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Religious Tourism in an Atheistic Society: The Example of the Czech Republic

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For a more accurate understanding of religious tourism, it is useful to distinguish between faith-based tourism, spiritual tourism and tourism in religious spaces. The former is characterized by religious faith (and processes of hierophany), the next by spirituality and transcendence experience, while the latter remains in the secular realm of experience. Based on this conceptual grasp, the paper presents the situation in the highly secular Czech Republic and investigates the opinions of service and offer providers in this type of tourism through interviews ($n = 3$). A comparison with the demand and preferences of tourism participants was collected through an online survey ($n = 104$). The findings point to a significant and untapped potential and minimal knowledge or interest on the other hand. This highlights the fact that if correctly communicated and presented, tourism in religious places can be something to present to Czech tourism participants and possibly to foreign tourists.

Key Words: religious tourism, faith-based tourism, spiritual tourism, Czech Republic, tourism offer, demand

Introduction

Religious tourism is now a relatively frequently studied phenomenon in tourism studies (Kim *et al.*, 2020, Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015, Pourtaheri *et al.*, 2012). Yet, it seems that knowledge is mainly gained from traditionally religious areas, while the situation in secular countries is not sufficiently explored. The aim of this paper is to find out what opportunities are available for religious tourism in an atheist country, using the Czech Republic as an example. We are interested in the perspective of tourism service providers and in the experiences of the participants themselves. With regard to the cultural and social specifics of the chosen country, it should be mentioned that the Czech Republic is one of the most highly secularised countries, the imaginary pinnacle of godlessness. In the last census in 2021, only 18.7% of the population declared themselves as believers identifying with a church or religious society, while 68.3% of the population chose the answer ‘without religious belief’.¹ For comparison, the data from a similar measurement in

Slovakia, a culturally, socially and historically very close country (for a large part of the 20th century there was a common state, Czechoslovakia), states that 70% of the population expressed a relationship to a church, religious society or religion in the same year.² Nevertheless, the high degree of secularisation in the Czech Republic does not preclude deep spiritual experiences, which are experienced in a wide variety of spiritual practices (Dyndová, 2019, Nešporová & Nešpor, 2009).

This situation implies a certain aversion or hypersensitivity to religious terms and therefore the necessity of a very strong distinction between religious and spiritual tourism. Furthermore, this situation makes it relatively difficult to selecting suitable respondents for research, as this is a rather closed market and tourism segment. Nevertheless, our results point to a relatively high potential for the possible use of this type of travel particularly in places with a rich cultural and religious tradition, despite the low level of contemporary religiosity of the population. Therefore, in this paper

¹ <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/the-czso-presented-the-first-results-of-the-2021-census>

² <https://www.scitanie.sk/en/roman-catholics-represents-56-percent-of-the-population>

we propose a more subtle distinction between faith-based tourism (based on religious faith and processes of hierophany), spiritual tourism (enabling the experience of transcendence) and tourism in religious spaces (which can remain in the secular sphere of experience).

Religion and Spirituality

Even non-religious modern people cannot, in the true sense of the word, completely free themselves from certain aspects of religious behaviour originating in history. For example, in Europe one can see an increasing popularity of celebrating Christmas and Easter (markets and events), even though the religious reasons may not anymore be the main motives for it, as they traditionally were before (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). The classical distinction between the profane (secular) and the holy (sacred), based on two modes of experience (Eliade, 1959), loses its firm contours in an attempt to adequately understand the phenomenon of transcendence as a distinguishing feature of both domains. The intersections and polyvalent meanings are then evident when trying to pinpoint the pilgrimage experience, which cannot be clearly identified as religious, secular or post-secular (Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016). It is in the different modes of experience of the pilgrim and the tourist that differences in the religious, spiritual and profane dimensions of a particular journey can be more accurately identified (Jirásek, 2014).

In such a schedule, however, not only the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, but also the imaginary intersection between them, namely spirituality, enters as a topic of reflection. The latter can take on the contours of both religious and non-religious definitions. Religious spirituality is tied to a particular religious system and faith tradition, thus different forms of e.g. Christian, Judaic or Islamic spirituality can be distinguished (Ghorbani *et al.*, 2018; Guilherme & Morgan, 2016; Louw, 2021). In contrast, non-religious or even atheistic spirituality (Jirásek, 2013; Manuel-Morgan & Lomas, 2021; Němečková, 2016; Walach, 2017) is not tied to a specific religious system and can be seen in four types of relationships: with self, with other people, with nature, and with transcendence (Mata-McMahon *et al.*, 2019, Walton, 1996).

