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## Possibilities of Developing Religious Tourism in Western Crete, Greece

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### Abstract

Religious tourism has a growing share in the total tourism market worldwide. The island of Crete, Greece is a popular international tourism destination visited by millions of people every year. The possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete have been investigated. Western Crete has many religious monuments with long history which attract visitors either for pilgrimage or for sightseeing motivated by religious, spiritual, historical and cultural reasons. The Orthodox Academy of Crete located nearby the historical monastery of Gonia, in Chania prefecture, is currently promoting religious tourism combined with ecological and social activities. The development of religious tourism will allow to many tourists to visit during their vacations in the island the numerous religious monuments in the broader area probably combined with visits in archeological sites and in places of unique natural beauty. The possibilities of developing religious tourism in Crete are currently positive. It will differentiate the tourism product of Crete increasing the competitiveness of the local tourism industry. The development of religious tourism in Crete will be beneficial to all stakeholders. The religious authorities, monasteries and churches, public authorities, tourism industry and the local communities are going to have multiple economic, social and other benefits from the development of religious tourism. However, all the private and public local stakeholders should be mobilized and cooperate for that while the religious authorities should have the principal role for its development.

**Keywords:** religious tourism, Crete-Greece, monasteries, pilgrimage sites, ecology, theology

### 1. Introduction

Religious tourism is a form of thematic tourism which is developing rapidly all over the world (*Albayrak et al, 2018, Rinschede, 1992, Iliev, 2020*). Many tourists are willing to visit religious monuments during their vacations while others wish to participate in pilgrimage rituals in holy places (*Poulaki, 2023, Luz, 2020*). Historically many people were travelling in the past centuries to visit holy and sacred places. Religion was the main motive for travelling in the past instead of entertainment and leisure. Development of thematic tourism in several tourism destinations is desirable since it differentiates the tourism product and increases the competitiveness of their tourism industry (*Shinde, 2017, Bona et al, 2020*). It is broadly accepted that the development of religious tourism has many benefits in all stakeholders of the local societies (*Tomljenovic et al, 2017, Matina et al, 2008*). During the last years a lot of research has been made regarding the religious tourism in several territories and for several religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (*Albayrak et al, 2018, Shinde, 2011, Luz, 2020, Huang et al, 2019*).

*The aim of the current research is to investigate the possibility of developing religious tourism in western Crete, Greece and its impact on the local society.*

Very few studies related with the development of religious tourism in the island of Crete have been implemented so far. Hopefully the current study is going to contribute in its future development in the island.

The current research could be useful to local religious authorities, to public authorities and to several stakeholders of the tourism industry in Crete. The text is structured as follows: After the literature review the growth of religious tourism worldwide is mentioned. In the next sections the religious monuments in western Crete are stated followed by a short reference to the recent message of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for sustainable development. In the following sections the efforts of the Orthodox Academy of Crete for the promotion of religious tourism are mentioned while the possibilities for developing religious tourism in western Crete are analyzed. Finally, the impacts of religious tourism to local stakeholders and to local economy are stated followed by the discussion of the findings, the conclusions drawn and the citation of the references used.

## 1. Literature review

The literature survey is separated in two parts. The first part is related with the development of religious tourism worldwide while the second is focused on Greece.

