

RELIGIOUS TOURISM: A VEHICLE FOR ALTERNATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Turkey is one of the major pilgrimage sites for the Christian community especially for Catholics, Protestants and Orthodoxies. Despite the growth of religious tourism throughout the world, relatively only a few studies have explored on this topic by scholars of tourism in Turkey. This paper focuses on religious tourism in Anatolia, Turkey which is a Holly Land for Christians whose purpose of the visit is for religious needs and pilgrimage.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the components and the nature of religious tourism in Turkey from following main perspectives: (a) the evaluation of the selected holy sites which are religiously important for Christian community. (b) The current state of religious tourism in Turkey. (c) The findings of a semi-structured in depth interviews with the experts of tourism business. (d) Analyzing the potentials for the future prospects as an alternative and sustainable type of tourism.

Key Words:

Religious tourism, religious sites of Turkey, sustainable and alternative tourism, biblical tours.

INTRODUCTION

Many governments have begun to realize that tourism remains a viable source of income only if ecological, cultural and economic goals are held in balance. Globally, the rapid growth of the tourism industry and harmful effects of mass tourism on natural environment have led to more interest in sustainable tourism and community-based alternative tourism. There has been a growing consensus that sustainable tourism is a way of reducing environmental degradation, preserving the ecosystem and local culture, and generating benefits for local populations (Shunnaq, Schwab and Reid, 2008).

Wood (2002) notes that a well designed tourism programme should incorporate the following elements:

- Conservation of biodiversity;
- Sustaining the well-being of local people;
- Interpretation/learning experience;
- Responsible action on part of the tourist;
- Delivery to primarily small groups by small-scale businesses;
- Conservation of non-renewable resources;
- Focus on local participation, ownership and business opportunities particularly for rural populations.

As a result of changing philosophy of tourism, the needs of tourists and the growing sophistication of travelers, “new” forms of tourism, which is called alternative tourism, appeared in developing countries. Demographic, economic and technological changes in society have contributed to a shift from traditional forms of tourism, characterized by inclusive tours focused on undifferentiated sun and sea locations, towards more engaging and meaningful holidays. Many of today’s visitors no longer desire a holiday focused on a sun/sea/sand scenario provided within an all inclusive holiday packages. They are more interested in discovering, experiencing, participating in, learning about and being included in the everyday life of the destinations (Simone-Charteris and Boyd, 2008).

Tourism demand has been diversified toward shorter stays and alternative types of tourism focused on authentic and unique holiday experiences. It is estimated that more than 25% of travelers from Europe seek new, alternative tourism products. This well-educated and affluent demographic

sector welcomes the opportunity to participate in out-of-the-ordinary experiences in non-traditional tourism settings.

The tourism industry has become diversified and has gradually been segmented into such varied submarkets by themes, specific types of attractions and events including historical/heritage tourism, urban tourism, rural tourism, gastronomy tourism, pilgrimage/religious tourism.

As the trend toward a wider variety of tourism products emerges, Turkey is well placed to offer highly attractive alternative tourism options. She is able to offer a multitude of these special interest niches. As a complement to its core product of sun, sand, and sea, her extraordinary landscape, natural resources, cultural and historical wealth, as well as its tradition of hospitality translate into appealing tourism activities.

Turkey attracts nearly 25 million visitors annually. The Turkish government has identified tourism development as a priority target and encourages the development of new forms of alternative tourism that can perfectly complement its traditional product.

In 1990’ies Turkish Ministry of Tourism and Culture considered alternatives to conventional tourism strategies despite growing evidence of their positive effects on the local economies of small communities and rural areas.

