

## Article

# Religious Tourism and Sustainable Development of the Economy in the Context of Globalization in the Northeast Area of Romania

Doina Guriță <sup>1,\*</sup> and Florin Ioan Scortescu <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Marketing, Faculty of Economics, University “Petre Andrei” of Iași, 700309 Iași, Romania<sup>2</sup> The Accounting Department, Faculty of Economics, University “Petre Andrei” of Iași, 700309 Iași, Romania

\* Correspondence: doina.gurita@upa.ro

**Abstract:** The present study aims to demonstrate the significance of religious tourism and its impact on both the economy and socio-culture. Religious tourism provides a sacred and spiritual environment that has the potential to shape the motivational state of individuals searching for cultural and religious landmarks and destinations to support their spiritual well-being. Hence, it is imperative to maintain close relationships between religion, culture, and tourism as they play a crucial role in promoting spirituality and human development, particularly in the context of globalization and sustainable economic development. In the latter part of the paper, research was conducted to formulate strategies aimed at the development of religious tourism in the northeast region of Romania, which is an economically underprivileged area with significant untapped tourist potential. The findings suggest that via improvements in infrastructure, the creation of a favorable business environment, enhanced promotion, development of accommodation facilities, and improvement in services, the area can achieve a higher quality of life and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** religion; religious tourism; development; sustainability; local resources; globalization



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## 1. Introduction

The present paper is a contribution to the ongoing national and international research on the religious phenomenon and religious tourism. The growing popularity of religious tourism in recent decades highlights the need for interdisciplinary research, including marketing. The aim of this study is to provide a contemporary understanding of the relationship between religion and religious travel, pilgrimage and religious tourism, and effective strategies for capitalizing on the religious tourism potential of the Northeast region of Romania.

The Romanian tourism industry is facing numerous challenges, including declining revenue, a rigid labor market, inadequate infrastructure, and unfavorable economic conditions. In this context, research on tourism, particularly religious tourism, using marketing methodology can provide useful insights and solutions.

The motivations for religious tourism are personal and intimate and are largely tied to religious heritage, family values, and traditions. These motivations are particularly strong in rural regions, such as the northeast (Moldova) and northwest (Maramureș), where traditions and values are better preserved.

After the fall of Communism in Romania in 1989, religion has regained the attention of researchers from fields other than theology. Drawing from the insights of demographer Vladimir Trebici, it is pertinent to emphasize that the variable of religion holds increasing significance as an explanatory factor in theories and models put forth by disciplines such as social psychology, sociology, and differential demography [1]. Furthermore, religion should not be disregarded within economic theories, exemplified by the seminal work of German economist and sociologist Max Weber (1856–1920) titled “The Protestant Ethic and the

Spirit of Capitalism”, which underscores the interplay between economy and religion [2]. The assumptions made by Weber have undergone critical reevaluation by Robert Barro and Rachel M. McCleary, who conducted a study encompassing 59 countries with varying religious dominance, revealing both the direct correlation between individuals’ faith and economic growth, as well as the inverse relationship between church involvement as an institution and economic development [3]. Robin Grier, building upon Weber’s hypotheses, further establishes a direct association between Protestantism and economic growth [4].

This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the relationship between religion and religious tourism and proposes strategies for maximizing the potential of the Northeast region of Romania. Thus, the significance of religion in shaping economic growth and the personal and intimate motivations for religious tourism highlights the importance of this research.

The objective of this study is to examine the strategies for the development of religious tourism in the northeast area and formulate a marketing plan that balances the demands of religious cultural institutions and religious tourists. The research explores the interdependence of religion and tourism using tourist experiences. The following aspects will be analyzed in the study:

1. a conceptual examination of religious tourism;
2. an examination of the unique features that drive the growth of religious tourism;
3. an analysis of religious tourists’ perceptions of the religious tourism offerings in the area, based on interviews;
4. the formulation of strategic directions for the growth of religious tourism;
5. the development of action plans aimed at enhancing the religious tourism experience;
6. the creation of a religious tourism marketing mix.

In order to achieve these objectives, various research tools were employed. The study utilized bibliographic documentation, including a literature review, to conduct qualitative deductive research. Phenomenological and interpretative research methods, informed by the works of Husserl, Hegel, and Sartre, were utilized to identify the essential meanings involved and to identify significant units within the phenomenon of religious tourism.

## 2. Literature Review

Tourism has acquired an increasingly paramount role in stimulating economic expansion, chiefly due to its substantial contribution as a primary generator of foreign exchange and a pivotal driver of export diversification [5]. This trend finds pronounced exemplification in select countries such as Italy, Israel, India, and France, where pilgrimage-like travel, grounded in “spiritual” and “spectacle” motives, persists as a dominant and enduring phenomenon. Consequently, religious, faith-based, and spiritual tourism, including the sacred practice of pilgrimages, assumes a salient and abiding position within the broader context of the tourism industry [6].

