

Abstract: The aim of this study is to verify the sustainable development perspectives of religious tourism and pilgrimage tourism in Greece. The historical development of religious and pilgrimage tourism follows on a global and national scale and the pilgrimages and holy religious centers are mentioned. The main research cases are the investigation of the factors that hinder the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism, and the investigation of the policy measures, so that Greece become a distinct religious tourism destination. The methodology research carried out by the application of the Delphi method on the islands of North Aegean, (Greece), with the implementation of two rounds of questions in order to examine the research cases related to the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism. In this paper the experts in the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism were selected, from the Church, the Public Sector and the Travel Agencies, in order to highlight the prospects for the development of this particular form of tourism. Secondary bibliographic and article research demonstrate significant lack of research which has been carried out with the object of the developmental approach of this specific form of tourism in Greece. The originality of the paper lies in the following main points: 1) for the first time, through the field of research, the possibility of developing religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece and in the islands of the North Aegean is examined, 2) significant findings and conclusions are drawn from the general convergence of the views of all experts who can formulate a strategic planning framework contributing to the sustainable development, and 3) the Delphi method is applied for the first time in a research field in the specific subject, in the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism.

Keywords: Destination management; Religious tourism; Pilgrimage; Sustainable development; North Aegean; Greece.

1. Introduction

Religious travel is perhaps the oldest and most widespread type of travel in human history which can go back to the beginnings of many religions and is still one of the most important forms of tourism in the world today based on volume and frequency of occurrence (Lucarno, 2016). Religious travels and tours around the world are booming, reviving the pilgrimage activity of ancient times. The performance of various acts of worship has been a great motivator for people since ancient times. Religious tourism is the oldest type of tourism. Anthropologists and archaeologists have discovered the existence of pilgrimage tours in Europe, Asia, America, and Australia since prehistoric times. Religious travel is perhaps the most widespread type of travel in human history

(Rinschede, 1992; Sigaux, 1996; Vukonić, 1996, 2002; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Kaelber, 2006), which may go back to the beginnings of many religions (Westwood, 1997) and is still one of the most important forms of tourism in the world today based on volume and frequency of occurrence (Shinde, 2012).

In recent years, there has been talk about the development of religious tourism, a mild form that does not destroy the natural environment and encourages respect for cultural and religious reality. Religious tourism is a global phenomenon, of great economic and social importance. It is one of the oldest special forms of tourism, since antiquity, both in Greece and in many other countries. The development of religious tourism brings many economic benefits to the reception areas. These benefits include revenue growth, job creation, regional development, and interconnection with other sectors of the local economy. The prospect of developing religious tourism is a global and universal effort (Poulaki, 2013; 2016). The universal religious feeling motivates tourists to visit the places of religious events. It is the main generative cause of religious tourism. There is a strong need for people to travel to get to know the religious monuments and traditions of religious content (Polyzos, 2010). Religious tourism uses the cultural trust of the past and the cultural heritage (Poulaki, 2013; 2018). Religious travels and tours around the world are booming, reviving the pilgrimage activity of ancient times. The performance of various acts of worship has been a great motivator for people since ancient times. Today, this shift to fulfilling religious duties is associated with a wide range of tourism activities, which constitute religious tourism (Poulaki, 2015; 2016).

European countries have developed religious tourism and they are in the process of development, specialization, and refinement, while Greece is still in the early stages of development. The religious tourism has not been organized both locally and nationally. Some fragmentary actions have been noted, by the Church and other public stakeholders involved in tourism. It is obvious that there is no tourism development plan with specific axes, which can contribute to development by creating new favorable conditions expanding tourism demand and creating an enriched and diversified tourism product.

This paper is structured in two parts: In the first part, an attempt is made to approach the theoretical background of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in global scale and in Greece. Emphasis is placed on its conceptual content and the distinction between religious tourism and pilgrimage. This theoretical goal is approached with the secondary elements that emerged from the international and Greek bibliography. The second part presents the empirical field of research conducted with both secondary and primary research with the application of the Delphi method to examine the hypotheses related to the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece and the North Aegean Region. The findings of the Descriptive Statistics and the Spearman Correlation using SPSS are presented. The research is completed with the conclusions and the proposed policy measures for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece.

