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Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism in Society, in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Paradigmatic Focus on 'St. Paul's Route' in the Central Macedonia Region, Greece

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Abstract: The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have transformed the worldwide socio-economic environment in various and unpredicted ways. More specifically, the pandemic restrictions and the necessary social distancing have generated questions concerning the 'day after' of religious tourism, especially in association with the value attributed to proximity, sharing, and communal worship in the Orthodox Church tradition. For the time being, pilgrimages and religious tourism in the Greek Orthodox context are quite stable and resilient, and seem to be intertwined with cultural heritage, the modern search for authenticity, and the touristic experience. This analysis aims to explore the key factors that may shape the future trends and plans for pilgrimage and religious tourism in the Greek Orthodox segment. For this reason, it will focus paradigmatically on the region of Central Macedonia in Greece, which is known for its religious and cultural heritage. This is an area in Northern Greece, linked to the missionary journeys of Apostle Paul, and to iconic religious destinations, such as mount Athos and UNESCO World Heritage sites like the Byzantine monuments in Thessaloniki. The analysis will further examine the possibilities of developing new and multidimensional forms of tourism, focused on visits to religious sites.



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1. Introduction

Two major research trends have occurred in recent decades, in the field of religious tourism. One of them refers to the significant growth dynamics of religious tourism in the contemporary world (Griffin and Raj 2017), and the other one considers the potential impact that pandemics may have on these growth dynamics (Mróz 2021; Raj and Griffin 2015, 2020; Kunwar 2021; Nhamo et al. 2020).

Our societies can be now characterized as 'post-pandemic'—not because we have completely overcome the COVID-19 pandemic (on the contrary, the pandemic is far from over), but because of the social changes that have occurred since February 2020 (the onset of the rapid spread of the epidemic was observed at the end of December 2019 in Wuhan, China). These changes could determine the course of our cultural paradigm from now on. On 25 February 2020, a World Health Organization (WHO) announcement marked the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and recommended a framework for managing initiatives worldwide. That was when a long process of efforts and adjustments began, to enable the global system to cope with the health, economic, social, educational, and political dimensions of the pandemic. It seems that the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 took tourist agents and organizations by surprise, and it caused a dramatic decline in tourism, in an unprecedented way, by modern standards (Gössling et al. 2020).

The pandemic has, therefore, affected the whole spectrum of life on a personal and collective level, by causing fear and dysregulation of social relations and human interaction in the workplace, in traveling hubs, in education, and in every field of the public sphere. Of course, it has also affected religious life, as religious gatherings were banned during the

lockdown and, in general, the idea of large gatherings and of performing religious practices and worship was much debated.

Research in Greece, and at an international level, has provided ample evidence (Mróz 2021; Tsironis et al. 2022) that pilgrimage and religious tourism have shown a resilient dynamic, even in difficult times. Moreover, they have created strong spiritual and emotional ties, and have consequently inspired more and more people from different backgrounds to visit religious destinations all year round, and not only during holiday periods. It is evident, though, that the pandemic has shaken the touristic industry internationally. Therefore, an important new theoretical and analytical challenge is to assess the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage and religious tourism.

This analysis aims to contribute to a better understanding of pilgrimage and religious tourism's turnaround potential. For this purpose, 'St. Paul's Route', in the region of Central Macedonia in Greece, will be used as an operational case study. The analysis will further examine the outlook of religious tourism within the Greek Orthodox context in the post-COVID-19 world, investigate new challenges and perspectives, and suggest strategic options to develop a multidimensional and resilient plan of development.

2. Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism in Greece: Traditional Practices in the Modern Era

In recent decades, pilgrimage and religious tourism have clearly been on the rise, and have become a rapidly expanding segment within the broader touristic field of activities (Sharpley 2009). Currently, the term 'religious tourism' is often used in a more general sense. It includes the pilgrim's will to get involved in the liturgical life of a religious community, and the religious traveler's intent to familiarize themselves with faith-based communities and their religious and cultural heritage. On an international level, activities such as attending religious meetings and events, pilgrimages, sacred-site visits, religious missions, etc., are associated with the wide category of religious tourism (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2021, p. 4). From this perspective, religious tourism goes beyond the frame of 'niche tourism' and becomes a dynamic and independent field of special interest. According to UNWTO reports (UNWTO 2016, 2020a), approximately 27% of travelers undertook a trip for religious reasons, to visit friends and relatives, or for health treatments. More specifically, the UNWTO (2014) "estimates 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites every year, with approximately 600 million national and international religious voyages in the world, 40% of which take place in Europe".