The strategy of Turkey 2023 targets wiser use of natural, cultural, historical and geographical assets that Turkey has, with a balanced perspective addressing both conservation and utilization needs by evolving these possible alternatives. She has several unique opportunities for different types of tourism compiled under the category of alternative tourism. By 2000, religious tourism has been one of the most important developing areas.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Religious tourism is a specific type of tourism whose participants are motivated by faith or religious reasons. Probably it has been one of the oldest and prevalent types of travel in human history, with human migration being linked to religion from earliest times. In the former case, the entire trip may be religious in purpose, whereas in the latter, visits to religious sites may be but one element of a multifunctional trip.

Traditionally, religiously motivated travel has coincided with pilgrimages usually undertaken for motives such as visiting a site where a miracle took place or where one is expected to occur in the future, fulfilling a commandment or religious requirement, obtaining forgiveness for sins, praying and seeking a cure for illness (Santos, 2002). For example 70 million Orthodox Hindus “wash away their sins” at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in northern India in January (Tilson, 2001).

Religious tourism has experienced unprecedented growth in the past thirty years. There are a number of forces, alongside faith itself, driving the growth of religious tourism, which include (researchandmarkets.com, 2009):

- A drive from consumers for more authentic experience, such as immersing themselves in the spiritual and cultural traditions associated with specific religions and pilgrimage sites.

- The emergence of a more diverse tourist product as national tourist boards and tourism providers seek to extend the traditional tourist season.

- An increasing number of travel agents offering religious tourism, pilgrimages and church tours a global culture where people seek more unusual holidays or more diversification within a trip.

According to Wright there are numbers of different religious travel options;

- Pilgrimage is the “heart” of the faith-based travel industry. The most common pilgrimages are church or religious group-sponsored trips to the Holy Land and Europe. With an estimated 150 to 200 million people embarking on pilgrimages each year within the Christian faith alone. This form of travel will always remain at the forefront of religious tourism.

- Cruising is another type of Holy Land trip which Christians and other faith groups are embarked in great numbers.

- One of the hidden growth areas of religious tourism is churches and religious groups embarking on leisure vacations and getaways. Although no definitive study has yet been published, it is estimated that possibly as much as 20% of all religious travel is leisure and getaway travel.

- A bulwark of the North American religious travel market is conferences and conventions. According to Religious Conference Management Association, almost 15 million people attended about 17,000 religious meetings in 2006. Major international events such as World Youth Day can attract more than one million participants and larger conventions in the United States such as the National Baptist Convention welcomes about 50,000 visitors (leisuregrouptravel.com, 2010).

As a result of marketing and a growing general interest in tourism, pilgrimages and other religious journeys are becoming tied to other types of tourism, and religious places are being visited for a variety of reasons such as their architecture and historical importance (Simone-Charteris and Boyd, 2008). Travel with the primary goal of visiting sacred sites often includes visits to neighboring tourist sites and vice versa. For example, pilgrims to Fatima (Portugal) along the way visit the Atlantic Coast and historical cities in the hinterland. Santiago de Compostela is usually a stop of multifaceted vacation including the Spanish seaside, culture and gastronomy (Santos, 2002). Thus, religious sites are simultaneously sacred and secular as they are visited by both pilgrims/religious travelers and tourists. Some tourists are believers and the pilgrimage and spiritual retirement are part included in their practice of faith. Some tourists are really attracted by an emotion, a place, a climate and its atmosphere, that allow them a dialogue and a consolidation of their faith during their trip (Gil and Curiel, 2008)

Smith in order to conceptualize the varying relationship between pilgrims and tourists has placed them on a continuum (see Figure 1). At one end of the spectrum lies sacred pilgrimage (a journey driven by faith, religion and spiritual fulfillment) while at the opposite end lies the secular tourist (driven by more materialistic motivations). Many people travel to a widening variety of sacred sites not only for religious or spiritual purposes, but also because they are marked and marketed as heritage or cultural attractions. They may visit because they have an educational interest in learning more about the history of a site or understanding a particular religious faith and

