

Theses for doctoral thesis (PhD)

**Investigation of Reformed religious tourism in the
Észak-Alföld region [Northern Great Plain]**

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1. Aim of the thesis, outline of the topic

It is well known that religious objects have been used for centuries not only for religious purposes but also for various cultural purposes, so as monuments and tourist attractions they also function indirectly as income generating factors. The demand for religious tourism, both international and domestic, has increased significantly in recent decades. In addition to pilgrims and religious tourists, non-religious tourists and cultural tourists are also visiting religious sites and religious events in large numbers, driven by increased demand for spirituality and the increasing accessibility of religious tourism sites, in addition to more professional marketing tools. In addition to its revenue-generating capacity, religious tourism is nowadays a means of avoiding seasonality and has significant socio-economic benefits in terms of diversification of the tourist offer. Many congregations are now looking at the presentation of religious sites and events, which were previously exclusively congregational events, as possible alternatives to religious tourism, in the light of available resources and existing tourism demand, and are trying to develop them as attractive tourist attractions and market them as a viable product.

The theme and structure of this dissertation are the dimensions that emerge along the broader concept of religious tourism. The conceptualisation of religious tourism is based on the presentation of national and international research in tourism anthropology and tourism organisations' definitions of religious tourism, its denominational delimitation and its ecclesiastical interpretation. Due to the late domestic study of the topic, it is particularly important to present the place of religious tourism within the general tourism system, its developmental history and its links with other tourism sectors. Also in the first chapter, the supply and demand factors for religious tourism in the Reformed world are presented, with a more detailed discussion of the motivation factor.

The importance of the various monument excavations for the development of tourism to the destinations under study is undeniable, since in the case of several municipalities the beginnings of local church tourism can be directly linked to these excavations. It is therefore essential, in addition to examining the historical background to these discoveries, to describe the interest of church tourists and the artistic and cultural heritage at the heart of their tourist development. The increase in the popularity of religious tourism in Hungary over the last decade has clearly been helped by the renovations carried out within the framework of EU-level tourism development, which, in addition to the restoration of churches, have clearly provided scope for visitor-friendly developments. The importance of the concepts and tenders communicated in tourism development strategies at various levels now have a major impact not only on sacred buildings and the functioning of the host community, but also on the concept of religious tourism. In the third chapter of my thesis, I will examine these developments and strategies in the light of religious tourism.

The focus of my research is on Reformed church tourism, its macro and micro level study and the analysis of empirical material. Within this, I focus on the typology of religious tourists, the general tourism characteristics of destinations, the primary and secondary superstructure of religious tourism, and the attraction and visitor management in churches. The study will also cover the latest forms of preservation and promotion of religious tourism heritage, thematic itineraries and church excursions, which have not been studied at all with a scientific interest. In a separate chapter, I will look at the festivals that have shaped the development of tourism since its inception, which are also important supply factors as a key tourist period, a demand factor and a related attraction, and the historical development and leisure activities of the centenaries of the Reformation. Finally, there is a separate chapter on the increasingly popular religious festivals and church concerts.

2. Outline of the methods used

My research from 2011 to 2022 will be significantly influenced by the tools, scientific methods and professional achievements of tourism, in addition to the methods of ethnography and anthropology. On the one hand, the use of tourism literature is necessitated by the disciplinary attitude that the situation of religious tourism in Hungary has been studied mainly by academic and practitioners working in tourism, while research in the field of ethnography and cultural anthropology has focused exclusively on pilgrimages and pilgrimages. In addition, the study of the practical implementation of the subject under examination, i.e. the economic and social impact of religious tourism on a given parish, and the question of visitor management in the context of church visits, requires the integration of tourism literature, and research on church exhibitions naturally has to draw on the guidelines and methods of museology.

The primary data collection, mapping the services and products of each destination, was based on personal and participant observation during fieldwork and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The latter were mainly conducted with church staff members responsible for operating religious tourism sites and welcoming visitors: pastors and caretaker-guides, occasionally supplemented by accounts from congregation members and presbyters. In addition to the on-site visits, an analysis of tenders, documentation and published reports on the improvements was also carried out. In terms of written sources for the thesis, parish and parish records were used primarily in the context of historic preservation excavations, church furnishings, and the examination of feast days. In measuring Reformed church tourism, the church guest books are of outstanding value, but have not yet been the subject of a complex scientific study.

