

2020

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Recommended Citation

Yasin, Raheel Mr; Jauhar, Junaimah; Abdul Rahim, Noor Fareen; Namoco, Sarah; and Enaizan Bataineh, Mohammad Saleh (2020) "COVID-19 and Religious Tourism: an overview of impacts and implications," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 8: Iss. 7, Article 15.
Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss7/15>

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COVID-19 and Religious Tourism: an overview of impacts and implications

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Tourism and its allied industries (airline and hospitality) have been hit hard by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) globally. This paper specifically explores the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on religious tourism and aims to enhance the literature; it also aims to provide a path for future research work, in particular empirical research or future research that covers the effects of this pandemic on destinations. This paper is built on the fusion of news published by different news agencies to support an overview of related literature on religious tourism and tourism management. This paper confirms that COVID-19 has affected religious travellers worldwide. The rapid spread of the virus and international travel restrictions by many countries are important factors. To drive future tourism activities, new forms of tourism like smart tourism need to be introduced. These changes will force businesses to reevaluate service design and distribution channels. Industry professionals and policymakers should concentrate on tailoring travel plan to the experiences of tourists. The recommendations can help to relive outbreak-related tension, deliver newly elevated experiences to tourists, and partially mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the religious tourism industry. These recommendations can also apply to the global tourism industry more broadly. Tourism scholars and practitioners should give proper consideration to this tragedy and how it might inform industry and social practices. This and other public health crises provide sterling opportunities for the industry to observe its effects on the environment, climate, and travellers themselves in a holistic way. This paper probably represents a frontier review, analysing critically the likely effects of COVID-19 on religious tourism practices in the coming future. Along with this it also represents the effect of COVID-19 on other industries e.g. hotel and airline, which are the supporting hand of the tourism industry.

Key Words: COVID-19, religious tourism, tourism destination, impacts.

Introduction

On December 2019 the World Health Organization country office in China was informed of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. This disease afterwards was given the name of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Early in the course of

this disease, 41 patients were hospitalised in China with positive coronavirus (COVID-19) results (Huang *et al.*, 2020). This virus quickly spread in the Wuhan region. In the early stage of this virus, no preemptive steps were taken to forestall its spread and precautions were widely disregarded. On 30, January, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency (Medscape, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Chinese government developed the strategy of containing the virus by locking down the entire city of Wuhan and thereby controlling it by mid-February (ECDC, 2020). However, by then, this virus had already been transmitted to all continents through global air transport, and in mid-March, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

Due to its novelty, it was very difficult for medical experts to recognise the symptoms, transmission, risk factors, mortality rate, treatment and prevention from this virus (Zheng, Goh & Wen, 2020). Due to this, it was transmitted from Wuhan across the globe. The COVID-19 outbreak got attention from mainstream media and the general public when the WHO declared a health emergency and instructed all countries to take necessary steps to protect their populations from this virus. In an effort to reduce the spread of the virus, most European countries followed the Chinese policy of lockdown to reduce personal contact (Chen *et al.*, 2020). At its peak, Chinese citizens were enforced to protect themselves against COVID-19 by staying at home, adopting social distance and avoiding unnecessary social contact (Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2020).

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV) (The New York Times, 2020b). Coronavirus (COVID-19) is easily transmitted from one person to another through respiratory droplets. Recently COVID-19 was identified in infected patients' saliva. Thus, saliva plays a crucial role in transmission from one person to another, and noninvasive salivary diagnostics is proving an efficient and affordable point-of-care platform to diagnose COVID-19 infection quickly and at an early stage (Sabino-Silva, Jardim, & Siqueira, 2020).

Up till now at the time of writing this paper, 225,526,230 people were infected from this virus and out of these 789,143 succumbed to death (Worldometer, 2020). The most affected countries include the USA, Brazil, India, Russia, and South Africa. Due to limited testing facilities in many countries, the actual figure of total cases remains underestimated and unknown. Globally, almost every individual and every country are affected by this

pandemic as it has interrupted world economic, political and socio-cultural systems (Mansour *et al.*, 2020; Sigala, 2020). It has reduced the global economy by 5.2% (The World Bank, 2020). Many countries are using different nonpharmaceutical remedies e.g. lockdown, home isolation, self-quarantine, social distancing, wearing of masks and others to control its spread e.g. Malaysia, Pakistan, USA, Italy (Business Insider, 2020).