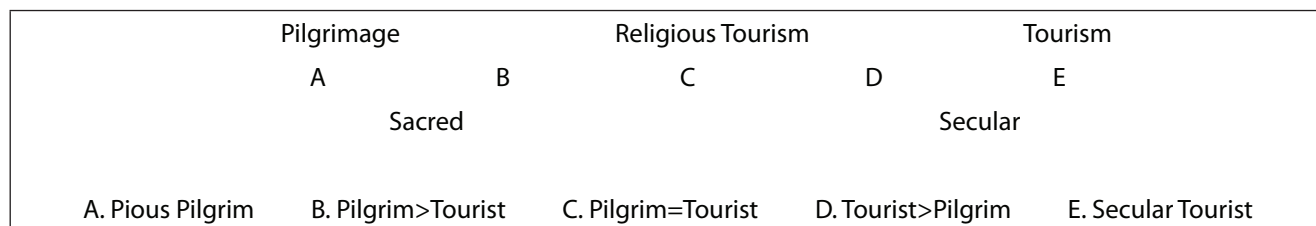


Figure 1: Pilgrim-Tourist Continuum - Source: Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2008)

its culture and beliefs; for nostalgic reasons or patriotic stirrings; for a chance to admire architectural or natural wonders; in search of authentic experiences; or simply out of curiosity (Simone-Charteris and Boyd, 2008).

The greatest increase in religious tourism has taken place during the 1990s and especially since the turn of the millennium. Pilgrimage travel alone is a multi-billion dollar market. Numbers demonstrate the vast size and economic power of the faith travel market. Today religious travel is a dynamic \$18-billion global industry with 300 million travelers. In North America alone, it is estimated at \$10 billion. The vast majority of other famous sites have also experienced similar substantial growth including Lourdes, Fatima, and biblical sites along the route of St Paul in Greece and Turkey. Holy Land destinations such as Jordan and Israel have also enjoyed record numbers in the new millennium (leisuregrouptravel.com, 2010).

The most important cult religious centers in the Christianity, scope attract up to 25 million pilgrims. Rome, Vatican and Lourdes attract almost 6 million visitors, while between 4 million visit Fatima and 2 million Guadalupe in Mexico (Gil and Curiel, 2008; Santos, 2010).

The primary driver of the religious market is Saudi Arabia with over six million Islamic Hajj and Umrah pilgrims making their way to the Kingdom each year. In Saudi Arabia alone the religious tourism industry generates an estimated US \$ 7 billion annually and with the market expecting 20 percent growth in the coming years. Tour operators, hotels and airlines are already tailoring products to tap into the religious market. Jordan and Palestine were identified as growth markets with 95 percent of tourism in Palestine religion-based and Jordan aiming to garner tourism revenues of up to US \$ 2.4 billion per year by 2010 (prlog.org, 2010)

Based on the U.S. Department of Commerce surveys, residents going overseas, the number of travelers citing religion as the main purpose for their trips grew 16.9% from 2002 to 2004. When you include people who listed religion as only one of the reasons, the growth rate reached to 22.5%. Fewer than 3% of Americans typically go abroad for religious reasons (latimes.com, 2010). The statistics show that faith-based travel does seem to attract more people in every single year.

Government at all levels is working together increasingly with religious organizations to both facilitate and promote such pilgrimages, given their economic impact on communities. Turkey’s Ministry of Tourism has begun promoting its many ancient Christian sites, such as Ephesus where St. Paul lived for two years, in national advertising campaigns in the U.S.; in Ephesus, so many pilgrims are visiting the house believed to have been the home of Mary and the Apostle St. John in their latter years (Tilson, 2001).

In Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where the Cathedral of St. James has preserved the relics of the saint since their discovery in 813 A.D., the Xunta, or local provisional government, coordinated a public relations-advertising-marketing campaign with the Catholic Church to publicize Holy Year events in 1999. According to Jose Agra Adan, an officer in the Ministry of Culture, Social Communication and Tourism, attracted more than five million tourists to the region and generated 500 million pesetas (\$3.3 million U.S.) in revenue (Tilson, 2001).

