



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Theology of Tourism: Foundations and Functions

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of a new theology of tourism in Christianity, addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the tourism industry. Utilizing a qualitative-exploratory approach, the research analyzes theological responses to tourism's rise since the late 19th century, a period marked by threats to traditional religious authority. Key findings reveal that while tourism poses significant challenges, such as moral laxity and desacralization, it also offers opportunities for enhanced religious visibility and new pilgrimage practices. This research contributes to the understanding of how religious institutions can adapt to contemporary societal changes, emphasizing the need for a proactive theological response.

Keywords: Theology of Tourism; Catholic Church; Religious Authority; Pilgrimage; Moral Challenges; Desacralization; Tourism Industry.

Background and Research Context

The intersection of tourism and religion has garnered increasing attention in scholarly discourse, particularly in the context of globalization and cultural exchange. The rise of the tourism industry since the late 19th century has transformed not only economic landscapes but also social and cultural practices, including religious observances and institutions. In this evolving context, the Catholic Church faces significant challenges, including the desacralization of sacred spaces, the commodification of religious experiences, and moral challenges associated with tourism, such as the promotion of sexual tourism and the potential for exploitation of local cultures and communities.

Despite the growing body of literature addressing tourism's impact on various religious traditions, there remains a notable gap concerning the emergence of a specific theology of tourism within Christianity, particularly within the Catholic Church. Most existing studies focus on the sociological or economic aspects of religious tourism, often neglecting the theological implications and the church's responses to these developments. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how the Catholic Church navigates the complexities of tourism, articulating a theology that addresses both the challenges and opportunities presented by this phenomenon.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to understand how religious institutions can adapt their theological frameworks to engage with contemporary societal changes, particularly in light of the increasing prominence of tourism as a global phenomenon. By investigating the theological discourse surrounding tourism, this research seeks to provide insights into how the Catholic Church can reclaim its authority and relevance in a rapidly changing world, fostering a more nuanced understanding of faith in the context of modern travel and pilgrimage. This exploration not only contributes to academic scholarship but also offers practical implications for church leaders seeking to engage meaningfully with the tourism industry.

Objectives and Research Questions

Main Objectives:

To explore the theological responses developed by the Catholic Church in light of tourism's growth and its implications for faith practices, focusing on how these responses can help the Church navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining its core teachings.

Research Questions:

- What are the primary challenges of tourism as perceived by the Catholic Church, particularly regarding moral and ethical concerns, and how do these challenges affect the Church's authority and teachings?
- In what ways can the Catholic Church adapt its theology to effectively engage with the phenomenon of tourism, ensuring that it remains relevant in a rapidly changing cultural landscape?
- How does the development of a theology of tourism reflect broader trends in modern Christianity and its interaction with contemporary society, including issues of globalization, cultural exchange, and the commodification of faith?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study is grounded in constructivist-interpretive theory, which posits that meaning is socially constructed through interactions within cultural and religious contexts. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for exploring the intersection of tourism and theology, as it allows for an understanding of how religious beliefs and practices evolve in response to societal changes, including the rise of the tourism industry. By employing this lens, the research aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which the Catholic Church interprets and responds to the challenges and opportunities presented by tourism.

Methodology:

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and exploratory, utilizing a multi-faceted approach to gather rich, contextual data. The primary data sources include:

- **Theological Writings:** Analyzing key documents, encyclicals, and pastoral letters from Catholic leaders that address the themes of tourism, pilgrimage, and moral authority. This literature provides insight into the Church's official stance and theological reasoning regarding tourism.
- **Church Documents:** Reviewing guidelines and policies issued by the Catholic Church related to tourism and pilgrimage, which reflect institutional responses to the evolving landscape of faith practices.
- **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of existing scholarly literature on tourism and religion, focusing on gaps related to the Catholic Church's theological responses. This review helps contextualize the research within broader academic discussions.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis will be employed to identify key themes and patterns across the data sources. This involves coding the data to highlight significant concepts related to the Church's challenges and opportunities in the context of tourism. The analysis will also explore how these themes inform the development of a theology of tourism, revealing the interplay between faith, culture, and the tourism industry. By synthesizing these insights, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the Catholic Church can navigate the complexities of modern tourism while remaining true to its theological foundations.

Findings and Main Arguments

This study presents several key findings regarding the relationship between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, highlighting both challenges and opportunities that shape the Church's theological responses. The core results are as follows:

Challenges of Moral and Ethical Concerns:

The Catholic Church perceives tourism as posing significant moral challenges, including issues such as sexual exploitation, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of sacred spaces. These concerns threaten the sanctity of religious sites and the integrity of faith practices. The commodification of religious experiences can dilute the authenticity of spiritual engagement, leading to a crisis of faith among believers who may feel that tourism prioritizes profit over piety.