Over the past 40 years, the world has experienced several major epidemics / pandemics, but none as extreme as COVID-19 which has had a severe effect on the global economy. While it is not as infectious as measles and does not kill an infected person like Ebola, people can begin transmitting the virus a few days before symptoms become evident (incubation period) (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Rothe *et al.*, 2020). As a result, infected people transmit COVID-19 before they become symptomatic and begin to take precautionary measures like self-quarantine, social distancing, wearing mask coverings. Limited testing facilities in many countries and unidentified carriers (undiagnosed, asymptomatic infected patients) are major factors in the spread of this virus (Li *et al.*, 2020).

People from all walks of life including but not limited to students, housewives, government employees have been affected, resulting in closure of educational institutions, closure of offices, cancellation of business and educational workshops, cancelling of concerts, tradeshow, the summer Olympics and bans on get-togethers.

After the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the WHO, all across the globe countries restricted regional and local travel immediately. Social activities were restricted, and the public was instructed to stay at home (The New York Times, 2020a). Many events, conferences, conventions, and sports leagues were cancelled or postponed, which had an adverse effect on national economies, including tourism (international and domestic tourism), air transport, public transport, hotels and motels and sports events like the postponed Tokyo Olympics (NZ Herald, 2020).

Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the COVID-19 outbreak effects religious tourism. Since COVID-19 has become a global challenge, researchers from different

areas of expertise have already, or are now studying the detrimental effects of the virus. Researchers in the tourism area also have shown their interest to explore the effect of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. This particular study scrutinises the effects of the COVID outbreak on religious tourism which is little explored by researchers heretofore.

Methodology

The method for this study is an in-depth analysis of relevant literature. The search for suitable studies included four steps. First, a list of keywords was developed, including COVID-19, tourism, religious tourism, tourism destination, COVID-19 and Tourism, COVID-19 and Religious tourism. Secondly, Computerised database searches were undertaken using ISI Web of Science, Business Source Premier, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Thirdly the following well renowned journals were subjected to manual search: *Annals of Tourism Research*, *the Journal of Sustainable Tourism*; *Tourism Management*, *Tourism Planning & Development* and *the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*. Fourth, literature was reviewed from major news agencies like CNN, BBC, Aljazeera, Arab News, different magazines and reports published by the WHO and IATA through using keywords in Google.

COVID-19 and the Tourism Industry

The tourism industry plays a significant role in the economic growth of many countries and is one of the world's largest employers (Chang, McAleer, & Ramos, 2020). COVID-19 has impacted heavily on international and domestic tourism, affected all industries, but most particularly the airline and hospitality industries, which are interlinked with each other. This is mainly due to restriction in many countries on national and international flight operations and closures of land borders. In the first quarter of 2020, airline industry revenue dropped by US\$314 billion, a 55% decline compared to 2019. In the first quarter of 2020, passenger demand fell to 50 % of the 2019 figure (-37% in 24 March estimate) (IATA, 2020a).

In the history of aviation, 2020 will go down as the worst year financially. Domestic and international passenger

demand is expected to fall by 48% as compared to 2019 and the industry is losing \$230 million per day on average which amounts to \$84.3 billion for the whole year. Revenues will fall 50% to \$419 billion from \$838 billion in 2019. In 2021, losses are expected to be cut to \$15.8 billion as revenues rise to \$598 billion (IATA, 2020b).

According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA) most airlines have liquidity of less than three months, and many airlines will shut down their operations permanently if travel restrictions are extended (IATA, n.d.). Airlines around the world are seeking government bailouts and packages. Many airlines have reduced their staff because of this crisis (Butler, 2020).

Due to fears in the community regarding the spread of the virus, many countries closed their hotels due to which, the hotel industry faces extreme pressures. Around the globe, all governments are struggling to maintain a balance between keeping their economy going to avert perilous levels of unemployment and inflation, and management of the virus.

