# Religion as a motivation to travel: The case of Tinos island in Greece

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*Abstract*

*Religious motivated tourism is probably as old as religion itself and as a consequence it is perceived by some scholars as being the oldest form of tourism (Eliade, 1969; Kendall, 1970; Smith, 1992; Fleischer, 2000). Though it has been studied from a variety of perspectives, most studies are based upon a Western Eurocentric construction of the term pilgrim. The aim of this study is, to explore the effect of the Greek Orthodox belief system on people's selection and motivation to travel to the sacred island of Tinos based on qualitative methods. Special issue addressed in this paper is the importance of places where a vow/wish is considered.*

Keywords: Religious tourism, motivation to travel, sacred places, Tinos

JEL Classification: Z12, Z13

## Introduction

Religious places are a focal point for many people across the world. Along with the literature, one of the most important distinctions between people present at sacred sites is their motivation (Jackowski, 2000; Jackson and Hudman, 1995; de Sousa, 1993). Motivation can be defined as something that commits people to a course of action (Blackwell, 2007) and it is generally agreed that religion has been and is a prime motive for undertaking travel to sacred places. Additionally, along with Digance (2006), visitors to religious sites expect very often a particular outcome of their actions there, which will result in a reward that justifies the effort put into carrying out the pilgrimage. Studies have shown that religious oriented tourists expect to be rewarded with a supernatural experience; to witness something out of the ordinary that marks a transition from a secular to a sacred state. An important issue that arises here is the significance of particular religious places in people's religious experience. Why do people prefer some religious places instead of other?

## Religious Places

Religious tourism as a market segment has not been systematically examined within the tourism research, even though, in line with various scholars, religion is an important motivator for domestic and international travel (McKelvie, 2005; Russell, 1999; Bywater, 1994), influencing also migration (Park, 1994) and peoples' leisure activities (Hall, 2006).

Almost all religions construct spaces and encourage their devotees to visit them. In order to understand the nature of religious representation and performances it has been suggested by Brace et al. (2006) to contextualize research within a temporal and spatial framework that is aware of these commitments. In this manner, places should be understand within the context of relationships, placing of people, materials, images, imaginations, memory and the systems of difference and similarity that they perform (Haldrup and Larsen, 2006; Crouch, 2001). Sacred spaces, in particular, have been defined by Jackson and Henries (1983, p.94) as 'that portion of the earths surface which is recognized by individuals or groups as worthy of devotion, loyalty or esteem'. Such places are not simply discovered or constructed, but they are also claimed, owned and run by people supporting specific interests (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995). Although sacred sites vary in size and shape, they share the characteristics of being relatively permanent and inspiring respect and devotion.

Whatever perspective taken, the experience of activities can clearly affect people, to such a degree that a profound sense of '*topophilia*' is experienced that elevates even the ugliest of sites to a status that would rival the more traditional tourist attractions (Tuan, 1974). Wright (1966) invented the word '*geopiety*' to define a cognitive and emotional attachment to a sacred place that is based on one's faith and values. Generally, it is possible to distinguish several major categories of sacred site, although categories overlap and many sites could fit quite reasonably into any of the several categories. The table below (Table 1) suggests a classification made by Shackley (2001) considering different religions.

**Table 1: Categorization of Sacred Sites**

| TYPE | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| Single ecclesiastic feature | Canterbury Cathedral, Hagia Sophia (Istanbul) |
| Burial sites | Catacombs (Rome) |
| Detached temples/shrines | Borobudur, Amritsar |
| Whole towns | Jerusalem, Rome, Assisi, Bethlehem |
| Shrine/temple complexes | Lalibela (Ethiopia), Potala (Tibet), St Katherine's Monastery (Egypt) |
| Earth energy sites | Glastonbury |
| Sacred mountains | Uluru, Everest |
| Sacred islands | Iona, Mont-St-Michel |
| Pilgrimage foci | Mecca, Medina, Compostela |
| Secular pilgrimage | Holocaust sites, Robben Island (RSA), Anne Frank House (Amsterdam) |