### 1.1 Religious tourism worldwide

*Jawabreh, 2017* has analyzed the development of religious tourism in Jordan. The author has examined the cooperation of all tourism stakeholders in the country to foster the development of religious tourism. He proposed the establishment of tourist companies in the country specialized in the organizations of programs for religious tourism. *Shinde, 2011* has studied the impacts of spatiality, temporality and community composition in pilgrimage sites on religious tourism. The author was focused on two sites in India indicating that the involvement of religious visitors with pilgrimage rituals foster the local communities. *Rot et al, 2014* have outlined the general characteristics of religious tourism in Croatia. The authors stated that Croatia is not recognized as a destination for religious tourism. They also mentioned that religious tourists are mainly Croatians with Roman Catholic faith. *Albayrak et al, 2018* have explored the religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem. The authors have analyzed data from 848 Jewish, Christians and Muslim tourists. They stated that visitors in unique cities like Jerusalem can be considered as secular people while the city is simultaneously a sacred and secular place. *Kessler, 2016* has analyzed the “Mosque tourism” as a feature of Islamic religious tourism. The author stated that Islamic tourism is a promising niche of the tourism market increasing the tourism arrivals in several “religious destinations” having a positive economic footprint. He also mentioned that Islamic countries and their religious heritage, monuments and history have several cultural aspects related with the beliefs, the history and the way of their life. These aspects consist of part of the Islamic tourists’ attractions interconnecting destinations, religion, culture and history. *Mosier et al, 2020* have studied the impacts of pandemic on religious tourism. The authors stated that the spread of Covid-19 has forced mosques and Christian monuments to shut down for health and safety reasons. They also mentioned that religious tourism is going to recover soon after the end of the pandemic due to the faith of the pilgrims and their willingness to visit holy places. *Chianeh et al, 2018* have studied the cultural and religious tourism development in Iran. The authors stated that Iran has a long history of more than 2,500 years with many monuments created from several civilizations with different cultures including important holy places for Muslim’s. They also mentioned that the country should attract visitors from nearby countries that have cultural and religious similarities with Iran. Additionally, they should try to attract visitors from other countries who want to visit Iran for its unique history and its famous monuments without obeying to the country’s social and religious norms. *Rinschede, 1992* has studied the forms of religious tourism. The author stated that religious tourism is exclusively or strongly motivated from religious reasons while it is one of the oldest types of tourism. *Shinde, 2018* has studied the governance and the management of religious tourism in India. The author stated that religious tourism is the dominant form of tourism in Asia while it is not well known how it is governed and managed. *Iliev, 2020* has studied the evolution of religious tourism. The author stated that the intensive growth of religious tourism in the global market, its complex structure and its dynamic qualitative and quantitative changes require a multidisciplinary and postmodern approach. *Jackowski, 2020* has examined the problems with the terminology of religious tourism. The author stated that migrations motivated by religious beliefs have played an important role in history while currently mil. of people go on pilgrimages every year. He also stated that pilgrimages should be considered a special form of religious tourism. *Luz, 2020* has investigated the pilgrimage and religious tourism in Islam. The author stated that pilgrimage in Islam is considered, according to Quran, the *Hajj*.