Numerous studies have provided insights into the motivational role of religion in social activities (Wuthnow 2012; Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011; Collins-Kreiner 2010) and, particularly, in traveling (Vukonic 1996). Both domestic and international tourism are historically related to religion. It is not a new phenomenon: scholars working on ancient cultures and medieval history confirm it (Collar and Kristensen 2020; Dillon 2013; Harland 2011; Swatos and Tomasi 2002; Smiraglia 2013). Traveling, peregrinating, and pilgrimage are strongly associated with religion. The debate on the relation between touristic and religious traveling to holy sites is not yet conclusive (Cohen 1974; Smith 1992; Eade 1992; Fleischer 2000; Della Dora 2012; Kim et al. 2020). The timelessness and cultural variety of religion-motivated visits do not facilitate categorization. However, most theorists referring either to ancient (Rutherford 2001) or modern times (Olsen and Timothy 2006; Stausberg 2011; Polus et al. 2022) tend to admit that, when analysis is based on dichotomies, it is almost impossible to achieve a total consensus in defining terms such as 'pilgrimage' or 'religious tourism'. Modern interpretations point out that "comparing pilgrims and tourists is a fruitless exercise because the meaning of 'pilgrim' and the medieval context of pilgrimage travel has changed over time and therefore is not a valid comparative partner with the modern tourist" (Olsen 2010, p. 849). Della Dora (2012, p. 951) notes in her own research on Mount Athos and Meteora in Greece that these are not only "holy landmarks in the Orthodox Christian world" but also religious centers with a "unique cultural and spiritual heritage, [and] they . . . host the most stunning world's sceneries". These are pull

factors for both pilgrims and tourists, in a context where the boundaries between religious and secular motives are blurred.

Therefore, an operational perspective needs to be constructed, to measure or analyze the phenomena of religion-motivated traveling. This operational and integrative perspective forms a cluster of basic attributes, such as: traveling to religious sites; using itineraries and tourist infrastructure; experiencing features of religious life; observing or participating in rituals, prayers, and feasts; taking part in faith-based activities, or getting involved in events and visits focused on tangible and intangible manifestations of religious life. From this perspective, the analysis draws upon an integrative frame of the possible facets of a religion-associated journey, instead of defining substantially religious tourism. Pilgrimage and cultural-religious visits are not regarded as identical, but as parts of a type of traveling that is focused on the experience of religious life (faith, rituals and their cultural and social embodiments in customs, traditions, art, cultural products, monuments, etc.).

New approaches in the literature (Terzidou et al. 2018; Lois-González and Santos 2014) have offered a wider conceptual framework of religious tourism in modernity. As Andriotis (2009, p. 68) noted: “religious trips are frequently multifunctional journeys which involve religious dominant factors along with other tourist motivations”. The current analysis is based on the concept of ‘polymorphic religious tourism’, which integrates different ways of motivating tourists to visit various destinations. The proposed conceptual frame belongs to the long evolution of definitions and concepts in the field (Iliev 2020). As the world changes, the touristic phenomena evolve, and so do the theoretical approaches. As highlighted elsewhere (Tsironis 2020, p. 64), the concept of religious tourism is multi-dimensional, and includes “not only the monuments, the relics and the artifacts, but also the Intangible Heritage, including the beliefs, the values, and the lifestyle of the local communities together with the Art, the legends, the liturgical texts and chants [...]. Additional to faith practices, activities that may be generated are walking, participating in fairs and local community events, and other choices related to healing, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, study visits etc.”.

In regard to the members of the Greek Orthodox Church, pilgrimage (‘proskinima’) is a long and meaningful practice—although it is not an obligation—on which the salvation of the believer depends. In general, pilgrimage is a journey that the pilgrim undertakes, in order to visit a sacred site, and it is quite often spoken of as “holy pilgrimage”. This term refers to travel solely motivated by faith, and distinguishes this journey from other activities related to culture and holidays.

Certain typical features have developed through the centuries. Visitors travel alone or, more commonly, with other believers. They prepare themselves for the trip by fasting and praying. At the holy site, they light a candle, venerate, and kiss the icons. They give money for the care of the poor, they participate in the Divine Liturgy, and possibly in a procession of relics or icons, and they may follow specific customs and practices, such as fulfilling a vow (‘tama’), walking up to the church on their knees, etc.