Source: Shackley, 2001, p.2

Taking into account the table above, sacred space exists, only for those who know its characteristics and the reason for its existence. As such, people's tendency to label only certain buildings, such as cathedrals and mosques as sacred, and everything else as secular spaces is not acceptable (Tuan, 1978). Accordingly, although some shrines are recognized as sacred by their devotees, who behave properly, tourists may not perceive the site as sacred and behave in an inappropriate manner, creating tensions (Shackley, 2001). This is one of the main issues associated with the management of sacred sites.

## Christian sites today

Focusing on Christian religious sites, pilgrim shrines are places that serve as the goal for pilgrim journeys (Nolan and Nolan, 1989). Sites of pilgrimage are via tradition associated with a holy person and usually an object symbolizing that person. To quote the Turners (1978, p. 6), 'pilgrimage sites are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen and may happen again'. Religious sites can be classified in a number of ways, with most classifications being effectively based on the site's type, in terms of religious significance and subject of devotion (e.g. miracles, image, relic), as well as, on the location and visitor motivation, which encompass visitors' activity there (religious vs. touristic) and the site's natural settings and importance.

Considering the first division of religious shrine types, a fundamental part of the tradition is related to pilgrimage origins, generally expressed in form of stories explaining how and why the shrine came to be established. Most shrines were easily assigned by Nolan and Nolan (1989) to one or another of the categories illustrated below (Table 2).

**Table 2: Shrine types according to story**

| Shrine Story Type | Description |
|---|---|
| Significant site shrines | Places related to events in a Saint's life or to the historical development of religion in a given region |
| Ex-voto shrines | Created as a thank offering for group or individual salvation from catastrophe |
| Devotional shrines | Created as a result of human action unrelated to miracles or unusual events |
| Spontaneous miracle shrines | Cults developed around an object already at the site that proves to be miraculous or as the result of a revelation of sacred power other than an apparition or the findings of a holy object |
| Acquired object shrines | Developed when a holy relic or image is brought from another place and proves to be miraculous in its new setting |
| Found object shrines | Cults developed after an image or relic is found in generally mysterious circumstances |
| Apparitional shrines | Cults developed as the result of an apparition or other vision |
| Vision related shrines | Combines accounts of apparitions with stories related to dreams, appearing images, and visions beheld by saints to whom shrines are dedicated |

Source: Nolan and Nolan, 1989, p.218

Particularly in the case of pilgrimage, such traits are vital in optimizing believers' experience of the trip and enhancing their connection to the place (Belhassen, 2008). Images and relics are as such found in several Christian religious shrines where they serve as visual focus for pilgrims, directing their attention to the heavenly powers of the person to whom the shrines is dedicated. In some cases, the importance of a relic or image outweighed the significance of place

to such an extent that pilgrim destinations change when the cult object is relocated (Nolan and Nolan, 1989).

Nevertheless, the attractive power of an object of veneration does not automatically make it a pilgrimage center. Many major religious tourist attractions are not pilgrimage shrines, in the same manner as many sites are not interesting for the typical tourists. The partial separation of tourists and pilgrims is thus evident in many places. Some major sites are both. In this vein, Nolan and Nolan (1989) further divided the religious places into three categories: Religious pilgrimage shrines, Religious tourist attractions and Sites of religious festivals (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Relationship between shrines, religious tourist attractions and festival sites**
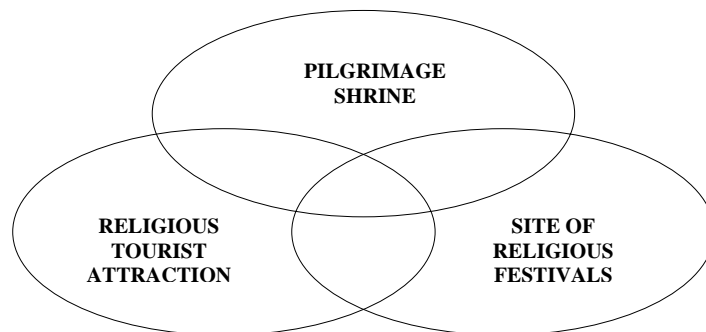