He also mentioned that all other journeys of Muslims, motivated by religion, can be categorized as religious tourism. *Shinde, 2017* has studied the possibility of urbanization in religious tourism destinations in India. The author stated that the town Shirdi in India dedicated to worship of a twentieth-century Saint Sai Baba attracts more than eight million visitors every year. He also mentioned that religious tourism economy promotes the rapid urbanization without the necessary planning. *Duran-Sanchez et al, 2018* have overviewed the religious tourism and Pilgrimage. The authors stated that publications on religious tourism are currently in an exponential growth stage. They also mentioned that the US is at the forefront of research while the most articles are published in Social Sciences Research Journals. *Shinde, 2021* has studied several characteristics in the ecosystem of religious tourism. The author stated that religious tourism encapsulates the essence of contemporary patterns of travel to sacred and religious places. He also stated that the ecosystem of religious tourism includes: a) the religious monuments, b) the touristic aspects, c) the religious traditions, and d) the spiritual aspects including mediation and engagement. *Ayorekire et al, 2020* have studied the opportunities and challenges of religious tourism development in Uganda. The authors stated that religious tourism is growing in Uganda like wildlife-based tourism. Implementing a SWOT analysis, the authors stated that the country has a high potential of religious tourism which is currently unexploited due to lack of appropriate policies in Uganda. *Naumov, 2011* has studied the perspectives for development of religious tourism in Sozopol, Bulgaria. The author examined the potential of religious tourism development in the town of Sozopol where the relics of St. John the Baptist were recently found. He also mentioned that Sozopol has a great potential to become a pilgrimage center. *Marine-Roig, 2015* has studied the religious tourism with reference the Basilica of La Sagrada Familia. The author stated that in several cases concerning religious buildings with exceptional architecture it is difficult to discern whether it is a question of religious tourism or a secular pilgrimage. *Olsen, 2014* has compared the motivations and expectations of experience within the religious tourism market. The author compared three case studies with reference: a) Several Cathedrals in U.K., b) the Casino de Santiago de Compostela, and c) the Holy land. He mentioned that there are differences regarding the motivations and the “expectations of experience” of people who travel to religious monuments and areas. *Tomljenovic et al, 2017* have studied the impacts of religious tourism to societal transformation. The author stated that religious/spiritual tourism can foster both personal and societal transformation mainly through spirituality and reflection of tourists on their lives and their world views. *Santos et al, 2013* have studied the religious tourism in the island of S. Miguel, Azores. The authors analyzed the tourists who attend the Ecce homo religious festivities in the island of S. Miguel, Azores. They mentioned that tourists are categorized as “spiritual”, “religious” and “moderate religious”. *Griffin et al, 2017* have analyzed the importance of religious tourism and pilgrimage. The authors stated that religious tourism and pilgrimage are substantial motives for the global movement of people. They also mentioned that religion-linked travel is often unnoticed by national and international tourism agencies. *Koren-Lawrence et al, 2019* have studied the linkage between religious tourism and archaeology. The authors stated that there are many religious tourism attractions that contain archeological findings and have unique characteristics. They also mentioned that in many cases there are conflicts between religion and archeology, religion and science, holy places and historic sites. *Irimias et al, 2013* have studied the religious tourism in Hungary. The authors stated that after the fall of communism, in 1990, the faith and pilgrimages have regained their roles in people’s lives. They also mentioned the development of the Via Maria pilgrimage route which was the first established within the central and Southeastern European area. *Dzikowska et al, 2023* have assessed the tourism potential of rural cemeteries on the polish-Czech borderlands. The authors stated that in the abovementioned area cemeteries and churches are significant religious resources. They also mentioned that the historical and natural landscape has a high potential for tourism development. *Huang et al, 2019* have studied the tourists’ experience during their visits in Buddhist heritage sites. The authors used personal interviews to assess the positive effects of Buddhism on visitor’s attitude with reference to China’s four sacred Buddhist mountains. They stated that the visits of tourists in Buddhist heritage sites had positive impacts on their happiness which was related mainly to the law of Karma.

## 1.2 Religious tourism in Greece

*Poulaki, 2023* has studied the religious tourism in North Aegean, Greece. The author has investigated the factors that hinder the development of religious tourism in the region and the policy measures that would promote it. She has identified many factors that hinder the development of religious tourism while she has proposed several policy measures for its promotion.