We believe that a distinction between *hierophany* and *transcendence* may be very useful for an adequate differentiation to more accurately describe the sacred and profane realms. In doing so, the phenomenon of spirituality may impinge on both of them. Religious experiences are distinguished from the everyday procurement of needs by their lack of expediency and their entry into the realm of the sacred, the holy. This realm emerges as a sign of religious significance, transforming, for example, a geographical space into a sacred place, for the recognition of which the phenomenon of faith is essential. For the religious person, contact with the sacred implies an encounter with something hidden, ineffable, numinous, accompanied by a sense of mysterious awe, linked to the grandeur of majesty, attractiveness and fascination (Otto, 1958). The sacred (the divine, the ‘absolutely other’) thus, penetrates natural reality from the top down, so to speak, a necessary movement for the religious definition of experience. If, for religious experience the characteristic feature is contact with the sacred, available only through faith, for spirituality it is existentiality and authenticity, that is, a way of being that belongs to each person’s possibilities. Thus, the spiritual dimension is characterised by transcendence, by stepping out of ordinary experience into extraordinary states of consciousness (wonder, love, peak experience, flow, etc.), so to speak, from the bottom up.

Religious and Spiritual Tourism

In the past, religion has been an integral part of the processes of civilisation and human self-identification. Only in the last two centuries has there been a more massive secularisation, but religious artefacts remain an integral part of the culture and history of every country. Religion manifests itself tangibly through architecture, literature or religious objects, which can become a primary or secondary motive for travel. Religious tourism can be viewed as a sub-area of cultural tourism focused on exploring, visiting and touring religious sites (churches, cathedrals, cemeteries, pilgrimage sites) or participating in a religious ceremony or pilgrimage (Vystoupil & Šauer, 2006), facilitating a holistic understanding of a given country (Chistyakov, 2020).

However, a visit to a destination alone is not sufficient to fully define it. If the traveller visits it only in the

disinterested mode of the tourist industry, he / she remains in the secular dimension of contact with the place as a tourist, but if the experience is characterised by an inner passion or lived faith, one can speak of a pilgrim (Jirásek, 2014). Let us recall that traditional pilgrimage, i.e. a walking journey performed for religious reasons, can be considered as one of the options of religious tourism (Jackowski, 2000). The experience of travelling and visiting religious buildings varies among religious people, as the pilgrimage experience involves strong feelings and perceptions of religious passion; on the other hand, the spiritual experience of a person with a different faith or without religious beliefs may arouse wonder, admiration and inspiration, while the tourist experience of a non-believer satisfies his / her cultural curiosity (Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is useful to distinguish 'religious tourism' implemented by people of a particular faith from 'tourism in religious spaces' (Heidari *et al.*, 2018), for the former, religious faith is an unquestionable condition and can therefore be referred to as 'faith-based tourism' (Álvarez-García *et al.*, 2018).

Spiritual tourism can be realised through visits to religious sites as well as other destinations if they open up opportunities for exploration and personal flourishing (Kujawa, 2017). This can also be achieved through culturally diverse meditation practices and exercises that impact tourism by connecting tourists to their deeper self, inner peace, and harmony (Manpreet *et al.*, 2021). In spiritual travel practices, the mundanity of procuring needs is transcended and space is opened for travellers to find, explore, and practice spirituality (Cheer *et al.*, 2017). Nowadays, travellers do not undertake traditional pilgrimage journeys solely for religious reasons, however, the experience of many of them can be defined by the concept of spiritual (walking) tourism defined by travelling on foot and slowness (Kato & Prozano, 2017). Thus, the essential measure of spiritual tourism is the diverse extraordinary transformative experiences leading to transcendence which changes the life horizon (Jirásek, 2020) of the traveller, but not entering the realm of the sacred, the 'absolute other' presented through processes of hierophany.

