**Religious sites as tourism attractions: The case of Azerbaijan**

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**Abstract**

The rapid development of tourism in the last few decades, religious sites have become important tourism attractions attracting both pilgrims and tourists. However, in many developing countries, particularly in many developing countries, numerous factors have hindered such development largely due to political, economic or socio-cultural influences. This research seeks to contribute to the existing literature of religious tourism by exploring the development of religious heritage sites in Azerbaijan. Exploratory in nature, the study adopts a qualitative approach combining secondary data analysis and participant observation at two religious heritage sites. The findings reveal that Azerbaijan has not yet recognized its potential as a religious tourism destination and there is an absence of enough attention to religious heritage throughout of the country. Along with the general lack of awareness regarding this type of tourism, religious sites are poorly maintained and managed.

*Keywords*: Tourism; religion; heritage; Azerbaijan

1. **Introduction**

Religion has been largely regarded as a “powerful source, which has long caused people to travel to religious centres in many parts of the world” (Wall & Mathieson, 2006, p.251). Traditionally related to ancient pilgrimage travel and later to the Grand Tour, religiously motivated journeys have become an important sector of modern day tourism (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). To an extent, this can be explained with the infrastructural advances and accessibility of spiritual places but also through the interest of local and national authorities to market such places as tourism attractions (Vukonic 2002). Religious centres, spiritual places and sacred destinations have been transformed into visitor attractions in order to bring economic benefits to local residents and governmental authorities while at the same time generating the so needed funding for heritage conservation and restoration (Raj & Griffin, 2015). What has been termed as ‘religious tourism’ has been developed from a small niche market to one of the most widely developed forms of tourism (Collins – Kreiner 2010; Digance, 2003; Olsen & Timothy, 2006).

The main purpose of this paper is contribute to the existing literature of religious tourism and more specifically, development of religious sites as tourism attractions. The study explores the potential of religious heritage in Azerbaijan and discusses its potential contribution in economic and socio-cultural dimensions. Religion in Azerbaijan has long historical roots with traces of Zoroastrianism, early Christianity and Islam. Despite its diversity of religious sites and religious heritage in particular, religious tourism is yet to be developed in the country, partly because of the communist era when religion was not among the priorities of socialists. This paper seeks to examine the potential of religious heritage sites and to further assess the level of religious tourism development. In order to examine the current condition, further development and prospects of religious tourism in Azerbaijan, the following research questions have been adopted:

* What is the current state of conservation of religious heritage in Azerbaijan?
* What are the opportunities to convert religious sites of Azerbaijan into tourism attractions?
* What is the current level of religious tourism development?

1. **Literature Review**

*2.1 Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism*

Religion has always been an essential part of human life. Since ancient times, people have travelled to holy sites such as Heliopolis, Luxor, Mecca or Rome for spiritual and sacred reasons (Rinschede, 1992; Scott & Jafari, 2010). These journeys largely referred as ‘pilgrimage’, are “one of the religious and cultural phenomenon best known to human society” (Collins – Kreiner 2010, p.440). Barber (1993, p.1) defines pilgrimage as “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding”. Pilgrimage journeys are dedicated to churches, temples, mosques, sacred mountains and places of divine visitations. Part of various religions, they are regarded as sacred and spiritual places, where worshippers come to pray, ask for forgiveness or other form of personal spirituality (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Vukonic, 2000). Pilgrimage is the most important pillar of the world’s major religions and continues to attract millions of people annually. For example, between three and five million Muslims gather to Mecca to perform the Hajj and more than twenty eight million pilgrims visit the River Ganges in India for spiritual reasons (Shinde, 2007; Singh, 2006).

During the recent few decades, pilgrimage has changed its appeal, largely as a result of the development of international tourism. As Collins – Kreiner and Gatrell (2006, p.33) argue, it is impossible to understand the development of tourism without considering the importance of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage journeys are widely regarded as the predecessors of present day tourism. (Fairder – Wessels, 2007; Raj & Griffin, 2015). Often considered as one of the earliest forms of tourism with deep historical roots in the history of humankind (Jackowski & Smith, 1992), ‘religious tourism’ has emerged as a niche type of tourism but has quickly progressed to one of the most popular forms of contemporary tourist movements (Naumov, 2011; Sharpley, 2009). The pilgrimage sites such as shrines, churches and mosques, have become magnets for both organized and individual tourists (Digance 2003) and some sites have been successfully inscribed to United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) World Heritage List.

