

## The complexities of religious tourism motivations

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**The complexities of religious tourism motivations:  
sacred places, vows and visions**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to understand the complexity of travel motivations to sacred places. Using ethnographic techniques within the Greek Orthodox context, we argue that while motivations are institutionally constructed, they are fragile, dynamic and progressive; being embedded within everyday performances of religion. This calls into question the fixed centeredness and predetermined sacredness of religious sites. Travel motivations become directly influenced by believers' intimate and emergent performances not only of places but also of religion itself; the meaning of places being based on lived experiences of doing religion and interacting with the sacred, as exemplified in vows and visions. Such understandings are crucial in predicting the effects of failing pilgrimages and the processes of authentication of places, which can help explain visitation patterns.

**Keywords:** religious tourism; motivation; performance; vows

**Introduction**

Evidence of the key role religion plays in people's lives is found not only in everyday practices such as eating, drinking and clothing (Bailey and Sood, 1993; Hunt, 2013), but also in tourist practices, including destination choice and motivations (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000; Vukonic, 1996). While a number of well-established theories such as

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and push/pull factors (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977), are applied widely in the tourism field (Baloglu and Uysal, 1996; Bashar and Ahmad, 2010; Crompton and McKay, 1997; Kim, Lee and Klenosky, 2003; Pearce 1993), travel motivations to sacred sites appear to be much more complex, entailing drives perplexed within power relations, inner desires and the supernatural experienced in religious performances. Religious oriented travelling therefore appears to be associated with motives related to constructive powers (i.e. religious authorities) (Bandyopadhyaya, Morais and Chick, 2008; Selwyn, 1996) and what Cohen and Cohen (2012, p.1299) call "cool authentication"; people visiting sites that have been declared by religious authorities to be of importance and linked to the sacred. Often imbued with fear, a set of religious doctrines that are considered the ultimate knowledge encourage their adherents to travel to religious sites that are perceived to be the 'Centre of the World' (Eliade, 1969; Singh, 2006). Resting upon dogmas, such as the world being sacred or evil and persons being religious or sinful (Silberman, 2005), Christianity, for example, has exercised considerable power over people through its doctrine of rewarding virtuous people for their good acts while punishing sinners for their unorthodox/bad acts (Kushner, 1989). Belief in religion is, therefore, frequently accepted because of the end to which it is directed (hell, for example, in the case of a sin) and because of its link to political powers, which also constructs and determines travel motivations. The hajj to Makkah is, for instance, part of the five pillars of Islam co-constructed by the religious authorities and the state (Jafari and Scott, 2014).

Nevertheless, in addressing the complexities of religious tourism motivations, research has found that people visiting religious sites are not driven exclusively by external factors, such as religious institutions and their scripts, which merely fall into Dann's (1977) category of pull factors, but also by push factors that may entail also non-religious motives. In his seminal work on religious motivations, Allport (1966) identified two main types of persons. Firstly, the extrinsically motivated person who *uses* religion, religion playing only an instrumental role and serving assorted forms of self-interest, such as satisfying one's social life (Durkheim, 1915) or demanding personality support or help in crisis (Pargament, Magyar-Russel and Murray-Swank, 2005). Secondly, the intrinsically

motivated who *lives* religion, which floods their whole life with motivation and meaning. While this research has influenced scholars looking at religious motivations (Hoge, 1972; Hunt and King, 1971; Liu and Koenig, 2013; Ryan, Rigby and King, 1993) and could explain some visitation patterns, the items used to measure it do not provide in-depth understanding about travel motivations to sacred places and ignore the transformative elements in the process of becoming. Moreover, such an approach dichotomises those involved in religion, neglecting the subjectivity of the religious experience according to which both the sacred and the secular elements may be of equal importance.

Tourism scholars have found that religious tourists may visit sacred places for reasons such as appreciation of nature, and educational and cultural enrichment (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Ron, 2009), including relaxation and self-discovery as is the case in Mount Athos, Greece (Andriotis, 2009). While these resemble traditional tourist models of motivation, it is argued that within the context of religious tourism, such journeys do not constitute an internal desire to escape from people's everyday religious life (Iso-Ahola, 1982; Matheson, Rimmer and Tinsley, 2014). Rather, religious tourists, bounded by an everyday life deeply embedded in religious practices, regard their trip to a sacred site as an extension of their religious self. Individual lived religious experiences are therefore crucial in understanding motivations, as many people aim to be transformed, cleansed or renewed based on new and powerful actions (Hyde and Harman, 2011).

Yet, while nearly every individual aims for her/his pilgrimage to be successful, the link between intentions and outcome is often elusive (Kaell, 2016) as are the subsequent reactions of the pilgrims. Rather than confining understanding of motivation as a practice that exists predominantly in decision-making before travel, this paper identifies tourist motivation as emerging throughout the religious experience, recognising the need to develop a deeper understanding of tourists' personal religious performances, and their association with the visitation of sacred sites. The paper also responds to Olsen's (2017) call to further investigate the effect of pilgrimages' failures on believers and their selection of sacred sites, in other words not just focus on highly successful ones.