Source: Nolan and Nolan, 1989, p. 16

'Religious pilgrimage shrines' typically have no particular historic or artistic significance, nor do they feature publicized festivals and are as such of relatively low value as tourist attractions. The majority of visitors to such places are associated with community-based or other devotional groups, members of religious tour groups or individuals who consider themselves pilgrims and most on-site activities are religious in nature. There are examples of officially recognized shrines that have had mass tourism-like impacts on their environment without attracting large portions of secular visitors. Such shrines are Knock in Ireland, Fatima in Portugal, Lourdes in France, Tinos in Greece and Altoetting in Germany. Considering other religions, shrines that fall into this category are the ritual bathing of some 70 million Orthodox Hindus to 'wash away their sins' at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in northern India in January (The Florida Catholic 2001 as cited in Tilson, 2001) and the two million Muslims that travel annually to Mecca and Medina as part of the hajj ritual (Tilson, 2001), which is considered to be the biggest annual mass movement of people on the planet. At these shrines the pilgrimage as an event is very important.

Furthermore, 'religious tourist attraction' or along with Moira et. al (2009) 'religious monument as parts of the natural landscape' are usually ecclesiastical structures visited by secularly oriented tourists and religious groups but are not considered to be places of pilgrimage in their own right. Many of Europe's most famous cathedrals fall into this category (Nolan and Nolan, 1989). A few of Europe's

best-known religious tourist attractions which are also important pilgrimage shrines are Chartres Cathedral and the abbey of Le Mont-Saint-Michel in France, Köln Cathedral in Germany  and La Mezquita in Cordoba. In those places, tourists usually outnumber pilgrims because such shrines are mainly known for their architecture, feature of site, or historic associations (Shackley, 2001). Religious sites, though, do not only involve build heritage. As an example, Meteora – an old monastic community in Greece - is also famous for its significant landscape. Nature today is increasingly viewed as important in its own right. The landscape has become a medium for symbolism, manipulation and transformation of the past and has resulted in expectations that the area will have a powerful 'spirit of place' as being connected to religious mythologies (Nolan and Nolan, 1989). Consequently, such religious places attract both believers and non-believers and resemble the sites of New Age pilgrims, who emphasize on environmental features.

The third category, 'sites of religious festivals', concerns churches, some of which are important tourist attractions and thus this category might overlap in some cases with the previous mentioned category (Nolan and Nolan, 1989). Similar to religious rituals, festivals can transmit certain meanings to participants through a range of activities, and extend tourism opportunities beyond everyday experiences (Getz, 1991). Religious festivals usually occur to commemorate anniversaries and jubilees. Some sites celebrate an annual festival in the honor of a particular saint or deity, or the death or birth of a saint or martyr as for instance, in Assisi in Italy where three to four million visitors walk annually to the tombs of St. Francis and St. Clare (Tilson, 2001), whereas other sites may keep a festival in honor of the anniversary of a particular apparition.

The vast majority of Europe's religious festivals do not, however, take place at pilgrimage shrines and are not generally thought of as pilgrimages (Ambrosio, 2007), especially due to the fact that many of these festivals even though they have religious routes (e.g. Christmas, Easter) they have been integrated in people's social life and have often occupied a cultural/traditional feature. In Germany, Nuremberg's Christkindles Markt attracts during Christmas time, visitors from throughout the country and around the world, and similarly, the island Corfu in Greece is overcrowded every Easter, due to phantasmagorical traditional events combined with the religious rituals of Christ's Resurrection that occur in the capital of the island.

