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THE EXPERIENCE OF HOLINESS: RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Background. This article explores the phenomenon of holiness as experienced through religious tourism in contemporary society, examining its philosophical foundations, sociological dynamics, and evolving practices. Religious tourism constitutes a unique intersection of spirituality, commerce, cultural heritage, and personal quests for transcendence. Drawing from theoretical frameworks such as Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophany, the study interrogates why specific physical locations are designated as sacred and how they shape pilgrims' spiritual experiences.

Methods. This study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach to explore the phenomenon of holiness in religious tourism. It begins with a hermeneutic reading of theological and philosophical texts, particularly drawing on Rudolf Otto's concept of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and Mircea Eliade's notion of hierophany, alongside pilgrims' narratives. A structural-functional analysis then examines how religious tourism reinforces spiritual identity and social cohesion, as seen in the Hajj and Marian shrines. The phenomenological method is used to explore the emotional and sensory dimensions of pilgrims' experiences in sacred spaces such as Jerusalem, Lourdes, and Varanasi. A psychological perspective further addresses pilgrims' motivations and inner transformations, especially at healing sites. Finally, a communicative lens considers how sacred experiences are shared through language, religious media, and digital platforms, including the rise of virtual pilgrimage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results. Findings reveal that the experience of holiness is mediated through sensory engagement, symbolic space, and communal participation. Sacred sites function as architectural and narrative facilitators of spiritual transformation. The study highlights tensions between commercialization and authenticity, showing how pilgrims navigate institutional frameworks, economic pressures, and personal devotion. Gender, globalization, and digital technologies further reshape pilgrimage experiences, creating pluralistic and hybrid religious spaces.

Conclusions. Religious tourism remains a vital pathway to experiencing holiness in the modern world. Despite processes of secularization and commodification, the pilgrimage continues to reflect humanity's persistent search for meaning and transcendence. The sustainability of sacred sites emerges as an urgent concern, requiring balance between preservation and access. The phenomenon of religious tourism thus illustrates the adaptive and enduring nature of sacred engagement in contemporary society.

Keywords: holiness, religious tourism, pilgrimage, sacred sites, spiritual experience.

Background

Relevance of the topic. In contemporary society, characterized by rapid secularization, technological advancement, and global interconnectedness, the persistence of religious tourism as a widespread practice invites critical reflection. While traditional forms of pilgrimage are often viewed through historical and devotional lenses, modern religious travel necessitates a deeper examination of how sacred experiences evolve under the pressures of commercialization, institutional mediation, and cultural exchange. Understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond simplistic distinctions between religious devotion and tourism to address nuanced questions about the very nature and location of holiness in a progressively secular world.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. The study of holiness has drawn considerable attention from both classical and contemporary scholars. Foundational contributions were made by R. Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*), M. Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*), who approached the sacred from theological, philosophical, and phenomenological perspectives. Recent scholarly contributions have further examined religious tourism through diverse disciplinary lenses. Philosophers such as Otto and Eliade conceptualized holiness as a distinctive category of experience and spatial reality. Contemporary anthropologists and sociologists have expanded on these ideas by investigating ritual practices, embodiment, and the communal nature of pilgrimage. Scholars like J. Eade and M. Sallnow emphasized the plurality of meanings that pilgrims attribute to sacred sites, while P. Sheldrake and Yi-Fu Tuan explored spatial, mnemonic, and identity-forming aspects of sacred travel. These studies underscore the complexity and dynamic nature of religious tourism in a globalized and mediated world. In the Ukrainian academic context, holiness is examined through

interdisciplinary approaches including religious ethnography, sophianic philosophy, phenomenology of religion, and the psychology of religious experience. Notable contributors include V. Horskyi, S. Krymskyi, M. Popovych, V. Tokman, Y. Zavgorodnii, Y. Kharkovshchenko, O. Predko, and O. Sarapin. The concept of sainthood, as a specific manifestation of holiness, has been further explored by L. Masliuk, V. Lappo, Z. Kucha, and N. Kovalchuk. Academic interest in religious tourism, pilgrimage, and sacred spaces especially within the Ukrainian context is gradually expanding. Key figures in this field include G. Rinschede, H. Hoffmann, N. Kriukova, and O. Borysova. Together, these researchers reflect a growing interdisciplinary engagement with how sacred experience is mediated, represented, and transformed in contemporary society.