Building upon research conducted in the context of Christianity (Belhassen, Caton and Steward, 2008; Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Rickly-Boyd, 2013; Turner and Turner, 1978), and within the framework of Christian Orthodoxy (Andriotis, 2009, 2011; della Dora, 2012), this study uses ethnographic tools to collect data on two organised coach trips to the island of Tinos (a Christian Orthodox site in Greece) and offer new, in-depth insights into religious tourists' motivations. Following Belhassen *et al.* (2008) and Thrift (1997), the study posits that motivations emerge throughout the religious tourists' experience, as cultural, social and material worlds intervene and interact. Specifically, aiming to understand the complexity of travel motivations to sacred places, we argue that religious tourism motivations are more than a result of constructed motivations, that is, of external agents such as religious/political powers and social realities (Bourdieu, 1990; Cohen and Cohen, 2012) that predetermine religious travelling. Rather, we acknowledge a refocussing from researching external and what Collins-Kreiner (2010, p.447) calls "general" elements of pilgrimage (Nolan and Nolan, 1989; Turner and Turner, 1978) to researching the individual inner experience (for a detailed review of the literature, see Collins-Kreiner, 2010) within the context of motivation. Religious tourism motivations are also the result of lived experiences that incorporate a series of personal embodied and affective engagements, and encounters with the sacred both in-site and in one's everyday life that may entail the unexpected (Badone and Roseman, 2004; Frey 1998). Based on Belhassen *et al.*'s (2008) influential work on *theoplacity* that highlights the importance of the dynamic relationship between the social and the spatial elements in touring a destination, and Rickly-Boyd's (2013) focus on the performativity of authenticity and places in tourism experiences, our study moves one step further. Specifically, its contribution lies in understanding the effect of the direct human-sacred interaction in generating motivations and authenticating places in an informal and immanent way (Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Edensor, 2009; Coleman and Crang, 2002; Crouch, 2000), thereby often re-writing places and questioning their fixed nature.

While an extensive literature exists regarding the influence of external factors on travel motivations, less has been written about the way personal lived performances of religion

and supernatural experiences authenticate places and influence motivations to visit them. Specifically, while some studies on vows and visions exist, which exemplify personal experiences with the sacred (Badone, 1990; Boissevain, 1977; Narayanan, 2006; Raj and Harman, 2006), limited attention has been given to their effect on the selection of sacred sites - an aspect which the current study aims to address. To contextualise our arguments, we first review theories related to constructed motivations emphasising the semiotic nature of motivations. Then we review theories of embodied and affective engagements related to experiential and non-representational aspects of motivations, reframing these within the religious tourism motivation context. Next we outline the method used to understand religious tourist motivations presenting the ethnographic tools adopted in this study. We then discuss the main findings before offering summary reflections in our conclusions.

### **Rethinking Motivation in Religious Tourism**

Within the tourist motivation literature, traditional approaches emphasise the semiotic nature of tourists' motivation (Urry, 1990). Tourists have a need to look in a detached way at signs and symbolic structures that are created through constructed textual or verbal means, such as collective narratives (Badone, 2007; Bogari, Crowther and Marr, 2003; Bruner, 2005), word of mouth (Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007) and myths (Bell, 2003; Selwyn, 1996), as well as through visual means, such as brochures, film and television, and social media (Hsu and Song, 2013; Hudson, Wang and Gil, 2011; Kim, Agrusa, Chon, and Cho 2008; Kim and Assaker, 2014; Scarles, 2004; Siripis, Scarles and Airey, 2013). Such media often create ideology-fuelled images of attractive or meaningful places and mobilise action; what Dann (1977) termed pull factors. In contrast, within the religious tourism context, motivations are not only constructed by external agents, but are driven by strong, deeply held, personal beliefs and embodied performances that are related to the everyday religious self and practice and thus the relationship with the sacred. The two respective processes will now be presented as central to the critique of religious tourists' motivations throughout their religious experience.

### *Constructed Motivations*

Processes of discipline and power imbued on people by institutions (religious or political) shape the wider public and perpetuate religious discourses (Xie, 2011) and performances. To influence visitation patterns, religious authorities create 'induced imagery' (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Kim and Chen, 2016), constructing imaginings and perceptions of sacred places using narratives and visual media. In this way they mobilise place discursively, directing people towards particular spaces that are fuelled by ideological interpretation acquired through religious texts and language (Selwyn, 1996); they choreograph, in Edensor's (2000) words, the religious play, intending to make cultural codes intelligible and convincing (Bourdieu, 1990; Edensor, 2009).

Within this context, religious oriented travel is often gendered (Kinnaird and Hall, 1994) or social status oriented (Bhardwaj, 1973), some religions having a considerable influence on who is performing religion and how (Barsalou, Barbey, Simmons and Santos, 2005; Rinschede, 1992). For example, women predominate at Christian Orthodox sites, as according to the Greek tradition it is most often women who represent and connect the families to the spiritual world (Dubisch, 1995). Respectively, in Hinduism sacred sites are visited mainly by the high castes (Bhardwaj, 1973; Rinschede, 1992). Many religions create even what Baudrillard (1981, p.85) calls "strategies of desire", through which consumers-tourists are mobilized by promises, such as miraculous healing. As a unique source of coping and distress, religion acts as a psychological support in reducing people's uncertainty and fear associated with death and health issues (Pargament *et al.*, 2005). Thus, by reproducing tales of miracles, religions create a discursive place branding that pre-programmes believers' expectations and actions and stage-manages their performances. Previous research (Digance, 2006; Dubisch, 1995; Olsen, 2006; Turner and Turner, 1978) on pilgrimage has revealed, for example, the tendency of people with health problems to visit sacred sites in order to experience miraculous healing attributed to the grace of God, which is understood as forgiveness in the Western Christian Church and as movement of God towards humanity in the Eastern Christian Church (Ware, 1993). Manifestations of sacred signs, such as miracles or

apparitions are therefore expected by many believers undertaking a religious journey (Davis and Boles, 2003) in anticipation of future improvements and healing (Dubisch, 1995; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Smith, 1992; Turner and Turner, 1978); but also out of curiosity resembling post-modern notions of a ‘society of spectacle’ (Baudrillard, 1981; Edensor, 2009) that is in search of the hyper-real to affirm religious belief.

