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**Article**

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# EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT AFFECTS ROMANIAN RELIGIOUS TOURISM: THE CASE OF ORADEA CITY

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**Ada Mirela Tomescu**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the critical factors responsible for the success of religious tourism in Romania, meaning a sustainable success. In the special case of religious tourism, this seems much easier to accomplish, but in Romania there is a lack of studies to show this.

The research outcomes show that the critical/decisive/determinants success factors in religious tourism depends on: the attractiveness of the location, the avoidance of excessive exposure of the elements of the religious offer, the limitation of the commercial activity, and how participants behave.

This paper is important, both for the assessment of religious tourism and for the possibility of the tourist destinations sustainable development strategy. The results of this research reveal that decisions should not be taken alone on the basis of a single set of factors, but that they should be taken together, taking into account all the factors involved. Also results indicate a focus on all stakeholders, highlighting current identified trends.

The work is focused on how the experiences of religious tourism are evaluated, and it is followed by some conclusions and limitations. This study being a preliminary work, in the future, the research should address the relative importance of these factors for different segments of the religious tourism consumers.

**Keywords:** critical success factors, assessment, sustainable development.

*Jel Classification:* L83; Z12

## **INTRODUCTION**

Religious tourism is subordinated to permanent education and encourages learning through travel. More than that, at first, it was the trip. Traveling people began to expand their horizons of knowledge and to seek answers to the great questions that have always stirred up the human mind, questions that make religion "What is happiness?", "Is there life after death?", "What is it wisdom?". This is how religious tourism was born, as a specific form of tourism, whose participants are "motivated either partially or exclusively

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by religious reasons" (Rinschede 1992). At the heart of these religious motives, according to Lewis, there is a "longing to heaven", although some may find it difficult to identify it either because of lack of education or lack of awareness (Lewis 1997).

The development of tourism in general has attracted also the development, of religious tourism, in particular. An eloquent aspect is the pilgrimage phenomenon that was estimated to have attracted 240 million people in 2000 (Jackowski 2000). Though, practically tourism interacts with religious life and religious institutions all over the world (Bremer 2005), religious tourism is not researched enough (Vukonic 2006). An explanation would be that atheism is attracting more and more followers, both globally and at a European level. In spite of the fact that religious tourism is the oldest form of tourism due to the concept of pilgrimage and the fact that this phenomenon has been going on for thousands of years (Pohner, Berki, and Ratz 2009 apud Sledge 2017), a synthesis of the statistical data for religious tourism all over the world are very difficult to obtain (Sledge 2017). According to the Eurobarometer Poll (2016), 19% of Spaniards, 24% of Danes, 26% of Slovenians, 27% of Germans and Belgians, 34% of Swedes, and 40% of the French, claim to not believe in "any sort of spirit, God, or life-force".

The Romanians are among the most religious peoples of the world (Voicu 2007). National statistics show that only 0.2% of Romanians declared themselves "without religion" or atheists at the 2011 Census, and that more than 250,000 Romanians travel every year for religious purposes throughout the country (INS 2015). However, the number of studies related to religious Romanian tourism is rather small. These studies either investigate Romanian religious tourism as a whole (Badulescu and Ban 2005; Vorjak and Gut, 2009; Angheluța, Strambu-Dima, and Zaharia, 2009; Alecu 2010) or certain aspects of it (Stanciulescu and Tirca, 2010; Chiș, Bacila and Ciornea 2012; Pohoța, Socoliuc, and Bostan 2013; Cristea, Apostol, and Dosescu 2015) emphasizes on the one hand, the particularity of the field and, on the other hand, the precaution and the skills with which must be act.