In the study of Reformed religious tourism, sites in Hungary were selected which, due to their Reformed churches with outstanding art-historical value, are able to offer an important religious tourism offer in the domestic tourism market. In addition, I also examined destinations that have only recently become known through significant religious tourism developments or monument conservation excavations. My thesis is based primarily on research conducted in the Reformed congregations of Satu Mare and Bereg, with Csaroda, Tákos, Nagylónya and Nyírbátor as the main sites, and the Great and Small Churches in Debrecen. After the capital, Debrecen is the most important regional integrating city in Hungary today, with the potential to become the economic and cultural centre of the wider and narrower region. The city also plays an important role in the religious tourism of Hungary, both as a tourist destination and as a venue for religious and ecclesiastical events. The National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 divides the former tourism regions, including the Northern Great Plain region, which is the basis of the study, into priority tourism development areas, defined on a professional basis, and within these, into specific destinations which are of outstanding importance for inbound and domestic tourism or which can be made so as a result of targeted development, and therefore there is a national interest in their concentrated development.

In addition to the above-mentioned destinations, I have also had the opportunity to analyse the topic at a number of Hungarian religious tourism sites abroad and across the border, the results of which I will present in the comparative studies. Thus, I visited several stops on several cross-border development routes, i.e. sacral sites in settlements that are significant and worthwhile for church tourism. The results of the research conducted primarily on other topics in the well-known settlements of the Black Red Valley, in Târcaia (RO) and in Cserkeszölő (Tiszaug), also contributed to the general findings at the macro level.

3. List of results in thesis form

In Hungary, the organised management of religious tourism has taken a long time to take shape, and for a long time it was understood to mean only pilgrimages, including by the academic and service sectors. Accordingly, the tourism-based use of churches was basically sporadic. The concept of religious tourism has been extended by new and newer factors, as defined by international tourism organisations, and has moved from being exclusively identified with pilgrimage at the outset to include church tourism and participation in various religious events and activities.

In Hungary, due to the well-known church politics of the decades before the change of regime, the study of the subject was one of the less publicised topics and therefore developed only with a relatively long delay. Nowadays, however, the increasing interest in the topic has led to a significant change in the definition of the topic in Hungary, and the conceptual expansion has led to an increasingly complex interpretation, often using both narrower and broader definitions, and abandoning the former denominational delimitation, and the host community is also becoming more conscious and differentiated in its use of the term.

The difficulty in researching religious tourism is due to the lack of a precise definition, the market size and the problem of measuring the typical flows. It is therefore essential to create a complex database of domestic religious destinations with a complex search engine, based on international and national empirical data, in order to facilitate comparative scientific studies and to enable tourists to find their way around more quickly and more easily.

The history of religious tourism dates back to antiquity, and as tourism has developed, religious attractions have become increasingly popular. The early Protestant forms of religious tourism were mainly vocation tourism, as compared to the regular attendance of Catholic worshippers at fairs or pilgrimages, Reformed worshippers only participated in vocation tourism products organised by parishes, church synods, conferences, training courses, association events, building dedications or inaugurations, and church excursions. In addition to the guest books, the popularity of secular vocation tourism to churches at all times is confirmed by the experience of the host community, which has seen a very large number of employees and guests from various educational, cultural, public administration and private companies.

Examining the links between religious tourism and other tourism sectors is very important for the long-term and profitable operation of religious attractions. It can be concluded that religious tourism attractions can be linked to a number of other tourism products, but this requires stronger cooperation and cross-selling. A stronger linkage between religious and cultural tourism is justified by the fact that, compared to other countries with a Catholic tradition, religious tourism has not been officially offered as a separate tourism product in Hungary for decades. The successful integration of heritage tourism and religious tourism should be seen in the context of national heritage sites of a religious nature.

Health tourism is increasingly focusing on mental health in addition to physical health, and there is a growing preference for so-called spiritual wellness, which is also a good link for religious tourism. Pilgrimages and various religious itineraries play an important role in the cooperation between religious and active tourism, as they offer an excellent opportunity to discover religious values and to relax while exercising. Religion is also known to be in harmony with the environment and nature, and the related tourism sectors of religion and eco- and retreat tourism can therefore be well combined. Church concerts and meditative silence tours can be offered as a spiritual recharging element, and the role of abandoned church ruins is also being valorised. It is also worth mentioning the emerging wedding tourism, for which the region's churches are excellent 'intimate' venues.

Seniortourists are becoming an increasingly important consumer due to their growing purchasing power, rising life expectancy and the increasing number of years spent in good

health and active life. This is why congregational tourists can represent a very significant, under-utilised niche market, based on their main motivation, especially for the host community of cultural and religious tourism. Religious and youth tourism are linked at several points in the sites studied, and the guest books show that even in the decades of the party state there was a high level of church tourism by student and youth groups, mainly in the form of school trips, pioneer camps and summer camps, and that after the change of regime, tourism for church youth groups also boomed.