*Isnart, 2014* has studied the religious tourism related with Catholicism in countries dominated by the Orthodox church like Greece. The author was focused on the Greek island Rhodes, which has many religious monuments, examining the role of the local Catholic church and the adaptation of the liturgy to the large number of tourists in the island. He mentioned that the Catholic church is revealed as part of a wider process of tourism transformation that has taken place in the island. *Stankova, 2019* has studied the perspectives for cultural and religious tourism in the cross-border area of south Bulgaria and northern Greece. The author stated that in the context of cultural tourism the religious heritage is also explored while several aspects of cultural and religious tourism are interconnected and interwoven. She also mentioned that the rich cultural and religious heritage in the trans-border area of the two countries offer the opportunity for developing cultural and religious tourism. *Balomenou et al, 2015* have studied the religious tourism in Greece and its contribution to regional development. The authors stated that religious tourism is an emerging form of tourism which promotes the sustainable development. The authors were focused on the Greek island of Samos which has important religious sites, monasteries and churches which are integral part of the national heritage. They also mentioned that the religious tourism in this island has not been developed yet although there are many prospects for growth while its promotion requires the development of local policy measures and several selected activities. *Kostantinidis et al, 2021* have studied the religious tourism in the prefecture of Pieria, Greece. The authors have questioned 102 participants regarding their views for the development of religious tourism in Pieria. Their results indicated that the prefecture of Pieria can develop religious tourism combined with other types of tourism. *Kotsi, 2012* has studied the possibility of developing short term religious tourism in the Orthodox peninsula of Mount Athos, Greece. The author stated that the local tourist market offers two options. A) a three hours cruise to the west-side of the monastic peninsula, and b) a day trip focused on women pilgrims, who had a five-hour voyage to see various monasteries in Athos. She also highlighted the importance of religious tourism for the local economy. *Bausch et al, 2020* have studied the pilgrimage tourism in Kavala, Greece. The authors stated that the city of Kavala has many religious and cultural monuments connected to Apostle Paul which are excellent prerequisites for the development of pilgrimage tourism. They also mentioned that although the city has many religious assets the necessary destination management structures for the development of religious tourism are lacking. *Mylonopoulos et al, 2019* have studied the Marian pilgrimages in Greece. The authors stated that since antiquity there is a belief that praying is more efficient when it takes place in sites related with Gods and Saints. They also mentioned that in Greece churches and monasteries have been established in areas related with miracles performed by “*Virgin Mary*”. The authors mentioned several famous Greek monasteries related with “*Virgin Mary-Panagia*” including: a) the holy church of Panagia Evangelistria in Tinos, b) the holy church of Panagia Ekatonapyliani in Paros, and c) the holy monastery of Panagia of the great cave of Kalavryta. *Tsironis, 2022* has examined the religious tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic focused on “*St. Paul’s route*” in central Macedonia region, Greece. The author stated that currently religious tourism in the Greek Orthodox context is quite stable and resilient while it is interconnected with cultural heritage and touristic experience. He also mentioned that the pandemic has raised questions concerning religious tourism which is related with proximity sharing and on-site visits in religious monuments and sites. *Terzidou et al, 2008* have studied the socio-economic impacts of religious tourism on the island Tinos. The authors stated that it is unclear so far how religious tourism affects the local residents in “*Holy destinations*”. They also mentioned that economic considerations override other concerns by local residents in “*sacred destinations*”. *Chantziantoniou et al, 2017* have studied the religious tourism in Greece focused on Saint John Russian in Northern Evia. The authors stated that the development of a national strategic approach to religious tourism can be based on the comparative advantages of Greece in this field. They also mentioned that the pilgrimages of Saint John Russian in Evia prefecture can be used for the promotion of religious tourism taking into account that Evia has also many natural and cultural resources. *The Orthodox Academy of Crete* has developed three educational programs for adults related with the European cultural and ecclesiastical heritage. The first program is titled “*Religious paths in northwestern Crete*”, the second “*A common European cultural heritage*” while the third “*Living Orthodoxy*”. *Polyzos et al, 2013* have performed a spatial analysis of religious tourism in Greece. The authors stated that the prefectures of Attica, Korinthos, Dodecanese and Cyclades host the greatest number of Pilgrimages and religious sites. They also mentioned that other forms of alternative tourism like cultural tourism, rural tourism, winter tourism et cetera can be combined with religious tourism to strengthen its demand and increase the flow of religious tourists.