The widespread development of religious tourism, however, has caused a number of complexities regarding the differences between religious tourism and pilgrimage journeys. ‘Religious tourism’, ‘faith tourism’, ‘spiritual tourism’ and ‘sacred tourism’ have often been used interchangeably (Smith 2009, p.74) and the distinction between them has not been clearly defined. In academic literature, ‘pilgrimage’ refers to a religious journey to sacred places solely for the purpose of spiritual enrichment (Glazier 1992, p.135; see also Vukonic 1998, p.84). Religious tourism, on the other end, is often defined as a subgroup of cultural tourism (Jackson & Hudman, 1995) since most of religious sites are visited by cultural tourists who “may or not have a religious affiliation” (Smith, 2009, p.74). In that context, religious sites are part of sightseeing tours, holidays and other tourist activities and being visited for their cultural, aesthetic, architectural or historical values. For example, many religious sites in Rome (see Tsai et al. 2002) and English Cathedrals in Britain (see Jackson & Hudman 1995) are simultaneously cultural attractions and are visited by both pilgrims and tourists.

*2.2 Motives behind Religious Tourism*

According to Weaver and Lawton (2002, p.189), motivation is “the intrinsic reasons why the individual is embarking on a particular trip‟. Since ancient times, religion has been the main motivator to undertake both domestic and international travel (McKelvie, 2005; Rinschede, 1992). Moreover, it is considered as the major factor that impacts behaviour of people during their journey (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003).

According to Badone & Roseman (2004, p.2), motivation is one of the main features that differentiates people travelling to religious sites. Although pilgrimage still comprises a large amount of travel journeys, previous studies have argued that pilgrimage has lost its traditional form in modern society and largely differs from its original conceptualization (see for example, Di Giovine 2011; Gladstone, 2005; Olsen, 2010). As a consequence, the distinction between ‘religious tourists’ and ‘pilgrims’ has become a complex notion as both groups have the same needs and use the same services, such as infrastructure, accommodation and transportation (Digance, 2003; Olsen, & Timothy, 2006). Despite the great number of previous studies devoted to the similarities and differences between pilgrims and tourists (e.g. Cohen, 1992; Collins – Kreiner & Kliot, 2000), the differentiation between them still remains widely contested and subject of various interpretations. As Bremer (2004, p.4) also reckons, “there is no particular definition to identify whether an individual is a pilgrim or not because that individual may participate in some sacramental exercises at one place before resuming his/her touristic persona”.

For the purpose of this research, we seek to analyze the potential of religious sites in Azerbaijan as tourism attractions. In order to do this, it becomes necessary to clearly underline the difference between ‘pilgrims’ and ‘religious tourists’. Understanding this difference can help us to study visitors` expectations as well as to propose new strategies for attracting more people to these sites (see Blackwell, 2007). Following Jackowski & Smith (1992) and Olsen & Timothy (2006), pilgrims are travelers whose major motivation is religious and spiritual fulfillment. Their main purpose of travel is to pray and worship at visited sites and take part in religious events. As we are more interested in the role of religious sites as tourism products, however, we do not explicitly examine the importance of religious sites in Azerbaijan as places of pilgrimage. Instead, we are more interested in their appeal to religious tourism market. Therefore, we are more interested in ‘religious tourists’ who are defined as ones who travel to religious places for educational, cultural, intellectual and emotional motives (Richards 2007, p.219; Wright 2008, p.111). Such tourists may have multiple interests and may be motivated by the architectural value of visited sites, their historical importance or their aesthetic value in the contemporary urban landscape (Bremer 2004; Digance 2003).