Religious institutions structure the dependence of people on religious symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) by creating collective realities and performances that tend to be viewed within these groups as fundamental and unquestionable truths that bestow reliability and anticipated consequences to people’s actions. Accordingly, motivations to visit sacred places are also indirectly imposed through social processes themselves (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Rickly-Boyd, 2013) that stimulate mobility and exchange in key sacred sites. Through collective understandings and mutual observations, intra tourist gaze (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Holloway, Green and Holloway, 2011) motivations are created based on particular values and behaviours that are acquired through processes of imitation, repetition and role-play (Bell, 2008; Butler, 1993) that enable people to become part of a whole (Durkheim, 1915; Reader, 2006; Zhu, 2012). Levels of church participation are, for example, learned behaviours transmitted within specific groups of people who, as ‘structured structures’, form an internalization process similar to those used by Mead (1934) and the symbolic interactionist tradition to describe the formation of self-identity. The power of sharing of religious tourism experiences and of community narratives can help to generate, maintain and intensify the authenticity of the visited site (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008), a process termed “hot authentication” (Cohen and Cohen, 2012 p. 1301). This is of particular importance for people in search of miraculous places, and highlights the power of word-of-mouth and trust in the experiences of others (Lester and Scarles, 2013).

Nevertheless, religious tourists as active beings also create religion in the course of performing it themselves, allowing unpredictable becomings that challenge the fixity of the religious choreography. Accordingly, they may develop their own travel motivations influenced by the multiple embodied encounters they have with the human and non-human elements throughout their entire religious experience. In the following section we



propose religious tourist motivations are created through a negotiation between performances, places and imaginative experiences, co-constructing reality and authenticating toured places.

### *Embodied and affective engagements*

Motivations to visit places are not only the outcome of semiotic elements, visuals and power relations that construct decision-making and expectations before travel. They relate also to experiential and non-representational aspects, namely personal lived experiences like corporeal or imaginative performances of religiousness that influence motivations anew (della Dora, 2012; Dewsbury, 2000; Franklin and Crang, 2001; Knudsen and Waade, 2010; Scarles, 2009; Thrift, 1997; Urry and Larsen, 2011). Accordingly, while Jackowski and Smith (1992), and Ron (2009), contextualise religious tourism within the broader term of 'knowledge-based tourism', Gutic, Caie and Clegg (2010) and della Dora (2012) recognize that knowledge in the context of religious tourism can be understood as an affective connection and understanding. It is a subconscious search for a spiritual experience and authenticity realised through embodied performances, as religious landscapes have no imaginary boundaries. Individual performances offer a form of knowledge, as people can both 'work' their symbolic religious contexts through their bodily engagement with the tangible parts of their religious world and the collective activities in sacred places (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008).

Religious understanding can unfold based on unpredictable, immanent events in peoples' lives that enable them to open up but also to refigure existing understandings of places, belief and self (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). For example, existentialists who believe in lived experience, attempt to derive religion from certain universally available subjective experiences (James, 1960), such as having an encounter with the Virgin Mary or speaking in tongues; what Wearing, McDonald and Ankor (2016) name epiphanic experiences describing sudden and significant insights that can occur in the course of everyday life. Such experiences can become abiding memories that influence and frame

the individual's future life (Sharpley, 2009). For example, a sudden miraculous manifestation (e.g. cure or vision) or particular positive moments in life that produce inner spiritual peace can alter individuals' religious doubts (Sharpley, 2009) and can lead to transformations. Equally, through a vow or promise many believers intend to establish a special bond to particular saints/deities and to seek their aid in times of need and crisis (Badone, 1990), resembling the patron-client relationship found in human social interaction (Boissevain, 1977). Within such contexts, failing pilgrimages can also result in questioning religious truth, despite Kaell's (2016) view that pilgrimages within the Christian belief system are to be evaluated over a longer time frame rather than basing them on immediate ritual success.

Motivations can therefore be conceptualised as dynamic and progressive, since they are influenced by processes of becoming rather than being merely related to states of being part of a larger whole (Zhu, 2012). Open to multiple affects and agencies that surround them (Crang, 1997; Thrift, 1997), 'a priori, in situ and a posteriori' (McCabe and Marson, 2006, p.105; Urry and Larsen, 2011) religious tourists adjust their motivations based on their current or previous travel experiences (Poria, Reichel and Biran, 2006), which condition their hierarchy of needs. Accordingly, repeated journeys are often motivated by the re-engagement in, re-enlivening of, and re-writing of the memories and visual conceptions tourists have already acquired (Scarles, 2009). Within such processes of becoming that are marked by complex relationships and multiplicity of performances (Hannam, 2006), places themselves become fluid constructions (Coleman and Eade, 2004). Being unable to perform imagined anticipations on-site, such as a cure, can demystify even known religious destinations, directly influencing religious tourists' future travel intentions. Consequently, religious "places are not fixed, given or unchanging but depend in part upon the practices within them" (Urry, 2007, p.54). They are as much a temporal as a spatial concept conditioning visitation patterns (Coleman and Eade, 2004).

Religious tourists' motivations, therefore, involve not only mimesis in terms of imitating prescribed actions as imposed by authorities that create identity, places and

performances. They also involve poesis and kinesis, in that people are constructing their own experiences and authenticity (Bell, 2008) through performing religiousness, such as vows, miraculous healing or having visions. Through such processes, the religious tourist gaze intertwines with the consumption of religious texts, discourses and performances, reconstructing predetermined discursive imaginings of places through experiential encounter and thus building motivations and places anew. Having reviewed the academic literature in which this research is grounded, we now outline the research method used to study religious tourists' motivations.