The relationship to physical movement and walking in the dimensions of religion, spirituality and secularity can be described by words in some languages better than in

others, and we cannot find unambiguous synonyms in English, for example, for the Czech triad 'poutnictví' – 'putování' – 'turistika'. The first is synonymous with 'pilgrimage', while terms such as 'travelling, wandering, walking, hiking' etc. are used for the second and third words, which do not bring to the fore the distinction between the spiritual and secular versions of walking and tourism. This is also why English texts use the third meaning in its original form (turistika) and not in the form tourism, characterised by a different semantic meaning (Martin *et al.*, 2016; Turcova *et al.*, 2005). However, we do not find a one-word equivalent for the second term, and the closest label may perhaps be 'spiritual walking' or 'non-religious peregrination'.

Therefore, in summary, we propose the following classification based on the previous thematic analysis of the experience in order to make a finer distinction of the given religion / tourism area:

Religious (Faith-based) Tourism enables religious individuals to realise and deepen their faith through visits to places where events important to the religion have taken place or are taking place; the modus operandi of the experience is hierophany;

Spiritual Tourism is characterised by the perception of the specificity of the place visited, which may be linked to a particular religion but may also exude a non-religious genius loci through its natural or cultural uniqueness; the modus operandi is transcendence;

Tourism in Religious Spaces does not distinguish the religiously significant destination from other places visited and focuses on the historical or broadly cultural aspects of the space; the experience remains in a secular mode.

In view of the gradual desacralisation of society, it is therefore common for tourism operators to include religiously sacred sites in their tourist guides and product offerings. Visitors' religious beliefs or atheism influence their behaviour, so overtourism of religious destinations should be avoided (Huang *et al.*, 2020) so that the authentic experience of *genius loci* can be preserved. This is because mass tourism to religiously exposed places transforms the atmosphere through possible inappropriate

behaviour and disrespect of secular tourists to the religious significance of the destination (Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015), including dressing up, photography, or vandalism, so it is questionable whether the boundary between a traditional sacred site and an experienced tourist attraction such as Stonehenge can be accurately drawn at all (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). This trend is compounded by, among other things, simplified accessibility and transportation to religiously significant destinations (Aulet & Duda, 2020) as well as the influence of information conveying media (Chistyakov, 2020) with the consequence of an intense increase in visitor traffic.

The ‘mobile turn’ can then reverse the topic to the point that tourism can also be perceived as a specific kind of religion (Hron, 2017). Let us note, however, that in such a case, it may be exclusively implicit religion (Bailey, 2010; Bailey, 2012), i.e., the search for parallels of religious functions in the secular world, evident, for example, in the implicitly religious significance of literature (Hošek, 2017), comics (De Groot, 2016), folk music (Nešpor, 2003) or sports (Aicinena, 2017). The traditional pilgrimage to Compostela can also be analysed through the prism of implicit religion if it is realised by a non-religious individual and transformed into a personal form of ritual with the consequences of a more meaningful life and overcoming a crisis of meaning (Schnell & Pali, 2013). Indeed, religious motivation to undertake the Camiño de Santiago pilgrimage is the least frequent, while most pilgrims are motivated by spiritual aspects, the desire for new experiences and for natural and sporting experiences (Amaro *et al.*, 2018), making the Way of Saint James a spiritual experience that interprets post-secular trends (Lopez *et al.*, 2017).

Religious (Faith-Based) Tourism and Tourism in Religious Spaces in the Czech Republic

As mentioned in the introduction, the Czech Republic is not considered a religious country, rather it is referred to as a ‘godless valley’ (Říčan, 2007), but at the same time a highly spiritual area where spiritual practices in the form of meditation programs, alternative medicine, ecological movements, sports cults, etc. are strongly visible. However, given the religious history of the area, which has been Christian since the 9th century, there are many religious monuments and places of pilgrimage.

Cultural tourism is highly developed here (especially Prague and other cities, castles and châteaux), but religious tourism, which can be classified as a subcategory of it, is currently almost negligible. At the same time, a number of places have long been connected to the St. James Way and the European Cultural Route of St. Cyril and Methodius, and new pilgrimage routes are also being implemented (Horák *et al.*, 2015). Although religious tourism is perceived as a potential product here, compared to the options offered abroad, this form is not established in the offers of Czech organised tourism providers.

The travel agency Čedok has been operating since 1920, and together with it, almost 200 travel offices and agencies and 80 associated members from related service sectors (transport, trade fairs and promotion, vocational education, insurance and data processing) are united in the Association of Travel Agencies of the Czech Republic (ACK ČR), which started its activities in 1990. A similar association has been operating since 1991 with more than 250 members, namely the Association of Czech Travel Agencies (AČCKA). The Czech Tourism Centre CzechTourism is an agency established by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic, its main objective is the foreign and domestic promotion of the Czech Republic as a tourism destination. This agency proposed a project entitled ‘Religious Tourism’, but it was not implemented in the end.