Pilgrimages, as a distinctive type of travel, exert their influence far beyond the confines of spiritual pursuits. Embracing multifaceted political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications, they manifest the potential to impact even global trade and public health dynamics. The inherent spatial mobility intrinsic to the phenomenon of pilgrimage endows it with profound significance and engenders scholarly interest, thereby meriting a comprehensive investigation [7].

Paradoxically, notwithstanding the profound religious experiences that religious tourism affords, these experiences have regrettably remained underappreciated. The subtle yet profound influence of such spiritual encounters on individual values, including happiness, satisfaction, and self-fulfillment, remains largely unacknowledged. This omission is noteworthy, given the age-old recognition of happiness as a cardinal aspiration during transformative life events [8].

The notion of “homo religious” serves to underscore an enduring and intrinsic interconnection between humanity and religious practices throughout the annals of history.

Evolving from celestial observations, the human proclivity to seek solace and fortitude from a higher transcendental being fortifies their spiritual affinities [9].

In the contemporary scholarly landscape, the conflation of pilgrims and tourists or the assimilation of pilgrimage into the broader concept of tourism emerges as a noteworthy paradigm shift. Scholars now converge on recognizing pilgrimage as a seamless integration within diverse modalities of tourism, warranting discerning inquiry and comprehensive appraisal [10].

A critical determinant of tourists' trust in destination brands, including those infused with religious themes, rests upon subjective sentiments. Crucial elements of destination branding encompass the expeditious availability of comprehensive information about scenic locales, the profundity of spiritual experiences proffered, and the distinctiveness of commercial undertakings entwined with these sacred destinations [11].

The accession of Romania to the European Union has spurred scholars to explore the profound influence of cultural tourism on the recently united Europe and the considerable advantages that can arise from this form of tourism.

Under the direction and supervision of Greg Richards, 2001 [12] has been compiled, showcasing the indispensable contributions of various European researchers. These studies serve as valuable milestones in the integration and circulation of Romanian tourism within Europe. Additionally, research has also been directed toward identifying and analyzing major pilgrimage centers in Europe and the world [12].

With regard to religious tourism as a distinct research topic, the contributions from experts are becoming increasingly varied and substantial. The reviewed studies seem to aim to demonstrate the scope of religious tourism and the potential for development in specific geographical or cultural regions. A notable collection of studies can be found in the publication, "Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: an international perspective", coordinated by Razaq Raj and Nigel D. Morpeth [13].

The studies included in this work embody a globalizing spirit and offer diverse models, proposed ideas, and ample perspectives for further research on the subject. Another relevant publication is "Tourism, religion, and spiritual journeys", authored by Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, which comprises a series of studies organized by field and provides a historical-philosophical overview of what is known today as religious tourism. This volume offers a crucial entry point into understanding the foundations and evolution of this type of tourism [14].

One of the seminal works in the field of religious tourism is the publication by Tomisav Hitrec, entitled "Religious Tourism: Development-Characteristics-Perspectives" [15]. Another notable contribution to the field is the work by Noga Collins-Kreiner, Nurit Kliot, Yoel Mansfeld, and Keren Sagi, "Christian Tourism to the Holy Land: Pilgrimage During Security Crisis", which provides an insightful examination of religious tourism in the Holy Land and its significance [5]. Additionally, Crispin Spaine, under the auspices of Leicester University Press, published in 2000 the volume "Godly Things: Museums, Objects, and Religion", which offers a unique perspective on the significance of religious objects as elements of attraction to people [16].

In the analysis of religious tourism, several hypotheses have been proposed to determine the similarities or differences between pilgrimage as a religious act or as a tourist activity. It is worth mentioning that pilgrimage can contribute to sustainable development, as most such activities have an underlying economic purpose. In addition to religious motivation, pilgrims also visit other sites to purchase souvenirs and other items, contributing to the local economy [17].

The study of religious tourism in Romania is limited in terms of quantity and quality. This may be due to the persistent reluctance between religious authority and secular approaches in the field. Nevertheless, an economic perspective is valid if financial capital is involved in significant amounts. A significant study that provides a comprehensive and practical overview of religious tourism in Romania, with a particular focus on its realities, is authored by Alina Bădulescu and Olimpia Ban of the University of Oradea [18].

Additionally, an article published in the magazine “Capital” offers a general overview of the issue, but it is not as in-depth, serving more as a popularizing view of the problem.

The field of religious tourism has garnered much attention from researchers, who have sought to analyze this phenomenon using innovative approaches. While some researchers may adopt a less direct attitude, particularly in certain countries, others adopt a more pragmatic approach to the issue, saying things “by name” [19].

In order to achieve an impartial understanding of reality, Romanian researchers have the opportunity to enhance their contributions by incorporating studies from external scientific disciplines, aligning with the well-known Latin principle “sine ira et studio” (without anger or bias) [20].

In the field of marketing and religious tourism, researchers have raised questions such as the necessity of marketing integration as a policy in religious organizations, the application of marketing in the religious field, the challenges faced both internationally and in Romania, the peculiarities of marketing in the field of religious tourism, and the contribution of religious tourism to sustainable regional development [21].