Opportunities for Enhanced Visibility and Engagement:

Despite its challenges, tourism presents the Catholic Church with opportunities to enhance its visibility and outreach. Pilgrimages and religious tourism can attract new followers and re-engage lapsed Catholics by offering immersive spiritual experiences. The Church can leverage tourism to promote its teachings and values, using sacred sites as platforms for evangelization and education about Catholic doctrine.

Development of a Theology of Tourism:

The research reveals a growing recognition within the Church of the need to articulate a theology of tourism that addresses both the benefits and drawbacks of the tourism phenomenon. This theology emphasizes the importance of stewardship, respect for sacred spaces, and the promotion of ethical tourism practices. By developing a coherent theological framework, the Church can guide its members in navigating the complexities of tourism while remaining rooted in its spiritual mission.

Adaptation and Innovation in Faith Practices:

The findings suggest that the Catholic Church is increasingly adapting its practices to incorporate elements of tourism. New forms of pilgrimage, such as virtual pilgrimages and themed retreats, reflect an innovative approach to engaging with contemporary believers. The Church's adaptation also includes fostering partnerships with local communities to ensure that tourism benefits both the Church and the surrounding environment, promoting sustainable practices that honor the cultural and spiritual significance of religious sites.

Broader Trends in Modern Christianity:

The development of a theology of tourism within the Catholic Church reflects broader trends in modern Christianity, where faith communities are increasingly engaging with societal changes, globalization, and cultural exchange. This engagement highlights the Church's ability to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, demonstrating that it can adapt its theological discourse to address contemporary issues while fostering a deeper connection with its followers.

Practical Implications for Church Leadership:

The study emphasizes the need for church leaders to actively engage with the tourism industry, developing strategies that promote ethical tourism, protect sacred spaces, and enhance the spiritual experience of pilgrims. By embracing a proactive approach, the Catholic Church can reclaim its authority and relevance, ensuring that it serves as a guiding force in the lives of believers amidst the complexities of modern tourism. These core results underscore the intricate relationship between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, revealing both the challenges it faces and the opportunities it can harness to further its mission in the contemporary world.

Discussion and Significance

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, revealing both the challenges and opportunities that shape contemporary faith practices. The identification of moral and ethical concerns highlights the Church's struggle to maintain the sanctity of sacred spaces in an increasingly commercialized environment. However, the recognition of tourism as a vehicle for outreach and engagement underscores the potential for revitalizing faith among believers, particularly through innovative pilgrimage practices.

Significance:

The significance of these findings lies in their implications for the Catholic Church's future engagement with tourism. By developing a coherent theology of tourism, the Church can guide its members in navigating the moral complexities associated with travel and pilgrimage. This theological framework not only addresses immediate concerns but also positions the Church as a relevant voice in discussions about ethical tourism and cultural preservation.

Limitations:

Despite the insights gained, this study has limitations. The qualitative nature of the research may restrict the generalizability of the findings across different cultural contexts within the global Catholic Church. Additionally, the focus on theological responses may overlook other critical dimensions, such as economic impacts and the perspectives of local communities affected by tourism.

Interdisciplinary Relevance:

The study's interdisciplinary relevance is significant, bridging theology, sociology, and tourism studies. It invites scholars from various fields to consider how religious beliefs shape and are shaped by cultural practices, particularly in the context of globalization. By fostering dialogue among theologians, sociologists, and tourism professionals, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the role of faith in contemporary society, encouraging collaborative efforts to promote ethical and sustainable tourism practices that respect both religious traditions and local cultures.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to scholarship by exploring the intersection of Catholic theology and tourism, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arise within this dynamic relationship. By articulating a theology of tourism, the research provides a framework for the Catholic Church to navigate the complexities of modern travel while maintaining its spiritual integrity. This exploration not only enriches theological discourse but also offers practical insights for church leaders seeking to engage with contemporary societal issues.

Future research should expand on this foundation by examining the perspectives of local communities impacted by religious tourism, assessing how their experiences shape and are shaped by the Church's engagement with tourism. Additionally, comparative studies across different religious traditions could provide a broader understanding of how

various faiths respond to the challenges of tourism, facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue. Finally, investigating the role of digital technology in shaping modern pilgrimage experiences presents a promising avenue for further exploration, particularly in light of the increasing importance of virtual engagement in contemporary religious practice.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in July 2019 at the Department of Abrahamic Religions, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.

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