims and other church believers. In this case, the attitudes of the Serbian Orthodox Church were that the act of Holy Communion should be performed in the homes of believers in agreement with priests.

However, during the holy services, some believers gathered around religious buildings partially adhering to the measures of social distancing. At this point, the Church appealed for the faithful to 'not to use church attendance as an excuse before one's conscience and neighbours for

Table 2. Factors, decisions, and its influence on religious practice and travel during COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia

| Factors affecting faithful and the Church | Decisions/Announcements | Influence | Strong points / 'resistance' to the measures |
|--|--|---|---|
| Prohibition on gathering many people - 'social distancing' (Government) | To comply with the decisions of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the ban on gathering more than five people in one place and other preventive measures that should contribute to preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. (Serbian Orthodox Church) | Damaged benefits of the believers of all traditional Churches and religious communities | The Church will not interrupt the serving of Divine Liturgy or cease communing with the faithful because this is a matter which cannot be debated: it is the basis of our faith in the Living God |
| Impossible to abolish the ban on movement or the curfew for pilgrims and other church believers (Government – based on Serbian Orthodox Church appeal) | Religious services in churches and in the open air are to be performed without the presence of the faithful. (Government; Serbian Orthodox Church) | Reduced opportunities for the church to take spiritual care of the people entrusted to them in every possible and permissible way | The risk is not in Holy Communion (on the contrary, we receive it, among other things, 'for the healing of soul and body'), the real danger of the virus is unrelated to Holy Communion |
| Church appeal not to use church attendance as an excuse before one's conscience and neighbours for disrespecting the measures of self-isolation. (Serbian Orthodox Church) | 65 years and older, as well as younger people in weak health and lower immunity, to refrain from coming to church for worship and put themselves and others at risk (Government; Serbian Orthodox Church) Following Divine Services on television and / or online, via church websites (Serbian Orthodox Church) People should schedule with their parish priest for Holy Communion at home (Serbian Orthodox Church). | Restriction, postponement of religious travel and pilgrimage | The Church offers its faithful as the singular Medicine of Immortality, Holy Communion, as well as the blessing of her holy Sacraments and of her entire sacramental treasury |

Source: Analysis and conclusions are derived from: Spc.rs., 2020 Statements

disrespecting the measures of self-isolation'.

Such measures certainly had an impact on issues of importance to the Church and its faithful. The benefits for the believers of all traditional Churches and religious communities in Serbia were 'endangered'. Opportunities for the church to take spiritual care of the people entrusted to them in every possible and permissible way was reduced. Furthermore, this had a special effect on the practice of religion, visits to churches and religious sites, as well as the organisation of religious trips and pilgrimages. According to the above, it should not be left out that there was a certain 'resistance' to the measures. This was manifested in strong positions that in some way opposed social distancing, as it was a form of exclusion from religious and social life. These 'strong points' depict various views of the Serbian Orthodox Church on

the role of religion in spreading the virus.

The first strong point concerned the interruption of sacred worship:

The Church will not interrupt the serving of the Divine Liturgy or cease communing the faithful because this is a matter which cannot be debated: it is the basis of our faith in the Living God.

Another is focused on Holy Communion:

The risk is not in Holy Communion (on the contrary, we receive it, among other things, 'for the healing of soul and body'), the real danger of the virus is unrelated to the Holy Communion ... the Church offers its faithful as the singular Medicine of Immortality, Holy Communion, as well as the blessing of her holy Sacraments and of her entire sacramental treasury'.

It is important to highlight that in most cases, gatherings of faithful were not organised by priests. The response of the religious community was that people cannot be inside religious buildings, in accordance with the government rules and measures during the pandemic. Priests performed Divine Liturgies inside churches and monasteries while small numbers of believers attended, feeling closeness with their priests and with the Divine Liturgy. In some places, the act of Holy Communion was performed (the basis for this was found in the views that the risk is not Holy Communion but the virus). However, most believers followed and ‘participated’ in the liturgies from their homes, as a television broadcast was organised.

At this point, it is necessary to emphasise the contribution of religious communities, their role in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also their understanding of the risks arising from religious activities. Certain scientific research indicates an increased risk of spreading the infection during religious events resulting from mass gatherings.

The link tracing the infection networks in various geographic regions suggests that the most significant community contamination has been occurring at religious / spiritual gatherings (church and synagogue services, weddings, etc. ... [where] closing access to group religious services primarily impacted the elderly and the adults (Radulescu & Cavanagh, 2020, 8;10).

From the example of the general standpoint of the Serbian Orthodox Church, it can be concluded that the role and importance of religious communities is crucial in the prevention of the COVID-19 virus. Their role should not be viewed only in the context of causing the virus to spread but also in influencing people to follow prevention measures. Religious tourism, religious communities, and the faithful have borne the brunt of the fight against the virus.

Conclusion

What can be learned from the COVID-19 crisis is that non-economic factors have far-reaching and multiple impacts on tourism. The issue of sustainable tourism development considers the economic, environmental, and especially, in this case, social elements of sustainability. Religious tourism and pilgrimage, as part of the overall social life of the tourist demand segments, represent a form of tourism

that has been particularly affected by social distancing policies. Religious gatherings that involve large numbers of people have been identified as a risk that promotes the spread of the COVID-19. Although such views may be justified, considering measures of social distancing, the conscientiousness and role of religious communities in supporting preventive measures should not be ignored. Although the practice of religion and pilgrimage is threatened, religious communities have contributed to the framework for establishing prevention.

Several important facts that emerge from this paper should be considered while analysing religious mass gatherings and religious travel impacted by COVID-19 anti-pandemic measures: the place and role of religious communities in the social system; the needs and wants of the faithful and pilgrims; religious approaches to understanding earthly phenomena; the influence of religious communities on the general public and; the strong points of belief and attitudes of religious communities grounded in faith towards diseases and plagues in the context of ‘the healing of soul and body’.

This approach involves a consideration of the broad phenomenon of faith in people’s daily lives during this type of religious tourism crisis. It can be concluded that the term ‘social distance’, which was generally used during the crisis, has a double meaning, and should be placed in the context of events and circumstances. The term ‘social distancing’ has a deeper impact on the emotional and mental health of people, especially believers and pilgrims, who strive for community-focused spiritual and emotional strengthening during the practice of faith and pilgrimage. By limiting social interaction and increasing partial exclusion from the life of the religious community (whether it refers to participation in religious activities or pilgrimages) the faithful individual or a group can experience significant negative impacts on their everyday life and spiritual health. For the purpose of wider research, it would be useful to analyse the consequences of restrictive ‘social distancing’ measures on the psychological and emotional characteristics of religious tourists and pilgrims.

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