## **Research Methods**

Our study follows a social constructivist philosophy, based on an ontological relativity, according to which issues of existence depend on particular worldviews, in this case the Greek Orthodox understanding. In particular, based on the notion that religious tourism motivation emerges through a series of performances that individuals exercise as part of structured and unstructured means, a qualitative case study was adopted as being the most pertinent to understand religious tourists' motivations in depth. Indeed, qualitative case studies offer rich empirical data (Yin, 2015), from which theory can be developed by recognising patterns and relationships (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Ethnographic research was conducted in two organised religious coach trips to the sacred island of Tinos, Greece. This island was selected purposefully as a critical case (Silverman, 2008), representing a major religious tourism destination. Tinos is located in North Cyclades, and has a population of approximately 8,600 inhabitants (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2013). Despite its size, Tinos attracts thousands of visitors annually who flock to see the miraculous icon, in the Church of the Annunciation, which is believed to have therapeutic qualities. It is said that in June of 1822, a nun named Pelagia in Tinos had a series of visions of the Virgin Mary, who indicated to her where the sacred icon was to be found (Panagia of Tinos, 2017). The Church of Annunciation, built on the place where the icon was originally found, became famous after numerous reports of miracles accomplished by the icon (Panagia of Tinos, 2017). Today the sacred icon of the

Panagia Evangelistria in Tinos is the most venerated pilgrimage item in Greece, equal to Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal. While Tinos is also visited by international tourists as part of touring the Cyclades, the majority of visitors are Greek Orthodox believers and gypsies, as well as a smaller number of international Orthodox groups travelling mainly from Russia and Ethiopia.

Research participants comprised a volunteer sample of Greek Orthodox believers undertaking two organised four-day religious coach trips from Kavala to Tinos. Both trips were scheduled within religious dates - 15 of August: the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, and 14 of September: The Holy Cross, which ensured homogeneity of the sample (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In particular, religious feasts like festivals generate discussions and reflection because people are brought together and emotions are aroused in unique ways. An information leaflet was distributed to each prospective participant as the coaches departed, the invitation to participate supported by verbal introduction given on the coach. In total during the two trips, 41 religious tourists were observed and 38 out of them were interviewed after their trip, each being identified by a code comprising their gender (F female, M male) and age in years (Table 1).

	Coach trip one	Coach trip two	Total
<i>Phase 1:</i> Participants observed	18	23	<b>41</b>
<i>Phase 2:</i> Participants also interviewed formally after trip	16	22	<b>38</b>
Total believers taking trip	40	34	74

Table 1: Participant numbers

In phase 1, participant observation was applied, with the lead researcher adopting the role of the ‘participant as observer’ to observe the repetition of patterns (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) and gather information, which often cannot be obtained during interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The role of a participant as observer was adopted to minimise the distance between the researcher and the participants, her actions demonstrating that

she belonged to and was one of them. In doing so she adjusted to the participants' cultural norms, used their language and her inherited knowledge of their religious belief system, and thus gained their trust very quickly, similarities between participants' and the lead researcher's national and religious background facilitating engagement and acceptance (Andriotis, 2009). In line with ethical approval, only the 41 participants who gave permission were included in the research (O'Reilly, 2005), 38 of these also being interviewed (Table 1). The lead researcher felt embraced by participants, who openly talked to her about personal issues and were willing to share their ideas about their movements. Comments from participants and their spouses in phase 2 indicate the trustworthiness of data, for:

*Petros: Just look at my wife! She is usually very shy in situations like that! Now she talked freely!*

*Katia: Why feel shy? She is so lovely and simple. The time passes by so pleasantly!*

Observation and informal discussions took place throughout each four-day tourist trip, this amounting to approximately 48 hours of contact on the coach, the ferry and on the island of Tinos (Figure 1), which resulted in the creation of unique, everlasting friendships.

To further ensure trustworthiness of data, issues of reactivity (Bernard, 2006) needed to be eliminated. Specifically, to reduce violation of scenes due to researcher presence, notes were made in absence of the participants. Scratch notes were made during the day whenever the researcher was alone, thereby recording mental notes of interesting occurrences (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). These were then meticulously analysed and emergent themes highlighted at the end of each day in the privacy of the researcher's hotel room.



Figure 1. Trips' route

To further understand the complexities of religious tourists' motivations, in phase 2 of the research semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in the participants' homes after their trips. Interviews lasted on average 75 minutes and were conducted after assuring participants' confidentiality and receiving their consent (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In an attempt to understand the world from the subjects' point of view and to unfold the meaning of people's experiences (Kvale, 1996), questions addressed issues of motivation and meaning of the place to the participants, as well as exploring experiences and behaviours, feelings and values. While the same questions were used during two different time slots, the sequence of the questions varied according to the interview procedure. Additional probing questions were introduced where participants' responses required clarification (Fielding and Thomas, 2008), the emphasis being on what they considered as important, drawing also on the happenings, behaviours and emotions noted during the participant observation (phase 1). All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English retroactively (O'Reilly, 2005) to ensure consistency in meaning. Informed consent was provided by all participants (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), pseudonyms being used to ensure anonymity.