International global tourist arrivals could drop by 20–30% in 2020, resulting in a potential loss of US\$30–50 billion (UNWTO, n.d). In many cities of the world planned travel has been reduced by 80–90%.(BBC News, 2020b). All around the world, tourist attractions such as museums, fun parks and sports stadiums are locked. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020a) claimed that this sector is facing the hardest impacts of the crisis. COVID-19 is resulting in massively increased unemployment, leading to economic damage and instability.

Although now hotels are beginning to re-open, the public are avoiding them due to fear of getting infected. Currently, it is unclear how individual motels and hotels will ensure that their rooms are safe for newly arriving guests and how to manage if any individual guest present with evidence of infection. Large chains need to rethink their global supply chains, and the mechanisms of dependency that they have generated (HLB, 2020).

Tourism and industries associated with it have faced many crises before, including the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2005, the '9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001 and prior

pandemics like 2009 swine flu, and the 2011 earthquake in north-eastern Japan (Kato, 2018). These experiences have seen the development of risk management toolkits, to deal with risk mitigation and recovery from crisis (e.g. Lynch, 2004) and recent resilience shifts in the industry (Hall *et al.*, 2018). However, due to its global scope and the widespread shutdown of travel, businesses and daily normal routine activities, the current COVID-19 pandemic is much severe in magnitude as compared to previous crises.

Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is considered one of the earliest forms of tourism (Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016) and it is one of the imperative segments of the tourism and travel industry. Literature suggests that the roots of religious travel can be traced from the evolution of religion (Ayorekire *et al.*, 2020). This form of tourism provides social, economic and many other advantages. Despite the importance of religious tourism globally, still very few studies cover this area therefore the literature needs to be expanded with wider perspectives.

Religious tourism is a vital segment of the tourism industry and it comprises globally, 330 million international tourists (UNWTO, 2014) and provides positive economic impacts on visited destinations (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques, 2018). Religious tourism also plays an important role in infrastructural developments (Rinschede, 1992), apart from creating many job opportunities.

In literature, the correlation between tourism and religion has been well established (El-Gohary & Eid, 2014; Jafari & Scott, 2014). The motivation for religious tourism is a combination of cultural, traditional and spiritual values that interact and lead to a decision to travel (Ayorekire *et al.*, 2020). Religious tourists along with their religious wishes are generally driven by their desire to absorb new ideas and generate spiritual memories (Griffin, 2007; Blackwell, 2007). The terms 'religious', 'tourism' 'spiritual' and 'pilgrimage' are interchangeably used by researchers (Galzacorta, Guereño-Omil, Makua, Iriberrri & Santomà, 2016).

Religious tourism can be defined as:

travel with the core motive of experiencing religious forms, or the products they induce, like

art, culture, traditions and architecture (FICCI Religious Tourism Report, 2012:2).

It can be split into multiple categories. The following are the major categories of religious tourism defined by an FICCI report on religious tourism in India

- Pilgrimages.
- Missionary travel.
- Leisure (fellowship) vacations.
- Faith-based cruising.
- Crusades, conventions and rallies.
- Retreats.
- Monastery visits and guest-stays.
- Faith-based camps.
- Religious tourist attractions (FICCI, 2012:3).

Examples of religious tourism activities include: visits of Christians to the Holy Land, Muslims to Mecca to perform Hajj, Jewish Pilgrims to holy graves in Israel, Shia pilgrimage in Iraq, and Sikh pilgrimage in Pakistan. A sample of famous religious destinations include Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, Jerusalem, Mecca, Varanasi, Lumbani and Nankana Sahab (Ayorekire *et al.*, 2020).

Evidence shows that religion plays a vital role in people's lives in daily practices (Hunt, 2013), in tourist practices and in the selection of destinations (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000). Religious travelling is related to motives connected to constructive powers (i.e. religious authorities) (Bandyopadhyaya, Morais & Chick, 2008). Scholars working on tourism have found that religious tourists due to different reasons, like appreciation of nature, relaxation and self-discovery, and educational and cultural enrichment, visit sacred places (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Ron, 2009). Religious tourists are bonded by their religious practices and select sites for trips as per religious beliefs (Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2018).