In addition to the above-mentioned organisations, there are also several travel agencies and offices in the Czech Republic that focus specifically on religious tourism. The tours offered to Czech clients usually fall under the category of outbound tourism and are most often pilgrimage tours. Since 2010, the internet travel agency PoutníZájezdy.CZ has specialised in pilgrimage tours to Israel, but also to other world destinations historically linked to religion. All offered tours are foreign, none of are organised in the Czech Republic. The travel agency Aleš Kučera has been operating on the market since 2012, also specialising primarily in pilgrimage tours, most often to Lourdes in France, then, for example, to Assisi or Rome. It cooperates, among others, with the Carmelite Publishing House and the *Catholic Weekly*, and targets parishes, interest groups, school or sports teams. It is the only travel agency in our review that offered one-day religious tours within the Czech Republic (Neratov

in the Orlické Mountains and Svatá Hora near Příbram) in 2022, including, among other things, participation in the Holy Mass or a tour of a pilgrimage site.

Since 2003, the Křížek travel agency, whose partner is *Catholic Weekly*, has been offering its services in the context of inbound tourism, specialising in German visitors from a religious background; clients include Catholic parishes, evangelical church congregations, church choirs, academies and church schools or foundations. In the context of outbound tourism, since 2008, it has focused on trips to Israel for Catholic parishes, dioceses, evangelical congregations, church communities, associations, academies, etc., thematically divided into New Testament and Old Testament, walking pilgrimages and Exercises (spiritual exercises while crossing the desert).

The family travel agency Avetour offers pilgrimage tours to Israel and Jordan in cooperation with members of the Fatima Apostolate who provide spiritual leadership and accompaniment. Since 2019, the Hrdlička travel agency has been cooperating with experts in Jewish culture and history, and some events are held in various cities in the Czech Republic connected with Jewish history. The travel agencies Veligradtour and VOMA are also presenting themselves as providers of pilgrimage tours (in addition to a number of other products). With a name identifying the religious affiliation of the owners, the Mesites Christian Tourist Agency provides standard holiday tours without a religiously conceived programme.

In the secular Czech Republic, several projects and portals focused on religious tourism can also be identified. In 2010, the *Magni* brand (magni.cz) was created, pointing out the potential that is not commonly available in guidebooks or standard promotional materials, namely the history of the country's spiritual development, or the presentation and promotion of religious monuments and the cultural and historical heritage of Christianity in the Czech Republic. The intention of the project is to create and market a new integrative tourism brand for the segment of sacral monuments, heritage sites, cultural and social events.

The *Open Gates* project of the Zlín Region (otevrenebrany.cz) intends to make artistically and historically valuable

churches linked to the European Christian tradition accessible to visitors from 2009. The *Night of Churches* programme (nockostelu.cz) presents sacral buildings in an unconventional way, or at an unconventional time of night. Similarly, the *Church Tourism* portal (cirkevnuturistika.cz) presents places of pilgrimage, church objects and Christian attractions, pointing out their cultural value, roots and traditions. It also presents a description of pilgrimage routes in the Czech Republic and offers accommodation in parishes or church-run facilities. The website *Pilgrimage Places in the Czech Republic* (poutnimistacr.cz) collects information about Czech and Moravian pilgrimage sites, supplemented by spiritual services and cultural events of individual parishes and dioceses.

Considering the large number of religious buildings and rich religious history in the Czech Republic on the one hand, and the not-so-obvious promotion of religious tourism in the public space of the majority secular society on the other hand, this study aims to find out the opinions of both providers and users of this segment of tourism.

Methodology

Research sample

Tourism service providers

15 providers from travel agencies were contacted by individual email with an attachment to fill in:

PoutníZájezdy.CZ,
CK Aleš Kučera,
CK Křížek,
AWERTOURL,
CK Adventure,
CK Avetour,
CK Hrdlička,
CK Veligradtour,
CK VOMA,
Křestanská turistická agentura Mesites,
Čedok,
Exim tours,
Invia,
ALEXANDRIA
Blue Style,

This was a deliberate selection of the largest representatives of travel agencies and tour operators on the one hand and smaller entities, but specifically focused on religious tourism on the other hand. After an unsuccessful return, it was decided to conduct interviews with respondents ($n = 3$), the selection criterion was the provision of services or products related to religious tourism, on the basis of one's own expressed interest.