Practical, there are people discussing the potential and opportunity that we have to give to religious tourism, but point out that if things do not happen in an organized and controlled manner, we could get into the position of losers. Therefore, a study that aims to take another step in identifying and understanding the critical factors responsible for the viable success of religious tourism in Romania is, in our opinion, more than necessary. Starting from the understanding of the key factors of success in tourism (Baker and Cameron 2008), this article presents the results of a research undertaken to detach generalizable lessons for Romanian religious tourism. Thus, in a first stage, with the help of the specialized literature, the determinants of the success of religious tourism are presented. In the second stage, the determinants identified in the case of our city (Oradea - that is a tourist destination in the West of Romania), are analyzed in terms of their characteristics and their links with the fulfillment of the purpose of religious tourism. Finally, the implications for the sustainable development of religious tourism in Romania are highlighted.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1. Understanding religious tourism

On the tourism market, the tourist consumer is increasingly looking for unique and specific experiences in the visited destinations, which implies, for example, unique landscapes or unique cultural attractions (Jones 1998, McCabe 2000, Baker and Cameron 2008; Meng, Tepanon, and Uysal 2008). That is why, in the case of religious tourism, a first question which appears almost naturally is: "What does the consumer of a religious tourism experience really want?" (Holmberg 1993; Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003, Timothy and Olsen 2006). Hereinafter, in our research we will follow this logic, in order to find the best answer. The philosophy we put into practice, depends on what we are aware of, or what we learn from experience. In these circumstances and due to of the aforementioned, we believe that first of all, we need to see what economists understand by religious tourism, as specialists of the material, and afterward the philosophers, as specialists of the spiritual (Jauhari and Sanjeev 2010; Imon 2017). As is known for economists, religious tourism is "a socio-economic phenomenon involving relationships and activities that are based on a spiritual motivation and that involves calling for the place where they occur for at least one night of accommodation." Instead, for a church man, such as the patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the majority religious faith in Romania, "every time we go on a pilgrimage to worship in cathedrals, monasteries or churches, we pray earnestly to the saints to guide our way, and try to resemble them, as much as possible through our good thoughts and deeds". Our approach is one that lies somewhere in the middle, generated by the caution of not mingle the sacred with the profane, the material considerations with the spiritual ones, a stage objectives with the purpose of life, and the like. We had in mind that the fact that religion is extremely well anchored in Romanian mentality, but also the fact that a religious offer - too ostentatious - can get more confusing, disoriented, than clarify up this mental, so besieged in this era of consumerism. The question, which is fully justified at this point, would be about what kind of consumerism, do we speak, in the case of religious tourism. Oxford English Dictionary presents two very different meanings of the word "consumerism": a. the positive one - "protecting and promoting consumers' interests" and b. a negative one - "preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods", we could add an excessive preoccupation. In this context, we agree with the "discerning" and the approach of religious tourism proposed by authors such as Angheluța, Strambu-Dima and Zaharia (2009) and Alecu (2010).

### 1.2. Challenges for religious tourism

As economists, our research mainly focused on those types of activities and relationships that were born on the occasion of practicing religious tourism (Russel 1999; San Filippo 2001) in the trend, respectively identified by the literature as being most susceptible to profound changes. Based on the factors or vectors of change mentioned by Jones (1998), we adapted them to the particularities of Romanian religious tourism as follows:

- *travel type* - short distances, based on the organization of events and experiencing;
- *destination type* - close to, and generated by the desire to have repeated experiences, even if shorter in duration;
- *product type* - accessible regardless of the season and offered in the option "everything in the same place";
- *strategy type* - focusing on characteristics, advantages and benefits, not on the number of tourists, also on the time and quality requirements of consumers who represents "the early majority";
- *community control* - increasing the degree of involvement and evaluation of the ethical, economic and environmental effects taken as a whole;
- *financial realism* - investments based on detailed studies on the necessity, opportunity and possible reaction of the market;
- *interacting with the tourist* - moving the emphasis to the relationship, promoting tourist packages that contain unique experiences, e.g. cultivating virtues or acquiring a certain skill only in a certain context offered by the religious tourist destination;
- *integration of new communication technologies* - creative adaptation of technologies to the needs of religious tourism related to the conception and presentation of the offer, communication with potential tourists, creation of databases;
- *segment and targeting* - offering attractive tourist packages that can be self-supporting financially and attracting potential tourists through messages and appropriate channels to each market segment;
- *changing the standardization-customization report* - we are considering personalizing the message sent to the client, direct communication, working with the tourist we see as "our seed", in order to conceive the offer, to interpret the feed-back and to take action at the level of the religious tourist destination.