The majority of authors advocate for the implementation of marketing principles and strategies in religious tourism as a means to achieve enhanced outcomes.

Nevertheless, despite the church’s endorsement of marketing in religious tourism, such as the establishment of pilgrimage centers and partnerships with tourism companies, the outcomes have not yielded proportional success [22]. In the field of marketing and religious tourism, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the potential benefits of applying marketing principles and strategies. As noted in previous research, there is a consensus among authors in the last two decades that these approaches can lead to optimal results in the field of religious tourism [22].

Moreover, Weber’s theories on the relationship between religion and economic growth have been reexamined in a study that analyzed data from 59 countries with varying religious affiliations. The findings revealed a direct correlation between an individual’s faith and economic growth, as well as an inverse relationship between the involvement of religious institutions and sustainable economic growth [23].

The present study aims to propose a marketing plan for religious tourism that balances the interests of both religious and cultural organizations and tourists. The authors contend that tourism and religion are intertwined with the experiences of tourists, and thus, it is crucial to consider both aspects when developing a marketing plan.

Religious tourism can also serve a social and cultural purpose, offering individuals the opportunity to learn about different cultures and religious practices. It is important to provide cultural support and educational resources, such as specialized guides, to help tourists fully appreciate the spiritual and architectural significance of religious sites [24].

It has been noted that religious organizations can also organize trips to religious places, thereby emphasizing the aspect of pilgrimage when accompanied by a religious figure such as a priest and incorporating spiritual activities such as prayer and worship [25]. The components associated with tourism, such as transportation, accommodation, and meals, will have a spiritual dimension, with transportation being conducted by coach, accommodation being provided in monasteries, and fasting being recommended, both physically and spiritually, to align with the beliefs of the community [26].

Religious tourism draws its essence from religion, with tourists visiting religious sites for various reasons, including curiosity, admiration of spiritual lifestyles, and the desire to learn about new places. Upon arriving at a religious site, their motivation may transform into a spiritual calling. Visitors to religious sites or participants in religious events can be classified as devout pilgrims or traditional tourists based on their objectives [27].

According to the UN’s definition of tourism, it is defined as a movement of people from their place of residence to a place of stay without performing remunerated activities [28]. In the context of religious tourism, this can be applied as the individual movement of people from their place of residence to a religious site for a temporary stay without performing



remunerated activities for reasons related to the knowledge of architectural heritage and religious history, as well as participation in religious events and activities [29].

UNWTO considers religious tourism as the visit to sacred places of a particular religion for the purpose of practicing religious rituals such as worship and the celebration of religious events [30]. The religious tourism phenomenon is considered a subtype of cultural tourism, with travelers seeking new religious and historical knowledge as well as fulfilling spiritual needs [31].

Religious tourism is often differentiated from pilgrimage, which is the movement of people to religious sites or holy places with the main motivation to pray and undertake penance, utilizing accommodation and meal services provided by monasteries [32]. Visitors to religious sites seek peace of mind and self-discovery, and the practice of religious tourism has the potential to define the anthropic aspect of this phenomenon [33].

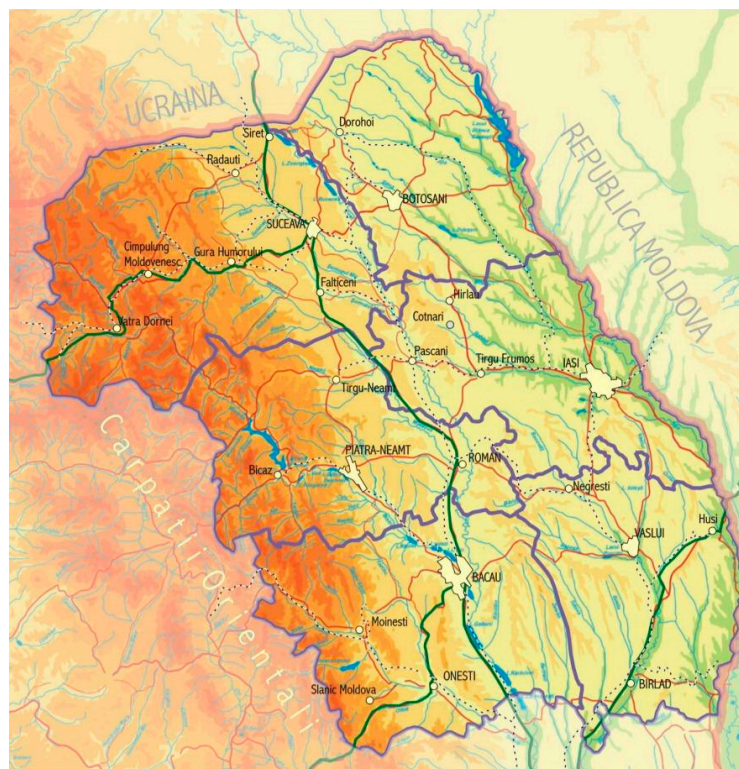
In Romania, the role of religion in shaping people's lives and activities has been significant throughout history. The spiritual significance of religious sites, such as monasteries, churches, and hermitages, along with the presence of dedicated individuals, has captured the attention and admiration of people, resulting in a special reverence towards these places [34].