At the same time, Greece has always been a center of religious interest, and a preferred destination for religious travel. Historical evidence describes these activities from as early as the ancient world (Rinschede 1992). In the Christian era, Greece had become one of the important centers of Christian reference. Saints and important figures of Christianity taught, lived, or completed their lives with their martyrdom in Greece. World-renowned religious sites and monastic communities, such as Mount Athos, the monastery of the Apocalypse on Patmos, early Christian monuments that still function as parish churches, etc., have continued to function uninterruptedly for centuries.

There are thousands of religious monuments, museums, historical churches, holy monasteries, and pilgrimages scattered throughout Greece. Each one of them is a special pole of attraction for tourists. In this context, religious tourism is currently a dynamic complex of activities and visits to holy sites (for religious participation and/or religious sightseeing), that plays an important role in the sustainable development of local communities. Religious tourism has also proven to be resilient when faced with historical or political

turbulence, health hazards, and safety risks. However, as part of the overall touristic sector, it has suffered the consequences of the world mobility downturn during the first two years of the pandemic.

3. COVID-19 Outbreak and Religious Tourism in Greece

Unlike similar situations in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic is not just an external danger for society, but also a situation with systemic characteristics. It directly attacked the constituent element of the modern model of life, as freedom of movement was restricted. The heart of our cultural paradigm seems to be malfunctioning, as we can no longer imagine ourselves and our societies without constant movement and interaction on a local and global level. Moreover, the association of mobility with our social identity has led to the misuse of the term ‘social’ rather than ‘physical’ distancing.

Since February 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak has brought to the fore a new global reality. The pandemic has affected millions of people around the world, and has stimulated researchers’ interest in its social, political, economic, educational, and health implications for the course of modernity. Tourism was perhaps the most directly and decisively affected social and economic field of them all (Abbas et al. 2021; Gössling et al. 2020). Arrivals and movement were dramatically reduced, as marked in a special UNWTO Barometer (2020).

The crisis and the touristic downturn have not left Greece unaffected (Institute of Greek Tourism Confederation (INSETE) (2021)). As early as March 2020, 48 pilgrims of Greek nationality tested positive for COVID-19 when they arrived back in Greece, from Israel. As the study of Pavli et al. (2020, p. 2) presented: “Twenty pilgrims required hospitalization . . . eight of hospitalized pilgrims developed complications. Two pilgrims died because of COVID-19”.

Precautionary guidelines and recommendations were issued all over the world, while mass gatherings and events were considered to be ‘super-spreader’ sites, including church gatherings and pilgrimages (Linke and Jankowski 2022; Tan et al. 2021; Mubarak and Zin 2020; Yezli and Khan 2020; Quadri 2020; Che Mat et al. 2020; Pavli et al. 2020). Universal concern regarding the risk factors of Covid transmission, such as population density, high mobility, and mass transportations—which are associated with religious gatherings (Lee et al. 2021)—has led to specific governmental healthcare guidelines. The WHO also issued similar guidelines and reports (WHO 2020).

On the 16th of March, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece announced (Holy Synod Communiqué 2020) the restriction of liturgical life (22 March 2020–11 April 2020), and stated that “§6 It adopts all the measures that the Greek State is taking immediately to deal with the spread of the virus”. At the same time, the Holy Synod stated that “§1 The churches should remain open for ‘private prayer’ of the faithful”. That was not an easy decision, and a part of the Orthodox community reacted to it, while the Church of Greece highlighted throughout the pandemic that diseases cannot be transmitted via Holy Communion. Following international trends, the Greek government took measures such as closure of schools and suspension of public events, while all religious gatherings were suspended on 16 March 2020 (Official Gazette of the Hellenic Republic, no. 872, vol. B, 16 March 2020: 9587–9588). Restrictions were maintained even after the lockdown. For a long time, churches were open mainly for “individual pray” or Liturgies with minimum participation. A few days later (20 March 2020), the Archbishop Hieronymus issued a pastoral statement trying to bridge the acceptance of sanitary measures and the denial of any connection between COVID-19 transmission and the reception of Holy Communion: “I stay at home because I love others; each and every one of them. I’m not staying in because I’m scared, but because I love (them). Love wards off fear!” (ANA-MPA 2020). Furthermore, visits and pilgrimage to Mount Athos—one of the most famous religious destinations in Christianity—were restricted in March. For the first time in the long history of the monastic community, the monasteries were closed to visitors.