Thematic analysis was used to discern themes and aggregate dimensions (Boyatzis, 1998) through the examination and comparison of happenings and ideas discussed by the participants in the phase 2 interviews. Initially, a series of first order concepts were identified and categorized. The relationships between and among these categories were explored in the second stage enabling the emergence of higher-order themes. These themes were compared and contrasted to identify the final aggregate dimensions

underpinning the conceptual and empirical contributions of this paper (Figure 2). Subsequently, data from phase 1 were compared and integrated with phase 2, verifying that both methods drew the same or similar conclusions (Decrop, 1999).

The majority of respondents (28 out of 38) were female, which was expected as in the Greek tradition it is usually the woman who connects the family with the sacred through her religious institutional performances (Dubisch, 1995). Respondents' ages ranged from early 30s to early 80s, with the majority being over 50 (25 out of 38). Indeed, Greek religious sites are well attended by older people. They are a unique source of coping that acts as a psychological assistant in reducing people's uncertainty and fear associated to mortality and health issues (Pargament *et al.*, 2005).

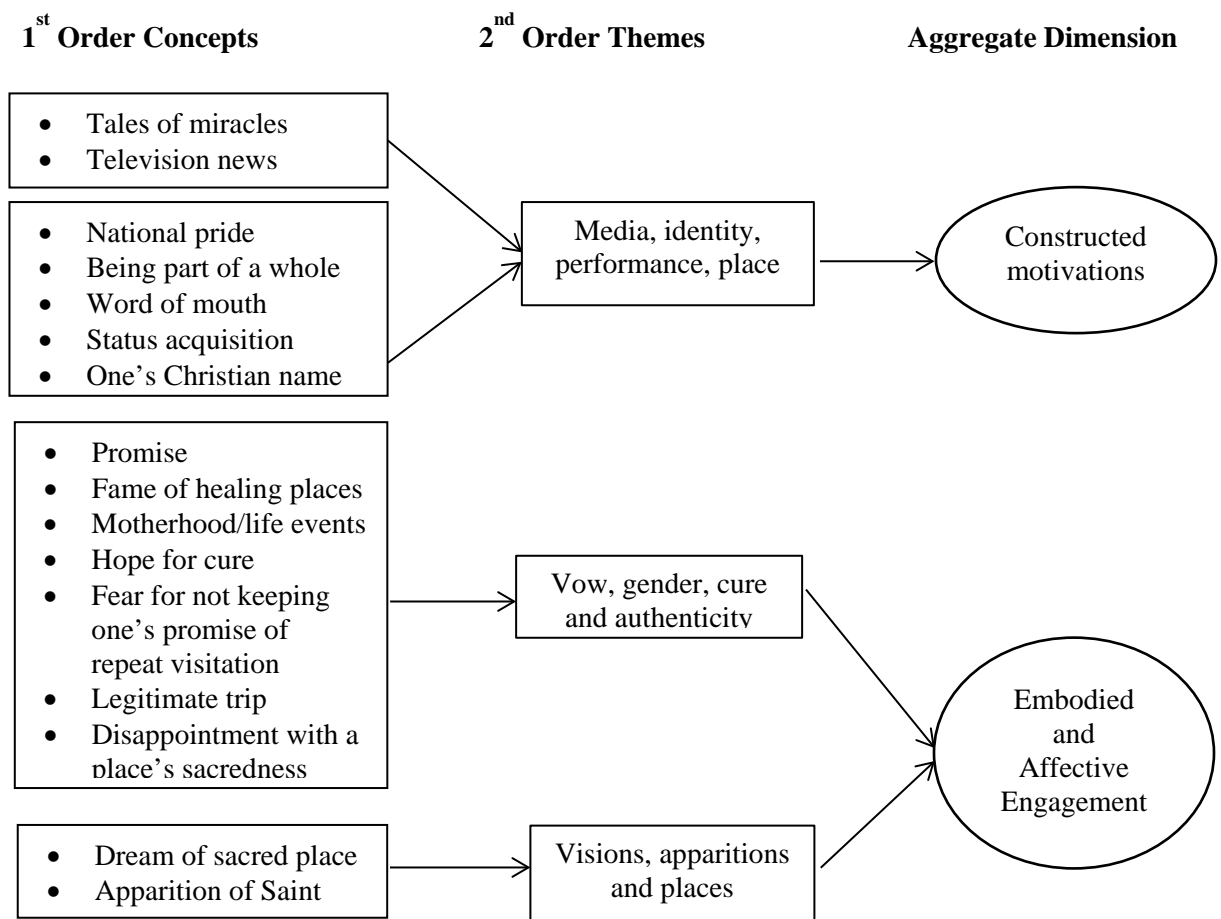


Figure 2. Data structure

Attention now moves to the critical analysis of these empirical data in order to further extrapolate motivations as externally constructed and individually performed within the religious tourism experience.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Drawing upon this study's empirical findings within the Christian Orthodox context, three main themes of religious tourists' motivations have been identified in the case study of Tinos, Greece. These are, the relationship between: a) media, identity, performance and place, b) vow, gender, cure and authenticity, and c) visions, apparitions and places. We now consider the first of these.

### *Media, identity, performance and place*

Within postmodern understandings of the 'society of spectacle' (Baudrillard, 1981; Edensor, 2009), many people are mobilised to sacred places by imposing myths and narratives of extraordinary miracles circulated by religious institutions (Badone, 2007; Bruner, 2005; Selwyn, 1996). As Babis (M, 62) said: *"I really wanted to see such a miracle by myself! I heard so many stories of disabled people that went there and suddenly started walking!"* Similar to MacCannell's (1976) and Urry's (1990) semiotic tourists who are searching for and are influenced by imposed signs in material landscapes, religious tourists engage in practices of 'hunting' and manifesting of religious signs, these constituting proofs of holy intervention. Many participants, for example, had a desire to see the metallic orange tree that stands in the church's main entrance. As Tasia (F, 66) narrated, *"the orange tree is so beautiful... it stands on the right side... a gift to Virgin Mary from a blind man who was cured. He promised to bring to the Church the first thing he would be able to see, which was the orange tree in his garden... Isn't it powerful?... The same also with the fountain in the church yard that [...]"*.