In conclusion, we believe that only by answering to these challenges, the religious tourism can develop sustainably and can fulfil the most ambitious function of tourism, namely the development of the human person.

### 1.3. Research question, conceptual background and relationship framework

In a world that despite unprecedented material progress seems to have lost its compass, we can ask: How could religious tourism help to improve the people involved in, and the surrounding world? Can the balance be restored in a global world where the population is in such an accelerated growth and resources are so rapidly exhausted?

Obviously, we believe that this is only possible with a perspective that takes spirituality into account. The meanings in which the words "*spirit*" and "*spiritual*" are used according to the Oxford English Dictionary, thus: *spiritual* is often used to signify only the material contradiction (e.g. *not concerned with material values or pursuits*). Some authors use the word *spirit* to name the soul, a non-physical element that is given to every human being when born (e.g. *The non-physical part of a person which is the seat of emotions and character; the soul.*) The Christian authors use *spirit* and *spiritual* (for believers of Orthodox rite: "*duh*" and "*duhovnicesc*", terms that are not fully translatable

into English) to name the type of life that raises into rational beings when they voluntarily submit to the Divinity (e.g. short for Holy Spirit; and relating to religion or religious belief). These meanings will help us in identifying the type of understanding of the spirit with which people operate - religious tourism consumers, looking for *happiness* or *well-being*. The concept of happiness, of well-being, has its roots in Ancient Greek philosophy. Over time, two forms have crystallized: hedonistic well-being, and eudaimonic one. The state of *hedonistic well-being*, appears after an abundance of positive feelings and pleasures, and the eudaimonic state, the *eudemonic well-being* as a result of pursuit the practice of life purpose, and the cultivation of virtues conducive to happiness. Currently, it is appreciated that as society moves towards a philosophy of recycling, reuse and increasing sustainability, achieving the "well-being" state and prosperity is better suited to an eudaemonic positioning (Hawkes 2006). We believe this is more than is obvious through the relationship of type economy-ecology-ethics. Moreover, it is appreciated that man can only be fulfilled as part of the whole, and this is viable through relationships. This is also quite logical, because we are not living singular but interdependent, and this is behold how the religious tourism consumer or the relationship with him is a continuous challenge of knowledge. The way we see the typology of these relationships in the case of religious tourism is given in the following table:

**Table 1.** Types of offers to consumers in religious tourism

Feature	Occasional transaction	Functional relationship	Strategic partnership
Time horizon	Short term	Medium term	Long term
The concern about the other party	Low	Medium	High
Investing in relationship	Low	Medium	High
The nature of the relationship	Connect with...; Positional negotiation	Coordination; Rational negotiation	Cooperation; Integrative negotiation
The predominant form of consumer participation at the spiritual level	Emotional participation	Rational participation	Volitional participation
Desirable finality at the spiritual level	Spirit sensitized (moved by the feeling part)	Aware of spirit (moved by thinking part)	Regenerated spirit (moved by chosen part)

Source: authors based on Dweyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987, 11–27.

## 2. THE DESIGN OF RESEARCH

In the case of city of Oradea, we have been studying religious tourism over ten years. Oradea, is a cosmopolitan city, characterized by cultural and religious diversity, which has always been an important reference point for Western part of Romania. Due to the development of the last years, in November 2017, it became the country's tenth city in terms of population, it reached 221,000 inhabitants. According to the National Statistics Institute of Romania, the total number of tourists who stayed at least one night in the city in 2017 was 223,356, 17.5% more than in 2016. Oradea can be proud to have at least 60 of churches, special as style and architecture. In a walk around the center, in one square kilometer, we can find an Orthodox church, a Catholic church, a Reformed church, a Neo-Protestant one and two synagogues.