*Stark, 2009* has studied the religious tourism in Roman Greece. The author stated that the difference between the concept of a tourist and a pilgrim is not so large. He also mentioned that travelers in the ancient Roman world visited religious sites while they were also interested in their secular nature, the history, the culture and the athletics. *Kilipiris et al, 2016* have studied the development of religious tourism in the Mount Paiko area, central Macedonia, Greece. The authors stated that the area of Mount Paiko is underdeveloped while it has a lot of religious, cultural and natural attractions. They also mentioned that religious tourism can be deployed as supplementary activity in the area with the support of the local church and other local stakeholders. *Kalogerakis* has analyzed several good practices regarding sustainability in the Orthodox Academy of Crete. Mr. Kalogerakis stated that the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew accepts that “The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical”. He also mentioned that the Orthodox Academy of Crete has implemented many ecological activities including: a) The realization of many national and international seminars on sustainability issues, b) The installation of a solar-PV system at 50 KW<sub>p</sub> on the roof top of the Academy’s buildings, c) The sensitization of the local society regarding energy cooperatives and energy democracy, d) The promotion of energy autonomous churches, and e) The implementation of various environmental sustainability projects. *The environmental activities of the Institute of Theology and Ecology of the Orthodox Academy of Crete have been reported.* The Institute has developed: a) the museum of Cretan Herbs with a collection of about 6,000 Cretan herbs, b) the Cretan walks, where visitors can walk in the countryside through half-day tours, and c) The establishment of a solar-PV system installed on the roof terrace of the buildings of the Academy generating a significant amount of its annual electricity demand. *The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has announced the Patriarchal message at September 1, 2023.* The Patriarch stated that “*the ecological crisis as a global challenge can only be addressed through international sensitization and mobilization*”. He also mentioned that “*the combination of ecological and social activities constitutes the hope for our future because we can only have sustainable development and progress when we are simultaneously concerned about the integrity of creation and the protection of human dignity and human rights*”. *Andrianakis et al, 2014* have studied and listed the Christian Monuments of Crete giving a short description of their history and characteristics. *Anyfantakis et al, 2015* have investigated the effect of religiosity and spirituality on depression of rural population in Crete, Greece. The authors stated that highly religious residents in rural Crete presented a lower likelihood of depression. They also mentioned that the sense of coherence may buffer the negative effects of stress on human health.

## 2. The growth of religious tourism worldwide

International tourism is growing rapidly including religious tourism. The concept of religious tourism encompasses two tourism subtypes: a) “*pilgrimage tourism*” for spiritual reasons and participation in religious rituals, and b) “*sightseeing tourism*” for viewing important religious monuments combined with visits in cultural and archeological sites and learning their history and culture. The globalization, the growth of people’s income and the availability of more leisure time, the improvement in transportation technology and the desire of people to visit other places, to meet other cultures and civilizations facilitates the traveling of an increasing number of people. Many of them want to visit sacred places for spiritual and ethical reasons either for pilgrimage or for seeing religious monuments which are important in their faith. It has been indicated that the religiousness and spirituality decrease the harmful effect of stress to human health (*Anyfantakis et al, 2015*). Some of them combine their visits in religious monuments at a destination with visits in cultural and historical sites. The approach to religious monuments, like monasteries, churches et cetera, have been facilitated due to improved transportation, to mobilization of many local stakeholders and their renovation in order to be more easily accessible. Religious tourism has positive economic impacts on local communities and on local stakeholders. The income from religious tourism is often used for renovation of local religious monuments in order to facilitate the visits of tourists. Territories with limited other resources are trying to promote their religious heritage as an additional pillar of income. Many tourists when visiting a destination combine the visit in religious monuments with visits in cultural, archeological and historical monuments or in sites with unique natural beauty. Promotion of religious tourism results in the differentiation of the touristic product at a destination assisting the local tourism industry. Therefore, there are many reasons that religious tourism is growing rapidly following the growth of international tourism.

**Table 1. Factors influencing the growth of religious tourism**

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | Search of authenticity                                 |
| 2.  | Diversified product offering                           |
| 3.  | Increased number of travel agencies                    |
| 4.  | Cheap flights  |
| 5.  | Enforced popularity of domestic travel                 |
| 6.  | Search for the unusual and unconventional holidays     |
| 7.  | Traveling related to personal beliefs and spirituality |
| 8.  | Cultural and religious preservation                    |
| 9.  | Growth of short brakes                                 |
| 10. | Promotion through media                                |
| 11. | Search for revenue streams                             |
| 12. | More sustainable tourism products                      |
| 13. | Expanding tourism market                               |
| 14. | Increasing use of internet and social media            |
| 15. | Promotion of thematic tourism                          |

Source: Griffin et al, 2017

**Table 2. Factors affecting the experience of religious tourists**

|    |                                    |
|----|------------------------------------|
| 1. | Mental engagement                  |
| 2. | Discovering new things             |
| 3. | Interacting and belonging          |
| 4. | Spiritual and emotional connection |
| 5. | Relaxing and finding peace         |

Source: Albayrak et al, 2018

### 3. Religious monuments in western Crete

The island of Crete is located at the crossroads of continents and civilizations and it has an extraordinary number of religious monuments created during the last two Millenia. They consist of an invaluable religious and cultural heritage of the island. The history of these religious monuments dated since the early Christian and early Byzantine period and continued until the end of the Turkish occupation in 1898 (*Christian monuments of Crete, 2014*). A small number of these magnificent religious monuments located in western Crete are listed in table 3.