The Vatican and the Italian government spent millions of dollars refurbishing infrastructure and religious and historical sites, and Israel invested \$300 million to accommodate “double the usual number of visitors, over 44 million”. Some 25 million visitors journeyed to Rome with more than 60 percent staying overnight (Tilson, 2001).

Religious tourism, having less threats and negative environmental effects on the destination and local population, constitutes an important strategic value for local and regional development. Religious tourism contributes to sustainable development and strengthens local economies. Religious tourism can have wider long-term benefits as a local development agent, lead to a sustained enhancement of cultural facilities in the region and develop the quality of life both in urban and rural settings.

TURKEY’S TOURISM INDUSTRY

Turkey is a major global player in the travel and tourism industry, generating more than 27 million international travelers by 2009. That should generate around \$21 billion in revenues. According to World Tourism Organization, Turkey is one of the top ten countries in terms of tourist arrivals (in the 8th rank) and tourism receipts (9th rank) in the world (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2010). Turkey’s tourism industry plays a vital role in the national economy. Tourism is one of the largest sectors which generate 5% of Turkish GDP and the nation’s major source of foreign currency. Tourism receipts generate 20% of whole export revenues. In addition, tourism generates employment opportunities in both the industry and its related sectors. According to WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council) 1.7 million employees work for tourism industry in Turkey. Historically, tourism industry has grown by about 20%. Despite the recessions during Chernobyl disaster in 1986, Gulf War in 1991, economic crisis in 2006 and 2009, even with the regional instability of the Middle East, and terrorist attacks, Turkish tourism industry has gained a big momentum between 2000 and 2010 and exploded into the 21st century averaging a growth rate of 15% per annum (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in the research. Literature on religious, sustainable and alternative tourism is used in formulating the structure of this research. The quantitative data, national and international statistics and indices of tourism and religious

tourism in particular, are obtained from Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkish Statistical Institute, Association of Turkish Travel Agencies, local tourism offices in order to implement different tools of the study. Semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with officials, tourist guide offices, specialized tour operators and tourist guides on religious tourism, and NGO’s by phone or face to face over a 2 month period in the spring of 2010. Based on their experience 12 key experts were interviewed, the duration ranged from 20-30 minutes. All records of interviews were maintained as written notes. Questions about the religious sites attracted tourists for pilgrimage purposes, importance of religious tourism, the role of institutions in the development and promotion of religious tourism are asked, besides the future expectations and ideas how to improve the religious tourism in the near future. Furthermore, the observations on the religious visits are the significant tool of this study.

One of the difficulties experience for this paper was the lack of quantitative data. It is difficult to measure the number of religious tourists visiting Turkey, because of the lack of specific statistical data, the only available numbers are the ones each sanctuary or religious centre collects. Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism helped immensely in sharing the data of travelers visiting holly sites.

Sector	Name of the Institutions	Job Titles
Public Organization	Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism Directorate General for Cultural Heritage ad Museum	Culture and Tourism Expert
NGO’s	Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB)	The head of tourism agencies
	Association of Tourist Guides of Izmir	Head of the association
	The Foundation of The House of Virgin Mary	Head of the foundation

Private Organization	Meander Travel Agency	Partner of the travel agency
	Macera Tourism and Travel Agency	Partner of the travel agency
	Novitas Travel Agency	Owner of the travel agency
	Oktagon Travel Agency	Partner of the travel agency
	Transbalkan Travel	Owner of the travel agency
	Liaison Travel	Owner of the travel agency
	Member of Association of Tourist Guides of Izmir	Professional Tourist guide for religious travelers
	Member of Association of Tourist Guides of Izmir	Professional Tourist guide for religious travelers

Table 1: Interviewees and Job Titles

RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND RELIGIOUS SITES OF TURKEY

Because of the fact that sun-sea-sand tourism has led to problems of seasonality and geographical concentration on the coasts, Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism has begun to diversify new types of tourism and promote new tourism products.