The demand for religious tourism products is also determined by three basic conditions: motivation, leisure time and disposable income. In terms of the latter, the ability to pay is generally lower for religious tourists than for consumers of other types of tourism. The majority of tourists arriving in the surveyed municipalities are considered by the host community to belong to the strong middle class in terms of their disposable income, while only 40% of visitors are middle-aged at most, and the majority are of school age or retirement age. The supply side of tourism is the security factor, which is also linked to the tourist attitude in the study area of being borderless, the perceived or real low standard of living in the destination and the fear of the local Roma minority. The other important supply element is the receptiveness and readiness of the local community, i.e. the organisational conditions for running tourism, which is currently less developed in the churches' structures, and cooperation with other tourism organisations.

The importance of archaeological excavations and monument conservation work for the development of tourism in a given destination is undeniable, since in many municipalities the start of local church tourism can be directly linked to these excavations. Parish leaders play a decisive role in the successful integration of churches into tourism, which is reflected not only in the removal of former wall paintings but also in their participation in the conservation process. The church in Nyírbátor shows that church tourism to the village started as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, even if not in the form of mass tourism in the modern sense.

The role of religious tourism within the national tourism organisation system has become increasingly important and the number of related professional groups has grown considerably. It is particularly important that basic knowledge on the subject be made available in tourism training for managers, professionals and religious operators responsible for attractions. The primary aim of the development of religious sites is to preserve local heritage and cultural heritage, and the tourist-oriented use and visitor-friendly renovation of buildings very often only provides the financial backing for the former, and the successful mobilisation and use of the available financial resources. The importance of the concepts and proposals put forward in the various strategies is primarily based on their direct existential impact on the local communities and parishes concerned (revenue generation, job creation). They have also had an indirect impact on the definition of religious tourism, as the developments made have also attracted the attention of academics and thus contributed to a change in its definition.

The parishes surveyed, as host communities, do not yet have a specific local tourism development strategy, but do not yet have a consciously and professionally developed tourism target groups. Tourists are typologised mainly on the basis of local experience, grouping stereotypes and possible self-definition of tourists. The experiences, recollections and guest books of the host communities of the churches studied show that the composition of church tourists has always been clearly dominated by organised groups, with many more secular than ecclesiastical groups. Within the latter, the guestbook analysis shows a clear Reformed majority, meaning that visits to the Reformed religious tourism sites studied also play an important role in strengthening denominational identity. In Nyírbátor, Csaroda, Tákos and Lónya, the largest groups of school, association and Reformed congregation tourists are represented, while the latter small villages also have a high presence of cycling tourists. However, the proportion of this type of visitor among urban churchgoers is particularly low. As

regards the educational level of visitors, the proportion of highly educated visitors is high, while the proportion of university students in groups is low compared to other groups of professional visitors. The number of so-called cruise visitors is very high.

The main sources of foreign visitors to the study area are from Germany, France, the Netherlands and Romania, most of whom, according to the guest book, do not arrive independently but are accompanied by domestic tourists, either as professional or VFR tourists. In the former case, international relations with churches, twin towns and universities are particularly important, with large numbers of foreign tourists coming to the region mainly from university towns in the eastern region, as part of the leisure activities of the institutional relations and professional events in the region. Budapest, Nyíregyháza and Debrecen stand out as the main destinations for domestic tourists. At the county level, visitors come mainly from the eastern part of the country, and from the western counties of Győr-Moson-Sopron County, in addition to Pest.

In terms of the superstructure of religious tourism, individual tourists are predominantly commercial tourists, while group religious tourists use private and other accommodation. Congregations in the most popular tourist settlements often offer their church buildings, which were repossessed during the regime change and have been renovated with minimal comfort, as accommodation, mainly for youth groups. In addition, in sister churches, private accommodation is very often provided by church members for church excursions or youth groups. The number of church-run accommodation facilities has also increased significantly in recent decades. Churches, due to their location within the municipality, especially in cities, usually have catering facilities already available. In small villages, the choice of accommodation is determined by spatial constraints and the lack of superstructure, and tourists tend to choose the only guesthouse in the village, which is located in the vicinity of the church. The current lack of infrastructure can be a challenge to the visitor experience and improvements are needed. In particular, the area could be an excellent destination for a new group of consumers who are receptive to eco-tourism and retreat tourism, but who are particularly in need of excellent infrastructure and superstructure.