2. Literature Review

Religious tourists seek to communicate with the divine, fulfill a vow or participate in some religious events. According to Rinschede, (1992); Vukonic, (2002), and Santos, (2002), religious tourism is the form of tourism in which participants move either partially or solely for religious reasons (Poulaki et al., 2015). Today's pilgrimages often combine spiritual purpose with traditional sights (Poulaki, 2018). The most important element of this journey is the spiritual benefit, such as the renewal of the spirit, the deepening of faith, the best knowledge of the Bible, theology, the changing experience of life (Cassar and Munro, 2016). Most cultural travels include a visit to these religious places, but they are not religious travels. A visit to the Vatican is considered a sightseeing trip, not a pilgrimage. If there is also a spiritual motive, then it can be referred to as a pilgrimage (Cassar and Munro, 2016). Religious tourism has become one of the driving forces for the preservation and exploitation of many religious monuments (Wiltshier, Griffiths, 2016). According to Gassiot, et al, (2015), religious tourism is a form of cultural tourism.

The issue of the distinction between the pilgrim and the religious tourist concerns the scientific community for several years. This is because depending on the place, religious or secular, in which the person moves, his needs, desires and behaviors during the trip are formed. Many researchers have referred to the distinction between pilgrim and religious tourist. The following differences between pilgrimage and tourism are important, (Cohen, 1992), such as: 1) Pilgrimage is more binding than tourism, while tourism has more free time. 2) Pilgrimage follows rules and a specific ritual program (Cohen, 1992; 2003), while tourism has a more cultural meaning and is associated with entertainment and recreation. 3) Tourism expresses the movement from one place to another, while the pilgrimage emphasizes the movement towards the center. Pilgrimage is an existential search for a sacred place (Munro, 2017), which is the center for existential experience (Turner and Turner, 1978), where pilgrimage routes have symbolic value. 4) Pilgrimages and religious traditions depend on time and sacred place (Nolan and Nolan, 1989), while tourism activity can take place at any time, according to human desire. 5) Pilgrims use travel for purely spiritual reasons, while tourists prefer secular travel. 6) Pilgrimage requires an existential situation; the behavior of pilgrims follows certain rules, while tourism follows an entertainment plan. 7) Tourists and pilgrims can travel with others but give different meaning to the company. Pilgrims mainly emphasize the spiritual dimension and not the social and secular ones (Lopez, Lucrezia, 2013).

The desire to visit sacred places and religious sentiment are motivations for the sacred journey. A distinction is made between visitors who are purely pilgrims, and religious tourists. Pilgrims and religious tourists often share the same desire to live an authentic experience (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Collins-Kreiner, 2010c). Pilgrimage is to worship (something/someone), the journey of a believer to a sacred place of worship, the sacred place where the faithful traditionally go to perform religious worship and generally any place, the

transition to which is a duty of honor, respect and value for a person. Timothy & Olsen, (2006), argue that the motivating factors for pilgrimage are usually the search for spirituality, faith, blessing, and the search for answers to various questions. In the pilgrimage there is the sacred power of time and space. Eade and Sallnow point out that the role played by physical location differs from one pilgrimage state to another (Dubisch, 2000). Tourism and pilgrimage are different social phenomena (Collins-Kreiner, 2010c). Participants have a religious motive exclusively or partially (Griffin, Raj, 2012). There are two forms, which depend on the goals but also on the way of travel. In one form the driving force is religious feeling (pilgrim) and in the other the driving force is the search for knowledge (religious tourist). Pilgrims spend their time meditating and praying, performing religious rites, and during their journey they visit specific "sanctuaries" (Poulaki, 2013).

Tourism has a more secular character than pilgrimage, which is mainly a sacred journey (Barber, 2001), and tourists and pilgrims seek authentic experience. Due to modern transformations and the increasing use of the term "Pilgrimage" in secular contexts (Collins-Kreiner, 2010), the geography of pilgrimage must explore how experiences change in pilgrimages. Pilgrimages are related to the study of mobility in the direction of sacred places. The mobility of the pilgrimage produces spatial relations. Pilgrimage routes have become very popular as part of the concept of religious tourism. The most famous route is the one at Santiago de Compostela (Raj, Morpeth, 2007).