The Purpose of this Article. This article thus seeks to critically examine the dynamics shaping religious tourism today, with particular attention to the embodied, sensory, and communal dimensions that underpin experiences of the sacred. By employing an interdisciplinary methodology drawing on philosophical insights into the nature of holiness, anthropological examinations of ritual practices and communal bonds, and sociological analysis of changing demographic and global trends, the study aims to unpack the complex interplay between tradition and innovation, authenticity and commodification, and individual spirituality within broader societal frameworks.

Methods

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that enables a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon of holiness within the context of religious tourism. To begin with, a hermeneutic approach is applied to interpret theological and philosophical texts that reveal the nature and manifestations of the sacred. Special attention is

given to Rudolf Otto's concept of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and Mircea Eliade's theory of hierophany, alongside the interpretation of religious narratives and pilgrims' testimonies. In addition, a structural-functional method is used to examine the role of religious tourism in maintaining spiritual identity, social cohesion, and moral order. This is particularly evident in cases such as the Islamic Hajj or the veneration of Marian shrines in Catholicism. To investigate the personal experience of holiness, the study also employs a phenomenological method, focusing on the sensory and emotional responses of pilgrims within sacred spaces such as Jerusalem, Lourdes, or Varanasi. Furthermore, a psychological approach is utilized to analyze pilgrims' motivations, emotional states, and spiritual needs. This is especially relevant in understanding experiences of healing, hope, and inner peace reported at sites of Marian apparitions. Finally, a communicative approach is employed to explore how sacred experience is conveyed through language, narratives, religious guides, and digital media. Particular attention is paid to the growing role of virtual pilgrimage and online devotional communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

The concept of holiness has fascinated humanity since time immemorial, compelling individuals to embark on pilgrimages to sites deemed sacred across religious traditions. Religious tourism the practice of traveling to locations imbued with spiritual significance, represents a complex intersection of faith, experience, commerce, and cultural heritage. This article examines how the experience of holiness manifests through religious tourism, analyzing its philosophical underpinnings, sociological dimensions, and the evolving dynamics of sacred site visitation in contemporary society.

The quest for encounters with the holy continues to motivate millions annually to traverse national borders and cultural boundaries, seeking transcendence at shrines, temples, and natural sites believed to mediate contact with divine reality. Yet this phenomenon raises profound questions: What constitutes holiness in physical space? How do travelers experience the sacred? And how have patterns of religious tourism evolved in response to modernization, secularization, and globalization? By examining religious tourism through multiple disciplinary lenses philosophical, theological, anthropological, and sociological, we gain insight into the persistent human yearning for encounters with that which exceeds ordinary experience, while contextualizing these sacred journeys within broader socioeconomic and cultural frameworks.

To understand religious tourism requires first grappling with the elusive concept of holiness itself. The German theologian Rudolf Otto's seminal work, "The Idea of the Holy" (1917), characterized holiness as the "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" a mystery both terrifying and fascinating that constitutes an encounter with the "wholly other". Otto argued that the holy represents a non-rational, non-discursive category of experience that forms the core of religious sentiment across traditions. This experience, according to Otto, manifests as a sense of creature-feeling, numinous dread, and overwhelming awe before that which transcends ordinary reality (Otto, 1917, p. 34). Similarly, philosopher M. Eliade distinguished between sacred and profane spaces, suggesting that sacred sites represent "hierophanies" locations where the sacred breaks through into mundane reality, creating an axis mundi connecting earthly and divine realms. In Eliade's framework, pilgrimage

destinations function as spatial manifestations of the sacred, allowing visitors to move symbolically from periphery to center, from profane to sacred existence (Eade, & Sallnow, 1991, p. 77). These philosophical conceptualizations help explain why certain spaces become designated as holy and why they exert such powerful attraction. The sacred site promises an encounter with ultimate reality whether conceptualized as God, divine energy, or cosmic truth that transcends everyday experience. The pilgrim's journey embodies a physical enactment of spiritual longing, a literal movement toward transcendence (Dubisch, 1995, p. 112).