Attractions management with an appropriate strategy is essential for the long-term successful operation of tourist attractions. Religious tourism is an important means of avoiding seasonality in tourism. All the religious sites studied have seasonally differentiated opening hours, given the limited human resources. Marketing is also of particular importance for churches, and the transformation of digital consumer habits makes their own online communication resources particularly important. In the parishes studied, there are financial constraints to employing the technical human resources needed to set up a website and to subsequently operate it, with the appropriate professional qualifications.

Visitor management services are also important to enhance the visitor experience, improve the accessibility of attractions and add uniqueness. Due to the spatial structure of sacred objects and the specificity of the theme to be presented, the range of interpretative tools that can be used is narrower than for other cultural attractions. However, thanks to visitor-friendly developments, the presentation of religious monuments is also providing increasingly differentiated tourist services for visitors through spectacular interactive tools. Attractions that receive a large number of professional and international tourists should also use audio-guides, kiosks or QR codes or iBeacons, info-communication tools that do not require personal participation, for more highly qualified domestic tourists who need additional information or foreign tourists seeking a description in a foreign language, as a solution to the difficulties caused by the lack of adequate human resources.

In addition to the previous spatial changes, the ever-changing needs and expectations of visitors, as well as the innovative part of religious tourism developments, have made it necessary to expand services, often by creating new church exhibitions that also extend the

duration of the visit. The increased financial resources made available through tenders have allowed for the creation of more interactive exhibitions with richer material and more spectacular installation elements, increasingly complemented by objects on loan from public and ecclesiastical collections, formerly owned by the parish. In parallel with the growth of religious tourism, there is a growing demand for the integration of museum education methods in churches.

Thematic itineraries are a new way of preserving and exploiting cultural heritage, which are highly beneficial for the less developed region of Satu Mare-Berg, which is rich in cultural resources but less developed in terms of superstructure and attraction management. The most important thematic itinerary of national Reformed religious tourism, which, in addition to the thematic selection of relevant sacral monuments, already provided the most important basic information about them and later also organised specific tours, is the Medieval Churches Itinerary. Tours of churches within the municipality and around a specific anniversary, in addition to heritage sites, are also becoming increasingly popular.

A transitional form between leisure and vocational tourism is the regular church excursions organised by the majority of Reformed parishes, whose primary motivation is not faith and religious practice, but the tourist experience. In addition to the available financial resources, their destination is determined primarily by attractions linked to religion or the Reformed Church, official programmes and events, and congregational contacts. By the latter, we may primarily mean sister-church relations, the development of which reflects the geographical orientation and historical development of the Reformed Church's external relations.

From the beginning, holidays have determined the development of tourism. The Christmas season, with its commercialised preparations and its potential for tourism, naturally stands out among the holidays, with its rich religious tourism characteristics. Only a part of Easter travel is linked to the holiday itself, the majority of it is essentially an exploitation of the opportunities offered by increased leisure time. The low level of festivity of Pentecost among tourists can be explained by the lack of popular symbols as religious associations and the less known biblical content of the holiday, and by the fact that this period has long been a time of fairs and mayfairs, which easily distracted attention from the religious nature of the holiday. Nowadays, it is increasingly seen as the last 'long weekend' before the main tourist season for the consumer society.

Church and religious anniversaries are nowadays generating increasingly significant economic benefits for cities through direct consumption and the use of accommodation. Increasingly "festive" anniversaries, such as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, can bring the Reformation and the Reformed Church closer to the younger generation through their fashionable management. And by successfully integrating them into current tourism trends, non-religious tourists are also more likely to participate in the programmes organised for the commemorative year.

Religious festivals are a transition between conference, festival and religious tourism, and therefore bear the characteristics of each of these sectors. Participants are influenced by cognitive factors, in addition to spiritual experience, faith affirmation and a sense of belonging. They also function as meeting places and as a means of strengthening VFR tourism. Religious festivals also generate increasingly intensive direct consumption for the host communities, mainly through the superstructure they require, while successful cooperation can also allow local cultural institutions to directly benefit from the events.

Music festivals, which also function as a tourist destination in their own right, have played a significant role in Europe since the 1920s and are now often held in churches. The most important music festival in the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg region, the Nyírbátor Music Days, which started in 1967, has been linked to the Reformed Church from the very beginning

and has attracted a large number of cultural tourists to the village. Church concerts are one of the most frequented profane church occasions. In terms of demand factors, church concert participants are motivated mainly by cognitive, aesthetic and physiological as recreational factors. Among the supply factors influencing their organisation, the organisational conditions of the host community, tourist attractions and infrastructure are mainly relevant



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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