In the pilgrimage, experience is the journey, that is, the "path" to the religious destination (fasting, vow and prayer), while in the religious journey; experience is only the destination (church, monastery, monument, etc.). Sometimes the religious journey is made for reasons of nostalgia, for patriotic interest, for admiration of architecture and natural wonders, for searching for authentic experiences or simply out of curiosity (Cerutti and Piva, 2016). The pilgrim's goal is basically spiritual. Many times, he wishes to fast during his visit to the sanctuary. This should be considered by the feeding units, so that they offer similar delicacies, as is very typical of Santiago de Compostela, where there is a pilgrimage menu. The pilgrim devotes a lot of time to prayer and contemplation. He participates in various religious ceremonies and visits sacred places for the healing of the soul and the body.

The journey to the place of pilgrimage acquires its own significance depending on the perspective of the church. For Christianity, the Holy Land and the sacred places associated with the life and work of Jesus are the main shrines. Christianity today has the largest share of religious tourism in the world. In the Protestant church the path, the contemplation, the withdrawal and the contact with the people and the tradition of the church are emphasized more, while in the Orthodox Church the emphasis is given to the sacred space and the holy person associated with it (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Travelers, whether they are purely pilgrims, or just tourists, or combine both the pilgrimage and the cultural element in their journey, have basic needs that must be met. Religious phenomenon,

whether perceived as pilgrimage or cultural, requires a cycle of economic activities developed by hotel businesses, travel agencies, airlines, food companies, advertising companies, retail stores, souvenirs, pictures etc.

For Muslims, pilgrimage to the sanctuary is the duty of the believer. Only the spiritual element dominates (Raj & Bozonelos, 2015). The pilgrimage is part of a larger journey in the footsteps of "God's ways". Unlike modern tourism, the relationship between the host and the guest is personal and is directed to a single goal - to submit to the "path of God". The journey must have a "spiritual purpose" to initiate the believer into the greatness of God, through the observation of the "signs" of history and the wonders of man and nature, which are gifts from God (Stausberg, 2011; Raj & Bozonelos, 2015). The Saudi government is providing financial assistance to selected Muslim groups to worship in Mecca.

Buddhism emphasizes the importance of pilgrimage and promises the pilgrim's immediate entry into heavenly Nirvana. Pilgrimages are mainly associated with the life of the Buddha, his activities, religions, and legends. Buddhism is supported in many important places in Sri Lanka. Lamaism, a special form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet, has a religious center in Lhasa. Tibetan pilgrims are looking for natural sites, such as caves, springs, lakes, and mountains. Pilgrimages to these areas are often associated with special events every 12 years, where more than 10,000 pilgrims gather (Kessler, 2015).

The main driving force of pilgrimage tourism is spirituality, which is a major driving force and current trend associated with all aspects of life (Yeoman, 2008; Stausberg, 2011). Spirituality as a term comes from Christian vocabulary and is used today in all religions. Spirituality today is the fulfillment of spiritual desires, a search for one's own path and the transformation of one's life. It is about searching, practicing, and experiencing the truth. The modern notion of spirituality does not always imply the search for God but is related to spiritual reality or the higher dimension. Spirituality may include religions but not necessarily (Shinde, 2012). In a sacred place the pilgrim communicates with God. Traditionally, this sacred place is a place of worship. In addition to traditional religious sites, it can be a natural landscape, such as a mountain, where a person can admire the wonders of nature and have a religious experience. The sanctuaries act as magnets to attract religious tourists; also, the trip itself and the destination create the attractive force to attract the visitor (Raj, Morpeth, 2007).

Spirituality is considered a universal value and is closely linked to culture, education, nature, and tourism (Shinde, 2012). In recent years we have seen a sharp shift towards spirituality in search of peace and happiness. There is a shift towards spiritual tourism. The pilgrim through spirituality can find peace and inner happiness with a focus on himself. The need for spiritual tourism is a growing longing to seek inner peace. Pilgrims seek to experience spirituality, give meaning and direction to their lives. Spirituality contributes to the shaping of a person's life by giving meaning and orientation to his daily life. Pilgrims

experience spirituality to find peace of mind and acquire supplies to cope with anything difficult. Spirituality and tourism are linked when people seek peace and contemplation in religious monuments (Yeoman, 2008). Some begin their journey with cosmic motivation and in the process become pilgrims (Kumar, 2016; Munro, 2017). Comparing the pilgrimage with religious tourism it is immediately apparent that there is a difficulty in separating the two concepts in practice. Sometimes pilgrimage and religious tourism are not separated as categories of the tourism product. An objective basis for distinguishing one term from another is the religious passion that characterizes this journey. Pilgrimage is the desire of travelers to reach the sanctuary and the primary element is faith. The characteristic of the pilgrim is his faith, although his program includes religious monuments and religious events. The terms, pilgrimage and religious tourism are often equivalent when included in the categories of the so-called tourism product. Even pilgrims want to satisfy their human curiosity, to meet new places, monuments, people, to have fun, but without neglecting their faith. Religious tourism is a proposal that requires less effort than a pilgrimage.