The images of performing religious crowds have a similar effect on travel motivations becoming core ingredient in authorities' construction of the "strategies of desire" (Baudrillard, 1981, p.85), with popular media often circulating collective ritual performances that create curiosity. As Makis (M, 53) admitted:

*"First and foremost it is curiosity that attracts you, because you watch it also on television... you see how they crawl... on their knees... and you want to be there that day when the masses ascend to the church to see what exactly is happening... I was impressed when I saw a famous singer on TV crawling to the church... You see, all that influences you..."*

Religious and political institutions are known to use heritage sites to construct national identity and pride, in that people can connect to their nation's history and religion through visiting and consuming such places (Bandyopadhyaya *et al.*, 2008). Tinos exemplifies such a site, since it is a place co-constructed by religious and political forces; it is assumed that the finding of the icon of the Virgin Mary on the island of Tinos contributed to the nation's fight for its independence (Dubisch, 1995). Accordingly, the most important religious celebration in Greece is the '*Dormition of the Virgin Mary*' that takes place annually on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, commemorating the Virgin Mary and especially the Virgin Mary of Tinos. Similar to previous studies (Kim and Chen, 2016; Siripis *et al.*, 2013), authoritative powers influence visitation patterns to Tinos, using visual media that authenticate places through processes of meaning making. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August the image of festive Tinos circulates all over Greece with TV news focusing on the holy icon, the leading politicians, and the crowds of people participating in the celebration. These festive images are accompanied by scenes including Greek flags fluttering all over the island of Tinos (Figure 3) along with the presence of navy generals and military ships providing symbolic gunfire. Such visual scenes construct imaginings and longings for the place building upon collective understanding, identity and belonging. As Vaso (F, 62) explained: "*it is a priority and commitment for all Greeks*". For most Greeks, this is clearly what Bhardwaj (1973) termed a 'national pilgrimage'. "*Here is **our** Virgin Mary, she is **our** Virgin Mary... for those of us who cannot travel outside Greece, the Virgin*

*Mary is Tinos*” [emphasis as original] (Anna; F, 41). Similar to the meaning the Wailing Wall has for the Jews, Greeks are attached to the site as it is part of being Greek, of performing everyday Greekness and being Christian Orthodox. As Nicky (F, 80) commented: “*every Christian comes round to Tinos. Whoever you may ask, he will say that at least once in his lifetime he has been there.*”



Figure 3. Church of the Annunciation, Tinos, Image copyright of first author

People are often driven to sacred places by the urge to be part of a whole. Travel motivations are therefore also constructed through inter-subjective interactions and sharing of religious experiences that amplify the authenticity of the places (Andriotis, 2011; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). The power of word of mouth (Lester and Scarles, 2013) is clear in Elsa’s (F, 45) words: “*I always heard other people saying “I went to Tinos, I went Tinos!”*”, and I thought “*Oh my Virgin Mary, make me worthy to come to you too...*” Such is the power of reproducing one’s collective identity that people often embark on compulsive pilgrimages. As Georgia (F, 75) commented “*to be actually there, in Tinos... signifies that you deserve to be there*”. Affirming one’s identity and status acquisition through visiting Tinos are thus common motives among visitors.

Believers’ religious identities, moreover, create unreflexive embodied know-how, the so called religious habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which often conditions their travel motivations. Within the Christian Orthodox context, visits to sacred sites may, for example, be elicited

by inherited statuses acquired via the mystery of baptism. In Greece, people are usually 'ascribed' to saints by being given a saint's name at baptism, attributing a personal identity to the religious individuals. This process creates or increases attachment to particular places that are dedicated to these saints and positively affects visitation. Most participants admitted that they have a "*prostati*" (Lia, F, 33), a personal protector, whom they are motivated to visit in person especially on her/his name-day celebration. As a participant (F, 60) named after the Virgin Mary commented, "*it is like visiting someone you love; when it is his [or/her] name day you want to visit him [or her] and celebrate with him [or her]... So it is with the Virgin Mary too...*" Accordingly, believers' names can determine which religious places are visited, when and by whom.

While motivations may initially be institutionally constructed, the way they become executed remains a personal matter that may contain unpredictable results. This is further exemplified in the case of the vow, which is discussed next.

#### *Vow, gender, cure and authenticity*

The relationship between the human and the divine is intensified in the context of a vow (Badone, 1990), this being one of the most frequently reported motivations of religious tourists in Tinos. In committing to such a promise given to a deity (usually a visit to him/her) in return for a fulfilled wish, an individual believes s/he secures the attention of the chosen deity. Katia (F, 71) commented: "[we] *believe that when we make a vow, the Virgin Mary of Tinos will realise our requests...*" To achieve particular end results, believers prefer religious places that accumulate evidence of holy intervention realised through embodied performances (della Dora, 2012), places where the secular meets the sacred. Babis (M, 62) stated: "*all Virgin Mary sites are the same. But she [the Virgin Mary of Tinos] is... She has a different grace*"; whilst Stella (F, 68) further explained: "*it is said that when you go to Tinos you will get well...*" [emphasis as original], Tinos understood as *the* authentic place of the Virgin Mary and her miraculous healing. Similar to medical tourists (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016), religious tourists select sacred destinations based on their anticipated outcomes, with religious places becoming fluid personalised centres of miraculous acts - religious sites understood as "affordances" to

solve one's problems. Reflecting upon the beliefs associated with different sites, Eleni (F, 65) shared the insight that St Irene Chrysovalantou in Athens is known for curing women with fertility problems, whereas St John the Russian in Chalkida heals headaches. As she recalled: *"you put his hat on your head and you don't have headache any more! Proven to work!"*.