Despite the previous mentioned shrines, other types can also be distinguished. For example, the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, which is visited by a large number of tourists and pilgrims (Murray and Graham, 1997) belongs to a 'route based' type of pilgrimage which combines touristic importance, pilgrimage festivals and cultic significance. Another shrine type is Mt Athos in Greece, which is the most famous centre of Orthodox monasticism. Mt Athos is a colony of monasteries, which falls under the ecclesiastical supervision of the ecumenical patriarchate and the secular protection of the Greek state. Mt Athos presents an example where access is restricted by gender; only a limited number of males are allowed access every day (Andriotis, 2009).

**The sacred island of Tinos**

Tinos is located in the Cyclades islands, south-eastern of Andros and north- western of Myconos. It is the third Cycladic Island in size (195 square kilometres) and the perimeter of its coast line is 114 kilometres. It has a population of 8.574 people, the majority of which (4.934) lives in the town of Tinos, while the rest inhabitants live in the villages of the island.

*History of the Church*
In June of 1822, a nun named Pelagia had a vision of Virgin Mary, who instructed her to inform residents of Tinos that they should excavate a particular field, where they would find a sacred icon. Excavations began and on January 30, 1823, a worker discovered the icon. The icon, called Panagia Evangelistria, meaning Our Lady of Good Tidings, is a portrayal of Virgin Mary kneeling with her head bent in prayer in front of a small low stand, wearing a golden-yellow-green dress. On the stand is an open book, on which are written the words pronounced by the Virgin herself after the Annunciation by the Angel. Regarded by scholars as being older than the Byzantine period, it may perhaps be the work of the Apostle and Evangelist St. Luke. It is assumed that the icon was a sacred object of a Byzantine church and was hidden or lost around the time of the Moslem invasions (Foskolos, 1991).

After the discovery of the icon, the construction of a new church, the well-known Church of Annunciation, begun. Before the church was completed in 1830, large numbers of pilgrims started visiting the island from all over Greece. Numerous reports of miracles experienced by people, further increased the fame of the Church, making its sacred icon the most venerated pilgrimage item of the Greek nation today(Foskolos, 1991).

The Church of Annunciation belongs to the category of the shrines of relatively low values as tourist attractions, where most of the visitors are either members of religious tour groups or consider themselves to be pilgrims (Terzidou et al., 2008). Additionally, as all faithful come to visit this particular church, one can speak about 'church tourism'.

Finally, since there is no airport on the island of Tinos, pilgrims arrive on large boats from Pireaus and Thessaloniki, to make devotions in front of the icon. Four major festival days are celebrated at the shrine attracting many religious tourists: January 30, the anniversary of the finding of the icon; March 25, the Annunciation of Mary; July 23, the anniversary of the vision of the nun Pelagia; and August 15, the Assumption of Mary. On each of these days the normally quiet town of Tinos is filled with many thousands of celebrating pilgrims (Dubisch, 1995). Considerable are also the short-term visits, as most of the pilgrims come to the island with the only intention to visit the church; there are also cases where pilgrims return home in the same day of their arrival.

## Methodology

Although quantitative methodologies are attractive and widely used in studies on tourism and religious experience (Fleischer, 2000), some authors (Riley and Love, 2000) have critiqued them for reducing the

complexities of human experiences to numbers and statistics as well as for their inadequacy to capture complete accounts of their understanding and meaning (Andriotis, 2009). Quantitative methods situated around a positivist paradigm are though unable to reveal tourists' holistic experiences because they cannot capture the subtleties of the experience (Ayikoru and Tribe, 2005; Jennings, 2001; McIntosh, 1998). Therefore researchers are increasingly adopting more subjective and qualitative elements that underpin tourists' experiences (Galani-Moutafi, 2000; McIntosh and Prentice, 1999) acknowledging the need to use interpretive methodologies based on the notion that people are able to give accurate accounts of their feelings and values.