Greece has many religious monuments, many of which have unique artistic value and enormous cultural content. These monuments are scattered throughout the mainland and island trunk and cover all periods of Byzantine and modern history with unique historical, artistic and cultural value. Many churches and monasteries are often visited by Greek pilgrims, usually on organized excursions, either through a travel agency or through the various parishes. The main motivation for organizing these pilgrimage routes is the intense interest in both pilgrimage and religion. Of course, this does not preclude their interest in the history and architecture of the various monuments. Religious-pilgrimage tourism is an important part of the tourism movement, has increased demand in several areas of Greece and its contribution to development can be particularly important. A key role is played by those factors that affect the demand for a religious tourism destination, and the relationship between this particular form of tourism and other sectors of the economy is crucial. Various fragmentary efforts have been made by the stakeholders in Greece to develop religious-pilgrimage tourism. However, this is a policy characterized by a lack of organization and proper tourism planning. Those policies and strategies that can improve the tourism development by projecting a differentiated and enriched tourism product while maintaining their identity and authenticity are absent. The complete lack of statistics to record the characteristics of the phenomenon is an indisputable witness to the lack of a substantial strategy for its development and its use as a tool for the development of the country's regions.

The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Investigation of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece.

Hypothesis 2: Factors that hinder the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the islands of the North Aegean.

Hypothesis 3: Policy measures for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the islands of the North Aegean.

Hypothesis 4: The islands of the North Aegean Region are a tourism destination with quality features and remarkable natural, cultural, and religious resources that, if utilized, can contribute to its tourism development.

3. Methodology

It is emphasized that while there are significant references related to religious-pilgrimage tourism (prominent books and notable publications in reputable scientific journals, mainly in the international arena), there are not scientific research focusing on the development of religious-pilgrimage in Greece and especially in the islands of the North Aegean. Research examining religious-pilgrimage tourism focus on the following issues: 1) Development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Cyprus, pastoral approach. 2) Religious-pilgrimage tourism in five-star hotels in Saudi Arabia. 3) The economic impact of religious tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 4) Religious tourism in Jordan, current situation, future developments, and prospects. 5) Parallel pilgrimage to the Kirtland Temple. 6) Examination of quality and satisfaction of services in an environment of religious tourism (Poulaki, 2018).

The specific research gap is being filled by this study. An extensive secondary bibliographic and articles approach to this subject is being carried out in Greece. The academic literature, research and studies of international and national research centers are examined. In addition, primary research is being conducted.

The Delphi methodology was selected, which was deemed appropriate to highlight the prospects for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the North Aegean. Experts related to the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism were selected, both from the Church and the Public Sector, and from the Tourism Agencies, and this research was conducted in two rounds.

This method seeks to reach the maximum possible consensus of a pre-selected group of experts on a topic, by giving them a series of sequential questionnaires. The process is completed when maximum consensus is reached between team members (Loo, 2002; Graham et al, 2003). Its peculiarity is that the process of working with experts is carried out in successive rounds and requires confirmation or revision of their views on the subject (Hasson et al., 2000; Graham et al., 2003; Okoli, Pawlowski, 2004).

The appropriate method was chosen for the specific research topic, the relevant bibliography was reviewed, and the experts were determined according to the selection criteria. In this research field, experts were selected who are related to the development of religious tourism in Greece. The processing of the collected data was carried out with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and the findings emerged from the Descriptive Statistics and the Correlation Coefficient Spearman. The research is completed with the recording

of the conclusions of the theoretical background and the empirical framework and the proposed policy measures for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings came from both the extensive bibliographic review and research on the development of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Greece, as well as the conduct of empirical research in the islands of the North Aegean.