*2.3 Religious Tourism Attractions*

Substantial part of the tourism attractions in the world are religious sites - places with a strong importance for different religions and their followers. Originally, religious sites were natural places such as mountains, rocks or caves. Later, with the expansion of different monotheistic religions, man-made religious sites started to appear. Since the ancient times such places were mainly the destinations for believers and pilgrims who could pass long distances in order to come and worship there. However, today the traditional appeal of religious sites has been changed and many of them are increasingly attractive for numerous non-religious tourists. Many sacred sites have changed their traditional characteristics and have been converted into “multiple-purposes places” (Vukonic, 2006; Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009). Ancient monasteries in Nepal and Bhutan, mosques in Turkey, United Arab Emirates or Egypt, churches and cathedrals across Europe and Latin America attract not only pilgrims, but also leisure travelers, so that, in some European churches visits “by tourists greatly outnumber those made by pilgrims” (Nolan, & Nolan, 1992, p.73). Moreover, majority of such places are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, so that 2/3 of the World Heritage sites are religion-based attractions (Shackley, 2001). As a result of this massive expansion, religious tourism has become one of the most rapidly growing segments of tourism industry that generates USD 18 billion annually (WRTA, 2008). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization’s estimation, “there are approximately six hundred million national and international religious and spiritual voyages in the world” (UNWTO, 2011). Taking this into consideration, more and more countries increasingly pay a great attention to development of religious sites and converting them into tourism attractions to promote religious tourism (Shackley 2005; Stausberg, 2011). For example, as soon as French government recognized that the Mont-Saint-Michel monastery along with other thirteenth century monasteries are the most appealing destinations for tourists it has allocated USD 92 million on the restoration and saving of this object. The reconstruction of Berlin Cathedral, which was destroyed during World War II, also eventually resulted in an increase in the number of visitors and it became one of the most popular tourism attractions in Germany (Stausberg, 2011).

As Richards argues, most religious sites today have been "turned into tourist attractions" and attract growing number of visitors (Richards 2007, p.220). For the purpose of this paper, we classify religious attractions into different categories. Following Nolan & Nolan (1992) and Shackley (2003) we distinguish between:

* *Pilgrimage shrines* with strong religious meaning that are visited mainly by pilgrims but also visited by non-pilgrims
* *Man-made religious sites* attracting tourists, that were originally constructed for religious purposes but over time became attractions
* *Man-made religious sites*, constructed to attract tourists from their inception, such as religious theme parks, museums
* *Places where the religious festivals are held*; serve as tourism attractions for pilgrims, as well as for tourists because of the festive events.

*2.4 Impacts of Religious Tourism*

As any other form of tourism, religious tourism has the potential to bring both positive and negative economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts to a destination and its host communities (Collins – Kreiner, 2010; Sharpley, 2009). Among the main advantages of religious tourism is its capacity to bring tourists all year round, which in turn provides more opportunities for local businesses and governmental officials to plan, develop and expand the supply of tourism services.

Economic contributions are often cited as the most important positive impacts for the local stakeholders at a given destination. Local communities usually benefit from improved quality of life and standard of living, job creation and infrastructural development (see for example, Mu et al. 2007; Terzidou et al. 2008). Eade (1992) demonstrates such positive impacts in the small town of Lourdes in France, where religious tourism has transformed this small village to one of the most visited religious centres in Europe. In the same vein, Singh (2006) argues that religious tourism is one of the most significant economic generators in India giving the example of Hindu celebrations around River Ganges. The development of religious tourism could also aid the state of conservation of religious heritage and contribute to its sustainable development. Increased visitor numbers and tourism expenditure can provide the necessary funding needed for restoration and preservation of religious heritage attributes (Cohen, 1992; Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

The expansion of tourism, however, could also lead to a number of negative impacts largely related to the state of preservation of religious heritage, level of authenticity and commercialization. The problematic relationship between tourism and religion dates back to the early meetings of the World Council of Churches (1970) and the Caribbean Ecumenical Consultation for Development (1971) when some concerns related to commercialization of religious activities and negative implications on local natural environmental have been discussed (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). The increased number of tourists usually comes with increased prices of goods and services (Terzidou et al. 2008), destruction of physical resources, overcrowding and environmental degradation (e.g. Shinde, 2007; Vukonic, 1998; 2002) as well as loss of authenticity and degradation of spiritual values (Shackley, 2001). Tourism has greatly changed religious centres transforming many of them into visitor attractions, which has caused various confrontations between pilgrims and tourists.