The performing of new life events plays another important role within this respect, influencing believers' religious actions and subsequent travel motivations to religious sites. For example, rites of passage (van Gennep, 1909) in women's lives, such as giving birth, mark a state of becoming that can change their conceptual understanding of life and association with religion. Indeed, Virgin Mary's role as *'Theotokos'* (the bearer of God), one of the basic teachings in Greek Orthodoxy (Ware, 1993), was found to bring her especially close to women, a fact that explains the large number of women on Virgin Mary pilgrimages like this to Tinos. Irene (F, 38) highlighted how motherhood enabled her to open up and refigure self and space in relation to the religious belief system. She justified her conversion and frequent trips to Virgin Mary sites by stating: *"the Virgin Mary is a great comfort to us, to all of us and especially to every mother as her own life exemplifies every mother's anxieties"*. Religion offers itself as a unique opportunity for people who are supposed to achieve something in case of believing. Supporting Olsen's (2006) observation that pilgrims believe they can obtain divine assistance if undertaking a journey for the sake of sacredness, Chlio (F, 54) said: *"I was so desperate that I thought this [a vow] is my last chance to see my child happy again..."*. Such a personalised and emotionally laden relationship with the deity has a profound effect on believers' travel intentions, such as selection of sacred site and frequency of visit. As Maria (F, 60) said: *"I promised that if my son gets well I will come to Tinos six sequencing times... He got well! So this is my fourth time in Tinos!"*. Respect and indebtedness are also evidenced within the context of a vow, believers hesitating to break their promised travel intentions; the execution of vows understood as personal obligation and commitment devotees express toward the deity (Harman, 2006). Maria further explained: *"There is always this fear... you know that something unpleasant will occur when you do not fulfil your vow..."*

*I always think that I need to do the six trips, I need to visit Tinos... It is very stressful... But I am very close now [laughing]!”*

Within this context, women often embark on religious trips based on gendered motivations (Shackley, 2001). Since women within the Christian Orthodox context are considered the link between the family and the sacred (Dubisch, 1995), it is through symbolisation that religious oriented trips they undertake are legitimated in the masculine world. For example, a number of women chose to visit Tinos, as its religious character assured approval by their husbands. Tasoula (F, 46) recalls her husband saying to her: “*you can go, I let you go if you want, but not somewhere else, only there.*” Religious trips are thus often gendered pilgrimages, with sacred places providing spaces for feminine communitas. Drawing on Turner and Turner’s (1978) notion of antistructure, legitimate trips create spaces of mutual understanding among women freed from the masculine structures of their everyday life. Tinos also provides a way for some women to escape from mundane aspects of family life and their role as mothers, and to enter into what Graburn (1979) calls the ‘land of play’. As Barbara (F, 45) recounted:

Barbara: “*...when you get married... you go without certain things because you have a lot of responsibilities with the children, the house... so the trip starts for me as an escape, the trip, and I think it is a way... for example, my husband would ask “what are you going to do there?... you know...”*”

Researcher: *So, in order to keep your husband less preoccupied you choose religious destinations...*

Barbara: “*Yes, a religious destination, and then I combine it with entertainment and all those things.*”

Nevertheless, belief in a deity may also lead to negative results in the case of an unfulfilled or broken vow. In particular, when people turn to religion in times of personal crisis as an ultimate hope to solve their problems, religious failure may have negative consequences, such as disappointment and feelings of abandonment. Accordingly, while some believers recognise the belief in future meaning over sudden personal misfortunes,

such as Lia (F, 33), who experienced a miscarriage after a fulfilled vow, explaining that “*God gave me a sign that I am capable of having children in future*”, others’ reactions are more impulsive. Soula’s (F, 65) story offers insights regarding this. She recalled abandoning her annual pilgrimages to St Raphael on the island of Mytilini (another important religious site in Greece) to which she had committed within the frame of a vow, revealing she blamed the saint for not having fulfilled her request, although she had visited him with strong belief. Being disappointed by her experiential and affective engagements with St Raphael’s site, she recollects how this influenced her future destination selection, denoting that religious tourists may adjust their motivations based on their current or previous travel experiences. She said:

*“I got angry with St Raphael, because I believed in him very much and I was praying for my niece who had leukaemia... I made huge vows and I cried from within my soul, I believed in his miraculous power... We finally lost the child and I stopped requesting things from him as I used to do... I don’t know... How come he didn’t hear anybody?... Since then, I never visited him again... This year I believe very much in the Virgin Mary of Tinos, I believe in her very much...”*

Accordingly, while vows are an institutional construction often determining a person’s relationship to a sacred place, the sustainability of this relationship is based on experiential aspects. Within this context, a place’s significance for religious tourists is not always fixed and permanent as embedded in Eliade’s (1969) notion of the ‘Centre of the world’. Sacred places appear to be transient and fragile as a result of subjective experiences both on-site and post-trip, which can demystify and unauthenticate even known religious destinations.