It is obvious that questions about visits and pilgrimage to sacred sites during the pandemic in Greece have been posed in the frame of a highly polarized and heated debate over

participation in religious ceremonies and simultaneous compliance with public healthcare guidelines (Martinelli 2020; Demertzis and Eyerman 2020; Michailidis et al. 2021). The debate could be better understood by taking into account the everyday habits of the religious community, and Orthodox principles (e.g., kissing the hands of the elders and priests, kissing and embracing the icons, receiving the Holy Communion with the same spoon, etc.), and the Eucharist-centered church life in the Greek Orthodox tradition. Thus, in-person participation is preferred to options such as virtual pilgrimages or television broadcasts.

As a response to the confusion and polarization caused by COVID-19, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a special message regarding the pandemic (Patriarchal Message 2020). Subsequently, he dedicated a significant part of his Christmas message (Patriarchal Encyclical for Christmas 2021) to the ethical empowerment of the church members. Both messages encouraged all Orthodox Christians “to be vaccinated” and “to adhere to the protective measures imposed by health authorities”. Summing up, through official statements and encyclicals, the members of the Greek Orthodox Church were called to participate in Church life, and to comply with health and safety regulations. However, it should be noted that a variety of statements and behaviors by clergy and lay people was demonstrated during the first two years of the pandemic, some of which defied the protective measures.

Throughout this succession of events, pilgrims’ motivation to travel was not destroyed. It appears that the resilience inspired by faith, in times of crisis (Pirutinsky et al. 2020), may also empower faith-oriented journeys (Kala 2021). A recent survey conducted in Greece during the first lockdown (Tsironis et al. 2022, p. 528) demonstrated how religious tourism was relatively unaffected by the pandemic as “the faith-related visitors’ motives overarch to some extent an assumed risks-versus-expected benefits outlook . . . ” and that “even within the pandemic era visitors seek polymorphous, non-commercialized experiences, often disregarding a risk-benefit equilibrium”.

The same trend is observed in various other cases, countries, and religions (Canete 2021), while there are studies showing that traveling intentions remain high (Ivanova et al. 2021), although uncertainty and anxiety are common nowadays. After a chaotic period during the first six months of the pandemic, when religious trips dramatically decreased (Mróz 2021), reports confirm a solid rebound of tourism in Greece (Alpha Bank 2022), which has created expectations for a renewed interest in religious tourism. Recently, a new project on faith-based cruises has been promoted by the Greek Ministry of Tourism, which was initiated as a cooperation between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus (Ministry of Tourism Communiqué 2022).

More specifically, it seems that religious tourism has been relatively untouched by COVID-19-related turbulence, mainly due to the non-transient character of the pilgrims’ journeys, which are not driven by trends and temporary circumstances. Throughout history, faith-based journeys have been organized in spite of risks, wars, hardships and adversities, infectious diseases, and epidemics. References to devotion, spiritual empowerment, and asceticism, the association with monastic communities, and the strength of religious identity encapsulate these journeys into an experience that can be described as “outer action with inner meaning” (Cliff and Cliff [1996] 2004). Although the conditions of pre-modern and modern traveling differ, the pilgrims follow ancient paths, not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of meaning.

One last thing needs to be considered. Some scholars claim that the ‘norm of social distancing’ might affect pilgrimage, and enforce a kind of isolationism. Therefore, pilgrimage would be “reduced . . . to individual spiritual experiences and, thus, abstracted from its external circumstances.” (Roszak and Huzarek 2022, p. 5). For the time being, there is no evidence to support this theory, in regard to orthodox pilgrimages in Greece. On the contrary, research (Tsironis et al. 2022), ethnographic observation, and material (photos and videos from celebrations and church liturgies) support the idea that pilgrims continue to follow rituals and customs as they did before the pandemic. However, future research should investigate more systematically the possible influence of variables such as demographic factors (age, gender, etc.), educational background, frequency of attendance at

religious services, etc. Qualitative analysis of data could shed light on current issues, such as the relation between sanitary measures during the pandemic and church-attendance rates. For example, studies have indicated a decline in religiosity in the USA ([Pew Research Center 2021](#)); however, it is unclear whether this phenomenon was caused by the pandemic, or if it actually preceded it.

4. The Case of ‘St. Paul’s Route’ in the Central Macedonia Region, Greece

One feature that surely strengthens the resilient attributes of religious sites in Greece is the fact that these sites are the centers of religious communities, while also responding to other touristic interests, and including various traveling facets. The historical traces in this region go back to the ancient era, and continue up to modern times. ‘St. Paul’s Route’, in Central Macedonia, is rich in important religious, archaeological, cultural, and natural touristic attractions.