Our approach is interpretative (Girod-Seville and Peret 1999). In order to understand the phenomenon of religious tourism and its evolution over time we analyzed a set of defining elements present in specialized literature (Holmberg 1993; Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003; Timothy and Olsen 2006). In order to ensure the necessary objectivity of our qualitative research we used multiple sources of information. Data used in our analysis originated from records, documents, participants' observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in five churches from the city of Oradea. Starting with 2008, we have studied the issue of religious tourism in Oradea. In 2017 we conducted a directional research. As well as we saw in the literature (Yin 1990), we have used several sources as can be seen from table 2.

**Table 2.** Sources of information on religious tourism factors in Oradea

Period	From 2008 to md 2017	Form md 2017 to first trimester of 2018
Data archives (records, documents)	yes	yes
Participants' observations	yes	yes
Semi-structured interviews	no	yes

During collecting, analyzing and presenting the data we met the criteria set by Yin (1990) and Robson (2002) to ensure scientific requirements. Data originated from records, documents and participants' observations were used to select the right persons for the eight semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were representatives of religious denominations in Oradea involved in leadership (5 persons) and representatives of local authorities involved in the field of religious tourism (3 persons). By their natures, the interviews, were conversational. We did not use default questions. Instead, we encouraged the interviewees to speak freely, about the situation, activity and aspirations of the confession / institutions they represent with reference to the present and future religious tourism in Oradea. Over the time of all the interviews, we had just follow-up questions, but always these took into account, the requirement of non-influencing the interviewee. Each interview lasted for about an hour and took place in the spaces where the interviewees are working.

### 3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In the following, we will summarize the results of our research. First, we will present four cases of spiritual establishments, succinctly characterized by their contribution to the development of religious tourism in Oradea. Then we will summarize the results of the interviews in order to identify the key factors affecting the religious tourism in Oradea.

#### 3.1. The illustration with cases contributing to the success of religious tourism in Oradea

The four cases of religious settlements that we will present here are the reference points for religious tourism in Oradea (Pop 2013), being as their valuable, rare, inimitable and well-organized tourism resource (VRIO). This appreciation is using the theoretical

framework developed by Barney (2001) and adapted to Romanian tourism by Botezat and Benea (2012). Summarizing (VRIO): a. (V) The value refers to the characteristic of the tourist resource to exploit the opportunities of the environment; b. (R) Rarity has to do with the presence of the tourist resource among the direct competitors; c. (I) Inimitable refers to how much it would cost or how easy it would be to get a tourist resource; d. (O) The way of organization is related to the extent to which the resource is used by the bidder, or how the organization of activities allows an efficient and effective use of the tourism resource.

In our opinion, the success of the religious tourism in Oradea depends, first of all, on an adequate promotion and management of this kind of resources that are briefly presented in the following.

#### Case 1: The Moon Church

*The Moon Church (built 1784-1790) is a stately building situated in the central square of the city (Unirii Square). This renovated market, which costed 4 million euros, convey the atmosphere at the beginning of the 20th century. The church is built in late Baroque style and has over 40-meter high tower. In the year 1793, the globe mechanism, indicating the moon phases in the sky, was placed in the tower and is operating with the same precision of over two centuries!*