This is by no means a representative sample of the sector. However one of the participant travel agencies focuses only on religious tourism, in its own words on 'spiritual journeys'. Another respondent is the operator of the Svatá Hora (Holy Mountain) near Příbram and the other manages Venio Abbey in Bílá Hora. They will be identified as Respondent 1 (representative of CK Křížek), Respondent 2 (representative of Svatá Hora) and Respondent 3 (representative of Venio Abbey).

Tourism Participants

Participants were approached via social media in thematic groups focused on travel and tourism (specifically: TravelUP - UP Travel Club; Kangelo - Adventure Club; Travel, Co-Travel; Travel, Adventure, Mountain Crossing, Tramping and Wilderness Hiking). The choice of these groups proved to be another limit of this paper itself, as it definitely affected the conclusions. Participation in the research was voluntary based on self-reported response and expressed interest. A completed trip or trip away from the place of residence was the only condition for participation. A total of 104 respondents (79 females, 25 males) aged 16-69 years participated in the online data collection via survey, approximately 50% were in the 21-28 age category, i.e. members of the younger generation who are more active users of social networks.

In terms of religion, more than half of the respondents identified themselves as atheists, while 17 people had no clear opinion on religion. 11 persons declared themselves to be members of the Catholic Church, but about 25% of the respondents declared themselves to be religious. It is interesting to compare these demographic data with the answer to the survey question ('do you consider yourself a spiritual person?'), to which 32 persons (31%) answered in the affirmative. 5 persons chose a different answer: 2x

agnostic, 1x no religion, 1x believe in 'something more', 1x believe in the universe and karma (an unspecified and unnamed force).

Data Collection

The initial assumption was to write to service providers, but the return rate of responses was minimal, resulting in zero predictive value (only one of the large travel agencies responded - repeated requests for cooperation had no effect). Of the specifically focused agencies, the interest in a personal meeting from CK Křížek was evident. As a result, the method of collecting data from providers was re-evaluated and pivoted into a qualitative form of information gathering through interviews with selected respondents from among the service providers. The form chosen was the understanding interview (Kaufmann, 2010), an intuitive unstructured process in which the researcher intervenes only for the purpose of directing or questioning and the importance is placed primarily on the respondent's life story and personal experience.

An online survey published by Survio.com was used to determine the user behaviour of tourism participants. The premise was a snowballing method by spreading the data among travellers. A pilot test of the final form was carried out by two respondents, whose insights and feedback led to modifications of deficiencies or incomprehensibility of the text. The survey was accessible between March 28th 2022 and May 28th 2022. Of the 199 total contributions, 104 people fully completed and returned the survey, a return rate of 52.3%.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim (20,746 words in Czech). Citation references in these findings are indicated by two numbers: the respondent and the page of the transcript of the specific interview. The method of interpretive phenomenological analysis, IPA, was chosen for data analysis (Řiháček *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2009). The transcribed interviews were subjected to repeated readings, supplemented with primary notes and comments on the transcripts. Cross-cutting themes and core categories that emerged in all interviews were identified for coding, further reading, and development of emerging themes.

Ethics

Respondents for the interviews provided a signed informed consent to voluntarily participate in the research, and all participants in the survey were informed about the process and conditions of data collection and its subsequent use for research purposes.

Results

Tourism Service Providers

The inhabitants of the Czech Republic are perceived by the respondents as 'areligious' (1,2) and the concept of religion has to be handled very carefully (1,10), as religion is still viewed with caution (2,9). The usual age group for this type of tourism are people aged 50-60 years (1) or seniors (2). Surprisingly, no Czech travel agencies have shown any interest in contractual cooperation with the Svatá Hora complex, even though it is 'one of the oldest Marian pilgrimage sites in Bohemia' (2,7). The operators of the site are trying to maintain a suitable atmosphere of silence and peace in the place without commercial overload:

to keep this place as a non-touristic place, so that we don't get buses with those groups that take a few photos and actually suck the place' (3,11).

A certain paradox is evident in the financing of religious sites, because

it must be an economically successful project ... and on the other hand it is pastoral work. And these two things can sometimes go against each other (1,8).