Although religious tourism is a relatively new product for Turkey, it has the potential to be a big business and fits well with the natural and cultural assets of the country. Traditionally, Christians have been the largest segment of the religious tourists in the Holy Land. Christian tourism (Biblical tourism) is the greatest potential for Turkey with the majority of her international arrivals coming from Europe and North America.

Christians, with a population of 2.1 billion (Anadol, 2002), create a big business throughout the modern world. Americans, Europeans and other nationalities are attracted in great numbers to sites of religious significance, whether associated with the Old and New Testaments, the lives of the saints or other holy people. Turkey has a captive market in the promotion of religious tourism which has huge potential for generating arrivals from Christian community.

The primary destination for the North American religious traveler (which comprises mostly the Christian and Jewish faiths) has traditionally been Europe and the

Biblical lands of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and Greece (Wright, 2007).

Although no study has yet been conducted on the religious market in Turkey, it is a fair estimate to put the size of this marketplace one million travelers. According to the data obtained from TURKSTAT (Turkish Statistical Institute), in 2009, 4% of the foreigners visited Turkey for religious purposes.

There are 5000 travel agencies in Turkey, according to TURSAB (Association of Turkish Travel Agencies) records; only 200 travel agencies are specialized on religious tourism (TURSAB, 2010).

There are many religious sites which is important for Christians in Anatolia. The selection of these sites based on their religious and touristic significances. In addition, these sites are the most targeted by tourists for religious purposes according to statistics obtained from Ministry of Tourism and Culture and TURKSTAT.

Anatolia has witnessed the history of some major religions such as paganism and three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Anatolia is a Holy Land destination for the three largest religious communities, for Catholics, Moslems and Jews. It was here that Abraham was challenged by God; it was here that Paul heard the call to carry his message into Europe (Edmonds, 1997) and it was here that Noah's Ark grounded in Mount Ararat.

The Anatolian history and culture is intensely characterized by the polytheistic (or pagan) religions, Christian, orthodox Christian, Jewish and Islamic element. The monuments of the Christian religion are an integral part of the national heritage of Turkey and attract a considerable number of visitors. The Roman and Byzantine churches are full of very important murals, iconographies, mosaics, rare icons, the temples, the monasteries and the chapels in the whole of Anatolia.

In many regions of the country the visitors also have the opportunity to come across buildings and places of devotion belonging to other dogmas and religions such as Judaism, polytheistic religions and which someone can observe the rare historic and cultural significance. Also in Mardin region Syrian Christians still carry out mass services in original Jesus' language. Some of these

monasteries (Mor Gabriel and Deyrulzafaran) surprisingly preserved to their glorious states. Even though this paper does not investigate in Moslem relics and sites, the visitors can interact and observe the mosques of the Ottoman and Seljuk period.

Beginning with the Stone Age inhabitants of Anatolia believed in gods and goddesses. The mother Goddess was the symbol of divinity in the Stone Age because of her force of fertility. While Hittites believed Teshub (weather god), Hepat (sun goddess), Phrygians believed Cybele (Great Mother) who was a chief goddess of Neo-Hittites known as Kubaba. Cybele was Mother Earth, the fruitful parent of living things, particularly wild nature (Edmonds, 1997). Greeks and Romans had many gods and goddesses. Among them Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans), Hera (Juno), Poseidon (Neptune), Hades (Pluto), Apollo (the god of light and agriculture), Artemis (the goddess of chastity), Aphrodite (the goddess of love), Dionysus (the god of wine) were the most important ones.

The Jews population has never been great in Anatolia but played an important role in the commercial life. According to the records, Jewish traders and merchants began to settle in northern Mesopotamia 720 BC and during the time of Alexander the Great. By the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) the dispersion came about and by the 2nd century AD there may have been a million Jews in Asia Minor (Edmonds, 1997).