#### Case 2: The Palace of the Roman-Catholic Episcopate

*The Palace of the Roman Catholic Episcopacy (built 1751-1799) or it is known as Baroque Palace in Oradea, a reduced replica of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna. This is one of the most valuable edifices built in Baroque style on Romanian territory and probably in South-Eastern Europe. Just like the two other nearby buildings, the Roman-Catholic Basilica of Saint Mary and the Corridor of Canons, the palace was built in the second half of the 18th century. This Baroque-style complex representative for Europe has in the middle a 117-room palace, interior walls painted with wonderful frescoes and a detail, as a curiosity, the ones 365 windows, one for each day of the year, but this is a legend, in fact there are 282 windows on the three floors of the monumental building.*

#### Case 3: The Neolog Synagogue "Zion"

*The Neologue Jewish Synagogue (built 1877-1878) entered the tourist circuit in 2015, after it was rehabilitated through An European, Romanian-Hungarian cross-border project. The rehabilitation was worth about 1.5 million euros. It is a monumental synagogue with a square plan. The eclectic styl has elements belonging mainly to the Italian Renaissance, its exterior and interior decorations are Moorish. The monumental building has a capacity of 1000 seats. At its inauguration in Novembre 2015, the bottle of parchment dedicated to Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria in 1896 on the occasion of the first rehabilitation of the synagogue was opened.*

#### Case 4: The Baptist Church "Emmanuel"

*The Baptist Church "Emmanuel" is a recent construction, built after 1990 in contemporary style. We mention this is the second largest Baptist church in Europe as construction. Inside there is an auditorium, dedicated to religious services with a capacity of 2,700 seats, but also several annexe rooms dedicated to various support activities. The church is renowned for its divine services and its choir. Adjacent to the church, stand three education institutions (a primary school, a high school and also a university, with the same name, that stand at the exit of the city).*

These four establishments contribute greatly to the success of religious tourism in Oradea, as can be seen from Table 3.



**Table 3.** Four examples of resources contributing to the success of religious tourism in Oradea

Name of religious touristic resource	Contribution to the success of religious tourism in Oradea
Moon Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ a focal point in the central square of the city that captures both the Orthodox believers and tourists;</li> <li>✓ the unique mechanism that works with the same precision for over 200 years;</li> <li>✓ adequate framing into the renovated central city square;</li> <li>✓ a reference element among the 21 churches of the Orthodox rite in Oradea.</li> </ul>
The Palace of the Roman-Catholic Episcopate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ attraction for Catholic rite parishioners, as well as for tourists in transit;</li> <li>✓ one of the most important Baroque buildings in Europe;</li> <li>✓ intrinsic value and of architectural and historical heritage;</li> <li>✓ it is a reference element through 15 other churches of the same rite in Oradea, one of them in the Oradea Fortress, which is known as the place of the Bible in Oradea, but also as first European astronomical observer and the place of the first zero meridian (established here between 1464–1667). It is said that the maps for Voyages of Christopher Columbus were originated from here.</li> </ul>
The Neolog Jewish Synagogue "Zion"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ attraction for the Jews having roots in Oradea (33% of city population before the Second World War) and for tourists;</li> <li>✓ historical and architectural testimony;</li> <li>✓ rehabilitation and rendering to the small Jewish community remaining in the city, but also to the entire local community;</li> <li>✓ also, organized as a multifunctional hall for cultural events (exhibitions, book launch and concerts, including the traditional music of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe, Klezmer music).</li> </ul>
The Baptist Church "Emmanuel"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ attraction for residents, Neo-Protestant believers, that are at work, or in transit;</li> <li>✓ the second largest Neo-Protestant church in Europe</li> <li>✓ restores the idea of school development (primary, high school, university) beside the church;</li> <li>✓ a reference element for the 21 Neo-Protestant various churches in Oradea.</li> </ul>

These four religious settlements represent an important element of the development of religious tourism in Oradea, which are the resources that can be used under the terms of knowing the factors that affect religious tourism. Identifying these factors and assessing their impact, both positive and negative, was the goal of interviews, along with the originated date from records, documents and participants' observations.