In considering the complex religious nature of the research project, the study is based on qualitative methods and a series of systematic ethnographic procedures that involve participant observation and in-depth interviews with religious tourists participating in a trip to Tinos. Aim of this paper was to gather empirical materials that reflect the participants' points of view regarding the meaning they attach to the selection of the particular site. Along with Goffman (1961) every social group has something distinctive and the best way to understand it is to get close to it. Ethnography, hence, entails the study of behaviour in 'natural settings'. The present author took part in an organized religious trip to Tinos in summer 2009 and interviewed 35 people after the trip. The questions considered mainly issues of selection and motivation to visit Tinos, in an attempt to understand the role of religion and sacred places for religious tourists, in their destination selection process. Participants' names have been changed in order to retain their anonymity.

## Findings and Discussion

Virgin Mary of Tinos, -also called 'Megalochari', which means 'Virgin Mary with the great grace'- is mainly known for Her icon that is recognized for its wide range of therapeutic miracles mainly connected to disability problems, fertility or terminal illnesses. When believers were asked why they choose Virgin Mary of Tinos, they recalled their vow to Virgin Mary of Tinos. Maria, stated: '*Though I usually prefer other places more isolated, I had a vow so I went to Tinos*'. When I further insisted in knowing what distinguishes that Virgin Mary from other Virgin Marie's in Greece, the answer considered mainly the fame of the miraculous icon as well as the particular Virgin Mary's grace. '*All Virgin Maries are the same. But She is.. She has a special grace*' (Nikos). Virgin Mary of Tinos has acquired the fame of a place where the irreversible can occur, as Stella stated '*It is said that when you go to Tinos you will get well..*' and the immediacy with a deity is assured; '*I was drawn by Virgin Mary of Tinos, why.. I do not know.. I just believed that She would answer my requests..*' (Evi).

The power and dynamic of religious places are, thus, especially evident where vows are considered as people are oriented towards end-results that consider mainly the fulfillment of their requests; of their ultimate concerns. As one participant said '*If one has faith, one never knows what could happen*'. Another one said that '*what faith does, so to say, is to help people overcome their problems and if you really believe a miracle can happen. This is what people do there.. they want to get courage, and strength in order to face difficult situations*' (Christos).

In fact, each religious site might be said to have its own 'traditions' and believers have most of the times different sign expectations from each deity.

> 'From each Saint you expect something different.. for example when you visit Saint Rafael ee .. you expect to hear his heartbeats. You can see how those who believe in him, lean their ears on his chest [relic] when they go to worship him and hear his heartbeats if they are lucky... When you visit Saint Irene you can see the blinking of her eyes..' (Eleni)

Equally, when health issues are considered, different religious sites are chosen according to the problem. The monastery of Saint Irene Chrysovalantou in Athens, is for example, known for curing women with fertility problems by offering them an apple and a rope to tie around their waist. Moreover, Saint John the Russian in Chalkida is known for healing headache, *'you put his hat on your head and you don't have headache any more! Proven!* (Eleni). Accordingly, the nature of one's problem and the creation of a vow connected to it lead believers directly to particular religious sites.

The significance, hence, of stories heard and myths connected to the particular place, seem to be evident in believers' intention to visit the island. Such miracles that are known by the believers mainly through word of mouth or personal experience, but also through the television coverage of pilgrimage in Tinos, raise their expectations to experience a personal miracle either on site or later back home. Nikos, recounted an unforgettable personal experience he have had:

> 'I remember years ago, while waiting to take communion there was a lady whose husband had terrible headache and he went to the icon, he leaned his head on it and eventually he was healed. I will never forget this!' (Nikos)

Similarly, Niki, said:

> 'I've heard so many things.. people told me about disabled people who.. went there and became cured.. and for other problems.. personal problems, health problems.. for their jobs..' '[this is why I choose Virgin Mary of Tinos because] she is famous.. and very miraculous..'