The expression of holiness varies significantly across religious traditions while maintaining certain common features. In Christianity, holiness often associates with places touched by divine presence through biblical events, saints' activities, or miraculous occurrences. Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre draws millions seeking proximity to the site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, while Catholic shrines like Lourdes in France attract those hoping for healing through the intercession of the Virgin Mary (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 85). Islam conceptualizes holiness through the lens of *baraka* (blessing) and emphasizes sacred geography centered on Mecca and Medina. The Hajj pilgrimage obligatory for able Muslims represents perhaps the world's largest organized religious tourism event, with millions gathering annually to circumambulate the Ka'bah and retrace Muhammad's footsteps (Aziz, 2001, p. 231).

In Hinduism, *tirthas* (crossing places) such as Varanasi on the Ganges River represent locations where the boundary between human and divine realms thins, facilitating spiritual transformation. The concept of *darshan* seeing and being seen by deity drives Hindu pilgrimage practices, with devotees seeking visual contact with divine images or natural formations believed to embody divine presence (Albera & Eade, 2015, p. 98). Buddhism emphasizes sites connected to Gautama Buddha's life events, with Bodh Gaya (site of enlightenment) and Lumbini (birthplace) drawing Buddhist pilgrims worldwide. Meanwhile, Shinto in Japan locates holiness in natural features like mountains, waterfalls, and ancient trees believed to house *kami* (spirits), creating a sacred geography intimately connected to natural landscapes (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 44).

Despite these differences, common elements emerge: sacred sites typically claim historical or mythological significance, often feature striking natural or architectural elements, and prescribe specific ritual behaviors that structure the visitor's experience of holiness (Dubisch, 1995, p. 126). Religious tourism fundamentally concerns embodied experience the sensory, affective, and cognitive dimensions of encountering sacred space. Contrary to assumptions that spirituality transcends physicality, pilgrimage highlights how bodily engagement mediates religious experience. Pilgrims kneel before relics, circumambulate stupas, immerse in ritual baths, prostrate along pilgrimage routes, or process on bleeding knees up sacred steps. These embodied practices do not merely symbolize devotion but constitute the very means through which holiness is apprehended (Kuca, 2014, p. 63). The sensory dimensions of sacred sites create environments conducive to transcendent experience. Architecture manipulates light, sound, and space to induce awe as exemplified by the soaring Gothic cathedrals of Europe or the precisely oriented temples of ancient Mesoamerica. Incense, chanting, bells, and ritual music create auditory and olfactory environments that heighten awareness and signal

transition to sacred time-space. Tactile encounters with sacred objects touching stones, statues, or relics provide tangible connection to divine reality (Predko et al., 2024, p. 169). These multisensory environments facilitate what anthropologist Victor Turner called "communitas" a liminal state where ordinary social distinctions temporarily dissolve, creating heightened receptivity to spiritual experience. The pilgrim enters an extraordinary mode of being, psychologically primed for encounters with holiness through both the journey's hardships and the destination's sensory intensity (Motychak, 2023, p. 424).

In terms of authenticity, it is worth noting that religious tourists frequently report profound experiences at sacred sites moments of clarity, emotional catharsis, healing, mystical communion, or conversion. These experiences raise philosophical questions about authenticity and mediation: do sacred sites innately contain holiness, or do visitors merely project significance onto them? Philosopher Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" provides a useful lens for examining this tension. Benjamin suggested that original artistic works possess an aura a sense of unique presence and authenticity that reproductions lack. Similarly, pilgrims seek the aura of original sacred sites, valuing direct contact with spaces believed to have witnessed divine manifestation. Yet this authenticity exists in tension with institutional frameworks that interpret, manage, and sometimes commercialize sacred space (Aziz, 2001, p. 92). Religious institutions mediate holiness through explanatory frameworks, ritualized access protocols, and authorized interpreters (priests, imams, monks). These mediations simultaneously facilitate and constrain the visitor's experience. A tourist might find spiritual meaning intensified through ritual guidance or diminished through regimented access procedures that prioritize crowd management over contemplation (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 234).