Anatolia has been the centre of Christianity ever since St. Paul, St. Peter, St John. She has been the site of many of the most crucial events in the history of Christianity: Followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" in Antioch (Antakya). Apostle Paul's missionary journeys took him three times through Western Anatolia. All seven Ecumenical Councils were held in Western Anatolia (Edmonds, 1997). It was the land of St Sophia, one of the most honored Christian buildings in Constantinople (Istanbul).

Some of the important religious destinations in Anatolia are; the route of Apostle Paul's, "Seven Churches of Revelation", St. Peter's Cave Church in Antakya, Virgin Mary's House in Ephesus, Saint Nicholas Church (the inspiration for Santa Claus) in Demre, Sumela Monastery in Trabzon, churches of Cappadocia and so on.

Seven Churches of Revelation. St John addressed seven churches of Asia Minor in his Book of Revelation, St. Polycarp Church in Smyrna (Izmir), the churches in Philadelphia (Alasehir), Laodicea (Denizli), Thyatira (Akhisar), Pergamum (Bergama), Sardis (Salihli) and the youngest of the Seven Churches of Revelation, Virgin Mary and St. John Basilica in Ephesus, most important of the "Seven Churches of Asia Minor". The churches described in Revelation chapters 1-3 are seven literal churches at that time. Although they were literal churches in that time, there is also spiritual significance for churches and believers today.

Virgin Mary's House. According to the tradition, John brought Mary to Ephesus after the death of Jesus, in keeping with Jesus' admonition to John to care for his mother. It was believed that Mary spent her last days in the vicinity of Ephesus and died there. The foundations of the house are old; they may date back to 1st century; the rest of the building may be 6th century. It was first identified in 1818 by an Austrian peasant, Anne Catherine Emmerich, who saw it in a dream exactly as it was found. Both Pope Paul VI in 1967 and Pope John Paul II in 1979 have celebrated mass here. Many people congregate at this sanctuary every August 15 to observe the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin (Edmonds, 1997). After the visits of Popes, Mary's House has become even more popular and well known for pilgrims and religious tourists. According to Vincent N. B. Micaloff, head of The Foundation of The House of Virgin Mary, over one million people visit Mary's house every year.

St Paul's Route. St Paul made three missionary journeys through western Anatolia and Greece during AD 47 and 57. He began his first missionary journey with Barnabas from Tarsus where he was born and he spent two years in Ephesus. He experienced lots of difficulties and met several dangers during his journeys. Barnabas and St Paul visited a synagogue on the Sabbath day in Antioch-of-Pisidia and St Paul requested to speak to the congregation. In the bible this is Paul's first recorded sermon (Edmonds, 1997). Today thousands of people come to Turkey in order to trace St Paul's steps and his spiritual journey. St Paul's Trail is a 500 km long route from Perge to Yalvac

(Pisidia) and follows partly the route walked by St Paul. Unfortunately there has been no data that how many visitors trace the footsteps of St. Paul every year.

St Paul was born as a Jew in Tarsus about AD 10 and spent his years there. Besides St Paul's Well which was believed that the water from the well has healing properties, and his church were visited by 55.000 in 2009. Pope the 16th Benedict had declared 2008 the year of St Paul. During 2008 major cruise lines stopped in Tarsus and allowed their customers visit St Paul's Church and Well.

St Sophia. St Sophia is a holly place of worship both for Christians and Moslems. It was a unprecedented place of worship, built by the Emperor Justinian in AD 537. After conquering the Constantinople in 1453, it was converted to a mosque and by 1935, it has begun to use as a museum because of its historic and universal importance. Today it attracts lots of spiritual visitors, according to the data of Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2009; 2.370.000 people visited St Sophia either for cultural or religious purposes.

