



Exploring religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem: The intersection of Abrahamic religions



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ABSTRACT

By considering the importance of religious tourism for travel and the tourism industry, this study aims to identify religious tourists' experiences in Jerusalem, as one of the most important holy cities. By a survey, 848 data were collected from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious tourists. Results showed that religious tourism experience was a multi-faceted construct, which consists of engaging mentally, discovering new things, interacting & belonging, connecting spiritually & emotionally, and relaxing & finding peace dimensions. By using these dimensions, perceived experience differences of tourists were examined depending on religion. Moreover, religious tourism experience was identified to significantly affect overall tourist satisfaction with Jerusalem. The study concluded with discussion of the findings and their implications.

1. Introduction

As one of the earliest forms of tourism, religious travels still represent an important market segment in the tourism and travel industry. For spreading the social and economic benefits that religious tourism offers, authorities of the religious destinations need to understand the behavioural patterns of tourists. Many researchers admit that every market understanding starts with identifying tourist motivations and continues by discovering the experiences at the visited destination (Van Vuuren & Slabbert, 2011; Weaver, McCleary, Han, & Blosser, 2009). Interestingly, despite the global importance and popularity of religious tourism, the numbers of researches that investigate the experiences of religious tourists are still scarce. Hence, the religious tourism literature needs to be expanded through the additional studies and the wider scientific perspectives.

Literature review indicates that scholars generally focus on the exploration and comparison of different type of travellers' experiences, such as tourists and pilgrims (Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015; Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015). In addition, the results of many studies showed that religious tourists with different religions may have different behavioural patterns (Bailey & Sood, 1993; Essoo & Dibb, 2004). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, to date, behavioural patterns of religious tourists who are the members of different religions, visiting the same destination have not been compared yet.

In light of the importance of religious tourism, and the lack of research about the experiences of religious tourists, this study aims to examine Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious tourists' experiences in Jerusalem through a survey. Jerusalem is purposely selected as being a unique holy city recognized by all Abrahamic religions. This historic city not only owns important holy places; it is also the global meeting point of religious tourists. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to highlight comparative religious tourist experiences in the same destination, and to contribute to the related literature from this perspective. More broadly, the objectives of the study are: (1) to explore and to compare the demographic and trip-related characteristics of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious tourists visiting Jerusalem; (2) to measure and to compare the religious tourism experiences of these groups; (3) to identify how the impact of religious tourism experience on overall satisfaction with destination may differ according to religion differences.

The remaining parts of the paper are organized as follows. In the second section, a literature review about religious tourism is presented. In the third section, tourist experience and religious tourism experience are discussed from various perspectives used in other disciplines. Afterwards, the methodology of the research is introduced, and the obtained results are summarized. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, the main limitations of the study, and some recommendations for future studies.

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2. Religious tourism

Religious travel, which is the oldest form of tourism (Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016) is a journey through spiritual locations for secular or religious reasons (Vukonić, 1996). In principle, tourist activities in the visited destinations such as sightseeing and recreation may motivate religious tourists, in addition to religious motives (e.g. the quest to feel the divine power, to be healed, and to be blessed) (Božić, Spasojević, Vujičić, & Stamenković, 2016). Hence, religious tourist motivation is a multi-faceted construct. With the purpose of exploring the underlying travel motivations of religious tourists, many studies have been conducted by the researchers. For example, according to Griffin (2007) and Blackwell (2007), religious tourists are mostly motivated by the desire to learn new things and create spiritual memories in their lives, besides to religious wishes and healing willingness.

In general, most religious tourism research consists of religion based case studies performed in various destinations. Hence, as stated by Bond et al. (2015), religious tourism literature mainly involves the identification and comparison of the experiences of different travellers (e.g. pilgrims and tourists) through collecting data from a destination. Whether focusing on different religions or destinations, the common discussion themes in the literature can be grouped under three headlines, namely: the conceptualization of religious tourism, the evolution of religious tourism, and the economic and cultural impacts of religious tourism. In the following paragraphs, each of these discussion themes is presented, respectively.

Previous studies about the conceptualization of religious tourism attempt to define this phenomenon and to clarify its differentiating features from the other tourism types. A quick literature review, in this context, shows a debate about the overlapping use of the terms spiritual tourism, religious tourism, and pilgrimage tourism (Griffin, 2007). For example, some researchers (e.g. Galzacorta, Guereño-Omil, Makua, Iriberrri, & Santomà, 2016) use the terms spiritual and religious tourism, interchangeably. However, other researchers argue that these are the distinct constructs, meaning different tourism types in terms of varying tourist motivations, visitor beliefs, and the most visited places (Heelas, 1998; Kato & Prozano, 2017). In addition, researchers have documented the distinction between religious and pilgrimage tourism by identifying the participant characteristics. For example, differing from pilgrimage tourists who must fulfil certain rituals in the sacred places, religious tourists might not have a religious belief at all (Galzacorta et al., 2016; Kujawa, 2017). Moreover, religious tourists may want to visit a destination for reasons of curiosity or admiration, while also benefiting from some supporting services offered in the area, such as tours and recreation activities (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016).