### 3.2. Determinants success factors in Oradea religious tourism

In table 4 we presented the result (authors) of the analysis. We started from the factors influencing religious tourism identified at national level as strengths and weaknesses in the study conducted by Vorzsak and Gut (2009). Then we processed the data from our study and inserted the conclusions in column three. In the fourth column we inserted the comments of the interviewees.

**Table 4.** Determinants factors in Oradea religious tourism

Factor (characteristic of religious touristic patrimony)	The identified competitive position at national level (Romania)	The competitive position at local level (Oradea)	The comments of interviewee
Geographical distribution	Strenghts (++)	Strenghts (++)	"Balanced"; "Possible to cover by walk"; "Concentrically displayed"
Originality	Strenghts (++)	Strenghts (++)	"Uniqueness"; "Heritage"; "Value"; "Attractiveness"
Number and diversity	Strenghts (+)	Strenghts (++)	"One to 3000 inhabitants"; "I do not think there is anything unrepresented"
Accommodation capacity	Weaknesess (-)	Strenghts (+)	"Increasing"; "Diversity"; "Maybe too commercial"
Co-operation with local authorities	Weaknesess (-)	Strenghts (+)	"Good cooperation"; "Constructive"; "Interest in partnership"; "Limits the excessive trade"
Degree of modern facilities	Weaknesess (- -)	Strenghts (+)	"Concern for modernization"; "The use of modern technology"; "Develpoment and spread online"
Media-attention	Weaknesess (-)	Weaknesess (-)	"Too little focused on positive elements"; "Tributary to the negative sensation"; "Subservient to economic interests"
Accesibility	Weaknesess (- -)	Weaknesess (-)	"Limited"; "Neo-Protestants are not very interested in religious tourism"
Guides, visiting hours	Weaknesess (- -)	Weaknesess (-)	"Limited groups"; "We do not offer guidance"; "We can not afford too much access inside"

Our study highlights the fact that Oradea could represent a successful case in religious tourism in Romania. Thus, while at the national level only three success factors were identified in the case of Oradea city were identified six factors. Moreover, the braking factors also have a lower impact.

The analysis of data, the interpretation of the interviews and the verification of the hypotheses of previous studies (Stanciulescu and Tirca 2010; Gallarza 2009; Cristea, Apostol, and Dosescu 2015) led us to the conclusion that the critical determinants of success factors in religious tourism depend on: the location, the avoidance of excessive exposure of the elements of the religious offer, the limitation of commercial activity, and how participants behave.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the research reveal that religious tourism in Oradea is determined by several factors, but the crucial success factors in religious tourism depends on "four generic groups": the attractiveness of the location, the avoidance of excessive exposure of the elements of the religious offer, the limitation of the commercial activity, and how participants behave. Whereas the attractiveness of the site is mentioned by all eight interviewees, the other three factors are perceived and evaluated differently by the representative people involved in the religious tourism coordination and / or the

leadership of representative religious institutions in Oradea. Thus, the seculars, representatives of the local authorities with attributions in the field of religious tourism, those involved in the coordination of religious tourism attach the greatest importance to avoiding the excessive exposure of the elements of the religious tourist offer, as well as to limiting of the commercial activity; while the religious, those representative with attributions in religious denominations in Oradea, that are involved in leadership and coordination activity of representative religious organizations, also representatives of religious denominations involved in the leadership of churches in Oradea, grant the greatest importance to the behaviour of tourists.

In our research we identified interdependent factors that can be easily included in one of the four groups, but also factors that may belong simultaneously to several groups. For this reason, a categorization of these is quite difficult. However, the groups identified by us are related to the *attractiveness, credibility and transformative power of the religious experience*. This is also the *novelty element of our research*.

In conclusion, we believe that this article is important, both for the assessment of religious tourism and for the development of tourist destinations sustainable development strategy. The results of this research reveal that decisions should not be taken alone on the basis of a single set of factors, but that they should be taken together, taking into account all the factors involved. Also results indicate a focus on all stakeholders, highlighting current trends.

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