1. **Religious Tourism in Azerbaijan**

Situated on the Western shores of the Caspian Sea, at the crossing point of Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan was one of the most ancient habitations of mankind and historically important stop along the Silk Road. Different empires that conquered Azerbaijan at the various periods of time as well as diverse ethnic groups which lived on its territory throughout the history, have shaped the cultural and religious identity of the country (Lech, 2007, p.6).

Religion and religious movements have a long history in Azerbaijan. In ancient times, heathenism was the dominant religious ideology. Large stone idols found in different regions of the country (e.g in Ismayilli and Mingachevir) reveal the great number of religious sanctuaries. Largely because of its geographical location, many different monotheistic religions later replaced the idols. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam appeared on the territory of the country and have intertwined with each other (Efendiyeva, & Aliyev, 2011, p.174; Lech, 2007, p.10). Among all of them, Zoroastrianism is perhaps the one that distinguishes Azerbaijan from many other countries in the world. Its roots date back to the 7th century BC when local inhabitants believed that universe consisted of four main elements – ground, air, fire and water. Fire was considered as a representation of God’s light and wisdom. During the 3rd century BC Zoroastrianism became the official religion of the Persian Empire and became widespread. Therefore, Azerbaijan (which was then part of the Persian Empire) is widely considered as “the mother of Zoroastrianism” (Lech 2007, p.40). Although Zoroastrianism is almost forgotten, some features of it still exist and take part of the cultural life of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is also one of the countries where in the 1st century AD the initial Christian communities already came into existence. The spread of Christianity on the territory of Albania is connected with the name of one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ — the Apostle Bartholomew. It is assumed that, he was killed as a martyr in 71 AD in the city of Albanopol (contemporary Baku) and his grave is, allegedly, located near the “Maiden Tower” in Baku, where later a chapel was built (Lech, 2007, p.238). Eliseus, a disciple of the Apostle Thaddeus, continued the work of martyred Bartholomew and played a large role in the spread of Christianity in Albania. Eliseus also was the first bishop of Albania and made several apostolic journeys to many parts of it, where later temples and churches were built. Although the Christian ideology in Albania was established in the 1st century AD, only in 320 Christianity became the official religion of the country (Geyushev, 2012, p.40).

After the Arab invaders entered the Trans Caucasus in the 7th century, Christianity and Zoroastrianism were replaced by Islam and a gradual process of Islamisation started. Unlike northern Azerbaijan with the entirely Christian population, the southern part of the country quickly converted to Islam and by the end of 8th century, the south was completely Muslim. Despite this massive widespread and the dominance of Islam, some followers of Christianity and Zoroastrianism remained (Robbins, 2005, p.74).

The importance of religion radically changed after the establishment of socialism in Azerbaijan (1920). During the early period of socialism (1920-1940), religion and religious activities were banished, religious leaders were persecuted and there was a huge destruction of religious heritage throughout the country. Most of religious objects were transformed to museums or were replaced with other buildings. However, despite the efforts of the Soviet Union to propagate atheism, religious beliefs have not been eradicated (Efendiyeva, & Aliyev, 2011, p.175). Declaring its independence at the beginning of the 1991, after the years of forced atheisation, Azerbaijan has experienced a religious revival and the religions that were spread during the centuries over the country started to come back to life (Lech, 2007, p.78). Today, according to its Constitution, Azerbaijan is a secular state with religious freedom ensured (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995, articles 7 & 48). Different religious confessions peacefully coexist in the country making Azerbaijan of the most religiously tolerant countries in the world (Robbins, 2005, p.77).

1. **Research Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology. Largely due to the exploratory nature of the research, qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate a more in depth analysis of the potential for religious tourism development in Azerbaijan. Moreover, qualitative research approach allows a greater flexibility and interpretation of the collected data (Veal, 2011).