#### *Religious Tourism in the Northeast Area of Romania*

From a historical perspective, the Northeast Development Region of Romania is a constituent part of the ancient historical region of Moldova. It has the largest area of Romania's eight development regions, covering a total of 36,850 km<sup>2</sup> and housing a population of 3,726,642 residents.

From an administrative standpoint, the region is bordered by the Republic of Moldova to the East, the counties of Maramureş and Bistriţa–Năsăud (northwest region), and the counties of Mureş, Harghita, and Covasna (central region) to the west, Ukraine to the north, and the counties of Galaţi and Vrancea (southeastern region) to the south [24].

Geographical Characterisation of the Northeast Region (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Geographical map of the Northeast region. Source: <http://hartiromania.celendo.ro> (accessed on 8 June 2023).

The northeast region is renowned for its rich historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage, which is seamlessly intertwined with modernity and the present era.

Geographically, the region is distinguished by a harmonious amalgamation of various landforms, with 30% consisting of mountains, 30% featuring subcarpathian relief, and the remaining 40% corresponding to plateau forms. The plateau forms prevail in the Vaslui, Botoșani, and Iași counties, accounting for approximately 70% of the area.

To the west, the region is demarcated by the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, which have peaks that reach almost 2000 m in height in the northern sector (such as Vârful Pietrosu, Vârful Rarău, Vârful Giumalău, Vârful Ocolașu Mare, Vârful Hășmașu Mare), decreasing in altitude towards the south (including Troțușului Mountains, Ciuc Mountains, and Vrancei Mountains).

The subcarpathians, which are between 700 and 800 m in elevation, form a gradual transition between the mountains and the foothills, with their forests and landscapes that are relatively underused in terms of tourism. There are several monasteries and hermitages located in this region, some of which are of significant historical antiquity.

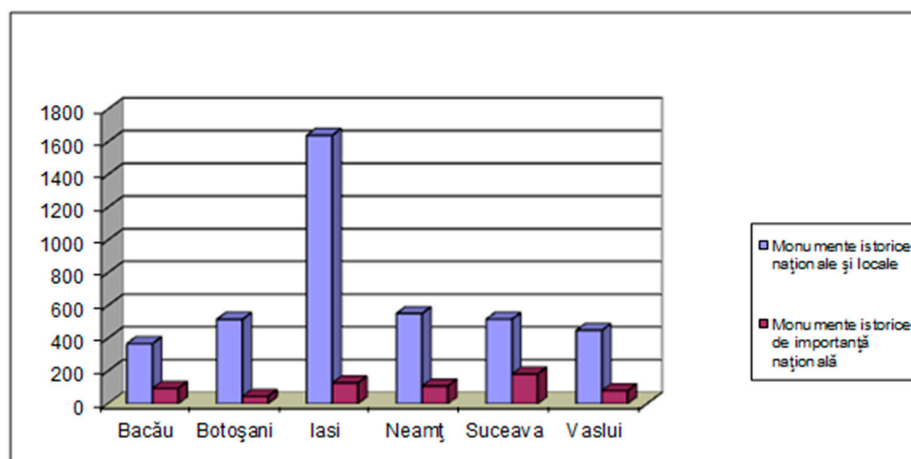
The eastern part of the region can be classified into two principal areas: the Moldavian Plain in the north and the Bârlad Plateau in the south. The Suceava Plateau, situated in the northwest part of the region, is characterized by heights ranging from 500 to 600 m and is well-known for its “obcinele” (slight undulations of the relief), which are widely recognized by tourists.

From a hydrological perspective, the region is traversed by eight significant north–south flowing watercourses, with the Siret (42,890 km<sup>2</sup>) and Prut (10,990 km<sup>2</sup>) rivers constituting the most substantial river basins. The Prut River serves as a natural boundary between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, extending over a length of 680 km.

The Bistrita and Moldova rivers, from a tourism and historical standpoint, present enormous potential in terms of cultural-historical and religious identity, as well as for active leisure pursuits. These waterways’ tourism significance is reflected in the development and management initiatives aimed at providing a comprehensive range of services. Most waterways in the region have been modernized, with “Mountain Spring” being one of the most significant reservoirs, boasting a normal retention volume of 1130 million cubic meters.

The region’s topography is adorned with a plethora of religious edifices, which present opportunities for the development of a multifaceted religious and medical tourism industry catering to both domestic and international demand.