4.1 Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage in Greece

Regarding the *Hypothesis 1* about the investigation of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece, the following conclusions emerged:

- Most tourists who choose Greece as a religious destination are mainly locals (internal religious tourism). This is explained by the fact that the Greeks are Orthodox Christians and the places of worship in Greece are sacred places of Orthodoxy. Religious tourists in Greece are Cypriots, Russians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians (Orthodox), expatriate Greeks from western and northern European countries, expatriate Greeks from America, Australia, Africa, university groups of religious, archeological, Byzantine studies from the Universities of the world, the amateur associations of hagiography, painting, sculpture (wood carving), the Orthodox Christians from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Orthodox Christians from Alexandria of Egypt.
- Tourists who come to Greece from abroad visit Mount Athos, Meteora, Tinos (Panagia), Corfu (Saint Spyridon), Andros (Saint Marina), Evia (Saint John the Russian), Patmos (Saint John), Aegina (Saint Nektarios) (Poulaki, 2013). There are hundreds of pilgrims entering Mount Athos every year. Of the total number of pilgrims, 40% come from Greece and 60% from other countries. Visitors come from countries such as Germany, Austria and Russia, Moldova, Georgia, Albania, and most recently from Lebanon. Mount Athos, Lady (Panagia) Soumela and many Byzantine churches in Thessaloniki and other areas attract more than 300,000 Balkan believers to Northern Greece each year. They travel thousands of miles to pray, worship, or get married. Tourism traffic to Mount Athos never stops. In the last few years, the number of Balkan tourist residence permits on Mount Athos has exceeded 300,000. More and more Bulgarians, Croats, Serbs, Poles and Romanians prefer Greek religious places. Particularly attractive destinations for Cypriots are Mount Athos and Meteora. Also, there is an ever-increasing flow of Russians to our country and specially to Mount Athos, Meteora, Corfu and Patras.
- Meteora belongs to the “All time classic” package of Greece and many tourists choose this tour, with visits to the Acropolis, Meteora, Delphi,

Ancient Olympia, while for the extension of the stay of the visitors in recent years alternative forms of tourism are developed, such as the tour, mountain biking and climbing. Meteora is the first religious community in the country, after Mount Athos. The area receives many visitors 365 days a year and many are walking tourists. In recent years, the flow of tourists from Asia has increased significantly, especially from South Korea, Japan, and China, which are primarily interested in geological morphology. Visitors to the area range from 850,000 to 1.2 million a year. The peak of the season starts in March and peaks in April and May and after the summer it recovers from September and October.

- Lady (Panagia) of Tinos is a favorite destination for those who are interested in religion, art, and history. This temple is directly connected to the history, economy, and tourism of the island. 1,500,000 pilgrims visit the Lady (Panagia) of Tinos on average every year from March to October. Many pilgrims visit the island every month during the winter months. This proves that the pilgrimage of Lady (Panagia) of Tinos is the first in Greece. The largest pilgrimage is recorded from the 1st to the 15th of August, when the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is celebrated. Religious destinations in Greece, such as Tinos and Veria, are capable of accommodating thousands of worshipers, even for one day. Other temples of the Virgin Mary are also well known, mainly in the Aegean islands, where tourists combine the pilgrimage to the Lady Mary with the holidays. Another reason that makes churches attractive is that festivals are held in many places.
- Also, other popular religious destinations are Saint Raphael in Lesbos, Lady (Panagia) Soumela, the monastery of Saint John in Patmos, Saint Triada in Aegina, Lady (Panagia) Proussiotissa in Evritania, the monastery of Paleokastritsa in Corfu, Saint Irene Chrysovalantou, Saint Spyridon in Corfu, Saint Gerasimos in Kefalonia, Saint Dionysios in Zakynthos and others. Patmos gathers many tourists during the Easter period, especially on Holy Week. Beginning on Easter Sunday until the Sunday of Thomas many organized groups arrive. Easter visitors exceed 3,000 people daily and come mainly from Greece and Cyprus, while in June the arrival of foreigners begins. Also, many believers visit Lady (Panagia) Ekatonapyliani in Parikia of Paros, to worship the icon of the 17th century.
- Activities that make up religious tourism (festivals, events) are not limited to the summer months. Holidays and festivals are held all year round and pilgrimages that are not related to specific holidays are also open all year round. The cultural and religious interest is intense inside and outside the tourism season. The festivals that take place in the summer on the islands of Greece, such as: Sifnos, Paros, Lefkada, Rhodes, Corfu, Chios, Lesbos, Samos, Santorini, gather many pilgrims.
- The "Steps of the Apostle Paul" is considered one of the most important religious routes in Greece. The journey of the Apostle Paul to Greece is a journey that moves today not only the pious believer, but also anyone who