The data collection process involved both desk and primary research. The secondary data was collected from previous papers, books, national reports and governmental strategies related to tourism development in Azerbaijan. The resources were systematically grouped according to their relevance to the research and analysed in accordance to the research questions. Due to the lack of published materials, secondary sources were mainly available in Russian and needed to be translated into English for the purposes of the study. Through secondary data, the authors were able to identify the most important religious heritage sites and select some of them for further investigation.

The primary data was collected through direct and participant observation conducted mainly in two religious heritage centres, namely Ateshgah and Christian Albanian Church in Kish during the summer of 2014. Additionally, direct observation and study visits to other parts of the country have also contributed to the assessment of the development potential of religious tourism in the researched areas. Both direct and participant observations involved intensive fieldwork in which the investigators were able to write a systematic description of the state of conservation of the observed sites while simultaneously observing the behaviour of visitors at observed locations.

1. **Results**

Azerbaijan is a land of various religious sites devoted to different beliefs that are scattered all over the country. Among them, there are unique ones in terms of religious, historical and architectural significance. However, despite the great number of religious heritage sites that can potentially attract tourists, religious tourism is developed at a very low level. The findings of this research show that there are many challenges that hinder the development of religious heritage sites and they range from the historical background of the country to the level of infrastructural development, marketing and promotional campaigns dedicated to religious heritage sites.

*5.1 State of conservation of religious sites*

Many of religious heritage sites in Azerbaijan are not at a good conservation level. Largely due to the Soviet policy that proclaimed atheism, religious heritage sites were not preserved and restored. In fact, some of them were actually destroyed by the socialist authorities. After 1991, many religious sites have also been suffering from natural degradation due to their location. As a result of all these negative influences, the state of preservation of many religious sites (incl. churches, mosques and monasteries) is poor and inadequate for tourism purposes. Having outlined the great number of sites and their diversity, these sites have a potential to be developed as sites for religious tourism but also for social cohesion.

*5.2 Poor Transportation and accommodation facilities in most regions*

Accommodation is a basic component in tourism industry and forms an important part of tourist infrastructure. In the early centuries, pilgrims travelling to religious sites were able to stay in monasteries and cathedrals for free. However, nowadays, while travelling religious tourists often look for places to stay (Bhatia, 2006, p.175-176). Therefore, lack of appropriate infrastructure in most of regions of Azerbaijan could be an obstacle on the way to development of religious tourism. The lack of accommodation places is not only a problem for religious tourism but a major issue for the country in general. Investments in accommodation providers, especially in large cities or places with numerous religious sites, is a crucial part of developing appropriate infrastructure for both organized package tour and individual travelers.

Transportation also plays an important role in the tourism product development process (Page, & Lumsdon, 2004). Because of the absence of organized transport modes and inadequate road conditions, in some regions there is a very poor access to religious sites. As noted earlier in the literature review, religious tourism is still considered as ‘niche’ and thus attracts more individual travelers who need appropriate transport options to move from one place to another. In that context, Azerbaijan needs to improve the accessibility and transport options to many destinations, not particularly religious heritage sites. The recent introduction of low-cost flights has partly addressed this issue but still more large scale projects are needed.

*5.3 Lack of specialized information about religious heritage*

The lack of specialized information about religious sites of Azerbaijan is one more barrier for development of religious tourism in the country. The lack of awareness about religious sites and the practical absence of resources for religious tourism are serious issues that prevent its development. The economic potential of religious tourism has not been sufficiently researched and most regions do not possess information about such places. As a result, people coming to Azerbaijan for religious or cultural purposes have very little possibilities to access information about the religious sites and their characteristics. Moreover, there is a shortage of an accurate statistics about the number of religious tourists visiting the country. This is mainly because of the difficulties in determining the travel motivation of people while visiting religious sites, whether they are cultural or religious tourists (UNWTO, 2011, p.28). Therefore, there is a need for specialized information and statistics on religious heritage of Azerbaijan that could facilitate a deeper understanding of the value of these sites for Azerbaijani people and at the same time provide religious and cultural tourism experience for tourists.