This paradox extends to those who are responsible for the sites - priests in parishes

have to be there for the people in the church first, then they can deal with the tourists (2,10).

The problem is also evident in the system of accreditation in the field of tourism, because these areas and the specific groups that visit them require

a certain type of guide, which local (Czech) agencies are usually unable to provide (1,15).

Although the sites offer complementary and associated services (information centre, shop with souvenirs and religious objects, library, refreshments, confectionery), the fact that they are a national cultural monument 'implies limitations rather than gains' (2,12). This also means that subsidies or grants (2)(3), on which the operation of the site often depends, become a source of funding. The issue of charging admission to a sacred monument brings with it a dilemma:

We are primarily a church, but I am not going to stand at the door and ask: 'Are you going to pray or are you going to look at the statues?' (2,9).

The sacral buildings are therefore freely accessible.

The moment we start charging admission, people feel like they have a right to do whatever. ... the moment we put a lady with a table there collecting admission and handing out toilet paper; ... it takes on a little bit of a different feel (3,11).

Intercultural practices and experiences with voluntary entrance fees are also interesting, noting that

when there is a German group, there is no problem with it, they just contribute immediately and it doesn't even occur to them not to contribute. When there are Czechs, it's very different (3,9).

This makes it difficult to determine estimates about visitor numbers, as this is usually something defined from sold entrance ticket. So far a proper method of precise visitor counting does not exist, so the officially stated visitor numbers are largely estimated.

The need for marketing promotion is not perceived as necessary by these service providers and they make do with existing contacts, word of mouth promotion and personal recommendation (1)(3). Other possibilities are advertising in the Catholic Weekly and cultural facilities in Prague (1,13), cooperation with the city (1,3), or with German organisations and the Czech-German Future Fund (3). However, nowadays it is necessary to publish updated information on websites and social networks,

that's the way it is unfortunately, oh well (2,12), we have to (3,15).

In doing this the sites are primarily providing practical information for example about the time of access,

This is the only thing we really want to offer: for people who want to come in, to be able to.' (3,16).

An important part of religious tourism is the natural attraction of the destination (desert, mountain), often going hand in hand with physical activity (1,11). Thus, pilgrimages are linked to religious tourism, but

certain distortions of pilgrimages occurring today have nothing to do with religious tourism (1,15).

Visiting sacred sites is central to religious tourism; there is a great deal of hidden artistic and spiritual richness, but often without the potential being adequately communicated to visitors by providers. People

come to see at least the architecture, if nothing else (2,8).

On the other hand, religious sites and monastery

would have a problem again if busloads of tourists came to visit, because the purpose of their life is something other than welcoming visiting groups (1,18).

Sacred buildings are supposed to serve religious purposes first and foremost,

it's a parish community, it's primarily for them. Not tourists (3,7).

Visitors are very strongly influenced by appropriate *genius loci*, the authenticity and energy of the place,

it's about keeping the offer really religious and spiritual (3,17).

Participation in religious tourism is not necessarily conditional on faith (1),

it certainly has meaning for the non-believer (2,8),

but it will always be a marginal rather than mass tourism (1,17). Despite the marginal nature of this tourism, the

tour operator claims that no one else offers similar services (1,3),

there is no other travel agency that is really this personal and client-oriented (2,6).

A higher number of similarly oriented high quality travel agencies would not be seen as competition, but as an increase in the possibilities and scope for the potential that the Czech Republic offers in this respect. However, this segment of the market is relatively closed (1),

often you can't even get to this group of people (2,9).

In short, the potential in this area is 'great and untapped' (1,18) and it makes sense to strive to

be ecclesiastical, or, as in the non-Christian sense ... spiritual (3,17).

Tourism Participants

In terms of general travel habits, which also indicate the potential for religious tourism, respondents most often travel with a spouse (44 people), with friends (36 people), with family (35 people), alone (23 people), or in a group of 10 or more people (4 people). The vast majority (100 people) plan their trip alone, only 4 individuals prefer organised tourism. Respondents mostly get their travel information online from social networks, blogs or websites (92 people in total), 67 people get their travel information from personal recommendations, 21 people get it from printed guides and books, 17 people get it from media (TV, radio), 10 people get their travel information from travel agencies and only 3 people get details from available mobile apps. The Czech Republic is the most frequent destination for 78 people, while 22 people chose abroad (within Europe) and 4 people chose abroad (outside Europe).