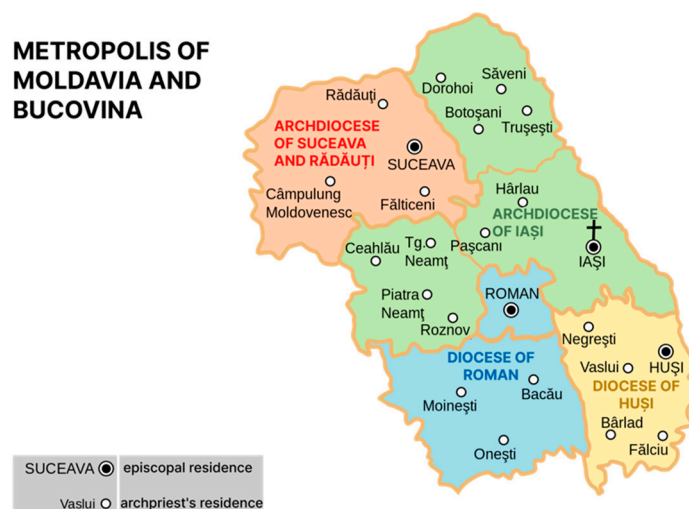
The northeast region of Romania is characterized by its rich cultural and historical heritage, exemplified by a plethora of ancient monuments that bear witness to the region’s diverse past, as suggested below (Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Distribution of monuments in the northeast region. Source: Graphical interpretation of the table.

The northeast region has 129 museums and public collections exhibited on a surface of more than 1100 thousand square meters and attracting more than 1.2 million visitors annually.

The following illustration provides a graphical representation of the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bucovina under discussion. The picture depicts a map of several metropolises, offering a visual representation of the concept at hand (Figure 3):



**Figure 3.** Metropolis of Moldavia and Bucovina.

Bucovina boasts a significant share of Romania's 30 cultural tourist attractions listed on the UNESCO International Heritage List.

Specifically, nine out of the 30 attractions belong to Bucovina, which highlights the region's vast potential for tourism. These nine attractions are the Church of "The Cutting of the Head of St. John the Baptist" in Arbore village, the Church of "The Assumption of the Mother of God and St. George" at Humor Monastery, the Church of "Annunciation" at Moldovita Monastery, the Church of "Holy Cross" at Pătrăuți, the Church of "Saint Nicholas" at Probota Monastery, the Church of "Saint George" in Suceava, the Church of "Saint George" at Voroneț Monastery, and the Church of Sucevița Monastery.

The growth of tourism, particularly religious tourism, in the North-East Development Region of Romania can be attributed to the presence of monasteries, hermitages, and pilgrimage sites. The tradition of old boyar families involved significant financial and material support to these religious sites, and the monasteries provided special accommodations for the families in their architectural structures. The monasteries were also known to offer free accommodation and meals to travelers and pilgrims, and this tradition continued until the late 19th century [24,27,30,35].

Additionally, the improvement in road infrastructure and the availability of transportation options to the general population led to a surge in tourism in the region, with religious elements being a significant factor in the motivation for travel. In the 15th to 19th centuries, people from great distances would embark on pilgrimage journeys to these religious sites, often on foot, and were drawn to the famous edifices and religious holidays [14,15,26].

Moreover, the growth of human settlements and increased urban population incomes, as well as decreased leisure time, led to the development of religious tourism as a distinct phenomenon. In the 19th century, the reaction to the stress induced by urbanization and intensified industrialization, along with cultural and spiritual concerns, led to a heightened interest in such leisure activities. In the context of urban dwellers' needs to escape the city, even for a brief period, spiritual pursuits took on an important role.

The emergence of religious tourism as a manifestation of cultural tourism in the Northeast region is not coincidental. This position is analogous to that between cultural

tourism and tourism more broadly, an aspect widely accepted. Firstly, religious tourism is a form of tourism that entails travel and staying away from one's permanent residence.

It is imperative to outline the distinctiveness of religious tourism as a form of tourism. The term "religion" in the name itself imparts a unique connotation and underscores the particularities inherent to this form of tourism. Domestic tourists who engage in religious rural tourism tend to have limited motivations that are primarily personal and intimate in nature [32]. These motivations are often tied to religious denomination traditions, values, and principles passed down within families and are less influenced by modern marketing methods. Additionally, the preservation of traditions and customs within religious institutions, as well as the national, historical, and cultural heritage value of many of these religious establishments built centuries ago, also play a significant role.

When it comes to religious tourism in the northeast region, urban dwellers are the primary consumers of tourism services. However, it is important to acknowledge the rural population as an active participant in consuming these services. This is due to the rich tradition preserved in rural areas, the spiritual wealth of rural communities, and the significance of the rural population in the overall demographic [36].

The main characteristics of religious tourism in the northeast region of Romania include:

- a large number of religious heritage sites that attract a significant number of tourists;
- presence of UNESCO-recognized religious heritage sites that are underutilized;
- most religious tourist destinations are located in rural areas;
- consumers of this form of tourism usually spend a minimum of one day at the destination;
- travel can be performed individually, with shared or personal transportation, or organized through a travel agency;
- at the destination, pilgrims use local services for accommodation, meals, and transportation;
- tourists also contribute to the increased exploitation of local resources through commercial exchanges.

In Table 1 below, some of the problems, objectives, and projections related to the tourism development in the northeast region are presented in brief.