**Table 3. Several religious monuments located in western Crete**

| Name and type of monument                   | Location               | Age                                   | Characteristics   |
|---|------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Monastery of Preveli                        | Prefecture of Rethymno | Since 13 <sup>th</sup> century        | It has a small number of monks. It is located nearby a site of extreme natural beauty in the south coast of Rethymno prefecture |
| The cathedral of the city of Chania, church | Prefecture of Chania   | Middle of 19 <sup>th</sup> century    | It is located in the city center  |
| Monastery of the holy trinity of Tzagarolon | Prefecture of Chania   | Beginning of 17 <sup>th</sup> century | It is located in Akrotiri peninsula east of Chania  |
| Monastery of Gouverneto                     | Prefecture of Chania   | During the 16 <sup>th</sup> century   | It is located in Akrotiri peninsula east of Chania  |
| Monastery of Gonia                          | Prefecture of Chania   | During the 17 <sup>th</sup> century   | It has a small number of monks and a valuable old library. It is located nearby the Orthodox Academy of Crete                   |
| Monastery of Chrysoskalitissa               | Prefecture of Chania   | During the 17 <sup>th</sup> century   | It is located in a Natura area and nearby Lafonisi a site of unique natural beauty in the south-west coast of Crete             |

Source: Christian monuments of Crete, 2014

#### 4. The Ecumenical Patriarch message regarding ecological activities, social activities and sustainable development

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has expressed his views in his message for the beginning of the Ecclesiastical year and the solemn day of prayers for natural environment (September 1, 2023). The Patriarch stated that: “*Ecological crisis as a global challenge can be only addressed through international sensitization and mobilization*”. He mentioned that “*people have understood the immediate connection of ecological and social issues and especially the fact that the destruction of the natural environment primary affects the poor among us*”. He also highlighted that “*the combination of ecological and social activities constitutes the hope for our future because we can only have sustainable development and progress when we are simultaneously concerned about the integrity of creation and the protection of human dignity and human rights*”. The Patriarchal message concludes that “*In the divine liturgy, the natural and material world, along with all the senses, participates in an inseparable way.....The world does not exist against, is not an object of man, but is assumed and communed*”. It is obvious that in the belief of the Orthodoxy Church the religious activities should be interconnected and intertwined with ecological and social activities while the environmental protection has high priority.

#### 5. The Orthodox Academy of Crete and the promotion of religious and ecological activities

The Orthodox Academy of Crete, located in Kolympari, prefecture of Chania, has developed multiple activities promoting the religious tourism combining religious, ecological and social initiatives according to the message of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. These initiatives include:

- a) The installation of a solar-PV system on the rooftops of the Academy’s buildings with nominal power at 50 KW<sub>p</sub> generating around 75 MWh annually,
- b) Organization of many conferences and seminars promoting the energy cooperatives and the energy democracy in the local society,
- c) Organization of many national and international conferences and seminars promoting environmental sustainability in various sectors,
- d) Installation of small-size solar-PV systems in churches reducing their climate footprint,
- e) Implementation of several sustainability projects with the involvement of the academic staff and the students in the local universities,
- f) Establishment of the Institute of Ecology and Theology in the Academy, and
- g) Development of three programs for adults related with the European cultural and ecclesiastical heritage. The first program is titled “*Religious paths in northwestern Crete*”, a four hours’ guided tour and a lecture. The second program is titled “*A common European cultural heritage*”, a four hours’ guided tour and a lecture, while the third “*Living Orthodoxy*”, is an one week program realized in the premises of the Academy.

The Orthodox Academy of Crete also participates in several EU funded projects aligned with the abovementioned message of the Ecumenical Patriarch while it is planning additional ecological and social activities cooperating with several stakeholders in the local society.