Commercial mediations introduce additional complexity. Gift shops selling blessed objects, luxury accommodations marketed to wealthy pilgrims, and packaged spiritual experiences commodify holiness while potentially democratizing access. The pilgrim-tourist thus navigates multiple layers of mediation, seeking authentic encounters within highly structured environments (Kostiuk et al., 2023, p. 147). Contemporary religious tourism exhibits complex demographic patterns that challenge simplistic categorizations. While traditional pilgrimage literature often portrayed pilgrims as predominantly elderly, rural, and motivated by orthodox piety, empirical studies reveal more diverse realities. Religious tourists span age demographics, though patterns vary by destination and tradition. Orthodox Christian monasteries in Greece show increasing youth participation, while Catholic European shrines continue attracting predominantly older visitors. Islamic pilgrimage sites see broad age representation, with financial capacity rather than age determining participation (Kharkovshchenko et al., 2024).

Education and socioeconomic status significantly influence religious tourism patterns. Higher education correlates with increased interest in historical and cultural dimensions of sacred sites, while middle-class economic status enables the time and resources necessary for religious travel. However, many traditions maintain mechanisms for supporting economically disadvantaged devotees through community fundraising, subsidized transportation, or free accommodations at pilgrim hostels (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 84). Motivation research reveals multidimensional purposes behind religious journeys. The traditional dichotomy between "pilgrim" (religiously motivated) and "tourist" (recreationally motivated)

inadequately captures the complexity of modern religious travel. Most visitors occupy points along a continuum, simultaneously seeking spiritual experience, cultural education, physical restoration, and leisure. Studies of Santiago de Compostela pilgrims found motivations ranging from traditional religious devotion to personal challenge, cultural appreciation, and nature connection with many pilgrims reporting multiple concurrent motivations (Dubisch, 1995, p. 54).

Gender dynamics in religious tourism deserve particular attention for their revelatory power regarding broader social structures. Historically, many pilgrimage traditions restricted female participation or imposed gendered conditions on sacred site access. Contemporary patterns show both persistence and transformation of these gender dimensions. Women constitute the majority of visitors at many Christian shrines associated with the Virgin Mary or female saints a pattern observed at Lourdes, Fátima, and Guadalupe. This reflects women's prominent role in maintaining religious practices in many Christian societies and suggests sites where female religious agency finds expression. The Catholic shrine of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina exemplifies this pattern, with female visitors significantly outnumbering males across age categories (Eade, & Sallnow, 1991, p. 23).

Conversely, certain Islamic and Hindu sacred sites maintain gender-segregated access or participation restrictions. The Hajj accommodates both genders but prescribes different dress codes and sometimes different movement patterns through sacred space. Some Hindu temples restrict menstruating women from entry, though such practices face increasing contestation (Predko & Predko, 2020b, p. 138). Gender also influences traveler experience through safety considerations, familial obligations that may limit women's mobility, and differing socialization regarding appropriate religious expression. These gender dimensions of religious tourism reflect broader societal negotiation of women's religious roles and embodied spirituality.

Moreover, globalization has transformed religious tourism through increased mobility, information access, and cultural exchange. Traditional pilgrimage routes now attract diverse international visitors, creating multicultural sacred spaces where various interpretations coexist. The Camino de Santiago exemplifies this trend, evolving from predominantly Catholic Spanish pilgrimage to international route attracting spiritual seekers from diverse backgrounds (Aziz, 2001, p. 100). Technological change has revolutionized religious tourism through online resources that democratize information previously controlled by religious authorities. Virtual tours, GPS navigation apps for pilgrimage routes, and social media communities connecting fellow pilgrims create new forms of preparation and participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual pilgrimages emerged as alternatives to physical travel, raising questions about embodiment and authenticity in sacred experience (Predko & Predko, 2020a, p. 74). Market segmentation has produced increasingly specialized religious tourism offerings catering to particular demographics or interests. Luxury pilgrimage packages, adventure-oriented spiritual journeys, ecologically-themed religious travel, and interfaith pilgrimage experiences represent market responses to diverse motivations. Religious tourism thus fragments into numerous sub-markets, each emphasizing different aspects of the holiness experience (Predko & Predko, 2020b, p. 136).

