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Between Sacred and Profane.
A Systematic Literature Review on Religious Tourism in Marketing Research

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Abstract

Religious tourism appears an increasingly important phenomenon in the contemporary tourism industry, being able to move huge amounts of people. It is a particularly complex and peculiar kind of tourism, that entails different meanings and spheres of human psychology and culture.

Due to the prominent role of cultural heritages and anthropological dynamics in its development, religious tourism has represented fertile ground for humanistic and anthropology-based research. However, data show that also the economic impact of this increasingly relevant phenomenon is strongly growing. Hence, tourism research has approached this phenomenon also from managerial and marketing perspectives, considering it as a particular kind of *consumption* phenomenon. The interest of tourism marketing and management is particularly recent, intensifying only in the last decade.

The present work provides a general overview of the research knowledge that has been developed so far, regarding religious tourism in tourism research, particularly focusing on tourism marketing and management research. This objective has been carried out by applying Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in order an international literature perspective on the topic. Results are provided in order to delineate major avenues for future research.

1. The importance of religious tourism in marketing research

Religious tourism is one of the most ancient forms of tourism (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). This form of tourism has known a renewed, strong interest in the last decades especially in some countries, like those of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Reader, 2007; Irimiás and Michalkó, 2013; Irimias et al, 2016). Today, religious tourism is believed to represent the driver of the largest global tourist gatherings (e.g., Shinde, 2008; Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009; Nyaupane et al, 2015). Religious tourism is an important source of revenue, with over 300 million people visiting the world's major religious sites every year (United Nations World Tourism Organization Report, 2013), feeding an industry worth \$ 18 billion. Religious tourism has been explored since a

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long time by tourism research (Rinschede, 1992; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Nyaupane et al, 2015). However, the increasing economic importance of this phenomenon calls for further marketing and management research efforts, helping marketers and tourism operators to better harness the potential of religious tourism locations, and to devise better offerings and strategies dealing with specific consumer needs. From a theoretical point of view, additional research on tourism, especially from a consumer perspective, can contribute to managerial sciences, by advancing the knowledge about how religious values are able to influence consumption decisions.

The aim of this work is to provide an overall picture of the research efforts that have been produced so far. A Systematic Literature Review has been performed, in order to classify existing contributions, and to highlight possible avenues for future research.

2. Methodology

The Systematic Literature Review is a commonly employed technique in marketing and management research (e.g., David & Han, 2004; Crossan & Apaydin, 2010, Mari & Poggesi, 2011). This technique has been chosen in order to better identify the topics analyzed so far by extant literature, and in order to propose, more precisely, gaps to be addressed by future research efforts. In order to perform SLR, some restriction criteria have been established:

- Several major scientific databases have been included in the analysis: Google Scholar, Elsevier Scopus, EBSCO Host Business Source Premiere, and ThomsonReuters ISI Web of Knowledge.
- Only journal articles have been considered, excluding books, book chapters, business reports, and other kinds of published/unpublished materials. In addition, only English-language publications have been included. Only journals related to tourism research, tourism marketing and management listed in the Journal Quality List (see Harzing, 2015) and in the ANVUR GEV-13 ranking were considered.
- An initial group of articles was found by considering the presence, within the article, of at least one of the following keywords: *tourism and religion*, *pilgrimage*, *religious cultural tourism*, *religious tourism*, *spirituality and tourism*, *spiritual travels*, *tourism and faith*. 3213 journal articles initially resulted.
- In order to obtain a manageable number of articles, results were carefully considered, looking first at the presence of the keywords above in the title, then within the keywords provided by the authors, and then, in the abstract. This selection procedure returned 91 contributions.
- Finally, all the remaining articles were carefully revised to ensure correspondence with the aims of the review. 20 articles were definitely selected.

3. Results. Religious tourism and tourists' motivation

Two initial considerations can be provided. First, few were the studies addressing this specific topic, at least published in journals considered in the selected rankings. It must be noted that, many of the existing contributions on the topic, are concentrated in lower level publications, coming from those countries in which religious tourism is a well-known phenomenon (e.g., Eastern European Countries). Second, the selected

contributions are quite recent, concentrating principally in 2000s.