loves history. The "Steps of the Apostle Paul" go through all the places that the Apostle taught and are an ideal combination of pilgrimage and tour in some of the most beautiful places in Greece. Stations of the course of the Apostle Paul in Greece were Samothrace, Kavala (Naples), Philippi, Amphipolis /Apollonia, Veria, Athens and Corinth. Many of them, which are also pilgrimages, hold religious events, such as in the city of Veria, where worship services are held in June in memory of the Apostle Paul, known as "Pavlia." The Synodal Office of Pilgrimage Tours (Special Synodal Committee) of the Church of Greece has marked a special activity regarding the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece. An attempt is being made to create an official pilgrimage map of Greece. The "Epifania" program is also moving in this direction to promote pilgrimage tourism.

- The tourism traffic in Greece from Russia is quite high. The movement of organized excursions from 2012 to 2018 was increased by 80%, when the wave of mainly Russian believers in Greece intensified. Until a few years ago, the Russians were going to Jerusalem, while in recent years they have preferred Greek religious places. The positive atmosphere of cooperation between the Church of Greece and Saint Petersburg contributed to this.
- Greek National Tourism Organization (G.N.T.O.) has made occasionally efforts to promote and develop religious tourism. These efforts have two main axes: 1) In the operation of infrastructure and attractions that will attract tourists and 2) to set the foundations for the development of private initiative.
- Many tourism offices in Greece organize and offer tourism packages to follow the "Steps of the Apostle Paul". These tours, unfortunately, are limited to visiting the most important places that the Apostle Paul visited but are not combined with other activities.
- There are many obstacles to the development of business in relation to pilgrimage, such as the lack of infrastructure and inadequate training of workers combined with the lack of institutional framework and the non-existent promotion of religious monuments. For the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism, a joint committee has already been set up by the competent Ministry and the Church of Greece, to create a new framework for attracting visitors of religious and cultural interest, throughout the territory and cooperation with local Dioceses.

4.2 Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage in the islands of North Aegean, Greece

Religious tourism and pilgrimage are more developed in Lesbos Island compared to the other islands of Greece. Religious tourism is considered as an untapped capital and the Church and the Public Sector have not sufficiently understood the benefits of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism.

The findings related to *Hypothesis 2* regarding the development obstacles of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the islands of the North Aegean are as follows:

The promotion of religious monuments is incomplete and the cooperation between the State and the Church in the islands of the North Aegean is non-existent. There is no tourism culture (Fig. 1) and there is no infrastructure in the monasteries. Also, the islands have been discredited by the refugee-immigration issue (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1: Lack of tourism culture hinders the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	12	22.6	22.6	22.6
	Agree	31	58.5	58.5	81.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	7	13.2	13.2	94.3
	Disagree	2	3.8	3.8	98.1
	Totally disagree	1	1.9	1.9	100.0
	Total	53	100.0	100.0	

Source: Poulaki, (2018)

Fig. 2: The defamation of the three islands of the North Aegean Region due to the refugee-immigration issue hinders the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	20	37.7	37.7	37.7
	Agree	23	43.4	43.4	81.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	7	13.2	13.2	94.3
	Disagree	3	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	53	100.0	100.0	

Source: Poulaki, (2018)

The increased prices on the islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios, the non-existent cooperation between Church and State, the negative attitude of the Church's institutions and the lack of a central stakeholder for the promotion of religious-pilgrimage tourism hinder the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism (Fig. 3, 4).