**Table 1.** The northeast region of Romania: problems, objectives, projections.

	Problems	Objectives	Projections
The Northeast region of Romania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate representation of the cultural and religious identity of the location.</li> <li>• Underdeveloped cultural-religious tourism in comparison to the region's potential.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a comprehensive policy framework for cultural tourism at the regional level.</li> <li>• Creation of a distinctive regional identity that is recognized both within the country and globally</li> </ul>	<p>Formulating a cohesive regional identity with the objectives of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing current market trends;</li> <li>• Analyzing all tourist destinations within the region;</li> <li>• Setting strategic goals.</li> </ul>

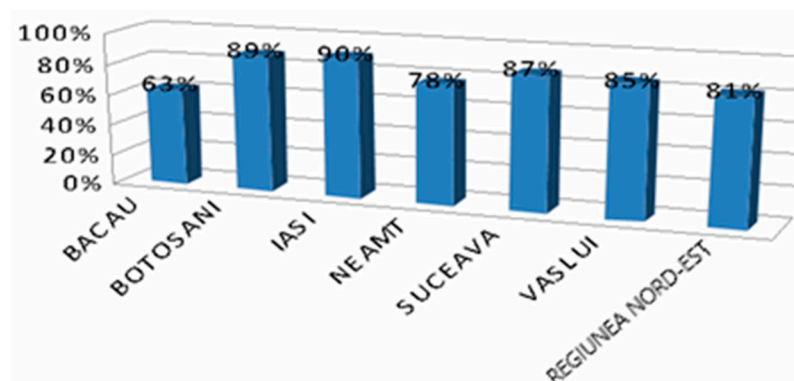
Cultural events represent a contemporary form of tourism that includes festivals, seasons, tours, and openings. Despite their great potential for development, cultural events are currently under-utilized.

Given its inherently multifaceted nature, cultural tourism often overlaps with other forms of tourism, such as leisure and business tourism.

An important aspect of analyzing the demand for religious tourism in the region is to conduct research on tourist arrivals and overnight stays, broken down by county and accommodation structure (Figure 4). Unfortunately, the pandemic and economic crisis have had a detrimental effect on tourism in the region. In 2020, the number of overnight



stays decreased from 1676.8 thousand in the previous year to 1364.4 thousand, representing a decline of nearly 18.6%. This trend was widespread across counties but with varying degrees of intensity. The most significant decreases were observed in the counties of Bacau (27.1%) and Neamt (22%).



**Figure 4.** Dynamics of overnight stays by county in accommodation facilities 2019/2020 in (%). Source: Processed Data.

The Northeast region of Romania presents a unique set of characteristics for religious tourism development, which necessitates the implementation of specialized tourism activities [35]. The development of these activities should consider general tourism infrastructure as well as specific tourism infrastructure, considering the different forms of religious tourism [37,38].

To fully understand religious tourism, research should focus on analyzing the demand for tourism services, estimating the demand, and examining the supply of tourism services [39]. The potential for religious tourism in the region can be evaluated using methodologies that consider elements of human heritage in religious buildings, elements of specific religious heritage, elements of religious and cultural heritage found within monasteries, and the accommodation structure available within the monasteries [34,40].

### 3. Research Approach: Methodological Benchmarks

In the first section, the study utilized bibliographic documentation, including a literature review, to conduct qualitative deductive research. Phenomenological and interpretative research methods, informed by the works of Husserl, Hegel, and Sartre, were employed to identify the essential meanings involved and to identify significant units within the phenomenon of religious tourism.

The analysis sought to develop an understanding of the content of the specific elements of religious tourism potential in the region and to systematize them in a comprehensive and cohesive manner.

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative in nature and utilized an interview-based research method. Interviews are widely recognized as a valuable qualitative method of market research and were deemed appropriate for this study due to their capacity to elicit in-depth information.

A structured set of questions, consistent for all participants, was used to gather data via interviews. Twenty-eight tourists (28) individuals were interviewed at the celebration of St. Parsacheva in Iasi on 14 October 2022 (Figure 5), utilizing a tool that consisted of five questions. The current study aimed to gather post-pandemic data, as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the number of tourism consumers.



**Figure 5.** St. Parascheva Pilgrimage, 14 October 2022.

According to Alain Giami (1985, 221), the group interview is a widely used psychosociological data collection method in empirical studies, particularly in marketing and market research. Henri H. Stahl (1974) recommends the use of the “group questioning procedure” to obtain collective responses to a verbal questionnaire in the prospecting phase, where useful information can be obtained from individuals called upon to study the problem in depth. The representative group of interview participants in this study was selected based on prior organized discussions.

In this study, a total of 28 tourists were interviewed and categorized based on multiple criteria, including nationality, confession, gender, age group, and education level.

The composition of the sample provides some diversity, with representation from different nationalities (2 Spanish, 24 Romanian, and 2 Italian), confessions (4 Catholic, 24 Orthodox), genders (16 women and 12 men), age groups (8 tourists aged 20–30, 7 tourists aged 30–45, 7 tourists aged 45–60, and 6 tourists aged over 60), and education levels (14 tourists with postgraduate studies, 10 tourists with university studies, and 4 tourists with secondary education).