Extant tourism research has investigated religious tourism embracing different perspectives of analysis. Initially, research on religious tourism has mainly concentrated in defining the phenomenon itself, adopting a more anthropological/humanistic approach, and then on investigating the characteristics of the religious tourist, considering its motivation, needs, and personal characteristics, adopting hence a more marketing/managerial-oriented approach.

The first stream of research described above is dated back to the early 1990s, investigating the inner socio-cultural characteristics of religious tourism, a phenomenon, whose origins can be dated back to ancient times. Historical documents have been found from the great civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and other signs and evidences were even dated earlier, to the prehistoric age (Rinschede, 1992). With respect to the inner definition of religious tourism, it has been defined as a specific type of tourism, whose participants are motivated either in part, or exclusively, by religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). Vukonic (1996) considers different kinds of religious tourism: pilgrimages, religious events, and «a tour of and visit to important religious places and buildings within the framework of a touristic itinerary» (Vukonic, 1996). Such distinction in terms of content and places is in line with other contributions, highlighting the existence of different types of religious tourists, or at least, reasons why people travel to holy/religious place (e.g., Smith, 1992)

Research has also considered the local impacts related to religious tourism, both in terms of economic growth and development (e.g., Alodadi and Behnin, 2008; Saayman et al, 2014), and in terms of sociological consequences (e.g., Terzidou et al, 2008). In addition, religious tourism has represented for scientific research a particular context, in which to study new entrepreneurial initiatives (e.g., Shinde, 2010) and forms of tourism management (e.g., Raj and Morpeth, 2007).

Other, more consumer-oriented studies have devoted their attention to exploring the motivational dynamics of religious tourists. As noted above, different kinds of religious tourists can be identified, and, in turn, religious motivation can exhibit different intensities, coexisting with more recreational goals (Rinschede, 1992; Tomasi, 2002, p. 19; Shinde, 2008). Smith (1992) introduced the pilgrimage-tourism continuum, a framework to categorize religious tourists and cultural tourists. The underlying assumption of the framework was that, a substantial distinction between pilgrims *tout court* and religious tourists exists, for example, in terms of motivations and fruition.

Religion appears to be a pull factor for tourists (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Dora, 2012; Hyde and Harman, 2011). The initial effort of Smith (1992) in categorizing religious tourists triggered an increasing interest in investigating tourists' behavior and motivations in this particular context (e.g., Nolan and Nolan, 1992; Poria, Butler and Airey, 2003; Wiltshier and Clarke, 2012; Raj, 2012). Research revealed complex interconnections between different kinds of motivations: religious, political, and even educational (e.g., Digance, 2003; Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Korstanje et al, 2014). Such stream of research appears in the last years particularly active, providing additional information about motivational and psychographic characteristics of tourists (e.g., Abbate and Di Nuovo, 2013).

4. Directions for future research

Religious tourism represents an interesting and challenging opportunity, both from the point of view of academic research, and from the point of view of practitioners. So far, research has produced mostly theoretical works, as a result of the need to explore, first of all, the origins and the nature of the phenomenon. Such kind of contributions have approached the phenomenon mainly from a humanistic and anthropological point of view. However, after a first stream of development in the early 1990s (e.g., Rinschede, 1992; Nolan and Nolan, 1992), research on religious tourism became quite fragmented, finding only in the last few years a renewed interest. This discontinuation did not contribute to the development of a structured, comprehensive research corpus, leading to the emergence of many gaps: for example, few empirical evidence and managerial applications have been provided. In general, it now appears important, to apply research tools proper of marketing, management, and consumer research to this specific context. Such kind of research efforts could represent an important step toward the development of an integrated framework, encompassing both the existing theoretical contributions with an interpretive managerial framework.

Anyway, the current state of things appears very encouraging. Research is quite recent, and very active (e.g., Irimias, 2016); marketing and management scholars are increasingly adopting analytical approaches to deepen several aspects of religious tourism (e.g., entrepreneurial initiatives, managing techniques, see below), providing at the same time empirical evidence. The emergence of academic journals entirely devoted to religious tourism appears as a strongly positive signal of an increased interest toward this specific context. Marketing and management research can produce important insights on this specific form of tourism, both contributing to the advancements of, for example, tourism management and consumer science, and offering at the same time valuable insights to market operators. In some cases, market operators in this specific context, can play a really crucial role in the development of local communities involved in religious tourism (i.e., developing communities in Eastern European Countries).

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