A vow to Virgin Mary of Tinos centers around a particular material manifestation of the divine – the icon - present in a specific sacred geographical place that constitutes a magnet pole for thousands of believers each year. Believers select religious places, where Virgin Mary's presence is visible; places that accumulate evidence of Virgin Mary's power that is concretized in the material world. The place selection is hence not merely restricted to Virgin Mary itself (as sites dedicated to Virgin Maries are numerous), but also to Her very activity there and manifestation of Her holiness in earthly assets; a place where the sacred meets the secular. It constitutes the reason for the selection of a Virgin Mary out of many others in terms of Her performance there and as such it is the grace of a place derived from its deity what attracts people, rather than the place itself. Place in this sense is not valued along with its outer characteristics, but with its user-value and immediacy with the deity. Remarkable is, Soula's story, who abandoned her year long pilgrimages to Saint Rafael (also a very important religious center in Greece) to whom she was affiliated,

because she blamed Him for not having fulfilled her vow, although she had visited Him with strong belief:

> 'I got angry with Saint Rafael, because I believed in Him very much and I was praying for my nephew who had leukemia.. I made huge vows and I cried from within my soul, I believed in His miraculous power.. We finally lost the child and I stopped to request things from Him as I used to do.. I don't know.. How comes it that He did not hear anybody?.. Since then, I never visited Him again.. This year I believe very much in Virgin Mary of Tinos, I believe in Her very much..'

Believers' specialized belief in a deity's charisma is what usually also prettifies a sacred place and preponderates in their imagination of it. As Panos said:

> 'I've never imagined the island to be somehow.. I didn't expect something in particular.. But I don't know.. maybe it is psychological, but .. when you see the church, so huge..- maybe because you expect something like this even if it is not so-.. you gaze upon it as being something grandiose, you see it and you say wow!!'.

Generally, believers do not wish to destroy the existence of the supernatural and their visit to a religious place is concentrated around the particular deity, not the place, not the clergies. In fact, many believers distinguish the natural (church, priests) from the supernatural (deity). Considerable is, for example, that though the Church of Greece has in times been found to be involved in economic scandals, as for instance, in 2008 in the monastery Vatopedi in Mount Athos, it did not influence believers' intention to visit Tinos.

> 'Why, on earth, should somebody blame the church or a monastery for the misbehavior of its priests?! It is not their church! It is mine! If it would be a store I wouldn't prefer it anymore, but it is not a store, and especially it is not their store!!' (Sakis)

## Conclusion

It has been found that believers' particular motives to visit sacred sites can reveal further interesting issues considering sacred places. In fact, it is the nature of believers' problem that directs them to specific sacred places. Believers who have a vow seek for a deity whose contribution is known and can therefore be equated to 'therapeutic tourists' who search for the best doctor to cure them and relieve them from pain. Consequently, religious places are not selected out of their appearance but out of their miracles. And it is the miracles that beautify a site rather than the sites' particular image. In particular, Tinos being the holy center of Greece acquires features of a brand destination, which people value for its fame for miracles rather than for its destination image; no patient would choose architecturally the most beautiful hospital to be treated in but the most famous in terms of effectiveness. From another perspective though, even the most 'ugly' hospital building or sacred site in this case, can turn to a beautiful (Tuan, 1974) and splendid place out of its use-value.

To conclude, though believers import secular requests to the place as a matter of their earthly existence (request for healing, job etc),

however, what seems to be valued and prevails in their choice of the places is their sacred – experiential features. Church clergies and tourist agencies should be aware of such features in an attempt to sustain and enhance them for believers. Nevertheless, as could be referred from the paper, managerial implications towards enhancing religious tourists experience at sacred places should be treated carefully and differently from those applied in other tourist destinations. For example, beautification of the site could result in loss of its authenticity and previous power. As such, sacred site managers or tourist agencies should first of all acknowledge and understand their own product (destination) and what distinguishes it from the products of their competitors (other religious destinations), and then, maximize their use-value for religious tourists.

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