Visiting a religious site or sacred monument was chosen by 10 people as their main destination. Considering the attractions associated with religious tourism, a total of 17 people usually visit the Stations of the Cross during their trips. The price factor (admission fee) will deter only 26 people, for reasons such as: the status of the attraction in relation to the specific amount of the admission fee, if the person is not sure what he/she will 'see as a

result' of paying the admission fee, or if the admission fee is unreasonable. However, the question is, given the different conditions of, for example, sacred monuments, what exactly is meant by a 'reasonable admission price'. Three respondents mentioned 'church' as a place where they would be unwilling to pay an entrance fee.

Awareness and knowledge in the field of religious tourism is not very high. A total of 74 people had never heard of it, 23 people already had some awareness and a total of 7 people chose the 'don't know' option. The individual interpretation of this designation in their own words led to the understandings:

- 17 x 'visiting sacred monuments - temples, churches, monasteries, synagogues';
- 10 'pilgrimages and pilgrimage routes'
- 9x 'visit to sacred places',
- 6 x 'visiting places with religious themes';
- 5 x 'visiting religious monuments';
- 4x 'pilgrimage sites',
- 3 x 'trips to religious cultural places';
- 3x 'religious event or ceremony'.
- 2 respondents emphasised the connection with the holding of a religious service or other ceremony,

Other responses included a connection to the dead, history and knowledge of the land, spiritual motivation, spiritual reasons, or 'traveling to god'. Three respondents pointed out that neither faith nor religion was a prerequisite for visiting these places or participating. Three respondents are of the opinion that it is not the destination or place that is important, but personal beliefs and religious reasons for/traveling. Another response was 'visiting a community of believers, contemplation, searching, architecture'.

In terms of knowledge of places of religious significance, 13 respondents had never heard of such a place and knew of none, but the most frequently mentioned were the Vatican (31 times), Santiago de Compostela (21 times), Mecca (17 times) and Jerusalem (15 times). In the Czech Republic, the most frequent answers were Hostýn (mentioned 6 times), Holy Hill (Svatý Kopeček) (5 times) and St. Vitus Cathedral (5 times).

According to the majority of respondents, religious tourism in the Czech Republic has a small (56 persons) or medium (32) potential; the polar ratings are small: with only 8 saying there is 'no' potential and 8 saying it has large potential. The most frequent reason for 'no' or 'little' potential was 'the Czech Republic as an atheist country', with potential perceived mainly in inbound tourism.

The main motivations for possible participation in a pilgrimage included sport and physical activity (41), personal reasons (27), spiritual reasons (17), religious reasons (9) and 5 times the possibility of 'other' reasons, e.g. 'fun' (1). 82 people could not imagine participating in an organised trip to a pilgrimage site, but 22 people would use this possibility.

Among the feelings evoked in respondents by sacred monuments and their visit, calmness and peace (53x), admiration (44x), amazement (31x), no feelings (18x), pleasant/enjoyable feelings (16x), and unpleasant feelings (10x) prevailed. Under the 'other' option was written 'respect' and 'awe that someone built this'.

The final question in this section of the survey explored whether the respondent would have remained present if a service or mass had been held at the time of their visit to the sacred monument. 38 persons would not stay, with the following three reasons being offered: 'I find it rude/disrespectful, I am not religious', and 'it is irrelevant to me and gives me nothing', '(hardened) atheism or interest in mere architecture'. 37 persons might stay, with three persons giving 'it depends on the current situation and mood' as the reason, and another opinion: 'probably not for the whole thing, I don't enjoy it much'. 33 persons would stay, the opinion 'for a while out of curiosity and for the experience yes, I am interested in a different way of life' appeared twice as a reason, another respondent stated 'I am religious, I would stay but it is not a rule for me' or 'I would stay but only for a Christian one'.

The last question was directed only to believers and religious individuals and asked their opinion of organised religious tourism in the Czech Republic. One of the respondents had never heard of the concept and therefore believes that there are no possibilities in the Czech Republic. Another knows about organised parish tours to

pilgrimage sites and the third respondent emphasised the fact that ‘if one wants to, one can find opportunities’.