#### *Visions, apparitions and places*

People are not only pulled to particular sacred sites by media, narratives and myths but also by a series of personal enactments of spiritual and affective connectedness unfolded during a religious trip or in their everyday lives. Religious visions and apparitions are strong motivators of action, as they create affective bonds with the sacred, constituting

signs and symbols that provide order and meaning to the faithful (Gesler, 1996). Equal to James's (1960) subjective experiences, visions are sudden, personal encounters with the sacred. Like visual representations, they empower believers' actions containing signs and messages that are directly communicated to them, thus influencing their desires and choices within the religious landscapes 'market' (Crouch, 2009). Similar to production efforts, visions initiate curiosities, by capturing the 'feel' of destinations and convincing people that sacred destinations are worth visiting. Tasoula (F, 46), who was visiting Tinos for her third time, recalled how she became convinced to visit Tinos in first place:

*"I was operated on in 2007 and in July 2007 when I had my second chemotherapy, I asked a woman I knew, who was about to go to Tinos, to light a candle for me there. Two days later, after my medical treatment I met her and she told me that she didn't go. In the afternoon of the same day, after lunch, while I was lying in my bed I dreamed of the Church of the Annunciation in Tinos, which was all lit up, and of me kneeling in front of the icon and begging... and when I woke up I said to my husband: 'I don't know how you will manage it, but we are going to Tinos!'"*

Rather than an exaggeration of reality, as is often the case with myths (Badone, 2007; Bell, 2003), advertising and other visual representations (Hsu and Song, 2013; Scarles, 2004, 2009), visions and apparitions represent reality for believers, as they are not directly imposed or produced by someone else. Such commitment to religious belief reinforces post-modern notions of the 'society of spectacle' (Baudrillard, 1981; Edensor, 2009), but within a different context. Unlike the understanding of spectacle as being inauthentic, hyper-real and humanly constructed, visions and miracles are considered by participants the result of holy intervention, and thus linked to the truly authentic based on people's beliefs and the holy scripts. Consequently, as visions are personalised, deliver the authentic and sacralise places, their effect is even stronger than that of advertising or other visual materials. Unlike distant and biased advertising campaigns, religious tourists become the producers of their own reality, according to their subjective interpretation of the imagined encounter. Vision may, moreover, be instructive and thus, within this context, pilgrimages constitute often, in Scarles' (2009) terms, the enlivening and

embodiment of their visual contents. Yannis (M, 68) recounted how the apparition of Saint Taxiarchis made him visit this saint on the island of Mytilini:

*“...I visited many monasteries, around 10 maybe... but not his [of the Saint Taxiarchi]. And he came to me! I was not sleeping, no, I was awake and he said to me “you didn’t visit me!”... he even hit me in my stomach, he came with his spear and hit me in my stomach. Never mind... he was angry... And after that I did a lot... I visited him in Mytilini, I went to his monastery, I took many pictures, I made slides... He is hanging in my house, in my children’s room, to protect them...”*

Motivations are therefore dynamic and progressively influenced also by processes of becoming rather than being merely related to states of being part of a larger whole (Zhu, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to understand the complexity of travel motivations to sacred places, recognising that motivations emerge throughout the religious tourists’ experience as cultural, social and material worlds intervene and interact. We argued that religious tourism motivation should be looked at beyond constructed powers that predetermine religious travelling and experiences, understanding motivations as being emergent and existing as a series of individual embodied and affective engagements with the sacred both in-site and in people’s everyday lives that may entail the unexpected. Exemplified through the context of vows and visions, our theoretical contribution lies in understanding the effect of the direct human-sacred interaction in generating motivations and authenticating places, religious motivations being affected by states of becoming.

On site, the religious tourist gaze intertwines with the consumption of religious texts, verbal accounts and embodied practices, rebuilding fixed discursive imaginings of place (as imposed by constructed means) through experiential encounter. Within this context, the fragile nature of sacred places and motivations to visit has been underlined, moving



the theory of sacred places further forward. Specifically, while sacred places are focal points for religions, what Eliade (1969) calls ‘the Centre of the world’, they are not always fixed in significance for their adherents, being largely depend on individuals’ particular needs, past performances and expected outcomes. Accordingly, while vows are an institutional construction often determining a person’s relationship to a sacred place, such as selection of a site and frequency of visit, the sustainability of this relationship is in some cases based on the experiential aspects of the people involved and the co-performance of places (endowed with a deity’s grace) and individuals in achieving particular ends. Unsuccessful pilgrimages, characterised by unfulfilled or broken vows, may have a devastating effect on some believers who question the sacredness of related places and thus their authenticity by choosing alternative ones.

We further found that while motivations to visit particular sacred places are often predetermined by belief systems being part of a religious identity and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), such as individuals’ visitation of places dedicated to the saint of whom they bear the same name or women’s special attachment and bond to places related to the Virgin Mary, people in the post-modern world are also driven to places by spectacle. Accordingly, religious authorities construct strategies of desire broadcasting miraculous places, dramatic ritual performances and personal miracle accounts to reinforce places’ images, infusing them with significance and imagination and influencing motivations to visit. Even stronger seemed to be the effect of personal lived imagined performances of sacredness, such as having visions and apparitions. Embodying *the* reality, as opposed to constructed means such as myths and television that may be subject to falsification, visions are personalised relationships with deities, who often instruct visitations to sacred places. Within this context, religious tourists are motivated by the embodiment of their visual contents that deliver the authentic.

Our study is not free from limitations. It comprises an examination of religious tourists participating in organized tours to Tinos, investigating only a small part of the range of religious locations and forms of religious travel in Greece. For a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within the Christian Orthodox world, there is a need to

research other religious places in Greece and in the greater Eastern Orthodox world, taking into account also those visiting religious places individually. Finally, acknowledging the crucial role of women within the religious context, future research would benefit from investigating the gendered aspects of travel motivations to religious places in more depth.

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