

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM: PRESENT AND FUTURE

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a major blow human health and the economic stability of countries around the world. The exponential rate of infection and spread of the virus has resulted in economic downturns around the world, as governments have tried to limit the spread of the virus by quarantine measures. By mid-2020, almost 200 million jobs had been lost [6]. Tourism has suffered the most, in part because travel has been a major factor in the spread of the virus. This has affected 90% of the world's population, as most of the world's regions have experienced a sharp decline in both international and domestic tourism [4]. There has been a temporary transition to «deglobalization» or to «anthropopause», from excessive tourism to lower tourism or even to «lack of tourism» [5]. There has been much discussion in science about this. We considered the opinions of prominent experts in the field of religious tourism from around the world on the prospects of tourism and pilgrimage in the postpandemic period, both in the world [1] and in Ukraine [2].

In the wake of the UNWTO pandemic [10], it has proposed six areas for action to be taken by the tourism industry to recover. They address health, social inclusion, biodiversity, climate action, economics, governance and finance, and say that tourism must be revitalized with a focus on people. However, the discussions surrounding this document did not include any discussion of religion or religious tourism. And this is strange, because:

1) almost 75% of the inhabitants of the planet belong to religious, spiritual or indigenous groups, which are to some extent connected with religion;

2) religion has long influenced the migration of people and ways of traveling, so it and related religious travel have been and are «human-oriented» and, accordingly, should be included in this paradigm of «human-oriented» tourism;

3) religion is the main driver of demand in the tourism industry, because up to 600 million people travel around the world every year for religious purposes. Tourism is embedded in many faiths, and related practices interact with religious life and religious institutions in all parts of the world, so mitigation of the negative impact of mass tourism on religious communities and religious practices must be included in this paradigm;

4) in 2019–2020, religious gatherings were identified as «hot spots» or «super-distributors» of the virus, which in some cases led to the decision of government and medical officials to close their countries. Consequently, health and travel concerns, as they relate to mass religious events and pilgrimage in general, must be addressed in the context of this «new paradigm» of the WTO [6].

The link between mass gatherings and the spread of infections are not a new problem. Not only tourism and pilgrimage, but also the Olympic Games, other

sporting events, music concerts, etc. have long been the subject of research related to the spread of disease. For example, the Hajj has been performed under the medical supervision of European governments and health officials since 1865, when cholera broke out in Europe and was spread by pilgrims returning from the Hajj. Since then, the hajj has become «medicated» – local, national and international governmental and medical organizations coordinate both to ensure the health of pilgrims and to minimize the risk of an outbreak of infectious diseases when traveling to and from the hajj [7]. But the pandemic frightened everyone, and there were cases when the virus was actually transmitted by pilgrims (in South Korea, Iran, the United States, Malaysia), then religious festivals and celebrations such as Pesach, Easter, Waisahi, Ramadan and Purnima, were canceled; many pilgrimage routes were closed; and churches, mosques, and temples were closed voluntarily or at the request of governments [8].

Because of this, religious leaders had to look for other means of communication with the faithful and pilgrims, including innovative ones. The most innovative response has been the use of techno-religious practices, including online worship, via Skype or Zoom [3]. Thus, Pope Francis held a daily live Mass [9]. Some sites and enterprising businesses have offered to use IT capabilities to attract pilgrims and tourists to observe or participate in rituals. However, there were also religious communities that ignored government directives on physical distancing, calling them «defiant» and «disobedient» and ruining their relationship with the authorities. At the same time, it should be noted that the actions of government officials were sometimes close to inadequate. For example, the governor of California banned singing at worship services because he believed that the virus was spreading in the air, and in Greece, government officials fined churchgoers [6]. As a result, some religious communities believe that certain government and medical initiatives in the field of health care are directly contrary to religious freedom, and they themselves feel that they, not the virus, are considered the main danger and persecuted.

Although the pandemic has temporarily halted and probably radically changed the way religious travel and rituals take place, there are at least three reasons why pilgrimage and religious tourism will not experience any long-term negative consequences once travel bans are lifted [6].

First. In some religious traditions, pilgrimage is mandatory because it is seen as a means of salvation. In particular, in the case of Hajj, it is necessary because it affects not only the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of believers in this life, but also their position in the afterlife. So the demand for pilgrimages will always exist.

Second. As one of the oldest forms of mobility, pilgrimage and religious tourism have long been the drivers of travel and tourism. This is partly because the assembly is the essence of religion, and the journey to the sacred spaces is a very important action of a believer. It is likely that the demand for travel to local services and shrines will increase, so the ties of local religious communities will grow. And to take advantage of this, tourism marketers and promoters should not shy away from religious tourism and pilgrimage, but instead focus on them as one of the first niche markets to restart domestic and regional tourism.

Third. Pilgrimage and religious tourism are too important from an economic point of view for humanity to afford to hold back religious travel for very long. Many religious sites bring significant material dividends to their communities through tourism. Pilgrimages are one of the world's largest events and gatherings, bringing billions of dollars a year to local, regional and national economies.

It can be said that religious tourism is one of the sustainable types of tourism, so it will never disappear. There will simply be (already there is) more variety of its forms.

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