The Route includes cities such as Thessaloniki, Veria, and the wider area of Pieria, which were important parts of St. Paul’s missionary journeys in Greece (Acts 17:1–15). ‘St. Paul’s Route’ also includes important cultural and commercial centers of the Byzantine era, which are known for their ancient tradition and religious heritage. Additionally, important pilgrimages can be found along the Route, like the Holy Pilgrimage of Panagia Soumela), the monastery of St. Dionysios in Mount Olympus, Thessaloniki’s Paleochristian and Byzantine monuments, and relics of old and new saints.

The analysis of data on tourism indicates ([UNWTO 2020b](#)) that Greece has recently received an increasing number of visitors. This phenomenon has obvious economic benefits, but raises concerns about the overall sustainability of tourism, especially in underdeveloped regions. The absolute dependence of the touristic economy on mass tourism, and the overconcentration of tourists in specific places during certain months, may be concerning. These trends create a significant gap between the six touristically busy months and the rest of the year, as well as a special gap between regions of mass tourism and those that cannot provide the typical touristic charms of sunny beaches. The positive impact of tourism on local economies and the cultural, religious, and natural characteristics of destinations in Greece are some of the reasons why new and sustainable tourism proposals are under consideration.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, Greece’s national tourism strategy advocates the simultaneous development of touristic products, and recognizes thematic tourism (rural tourism, health-related tourism, ‘Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE)’-related tourism, etc.) as a factor in financial growth ([Ministry of Tourism 2022](#)). A significant aspect of Greek thematic tourism is religious tourism, as it includes internationally famous pilgrimage sites, and their spiritual and cultural importance. Nevertheless, religious tourism is not only an economic factor but also a social, cultural, religious, and environmental feature of fair, resilient, and sustainable planning at local and national levels.

More specifically, the significance of religious tourism for Greek tourism can be summarized in five points. Firstly, religious sites in Greece are recognized for their universal value, as they cover centuries of religious life. An example of such sites is the city of Thessaloniki—which is famous through the epistles of St. Paul—and its continuous religious life up to modern times. Secondly, many of the religious sites and monuments enjoy full international recognition (see: the Paleochristian and Byzantine Monuments of Thessaloniki, listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, 1988). Thirdly, these sites are always accessible. Fourthly, they are linked with resilient and sustainable expressions of tourism, as well as with its ‘soft’ form ([Lusby 2017](#)). Fifthly, a plan based on religious heritage can be developed in parallel with other thematic options for tourism. In addition, modern studies have looked into the past, in a way that has brought forward a variety of motives and activities involved in pilgrimages. As [Rinschede \(1992, p. 65\)](#) noted, “In history, religious journeys always were multifunctional journeys, even when the religious factors seemed to dominate”. In one way or another, studies with a focus on the Orthodox Church have indicated that people who participate in religion-related journeys may have

various motives (Drule et al. 2012; Božić et al. 2016). This has been confirmed by analyses focusing specifically on religious tourism in Greece. Terzidou et al. (2018, pp. 54–55) noted “the complexity of travel motivations to sacred places”, and underlined “that motivations emerge throughout the religious tourists’ experience as cultural, social and material worlds intervene and interact”.

Summing up, the current literature (Stausberg 2011; Nolan and Nolan 1992) has suggested that tourists are drawn to a broad range of religious sites and attractions, usually categorized as sacred sites, significant centers of worship, religious artifacts with cultural value, museums, or feasts and events. Pilgrims are focused on places that are linked with the religious identity of a community, and on centers of worship, where they can find relics and icons. The same touristic groups are attracted to the sense of authenticity of religious treasures, including their architecture, sculptures, iconography, the natural scenery, and liturgical traditions. Nolan and Nolan (1992, p. 68) offered their own Europe-specific categorization, which consists of “[a] pilgrimage shrines with strong emphasis on religious devotions . . . , [b] shrines that function as devotional centers and religious tourism attractions because of various combinations of historical, artistic, and scenic site characteristics; and [c] places where religious festivals are the principal attractions”.

The region of Central Macedonia hosts holy sites, which can be considered centers of reference for the Orthodox communities, important religious destinations for all Christians, and religious, cultural, and historical attractions. These constitute a pull factor for the whole region. ‘St. Paul’s Route’, in this area, is characterized by historical authenticity, and connects cities and roads that he passed through during his missionary journeys. Authenticity is very important for the overall touristic experience (Bryce et al. 2015; Domínguez-Quintero et al. 2019; Carreira et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2020; Rickly 2022) and, particularly, for religious journeys (Andriotis 2011; Belhassen et al. 2008; Moufahim and Lichrou 2019). Moreover, the communities that St. Paul created are still in existence, and their latter-day members continue to use St. Paul’s own epistolic words in their liturgies. This phenomenon enriches the visitors’ authentic experience.