#### 6. Possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete

Western Crete has not many religious monuments which are characterized as pilgrimage and sacred sites which exist in other Greek areas like Tinos island, Meteora, Athos peninsula (Kotsi, 2012, Terzidou, 2008) et cetera. However, it has many historical religious monuments dated several centuries ago which have unique characteristics (Andrianakis et al, 2014) attracting not only religious visitors but also tourists who want to visit them during their vacations. Although the majority of tourists visiting Crete are attracted from the sun and the sea in the island there is a significant tourism segment that prefers to combine its holidays with experiences in other local attractions in the fields of culture, gastronomy, archeology, history, nature et cetera. Therefore, guided religious tours can be developed in western Crete offering the opportunity to Greek and international tourists to visit the local religious monuments during their vacations. This is already a reality in several territories worldwide (Shinde, 2018, Kessler, 2016, Albayrak et al, 2018) while in others the advantages of developing religious tourism have been highlighted (Jawabreh, 2017, Naumov, 2011, Santos et al, 2013, Balomenou et al, 2015). The organization of these tours require the cooperation of many local stakeholders including the local religious authorities, tour operators, local municipalities et cetera.

These half- or one-day tours can be combined with visits in places of historical heritage, in archeological sites and in sites of extreme natural beauty. These half- or one-day guided tours could indicatively include:

- A) Visits to monastery of Gonia, to monastery of Chrysoskalitisa and to Lafonisi, a nearby located seaside place of extreme natural beauty,
- B) Visits to the Cathedral of Chania, to several historical churches and monasteries in the city and to monastery of Gouverneto,
- C) Visits to monastery of Preveli and a seaside place in a nearby rivers' delta with palm trees and unique natural beauty, and
- D) Visits to several "Holy Maria" churches in the broader area creating a "Virgin Maria" route.

A significant advantage for the development of religious tourism in western Crete is the good local infrastructure and the well-renovated religious monuments which are easily accessible from the visitors. The development policies for the attraction of religious tourists in Crete should be different for pilgrimage tourists compared to tourists who wish to visit several local religious monuments, for one or two days during their vacations, being aware about the religious, historical and cultural heritage of their destination. The factors hindering religious tourism in Greece are presented in table 4 while the policy measures for the promotion of religious tourism in Greece in table 5.

**Table 4. Factors hindering religious tourism in Greece**

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| 1.  | Significant shortages in infrastructure                  |
| 2.  | High prices  |
| 3.  | Lack of innovation, entrepreneurship and planning        |
| 4.  | Lack of infrastructure in the areas of monasteries       |
| 5.  | Absence of tourism culture                               |
| 6.  | Defamation of some areas due to refugee-immigrants issue |
| 7.  | Difficult approach to some religious sites               |
| 8.  | Incomplete promotion of religious tourism                |
| 9.  | Lack of cooperation between church and state             |
| 10. | Negative attitude of the church                          |

Source: Poulaki, 2023

**Table 5. Policy measures for the promotion of religious tourism in Greece**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. | Organizing and promoting religious tourism                                 |
| 2. | Mapping all the religious monuments with the assistance of the church      |
| 3. | Connection of religious tourism with the history and the culture           |
| 4. | Organizing and supporting conferences on this issue                        |
| 5. | Cooperation of all stakeholders in the promotion of religious tourism      |
| 6. | Promotion of the religious and cultural heritage in the territory          |
| 7. | Developing the religious tourism with respect to the religious monuments   |
| 8. | Improvements in the transportation to religious monuments                  |
| 9. | Activation of the role of the church in the promotion of religious tourism |

Source: Poulaki, 2023

## 7. The impacts of religious tourism to local stakeholders and to local economy

The development of religious tourism in western Crete is going to have positive impacts to the local stakeholders including:

### a) *Monasteries and churches*

The principal stakeholder in the organization and development of religious tourism are the local religious authorities. They should actively participate in the design of local religious routes together with the authorities of several religious monuments which will be visited. Monasteries and churches attracting tourists will have the opportunity to sell their products including foodstuff produced in their own fields, icons and religious handcrafts.