COVID-19 and Religious Tourism

Studies confirm that tourists visiting religious sites are not only driven solely by external factors, such as religious institutions and their scripts, which merely fall into the category of pull factors of Dann (1977), but also by push factors which may also involve non-religious motives. Allport (1966) identified two categories of persons. Firstly, the extrinsically motivated person for whom

religion plays an instrumental role, fulfilling different types of self-interest (Durkheim, 1964). Secondly, the intrinsically motivated who lives religion that floods their entire lives with purpose and meaning.

Mosques, Churches, Synagogues and other religious places are considered as hotspots for COVID-19 (The Star, 2020). In these places, COVID-19 can easily be transmitted from one person to another. Missionary activities in Malaysia and Pakistan caused the sudden increase in the number of COVID19 cases. As COVID19 spread from China to different parts of the world and when the WHO announced the health emergency, every country closed its borders to pilgrims, closed religious places, stopped visa operations and many countries annulled the issued visas in order to protect their country from the COVID-19 virus. All religious places were closed for the public to perform religious activities leading to a decline in religious tourism.

Kartarpur corridor (a joint venture of Pakistan and India for Sikhs to visit their very 1st Gurdwara) has been closed since March 16, 2020 for an indefinite period due to which Sikh pilgrims are not being allowed to enter into Pakistan and visit their religious place. The holy month of Ramadan is very important for Muslims, they fast in this month, and around two million Muslims traveled to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah in this month in 2019. But because of COVID-19 this year Ramadan was distinctly unlike earlier Ramadans as the coronavirus pandemic has halted many of the world's normal life routine activities, including worship at holy places. The Grand Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet's Mosque in Madina, the two holiest sites of Islam, were empty as populations of both cities are under a full curfew to control the spread of the virus (Arab News, 2020). In the 1400 year old Islamic history this has happened rarely (The New York Times, 2020a)

The Hajj to Makkah is, for instance, one of the five pillars of Islam, co-constructed by the religious authorities and the state (Jafari & Scott 2014). Every year Muslims from all around the world come to Makkah to perform Hajj. Hajj is one of the largest religious gathering of people in the world. In the year 2019 around 2.5 million pilgrims performed Hajj (The National, 2020). While in the year 2020, due to COVID-19, the Saudi government allowed

only 1,000 pilgrims rather than two million to perform Hajj - pilgrims from other countries were not allowed to enter Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj (CNN, 2020). Along with Mecca, Medina is important for Muslims as the burial place of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, and is visited by pilgrims during Hajj.

According to historians, Hajj was cancelled for the first time in AD 967 due to an outbreak of plague, afterwards in AD 1048 Hajj was cancelled due to drought and famine. Thousands of pilgrims from Indian in 1832 lost their lives on their way to perform Hajj due to an outbreak of Bubonic Plague. Cholera outbreaks in multiple years throughout the 19-century claimed thousands of pilgrims' lives during Hajj (Smithsonian, 2020).

Shia pilgrims travel to Iran, to the holy shrines in Qom and Mashhad, and from there, they go to Iraq to visit shrines in Najaf and Karbala. Iran is one of the worst-hit locations linked to religious congregations in the current pandemic. The Head of the main shrine in Qom asked the pilgrims to keep coming to the shrine (Quadri, 2020) leading to an unabated spread of COVID-19 in Iran and neighbouring countries (Wright, 2020). Similarly, religious meetings in Malaysia, Pakistan, and India became COVID-19 transmission hotspots (Quadri, 2020).

The Iraqi government shut down Shia shrines in Iraq, banned public gatherings, including religious visits, for public health reasons. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims witness the convergence every year in Iraq's holy city of Karbala in the weeks leading up to the holy month of Ramadan to celebrate the annual Shaabaniya pilgrimage. Shaabaniya was cancelled this year due to the current battle against the coronavirus (Aljazeera, 2020). Shia Muslims kiss the walls of the shrines, where religious figures are buried, due to which COVID-19 could spread easily. This is suggested as one of the reasons that cases of COVID-19 in Iran are very high.