Cave Church of St Peter. Tradition has it that St Peter was the first to establish a church in Antioch-on-the-Orontes with St Paul in the 1st century AD. It was believed that the church (also known as the Grotto of St. Peter) where the word of Christian first used have been dug by the Apostle Peter himself as a place to meet the religious needs of early Christian community of Antioch. In 1963 it was declared as a pilgrimage area by Pope Paul VI (Tumbek, 2009). According to Tumbek (2009) 90 % of tourists visiting the church were Christians. It is estimated that 40 % of tourists have visited Antakya (Antioch) for religious purposes.

Church of St Nicholas. In 5th century, Myra was a centre of pilgrimage where diseases having been cured. St Nicholas (Santa Claus), the first Bishop of Myra, was a famous person with his charitable personality and miraculous ability to cure people's diseases. His church was also turned into a centre of pilgrimage. Which of the tombs found in the church belong to St. Nicholas is still a matter in debate. Every year "Santa Claus and Invitation to the World Peace" activities are held in the Church of St. Nicholas on the 6th of December, decess date of Santa Claus. In 2009 400.000 people (Ministry

of Tourism and Culture, 2010) visited the church of St. Nicholas. Orthodox Russians tend to visit the church of St. Nicholas while they are on their sun and sea holiday in Antalya annually.

Churches of Cappadocia. Although over 3.500 rock churches have been identified in the area (Edmonds, 1997) some of them, Tokalı, Elmalı, Karanlık, Barbara, Yılanlı, El Nazar were the most important ones for their frescoes representing the beliefs of Christianity. The churches were built between IX-XI centuries by the early Christians who escaped from Roman persecution.

Sumela Monastery. According to tradition, Sumela Monastery was founded by two priests called Barnabas and Sophronius who came from Athens during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius I (AD 375-395). The monastery was a pilgrimage area of many Orthodox Christians until it was closed in 1923. Today 250.000 people (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2010) visit the monastery annually.

Museum of St Sophia. The Museum of St Sophia in Nicaea (Iznik) is the building in which the seventh and the last Ecumenical Council was held in AD 787. The first council was held in Nicaea in 325 as well where the Pagans and the Roman Empire accepted and united Christianity. Also Jesus was named the son of God. Nicaea was accepted as a holly site by 2nd Vatican Council in 1962.

There has been 21 Ecumenical Councils in the Christianity history (Usta, 2005). Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople (AD 381). The 3rd Council was convened in the church of "Ally Holly" (Church of the Council) in AD 431 in Ephesus. It was the first church in the world dedicated to Virgin Mary. Ephesus has witnessed several councils.

The religious sites are shown in Map 1.

"Turkey is a secular country where Christianity are worshiped daily without any permission from anybody". Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism allows visitors to hold religious ceremonies in some museums (former churches) in Turkey. These are the Church of Virgin Mary in Izmir, St Jean Basilica in Selcuk, churches of Cappadocia (Derinkuyu Orthodox Church, Kaymaklı

Church, Kılıclar Church, El Nazar Church, Mustafa Pasa Church, Konstantin Eleni Church, Dereyamanlı Church), St Peter Church in Antakya, St Nicholas Church in Demre, St Paul Church in Tarsus, St Paul Church in Yalvac, Sardes in Manisa, St Sophia Museum in Iznik, churches of Leodicia in Denizli, Sumela Monastery in Trabzon and Akdamar Church in Van (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism records, 2010).

FINDINGS

The findings of the research are structured in four main dimensions: The most important religious sites for Christian community, the current state of religious tourism in Turkey, the potential of religious tourism for the future prospects, the religious sites visited driven by spiritual/pilgrimage needs or cultural purposes.