Discussion

An assessment of the conditions and potential of religious tourism has not yet been carried out and published in the Czech Republic. It is evident from the respondents’ answers that their understanding of the subtle nuances of theoretical concepts is relatively low. The phenomenon of the link between faith and participation in religious tourism appears to be questionable. In any case, we cannot see in the respondents’ reflections a distinction between religion and spirituality, as is discussed in much of the literature:

- a modus of ‘*religious tourism*’ (faith-based) in which the traveller experiences an encounter with the sacred through hierophany;
- ‘*spiritual tourism*’ which includes wonder, amazement or other aspects of transcendence, and;
- ‘*tourism in religious spaces*’ in which the visit to sacred sites and monuments remains in a secular mode of experiencing.

Knowing this state of affairs, the lack of interest on the part of specifically targeted travel agencies in participating in the empirical investigation is all the more surprising.

A remarkable finding may be the consistency between the fact that 67% of the survey participants pay particular attention to personal recommendations and the fact that service providers do not feel the need to advertise because they rely on word of mouth recommendations. Nevertheless, they are aware of the need to set up and manage websites and social networks, which are essential for the availability of information nowadays in a situation where 88% of respondents prefer to search for information for their journeys online.

Thus, the findings presented by our work consist of noting the lack of knowledge about the possibilities and potential of religious tourism among potential participants, and at the same time the considerable efforts of providers to prevent overtourism at religious monuments. Site managers desire to not increase the number of incoming tourists, determined, among others factors, by negative

experiences (including the theft of a voluntary entrance fee box). The theoretical observation about the fear of significant touristisation of sacred places is thus confirmed by practice in the Czech Republic (Hron, 2017).

This paradox is manifest in the different perception of the potential of this type of tourism for the Czech Republic. From the providers’ side it is seen as a considerable phenomenon (but at the same time inappropriately used), while from the participants’ side it is perceived as small to medium. The low awareness in the travel community of the opportunities that organised religious tourism providers currently offer in the market should become a challenge to better target information about the opportunities that already exist and are being realised. The younger generation, who were the most likely to respond to our survey, prefer individualised travel over organised tourism and almost 80% of respondents would not be willing to travel to a pilgrimage site in an organised way. However, the cultural and historical focus and interest of the participants leads to an increase in the popularity of thematic cultural events (Church Night, Open Gates), which are already reaching the respondents and thus increasing the potential visitation to sacred sites.

We find interesting discrepancy between the usual motives for participating in pilgrimages, which are spiritual in nature (Amaro *et al.*, 2018, Lopez *et al.*, 2017, Schnell & Pali, 2013), and the views of our respondents, for whom the primary motive is the physical activity itself and personal reasons. It can be assumed that the specific situation of low religiosity in the country may also be reflected in the response to this question.

Limits

The repeatedly mentioned low number of responses from religious tourism service providers is the most obvious limitation of this paper. It is possible that the big travel agencies, which focus mainly on the profitability of mass tours, have neither the time nor the inclination to engage in such communication that does not lead to revenue. At the same time, the research was undertaken after-COVID-19, when tourism providers were dealing with many other problems. Some providers responded that they did not have time to do this. However, the degree of subjectivity of the opinions which were expressed by

the participants reflect the social situation, where religion is marginalised for the majority of people in the Czech Republic and plays a lesser role than in countries with similar cultural, historical and religious experience.

A second limitation may be the recruitment of participants in the survey through general travel interest groups and the omission of specific religious communities, among whose members it can be assumed there may be those interested in travel who would have enriched the results with additional aspects and deeper understanding.

Conclusion

The highly secularised Czech Republic has sufficient opportunities, prerequisites and potential for religious tourism. The main finding of our study is therefore the inappropriate handling of this potential by current tourism service providers, including the failure to include similarly conceived products in the permanent offer of major Czech travel agencies. However, an important fact is that tourism is not a priority for the operators of complexes and sacred buildings, and in the current situation, probably will never be.

The prevailing atheism of tourism participants was confirmed, which influences their lack of interest in this type of tourism, or ignorance of the segment. However, the general findings from our respondents may inspire the providers to possibly adjust the way of promotion or overall services. Given that the Czech Republic was the most frequently mentioned destination and that up to 40% of the respondents regularly visit religious monuments during their trips. Providers should not focus primarily on foreign tourists, but also consider making it more attractive to Czech clients, who cannot be expected to actively engage in 'religious (faith-based) tourism', but the untapped potential of 'tourism in religious spaces' is unjustly neglected.

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