Nowadays, religious routes attract a variety of visitors, and have a multifunctional role for the economy, community and religious life (Olsen and Trono 2018; Vukonic 2002). ‘St. Paul’s Route’, for instance, does not only unite religious monuments, but also the sights of an entire region, in historical continuity. Thus, visitors can combine pilgrimage with destinations of cultural or environmental interest (like the UNESCO World Heritage site of Vergina, where Macedonian burial monuments can be found, or Mount Olympus). Monuments from different cultures—such as ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, Ottoman and Byzantine—co-exist, and offer the opportunity for the development of multidimensional touristic routes (religious–cultural route, religious–historical or educational route, etc.). These destinations have been adequately researched and highlighted by archaeologists, environmental scientists, and historians. Hence, they offer multiple options to visitors who wish to go beyond religious interests and ‘see’ the world through St. Paul’s eyes. The numerous sites of interest vary. They include ancient and modern pilgrimages, which are directly or indirectly related to St. Paul, and can be combined with new pilgrimages, like the tomb of Elder Paisios of Mount Athos (a contemporary saint who died in 1994, and was canonized in 2015). The latter is a site that recently became one of the most famous and popular pilgrimages for Orthodox Christians all over the world. Furthermore, Mount Athos, the oldest living monastic community in the world, is near Thessaloniki, although it is not part of the region of Central Macedonia, due to its special jurisdiction (Papastathis 1993; Konidaris 2003; Alexopoulos 2013). Religious tourism in this region has already survived the global economic crisis, which showcases its potential for stability in turbulent times.

Similarly, there are some notable characteristics of this area that might propel religious tourism in the upcoming years. The biggest city in this region is Thessaloniki, which serves as a main hub for the area, and for the southern Balkans, and connects cities and countries through its transportation network. Thessaloniki links religious tradition and

cultural heritage with modern facilities (Kostopoulou 2022), and some of its monuments have been classified by UNESCO as World Heritage. Thessaloniki also includes religious sites, cultural and educational organizations, and highly qualified staff. Moreover, the city of Thessaloniki has an integrative legacy that can serve the purpose of ‘St. Paul’s European Cultural Route’. This is important, as religious–cultural routes have stimulated the interest of tourists in recent decades (Mróz et al. 2019). Eventually, the Route could become a positive factor in sustainable and human-centered development for the whole region. According to international literature (Iliev 2020, p. 135), “historically, pilgrims have been responsible travelers without causing socio-cultural and environmental damage to local communities”.

All in all, a polymorphic plan of religious tourism could be developed. Visitors could combine moments of spirituality with educational or cultural activities, untouched nature, and peaceful experiences. The emergence of innovative, viable plans that combine visits to religious sites with other touristic options could strengthen the resilience of religious destinations and routes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. After COVID-19: New Perspectives

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on society, economy, politics, religious life, and culture, have caused concerns about the future on a global level. Anxiety, vulnerability, and insecurity have become part of everyday life. Safety and sanitary issues still affect touristic behavior today. Particularly in the field of religious tourism, visitors seem to welcome protective measures, but do not intend to stop faith-related travel (Tsironis et al. 2022). In terms of administration, it is expected that religious celebrations and pilgrimages will be planned in the post-pandemic world “in compliance with the measures necessary to prevent the contagion of the SarsCov-2 virus” or other health hazards (DiReSoM 2020, p. 167). Therefore, an overall challenge for all tourism stakeholders will be to decipher the COVID-19 impact, and to better understand the key factors behind the pilgrimage rebound in the coming years.

The experience of a pandemic or a deadly disease is not new. Religious communities have incorporated this experience into their narrative. History shows that pandemics (as well as wars and other hazards) do not eliminate long-term practices of pilgrimage (Foster 2010; Kužić 2014). Various religious communities have found their own ways to adapt and continue their pilgrimages, by using ‘mini’, localized, or new pilgrimages (Bailey 2022), by becoming more accustomed to technological methods of participation (Séraphin and Jarraud 2021; Faris and Griffin 2020), or by waiting for the end of the pandemic.