Fig. 3: Increased prices on the islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios hinder the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	15	28.3	28.3	28.3
	Agree	33	62.3	62.3	90.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	3.8	3.8	94.3
	Disagree	2	3.8	3.8	98.1
	Totally disagree	1	1.9	1.9	100.0
	Total	53	100.0	100.0	

Source: Poulaki, (2018)

Fig. 4: The lack of a central stakeholder for the promotion of religious-pilgrimage tourism hinders its development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Totally agree	8	15.1	15.1	15.1
	Agree	27	50.9	50.9	66.0
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	5.7	5.7	71.7
	Disagree	12	22.6	22.6	94.3
	Totally disagree	3	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	53	100.0	100.0	

Source: Poulaki, (2018)

The findings related to *Hypothesis 3* regarding the policy measures to be taken for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the islands of the North Aegean are interesting. There are many ways and actions to promote religious-pilgrimage tourism, so that this form of tourism can be a lever for economic development in the islands of the North Aegean. Most experts point out that the ways in which islands are promoted as religious tourism destinations must be part of a more general strategic development plan without being fragmentary, highlighting elements of uniqueness and differentiation of that tourism product. It is very important to have an operational action plan, to approach new markets, to strengthen the institutions with coordination, synergies and collaborations, to develop and diversify the tourism product, to have targeted marketing, communication strategy and to promote great religious monuments, so that religious-pilgrimage tourism can be a lever for economic development in the North Aegean Region.

It is worth noting the convergence of opinions of all experts involved in the Delphi method regarding *Hypothesis 4*: The islands of the North Aegean Region

are a tourism destination with quality features and remarkable natural, cultural and religious resources that, if utilized, can contribute to its tourism development.

Fig. 5: Spearman Correlations: Hypothesis 4: The islands of the North Aegean Region are a tourism destination with quality features and remarkable natural, cultural, and religious resources that, if utilized, can contribute to its tourism development

		Hypothesis 4 -Church-	Hypothesis 4 -Public Sector-	Hypothesis 4 -Travel Agencies-	
Spearman's rho	Hypothesis 4 -Church-	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	1.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.	.
	Hypothesis 4 -Public Sector -	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	1.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.	.
	Hypothesis 4 -Travel Agencies-	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	1.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.	.

Source: Poulaki, (2018)

The above table shows the absolute correlation between all variables (Church-Public Sector, Church-Travel Agencies and Travel Agencies-Public Sector). In *Hypothesis 4* it is observed that there is an absolute correlation between the view of the Church and the Public Sector (1,000) and the Travel Agencies (1,000) and of the Public Sector with the Travel Agencies (1,000), and therefore a general convergence of views on this hypothesis.

Greece has a long tradition in tourism and hospitality, mainly due to its history and ancient culture. The Aegean Sea has been a well-established destination offering many facilities. Traditionally built islands, beautiful landscapes, the sea, and cultural heritage form a great and desirable destination. Of course, remote island destinations are more difficult due to their over-dependence on the tourism industry, the scarcity of natural, economic, and human resources, and their inability to achieve competitive advantage in other economic activities. Based on the findings of the present research, it is concluded that religious tourism has not been developed in Greece in relation to the ideal development that this special form of tourism could present. Religious tourism is a bit developed in many places, being an untapped capital. The Church and the Public Sector have not sufficiently understood the benefits of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism, while the predisposition of all stakeholders for the promotion of religious-pilgrimage tourism is positive.

5. Conclusions

Religious tourism is a global phenomenon of great economic and social importance. Tourism and pilgrimage have several similarities but also different characteristics. In the pilgrimage, the desire of the travelers to reach the sanctuary is basic and the primary element is the faith. The main factor for the pilgrimage is usually the search for the spiritual, the faith, the blessing and the search for answers to various questions. The development of religious tourism and pilgrimage requires proper management. In matters of organization, the needs of both pilgrims and religious tourists must be considered. The search for incentives is crucial to the management of a religious destination that includes: 1) The management of transportation and accommodation, 2) The management of catering and leisure, 3) The management of guided tours and experiences. In the context of the development of religious tourism, companies and organizations are established, public and private, which aim not only at the effective management and protection of religious wealth, but also its promotion.

Today, the most important monastic complex in Greece is Mount Athos and is a great destination for pilgrims and religious tourists. Mount Athos as a living monument of invaluable cultural value has many visitors all year round. Also, the unique rocks of Meteora, located between earth and sky, are included in the UNESCO list as part of the world's natural and cultural heritage, attracting many pilgrims. Although there are no official figures in the country, religious tourism is estimated to be 85% domestic but growing rapidly in recent years. For Greece, the first places of preference are occupied by Mount Athos, Meteora, Patmos, Syros, Corfu, Tinos, etc. It is generally accepted that religious tourism remains unexploited in Greece, accounting for 15% of all tourism activity. Religious tourism is opening to new markets, such as Russia. The number of Russian pilgrims visiting Greece has been growing rapidly in recent years, with the sole aim of seeing important religious monuments in the country closely, as well as worshipping holy relics.