With a sample size of 28, it is important to acknowledge that the findings may have some limitations due to the relatively small sample. The generalizability of the results to the broader population of tourists could be reduced, and the margin of error may be relatively higher.

However, despite the small sample size, it is possible to derive meaningful insights from the data collected. The study’s objectives and research questions should be taken into account when considering the adequacy of the sample size. In some cases, smaller samples can still provide valuable qualitative or exploratory insights, especially when studying specific subgroups or niche populations; to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings, future research could consider expanding the sample size and employing appropriate statistical analyses.

The processing of the information obtained during the interview is presented in the following Table 2:

**Table 2.** Results Table.

Questions	Answer Variants (Interview/Focus-Group)							
	Ecclesiastical art		Sacred atmosphere		Symbolic capital		Historical personalities	
1. What aspects particularly influence your decision to visit religious structures?	32.14%	34%	28.57%	31.50%	25%	27%	14.29%	7.6%
2. What is the main reason behind your visits to religious establishments, documentation, or religious devotion?	Art history		Religious history		The practice of worship		Curiosity	
	53.71%	58.65%	21.43%	23.35%	17.86%	10.75%	25%	18%
3. What is the frequency of your visits for religious tourism purposes? (annually, rarely, very rarely, occasionally)	Annually		Rarely		Very rarely		Occasionally	
	46.43%	48.50%	28.57%	27.60%	17.86%	15.80%	7.14%	8.50%
4. Do you tend to buy specific keepsakes from the religious sites you visit?	All the time		Within budget		Rarely		Never	
	71.43%	80%	7.14%	7.50%	10.71%	11.30%	7.14%	1.20%
5. Do the souvenirs purchased from the holy places you visit serve as memories or as symbols of your religious convictions?	Memories				Religious symbols			
	67.14%		70.67%		32.86%		29.33%	

The interview and focus group conducted during the feast of St. Parascheva in Iasi on 14 October 2022 highlighted the fact that cultural motivation played a predominant role in meeting the demands of religious tourism consumers. Representatives of travel agencies from the cities of Iasi, Botosani, Suceava, Vaslui, and Neamt were also interviewed, revealing that 40% of the travel agencies' activities were dedicated to religious tourism.

The initial stage of this study involved exploratory research, which entailed establishing the coordinates of tourism in the northeast of Romania, defining the hypotheses, and identifying the variables underlying the research.

This process encompassed the empirical investigation of past tourism trends, as well as the examination of various influencing factors. The main objective of this research is to analyze religious tourism in the northeast of Romania and identify strategies for its sustainable development utilizing marketing techniques.

Ultimately, the goal is for the region's cultural and religious attractions to become highly desirable tourist destinations in the years to come.

In accordance with the development policies of the region, local administrations and the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bucovina have expressed a shared vision for the area to become a hub for religious tourism, both for domestic and international visitors.

As noted in the specialized literature, religious tourism consumers have a diverse range of motivations. Some seek to understand history, admire works of art or architecture, and visit Romanesque churches or Gothic cathedrals, among others. The variety of tastes, as Jacques Noyer states, "differentiates tastes", with some being motivated by beauty, others by price, and still others by the quality of the work. The faithful of all religions, the faithful of all places, the skeptics, and those with doubts all share common elements—eyes, feet, and a heart—and are all human.

### *Results and Discussion*

**Question 1:** "What aspects particularly influence your decision to visit religious structures?"

- The data analysis indicates that ecclesiastical art is attractive to 32.14% of the respondents, while only 14.29% show interest in historical personalities.

**Question 2:** "What is the main reason behind your visits to religious establishments, documentation, or religious devotion?"

- The results reveal that 35.71% of the respondents are drawn to Art History, whereas only 17.86% show interest in Religious Worship.

**Question 3:** “What is the frequency of your visits for religious tourism purposes? (annually, rarely, very rarely, occasionally).”

- The data processing reveals that 46.43% of the respondents undertake annual trips for religious tourism, while only 7.14% take occasional visits for tourism purposes.

**Question 4:** “Do you tend to buy specific keepsakes from the religious sites you visit?”

- The processed data show that 71.43% of respondents usually purchase souvenirs from places of worship.

**Question 5:** “Do the souvenirs purchased from the holy places you visit serve as memories or as symbols of your religious convictions?”

- The analysis of the data suggest that 67.14% of the respondents consider souvenirs as general keepsakes, while only 32.86% regard souvenirs as religious symbols.

The research findings provide valuable insights into the factors influencing the decision-making process behind visiting religious structures and shed light on the motivations driving religious tourism. With respect to the first inquiry, it is evident from the data analysis that ecclesiastical art exerts a considerable attraction on 32.14% of the respondents, underscoring the allure of artistic elements within religious edifices. Conversely, historical personalities appear to have a relatively diminished impact, garnering interest from only 14.29% of the participants.