Religious tourism was sustained even during the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of motives and intentions, but definitely suffered from the consequences of the international crisis: the flow of tourists stopped; there was doubt and fear; and religious gatherings were restricted. Of course, after a natural catastrophe or pandemic, there are lessons to be learned. The experience of fighting COVID-19 led to policy options, practices, and arrangements that should be addressed in every “crisis preparation, planning and response strategy” (Jamal and Budke 2020, p. 185). In a way, “monitoring religious routes and trails to ensure physical distancing,” (Olsen and Timothy 2020, p. 181) became a key issue.

Considering the new experience of COVID-19 in the frame of the Second Modernity era (Tsironis 2018), new challenges have been added to old ones: they should be recognized and dealt with. The times necessitate a better understanding of the “wider challenges within which tourism operates” (Bowen 2022, p. 2) and, eventually, the creation of potential ways of balancing between the adaptation and the safeguarding of such destinations’ core values (Von Bergner and Lohmann 2013). In summary, the management of religious sites faces the challenge of finding a threefold balance, i.e., to learn from the pandemic, to empower the essential values of pilgrimage, and to integrate “a multi-goal, multi-domain, multi-actor and multi-level approach” into a plan for crisis response (Hartman et al. 2020, p. 214).

From a wider perspective, the current conditions form three main categories of challenges, with which the stakeholders of religious tourism will have to deal in the near future: firstly, facing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion-oriented journeys; secondly, developing a strategic plan which includes proactive and reactive health and safety provisions; thirdly, linking various touristic motivations with the assets of each destination, in order to serve the needs of visitors and pilgrims.

If the best answer to potential crises is a strategic plan that integrates risk assessments and crisis management, then it will be important to build the future of religious tourism on the foundation of the experiences we have acquired during the pandemic. Future plans should not be solely based on provisions of quantitative development. What seems permanent today may be overturned tomorrow in a “runaway world” (Giddens 2002). Another important point to note is the significance of multidimensional touristic policy-making, rather than confining a destination into taking advantage of only one form of tourism. This paper suggests that religious tourism is one of the most important elements in sustainable touristic development, for two main reasons: firstly, its potential for continuous development, even during less busy months; secondly, its ability to co-exist with cultural, environmental, and educational tourism; this ability allows flexible traveling schedules for touristic groups of any size.

After the first couple of years of the pandemic, participation in pilgrimages and visits to holy sites in Greece remained relatively high, which indicates that the main challenge is not really quantitative growth. The question is how to apply standards of high quality, in order to protect the visitors’ health and wellbeing, and to preserve sacred places, their authenticity, and their natural surroundings.

The proposal of a polymorphic strategy for religious tourism (Tsironis 2020, p. 64) serves the aim of local development through sustainable practices by “combining the plurality of modern tourists’ motives . . . and the variety of experiences the religious sites may offer and setting rules and principles at the functional level (working hours, proper infrastructures, interrelation between sites, monuments and activities) . . . Based on the polymorphic strategy a diversified circle of functionality could be designed regulating the different types of motivation and visiting activities, e.g.: different age groups, different social groups (families, parishes, pilgrims, lonely travellers, etc.)”.

In this context, a series of initiatives could enhance the resilient character of religious sites in the post-pandemic world. These initiatives might include specific information to cover post-pandemic needs, which would be made available to the public through smartphone applications or awareness campaigns in international touristic forums and platforms; they might also take the form of flexible, religion-based itineraries, which would highlight the special character of religious tourism in Greece; they might even involve a direct link between religious sites and other monuments, routes, and destinations. Thus, the diversity and abundance of touristic destinations in Central Macedonia and in Greece would be further illustrated.

Research has shown that “religious devotion, regional identity, cultural heritage and linguistic tradition, landscape” and proximity to city hubs are some of the contributing factors to touristic satisfaction (Canoves and Prat 2016, p. 26). Such factors could also significantly facilitate the recovery of religious tourism after the pandemic, on an international level (Konstantinidis et al. 2021).

‘St. Paul’s Route’, in the region of Central Macedonia, includes well-known and lesser-known destinations, world-renowned religious sites and monuments, and archaeological, cultural, and environmental assets. The authenticity of the liturgical and spiritual life of Orthodox monasteries and churches, the aesthetic enjoyment of icons and elements of architecture, the experience of local traditions, the unspoiled landscape (especially in remote monasteries), the ancient Greek monuments, the gastronomic culture, and modern facilities create a potentially multidimensional experience. Furthermore, a visit to a religious destination can be combined with fasting and local traditions, seminars on iconography and chanting, cultural events, participation in local festivals, and overnight stays in traditional

villages; it can also be linked to the life of local communities, thematic seminars, hiking, water activities, agricultural tourism, etc. As long as the connection of religious sites to touristic activities does not lead to lack of devoutness during the religious visit, or to a 'shallow' touristic mixture of various options, the aforementioned multidimensional strategy could contribute to the resilient character and development of pilgrimage and religious tourism in the post-COVID-19 era.