The drive of the visitors: either by spiritual/pilgrimage needs or other purposes

Consistent with the pilgrim-tourist continuum it is explored that pious pilgrims visit seven churches of revelation, while other religious tourists driven by either spiritual and touristic needs visit the seven churches and other religious sites such as House of Virgin Mary in Ephesus, St Sophia Museum in Istanbul, Cave Church of St Peter in Antakya, St Paul's Trial and so on. All participants agreed that the visitors whose primary goals of visiting sacred sites were spiritual (pure pilgrims) visited the seven churches and attended to mass services in some of the churches such as St Polycarp Church in Izmir and House of Virgin Mary in Ephesus. While Protestants visit St Paul and Cappadocia for spiritual purposes, Catholics and Orthodoxies visit seven churches and the House of Virgin Mary. According to the travel guides, interviewed for this study, it is estimated that most of the religious travelers are US citizens, 50% of religious travelers are the members of churches and students of theology, the 50% of travelers are middle aged or elder people between the ages of 40-75 and have good income.

The most important religious sites for Christian community

The above mentioned churches and religious sites are important. However the research in specialized tour

operators claims that Istanbul, Ephesus, St Paul's Trial and Seven Churches of Revelation are the most important sites.

The current state of religious tourism in Turkey

Religious tourists visiting Turkey are relatively elderly tourists who require financial, economic and political stability in the country. They are also sensitive in adverse publicity regarding religious news such as the Heybeliada Orthodox Seminary. All the interviewees believe that Turkish market share is relatively small, less than 10% of the whole Turkish tourism market but full of potential. After the current and the former Pope's visit to Turkey, the numbers in tourists have increased dramatically which supports the above.

The potential of religious tourism for the future prospects

In addition to above mentioned sites our findings show that the future potential sites could be named as follows: city of Urfa (Harran) where Abraham lived according to the Old Testament, Mount Ararat where the Noah's Ark alleged grounded, city of Kars where the ruins of Armenian city of Ani rest.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate holds an honorary primacy among the autocephalous, or ecclesiastically independent, Churches. It enjoys the privilege of serving as "first among equals". It is also known as the "Roman" Patriarchate (hence the Turkish phrase: Rum Patrikhanesi), recalling its historical source as the Church of New Rome. This means Istanbul have the potential to create a new Vatican like spiritual place for Orthodoxies around the world. The current political environment of the country would not even imagine for such an outcome.

Synagogues in Istanbul and Izmir have a special importance for Jews which could be explored to attract tourists.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study provide a basis of the current state of religious tourism in Turkey. All organizations both from public and private sectors recognize the importance of religious tourism in terms of attracting tourists to Turkey. The government should provide clear leadership

to improve religious tourism.

In order to increase Turkey's share in religious tourism market, the national and the governmental foreign policy should always be zero problem with neighboring countries, peace in Middle East and tolerance between the religions.

The Government of Turkey should willingly restore, protect and maintain all religious sites not just those belonging to the Muslim faith because these sites are all assets of the Anatolian history and culture. As the descendant of the Ottoman Empire who was an accepted way of life, to other faiths and nations, the diversity of different cultures can be welcomed and embraced, by way of example, of over half a million Jews immigrated to Istanbul during the reign of the Ottoman Empire.

In order to develop religious tourism constructive partnership between industries, local residents and representatives of government should work collaboratively. More research about the context of religious tourism is required in order to provide local development. Further studies should be carried out on the religious tourism market, the tourist profile, the expenditure of religious tourists/pilgrimages.

In order to develop and sustain religious tourism in Turkey, tourism planning (carrying capacity, studies on tourism income and religious travelers, sustainable development strategies) must be taken into consideration. The developments should be in sustainable basis and must be compatible with the natural and cultural resources of the country, economic and social life of the local area and for their survival. Religious tourism constitutes an important strategic value for local and regional development because of its less harmful effects on the environment.

Pilgrimages are less harmful for local customs. As sustainability has become an important strategic goal for most destinations, religious tourism has gained prominence as a sustainable way of tourism.

The researcher hopes to contribute the possibility of bringing the Muslims and Christians closer together in the Holly Land of Anatolia through a deeper understanding of the common religious heritage of them.

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