Regarding the principal reason underpinning visits to religious establishments, the results reveal that Art History serves as a prominent motivator for 35.71% of the respondents. This suggests that individuals are drawn to the cultural and artistic facets inherent in religious sites. In contrast, Religious Worship emerges as a less salient factor, piquing the interest of a mere 17.86% of the participants.

The frequency of visits for religious tourism purposes is explored in the third inquiry. Data processing discloses that a substantial proportion (46.43%) of the respondents embark on annual religious tourism trips, denoting a recurrent engagement with such pursuits. In contrast, occasional visits for tourism purposes are indicated by a mere 7.14% of the participants, underscoring the relatively infrequent nature of such activities.

The fourth inquiry centers on the acquisition of specific keepsakes from religious sites. The processed data reveal that a significant majority (71.43%) of the respondents tend to engage in souvenir purchases, emphasizing the significance of mementos as tangible representations of the visited religious locales.

Furthermore, the analysis of the fifth inquiry suggests that the majority of respondents (67.14%) consider souvenirs primarily as general keepsakes rather than symbols of their religious convictions. This implies that while souvenirs hold personal meaning and serve as repositories of memories, they may not necessarily possess deep-rooted religious symbolism for individuals.

During the interview and focus group discussions, it became apparent that cultural motivations play a pivotal role in meeting the expectations and desires of religious tourism consumers in the northeast region of Romania. Additionally, insights from travel agency representatives operating in the region indicated that approximately 40% of their activities can be attributed to religious tourism.

The scholarly literature corroborates the diversity of preferences observed within the realm of religious tourism. Individuals exhibit varied interests, ranging from historical sites and artworks to architectural wonders such as Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals. This underscores the subjective nature of preferences, as different individuals find beauty, value, or admiration in various aspects of religious structures.

Jacques Noyer’s perspective on diverse tastes further underscores this notion, positing that preferences may diverge based on personal factors and perceptions. The motivations driving religious tourism are multifaceted, encompassing realms such as mysticism, poetry, history, art, architecture, collection, gastronomy, biblical studies, and medieval studies. This

expansive range of motivations suggests that religious tourism attracts a diverse cohort of individuals, including adherents from different religious traditions and geographical locations, as well as skeptics, all united by a shared human curiosity to explore religious destinations.

In summation, these research findings illuminate the complex dynamics of religious tourism, shedding light on the interplay between cultural motivations, individual preferences, and the diverse interests of those seeking religious experiences.

#### 4. Research Conclusions

Religious tourism presents a compelling research challenge within the field of European tourism, attracting growing interest from both religious organizations and tourism operators. In our study, we employed interviews and focus groups to identify the key characteristics of religious tourists from various nationalities. Our focus was on understanding the role of attractions in shaping cultural-religious travel choices and the intensity of the phenomenon, which provides valuable insights for future research endeavors.

Our investigation into the demand and supply of religious tourism services revealed that cultural motivations exert a significant influence on travel decisions for tourists visiting religious destinations. The northeastern region of Romania boasts a wealth of cultural-religious tourist attractions, including monasteries, historic churches, and UNESCO-recognized sites such as the Voroneț Monastery and Moldovița. With the development of infrastructure, effective marketing strategies, and improved accommodation options, Romania possesses the potential to establish itself as a popular religious tourism destination.

The present study aimed to identify key directions for future research in the realm of religious tourism in the northeast region of Romania. To this end, we analyzed the research findings, guided by the methodological recommendations of Henri H. Stahl (1974). Stahl's "group questioning procedure" was employed during the prospecting phase, enabling us to gather valuable information from respondents for a comprehensive exploration of the research problem.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the tourism industry at large, including religious tourism. However, there has been a notable increase in the demand for religious tourism, presenting an opportunity for economic growth and the formulation of strategies to attract religious tourists from abroad.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of our study. Firstly, our research focused exclusively on interviews and focus groups, which may have restricted the range of perspectives obtained. Future studies could incorporate surveys and observation methods to capture a more diverse array of data.

Additionally, our investigation concentrated on the Northeast region of Romania, thus limiting the generalizability of our findings to other geographical areas. Future research should encompass a wider scope, including multiple regions within Romania and other countries, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of religious tourism.

Building upon our study, several avenues for future research in religious tourism emerge. Firstly, exploring the motivations and experiences of religious tourists in greater detail would contribute to a deeper comprehension of their travel choices and the factors influencing their decision-making processes.

Furthermore, investigating the impacts of infrastructure development, marketing strategies, and accommodation improvements on the growth of religious tourism would provide insights into effective strategies for destination management and promotion. Moreover, conducting comparative studies across different religious tourism destinations and examining the effects of intercultural interactions and exchange on the visitor experience could yield valuable insights.

Lastly, given the evolving post-pandemic landscape, further research should investigate the adaptations and resilience strategies adopted by religious tourism stakeholders to overcome the challenges posed by the ongoing crisis.



By addressing these limitations and pursuing these research directions, scholars can contribute to a more robust and nuanced understanding of religious tourism, its significance within the tourism industry, and its potential for sustainable development in various destinations.

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