6. Conclusions

As previous studies have highlighted (Jackowski and Smith 1992, p. 105), pilgrimage and "religious tourism could become an enduring source of employment and income, without sacrificing the important social and religious functions of the sanctuaries and their pilgrimages". At the same time, they represent the history, the authenticity, the character, and the timelessness of faithful communities, in a unique way. The assembled tangible and intangible elements of religious tradition paint a complex picture, which not only reveals religious heritage, but also rich cultural history, intercultural crossroads, and the stories and myths of devout pilgrims and local communities. The aforementioned analysis demonstrates that 'St. Paul's Route' is a sociological 'chain of memories' (we use here a term coined by Hervieu-Léger 2000) rather than a road, as it links communities, people, and cultures. COVID-19 refreshed the public's interest in pilgrimage, its personal and collective meaning, and its motivational power. In this context, future studies are needed, to investigate the pilgrimage under new conditions, in terms of mobility, and as part of wider interpretations of modern-day life. When Greek people started to "get their lives back", after the major debt crisis and the three COVID-19 pandemic waves, they planned a series of activities according to their lifestyles, rather than just trips and visits. Currently, participation in religious celebrations and pilgrimages is steadily increasing, while new governmental and clerical plans are scheduled to be applied in practice.

The sustainable development of 'St. Paul's Route', in the region of Central Macedonia, is expected to empower cross-regional cultural and economic relations, to lead to innovative touristic options based on faith-oriented journeys, and to enforce international cooperation in the post-COVID-19 era. The variety of religious sites and monuments, the piety of pilgrimage practices, the authenticity of a living culture, and the intra- or inter-regional mobility of pilgrims could become significant resilience factors, by strengthening local economies, and safeguarding the social and ecological sustainability of religious sites. Previous studies have provided evidence that religious destinations are positive aspects of local socio-economic development, because they "strengthen the importance of building collaborative processes" (Romanelli et al. 2021). This ecosystemic approach is in accordance with the UNWTO Bethlehem Declaration (UNWTO 2015), which encourages people to "develop religious tourism routes, cross-country pilgrimages and networks of religious tourism destinations, as effective means to foster regional development and integration, cross-cultural exchanges and understanding as well as self-education and learning".

The current situation necessitates renewed planning, management, and practices in the field of religious tourism in Greece (Papazoglou et al. 2021, p. 3225). The future challenge for pilgrims and hosts in religious sites will be to combine protective measures (WHO 2020) with the pilgrims' practices, and to protect authentic traditions and public health. The issue of proactive and reactive (health) security will be the main concern at all levels in the coming years: thus, it should be part of strategic planning, which will enable the integration of the concepts of risk and unpredictability, and create some balance between the need for short-term measures (limiting movements, and the control of visits) and the protection of basic freedoms in mobility and religious practices.

The present study acknowledges certain limitations to the analysis of current and future perspectives of pilgrimage and religious tourism in the Greek Orthodox context. As previous studies (Andriotis 2009, p. 81) have already pointed out, "writing in visitor books is entirely voluntary", whereas the lists of pilgrims and visitors—if existent—rarely provide demographic, social or other kinds of data (Božić et al. 2016). This kind of listing and

tracking is not an essential part of the pilgrimage tradition in Greece. Moreover, collecting and processing personal details, regarding religious or philosophical beliefs, in churches, monasteries, or holy sites is hindered by General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Additionally, COVID-19 restrictions have not facilitated data collection. Future studies could measure the numeric variations of pilgrimage more precisely.

The present analysis contributes to the literature by examining pilgrimage and religious tourism in the Greek Orthodox context, with a special interest in the challenges that have emerged since the COVID-19 outbreak. In agreement with other analyses, this analysis points out that pilgrimage and religious tourism can be important factors in a post-COVID-19 “viable exit strategy” (Shilo and Collins-Kreiner 2022, p. 10). The present analysis utilized ‘St. Paul’s Route’, in the region of Central Macedonia, as a case study, as this is a widely known area for religion-oriented journeys. This analysis demonstrates a polymorphic conceptualization of religious tourism, and underlines the significance of a strategy that promotes the connection of religious sites with a variety of ‘soft tourism’ forms as the key recovery option in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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