They will have revenues which can be used in the renovation of their premises or for social support of poor people who need assistance.

b) *Tourism industry*

The development of religious tourism in western Crete will differentiate the local tourism product which is mainly based on the “*sea and sun*” tourism. It will cover the requirements of a small tourism segment which wishes to combine its vacations in Crete with cultural and religious activities. The development of thematic tourism in the island will increase the competitiveness of the local tourism industry. Tour operators with transportation buses and tourism guides will participate in the realization of several religious tours having revenues from these activities. During their day-traveling tourists will stop in cafes and restaurants having coffee and meals adding to the daily revenues of these small-scale enterprises.

c) *Local authorities and societies*

The development of religious tourism in western Crete will increase its assets as tourism destination attracting more visitors and increasing the local tourism-related employability and income. More financial resources will be used in the renovation of the religious monuments while the transportation and the accessibility to them will be improved. Religious tourists will visit, apart from religious monuments, historical and archeological sites increasing the tourist’s traffic to them. New shops will be developed nearby to religious sites offering specific products and services to religious visitors.

The benefits due to development of religious tourism in western Crete are presented in table 6.

**Table 6. Benefits from the development of religious tourism in western Crete**

| Stakeholder                   | Benefits  |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Monasteries and churches      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monasteries and churches attracting tourists will have the opportunity to sell their products including foodstuff produced in their own fields, icons and religious handcrafts having revenues.</li> <li>2. The philanthropical activities of the local church authorities will be increased.</li> <li>3. More financial resources will be used in the renovation of the religious monuments while the transportation and the accessibility to them will be improved.</li> </ol>  |
| Tourism industry              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Differentiation of the local tourism product which is mainly based on the “<i>sea and sun</i>” tourism.</li> <li>2. Religious tourism will cover the requirements of a small tourism segment which wishes to combine its vacations in Crete with cultural and religious activities.</li> <li>3. Tour operators with transportation buses and tourism guides will participate in the realization of several religious tours having revenues from these activities.</li> <li>4. Cafes and restaurants located nearby the religious monuments will sell coffee and meals increasing their daily revenues.</li> </ol> |
| Local authorities and society | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The tourism-related employability and income will be increased.</li> <li>2. Religious tourists will visit, apart from religious monuments, historical and archeological sites increasing the tourist’s traffic to them.</li> <li>3. New shops will be developed nearby to religious sites offering specific products and services to religious visitors.</li> </ol>   |

Source: Own estimations

## 8. Discussion

Religious tourism is growing rapidly worldwide enriching the tourism product in several destinations having also significant economic and social benefits in the local societies. It has been indicated that western Crete has many religious monuments dated since early Christian and early Byzantine period. The Orthodox Academy of Crete has been active so far in the promotion of theological, ecological and social activities following the message of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew regarding the nexus among theology, ecology, society and sustainable development. The possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete with positive impacts to the local societies have been highlighted. Our results indicate that western Crete has all the preconditions for the development of religious tourism.

The results can be utilized by the local religious authorities, the public authorities and the tourism industry for the promotion of thematic tourism in the island. Our findings do not describe precisely how the religious tourism should be developed in the area, in which target groups it will be focused on and what “*tourism product*” will be offered to them. Further studies should be focused on different religious routes which should be created in order to fulfill the desire of tourists to visit the local religious, cultural and historical heritage during their vacations in western Crete.

## 9. Conclusions

The possibility of developing religious tourism in western Crete has been investigated as well as the impacts on local stakeholders. Our study has indicated that:

- a) Religious tourism is growing rapidly worldwide,
- b) Western Crete has many important religious, cultural and archeological monuments which attract several tourist groups,
- c) The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has announced that the simultaneous implementation of theological, ecological and social activities is necessary for the promotion of sustainable development,
- d) The Orthodox Academy of Crete implements several religious and ecological activities locally,
- e) The prospects for the development of religious tourism in western Crete are favorable, and
- f) The development of religious tourism is going to have positive economic and social impacts to all local stakeholders.

Our work can be useful for the local development of religious tourism and the organization of guided tours to the rich religious, cultural and archeological monuments in the broader area.

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