Another debate about the conceptualization of religious tourism is related to the distinctions between pilgrims and tourists. Although, Smith (1992) suggests that pilgrims and tourists can be placed at opposite ends of a spectrum (i.e. from sacred to secular), the researchers (e.g. Ostrowski, 2000) agree that it is difficult to make such a distinction for contemporary travellers. While, a pilgrim, apart from his/her religious rituals, may also engage in non-spiritual activities (e.g. visiting touristic attractions and shopping), a tourist can participate in spiritual activities whilst on holiday (e.g. visiting a holy place by taking a daily tour). This implies that, especially in the current post-secular world, “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 20).

Regarding the evolution of religious tourism, two major changings can be observed, namely: the motivations of travellers, and the perceived essence of religious destinations (Heelas, 1998; Okamoto, 2015). For example, people who visit religious destinations nowadays, often consist of secular travellers (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Hence, contemporary religious tourists are possibly motivated by various other factors, in addition to pilgrimage motives (Blackwell, 2007; Hyde & Harman, 2011). Another evolution in religious tourism involves the perceived essence of visited destinations. Although, certain religious

locations are addressed in the medieval era as places of pilgrimage (Blackwell, 2007; Collins-Kreiner, 2007), in the present, the locations that are recognized as religious tourism destinations, do not necessarily have the characteristics of a sacred site or pilgrimage area. For example, the home of a famous person or his/her statue can become a spiritual place for people. According to Timothy and Conover (2006), rapid technological and social developments in people's lives might lead to such types of evolutions in religious tourism.

The exploration of the social and economic impact of religious tourism has been another area of discussion for the scholars. Many researchers admit that religious tourism, which represents a global market segment consisting of 330 million international tourists (UNWTO, 2014), offers significant and positive economic impacts for visited destinations (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques, 2018; Kouchi, Nezhad, & Kiani, 2016). In addition, Rinschede (1992) states that religious tourism contributes to infrastructural developments, as well as increasing recruitment opportunities in host destinations. Especially in some countries, religious tourism constitutes an important part of the tourism industry. For example, in 2009, 44.5% of the export earnings of Indian tourism were from religious tourists' spending (Bollaram, 2017). In contrast to its potential economic contributions, Vukonić (2002) points to the commercialization of religious services and sacred sites as a threat.

The economic exchanges and social interactions between local people and religious tourists may also lead to cultural transformations in host destinations (Joseph & Kavoori, 2001). For example, local religious rituals, which are performed by a small local group, may turn into international festivals (Shinde, 2007). However, local people and tourists can interpret such kinds of changes, differently. From the local people's perspective, such events may have negative impacts on cultural heritages, such as an increase in cultural degeneration. From the tourists' perspective, unique local cultures enrich the value of destinations. For example, one of the most important religious events in the Northern Portugal, which is called ‘festa’, has made a significant contribution to the traditional and cultural identity of this destination (Fernandes, Melo, & Cardoso, 2016).

3. Tourist experience and studies on religious tourist experience

Tourist experience is “a socially constructed term, whereby the meaning of the tourist experience is associated with multiple interpretations from social, environmental, and activity components of the overall experience” (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009, p. 24). In a recent literature review, Adhikari and Bhattacharya (2016) categorize the antecedents, formation, and implications of customer experience into two main streams in the marketing field. While the first stream examines experience as a product attribute or a complete product, the second investigates experience through customer interactions with the physical environment or people. Hence, it would be logical to examine tourist experience research depending on these two streams and to present a review of studies conducted in the areas of economy, marketing, psychology, and sociology/anthropology (e.g. Sheng & Chen, 2013; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011).

In traditional economic transactions, customers may obtain products/services in an environment where businesses offer and filter experiences through expectations and mental images relating to the operator and other corresponding products/services (Komppula, 2006). However, as noted by Pine and Gilmore (2013), the nature of economic offerings being sold by companies has shifted in the age of post-modernity from products and goods to experiences. Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva, and Greenleaf (1984) therefore proposed that the ‘world of products’ perspective should be changed into the ‘world of experience’ by putting a new emphasis on the customers' role (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). According to the customers' point-of-view, “customizing a good turns into a service, customizing a service turns into an experience and customizing an experience turns into a transformation” in today's

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