It has been established that in most of Greece's reception areas, the condition of infrastructure and services is problematic, despite the existence of quality resources. There is a shortage of infrastructure and superstructure projects, as well as services, as well as problems with airlines and ferry connections, especially during the winter months, and there has been a shortage of large-scale infrastructure and shortages of skilled workers. Religious-pilgrimage tourism has not been organized both locally and nationally. The complete lack of statistics on the characteristics of the phenomenon has been established. In recent years, some actions have been taken by both the Dioceses and other public stakeholders involved in the development of religious tourism, but it is still in its infancy, as it is fragmentary. In particular, there is a lack of a tourism development plan with specific strategic components, such as: 1) Contributing to local development by creating new favorable conditions, 2) Expanding tourism demand and extending the tourism season, 3) Creating a product enriched and diversified. 4) Utilization of the rich history, culture and ecclesiastical history of Greece, 5) Development

of infrastructure and provision of suitable facilities for tourists, and 6) Consolidation of a development program aimed at tourism development.

Also, religious-pilgrimage tourism has not been developed in the islands of the North Aegean Region. This is a general convergence of views of the Church, the Public Sector and the Tourism Agencies. The Church and the Public Sector have not sufficiently understood the benefits of the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism. There are many factors that hinder the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in North Aegean: 1) Significant shortages in infrastructure and superstructures, 2) Increased prices, 3) Lack of entrepreneurship, innovation and planning, 4) Lack of infrastructure in monastic areas and the absence of affordable hotels-accommodation, 5) Absence of tourism culture, 6) Defamation of the islands of the North Aegean Region due to the refugee-immigration issue, 7) Difficult approach to some religious monuments, 8) Incomplete promotion of the religious monuments of the islands and the religious-pilgrimage tourism, 9) Non-existent cooperation between the Church and the State, 10) Negative attitude of the Church.

There are many policy measures for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in Greece: 1) Organizing and promoting, inside and outside Greece, of guided tours of pilgrimage interest, 2) Mapping of all religious monuments with the cooperation of the Church, 3) Connection of religious-pilgrimage tourism with the historical and cultural elements, 4) Organizing and supporting conferences, seminars and information and training meetings both at home and abroad, 5) Cooperation of all stakeholders with the ultimate goal of planning and implementing relevant actions, 6) Promoting the religious and cultural heritage of Greece, 6) Recruitment of trained staff for guided tours of religious monuments, 7) Development of religious-pilgrimage tourism with respect to religious monuments, 8) Measures for the better and more economical movement of pilgrims-tourists, 9) Creation of a Branch of the Synodal Office of Pilgrimage Tours of the Church of Greece, 10) Activation of the role of the Church.

All stakeholders from the Church, the Public Sector and the Travel Agencies are very interested in the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism, emphasizing the coordination of work and the good cooperation that should characterize them to achieve their goals. The policy measures are sufficient and can be implemented in the framework of a comprehensive promotion strategy, with coordinated actions through the implementation of a strategic tourism development plan, to form a sustainable development policy for the management and protection of historical and religious monuments, enhancing the creation of a strong local identity. The convergence of views expressed in the present study can serve as a key axis for the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism in the islands of the North Aegean. After all, all actors from the Church, the State and the Agency are very interested in the development of religious-pilgrimage tourism, emphasizing the coordination of work and the good cooperation that should characterize them to achieve their goals.

Therefore, the emergence of Greece as a religious-pilgrimage destination can be an important way out for the economy with multiple benefits. The development of religious-pilgrimage tourism will ensure a significant and steady flow of tourists throughout the year, severely limiting the seasonality of tourism demand. However, the implementation of targeted policies for sustainable tourism development should be a key component, while maintaining the cultural and environmental richness of Greece. Greece has many strong points, which can take advantage of and promote its tourism activity, being an important attraction for religious-pilgrim tourists. The long history of religious tradition and the remarkable sites of great historical and cultural interest can meet the expectations of religious tourists. Visits to religious attractions can be combined with other alternative tourism activities.

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