*5.4 Lack of special tours to religious sites*

Within the framework of religious tourism, it is important to consider the potential impact of the special organized tours and tour guides. According to Zhang and Chow (2004), the success of many tourism destination often relies on the availability of tours, as during them, tour guides provide visitors with useful and necessary information. As most people visit religious sites not primarily motivated by religion, but also for cultural, architectural, historical and other purposes, the tour guide is a key person in the process of satisfying visitors’ interest in culture, history and religion by providing them with necessary information about different features of tourist attractions (Zhang, & Chow, 2004). However, in Azerbaijan, despite the numerous religious sites, the organized tours to such places are absent and there is a lack of connectivity between religious sites. Therefore, specialized religious heritage tours as well as educational and cultural tours to sacred sites are needed. They can connect the sites making them more accessible and attractive for tourists as well as contribute to raising awareness of religious and cultural tourism in Azerbaijan as a whole.

*5.5 Lack of promotion centers and absence of Tourist Information Centers (TICs)*

Being one of the components of the “4 P’s” (product, price, promotion and place) marketing mix, promotion is an important component of tourism development (Kotler, 2001). In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, absence of TICs in most regions of Azerbaijan that provide information to visitors about religious sites, could severely limit the development of religious tourism in the country. Promotion centers and TICs are significant players in encouraging visitors to visit these places, therefore, lack of effective promotion and absence of TICs in most regions is one of the main challenges for development of religious tourism in Azerbaijan.

1. **Conclusions and further research**

The religious heritage of Azerbaijan contains traces of centuries-old history exemplifying various moments of human history. Despite the historically deprived periods when religious heritage was under continuous degradation (for example during the Soviet era), religious heritage have survived and is now considered as a precious resource, particularly for the development of religious and cultural tourism. As demonstrated in this study, the potential of religious tourism in Azerbaijan is rich and diverse, represented by religious sites erected over the centuries and dedicated to different religions. Temple of Zoroastrians, historical Muslim Mosques, Catholic and Orthodox Churches, ancient Christian Albanian temples, Jewish Synagogues, Temple of Prophet Noah, Apostle Bartholomew`s chapel constitute a good foundation and could be used into tourism attractions.

This research argues, however, that Azerbaijan has not yet recognized its potential as a religious tourism destination and there is an absence of enough attention to religious heritage throughout of the country. Along with the general lack of awareness regarding this type of tourism, religious sites are poorly maintained and managed. Places such as, the Christian Albanian Church in Kish, which is also known as the "Mother of all Churches of the East", have suffered from inadequate maintenance and lack of marketing which limit their appeal for tourists.

In sum, while Azerbaijan has obvious potential for development of religious tourism, however, it should try to tackle some challenges it faces with. Therefore, based upon the experiences discussed in this paper, in order to turn the peculiarities of religious sites into opportunities and develop religious tourism, the following recommendations can be given:

* Provide different types of accommodation in regions, suitable for middle class visitors, as well as for luxury seekers and improve the existing ones
* Improve transportation facilities and in order to facilitate the access to religious sites in certain regions
* Improve the state of conservation of religious sites by maintaining and restoration them to enhance their value to visitors and tourists
* Encourage the entry of local and foreign investors in tourism field; to invest and improve the religious sites
* Highlight the benefits of improving religious sites for local citizens and encourage them to participate in religious tourism development plans
* Establish tourist information centers in different regions to provide information and to motivate tourists to visit religious sites
* Organize themed tours of religious, as well as educational and cultural character to religious sites
* Develop thematic route focused on the potential of the region
* Provide tourist leaflets and brochures with information about religious sites and their historical and cultural importance
* Collect information and statistics on religious heritage of Azerbaijan
* Launch effective tourism promotion and marketing strategies.

Further research studies should investigate the state of conservation of religious heritage in depth and conduct some comparative analyses in different regions of Azerbaijan. Moreover, this research is mainly supply-based, and therefore further research from a demand perspective is necessary in order to ascertain the interest of visitors towards the religious sites in the country.

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