Tirtha Yatra Pilgrimages to holy places are a crucial component of the Hindu religion and are performed by tens of thousands of Hindus every day for spiritual solace (Quadri, 2020). Kumbh Mela the world's largest religious congregation is held every twelve years on the banks of river Ganges (Singh & Haigh, 2015). Ardh

Kumbhs or lesser festivals take place other years. Since March 20, 2020, however, all Hindu sacred sites were closed (Quadri, 2020).

Jerusalem is one of the most historical religious cities in the world and is highly valued by religious tourists because of its number of religious traditions (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018). It is recognised as a holy city by all Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism). In 2019 4.5 million tourists visited Israel (The Jerusalem Post, 2020) but now the borders of Israel are closed for travellers.

SARS had a major impact on the tourism industry. SARS damaged international travel because many countries imposed travel restrictions on the SARS affected countries. In 2003 international tourism fell by 1.2%. Tourist arrivals in East Asia fell by 41%. In Beijing, the hotel occupancy rates dropped down to 10% while in Vietnam 400,000 foreign tourists cancelled their tours. The FIFA women's world cup was moved from China to the United States (Wilder- Smith, 2006).

Conclusion

Tourism plays a significant role in the world's economic growth and development plans. It is clear for the literature that the global tourism industry has been affected badly by COVID-19. Along with that, religious tourism came to a standstill. Almost every country closed its international borders to take safeguard public health as well as closing the Mosques, Churches and Temples. It has been recommended by religious scholars from all religions that the faithful should perform their religious activities at home.

In carrying out these actions, governments around the globe are attempting to create a balance between keeping their economies going and preventing treacherous levels of unemployment and deprivation. The situation is unprecedented. Within months, the focus of the global tourism industry has shifted from over-tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Seraphin *et al.*, 2018) to non-tourism (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). In order to cope with the issue of COVID-19 smart religious tourism should be introduced. Smart tourism could enhance the tourist experience (Buhalis, 2019; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). In the immediate future any face-to-face religious tourism

will require every visitor to wear a mask and sanitise their hands, while also following all appropriate hygiene etiquette. Tourist attractions and sites must observe strict social distancing and management must control and limit public to enter into their venues.

Theoretical Implications:

This study enhances the literature regarding COVID-19 and religious tourism. In addition to that, this study presents how COVID-19 has negatively affected religious tourism.

Managerial implications:

The present study highlights the effects of COVID-19 on religious tourism, the implications for the local authorities of sacred sites, tourism companies, policymakers, airline officials, and religious tourists. Until now the situation is unpredictable as now one knows when (if ever) the COVID-19 battle will be over and when scientists will produce a viable vaccination for this virus.

In order to save the tourism industry and reduce the impact of COVID-19 on unemployment and economic stability, it is better that tourists should follow the instructions as suggested by the WHO - wear proper masks, sanitise hands, maintain social distance, and in this way, they can enjoy their trips (when allowed) with safety. Second, the airline industry needs to ensure that they properly sanitize their planes for the safeguard of travellers and the overall industry. Third, it is suggested that religious places should now open for religious tourism with precautionary measures and prepare a standard operation procedure (SOP) which needs to be followed by every religious site visitor. Lastly, sites need to consider controlled access, perhaps restricting visitors who are aged 65 or over, and only allowing limited numbers of people to enter religious sites for prayer, in order to forestall the effect of COVID-19 on tourism and the religious tourism industry.

Limitations and Suggestion for Future Research

This study has some limitations. It examines a selection of major religious events of some of the main world religions. Future research can expand on this by adding more religious destinations, and a broader variety of faiths. Future studies can study the impact of COVID-19

on unemployment, economic instability and employee behaviour. Empirical studies will be undertaken in the future to provide deep understanding regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on religious tourism and travel trends. The empirical finding will help to examine the demographic changes in the tourism industry. Such investigations will also help us to understand the environmental changes brought about by COVID-19 on religious destinations.

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