These changes produce both homogenization and heterogenization effects. Standardized pilgrim experiences emerge through tourism industry mediations, while simultaneously, the diversity of interpretive frameworks expands through global participation. A Japanese Buddhist, American evangelical, and European secularist might walk the same sacred path while experiencing entirely different forms of holiness. (Rinschede, 1992, p. 61) For instance, Jerusalem represents perhaps the world's most complex site of contested holiness, where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim claims to sacred space overlap and sometimes conflict. The Western Wall, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and Dome of the Rock Al-Aqsa Mosque complex exist nearby, creating a religious tourism landscape fraught with political implications (Rinschede, 1992, p. 61).

Visitor demographics reflect both religious diversity and political realities. Christian pilgrims predominate numerically, arriving primarily in organized tour groups from North America, Europe, and increasingly, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Jewish visitors include both foreign tourists and Israelis, while Muslim access fluctuates with geopolitical conditions, with visitors predominantly from Jordan, Turkey, and Southeast Asia during periods of relative stability (Rinschede, 1992, p. 61). The Jerusalem experience illuminates how political conflict shapes access to holiness. Security checkpoints, restricted entry periods, and military presence create differentiated access based on religious and national identity. The Old City thus becomes a microcosm where global religious power dynamics manifest spatially, with certain groups experiencing privileged access to holy sites while others face limitations (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 102).

Tour guides play critical mediating roles, offering narratives that emphasize particular religious or political perspectives. A Christian pilgrim group led by an Israeli Jewish guide, a Palestinian Christian guide, or an international church representative might experience radically different interpretations of the same sacred landscapes. This interpretive multiplicity demonstrates how holiness experiences remain embedded in broader narratives of belonging, history, and legitimacy. Varanasi on India's Ganges River presents a case study in holiness intimately connected with death ritual. Hindu tradition holds that dying in Varanasi brings moksha (liberation from rebirth), making the city simultaneously a pilgrimage destination and a death tourism site where cremation occurs publicly along riverbank steps (Rinschede, 1992, p. 63).

Visitor demographics reveal distinct categories: domestic Hindu pilgrims predominantly from rural and semi-urban areas seeking ritual purification; elderly Hindus arriving specifically to die in auspicious territory; and international tourists (primarily from Western countries, Japan, and increasingly China) drawn by cultural interest and spiritual exploration. These groups experience Varanasi's sacred geography differently Indian pilgrims engage in ritual bathing and temple worship, while international visitors more often observe cremation ceremonies as cultural spectators (Rinschede, 1992, p. 64). The Varanasi case illuminates tensions between traditional ritual practice and tourism development. Government initiatives promoting the city as a heritage tourism destination sometimes conflict with traditional uses of sacred space. Cremation rituals become simultaneously devotional acts and tourist attractions, creating ethical questions about the commodification of death rituals and appropriate visitor behavior (Rinschede, 1992, p. 65).

This case also demonstrates how environmental concerns intersect with sacred experiences. The pollution of

the Ganges threatens both the river's practical ritual uses and its symbolic purity. Pilgrims continue to bathe in heavily polluted waters, relying on their faith in the river's spiritual purification properties, while cleanup initiatives strive to reconcile ecological sustainability with religious practice (Aziz, 2001, p. 101).

Marian apparition sites locations where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to visionaries provide insight into forming new sacred spaces in the modern era. These sites, including Lourdes (France), Fátima (Portugal), Medjugorje (Bosnia-Herzegovina), and Kibeho (Rwanda), illustrate how contemporary experiences of holiness emerge, gain institutional recognition, and evolve into significant religious tourism destinations (Rinschede, 1992, p. 66). Visitor demographics at Marian shrines show pronounced patterns: predominantly female, skewing older in Western European sites but more age-diverse in Eastern European and Global South locations. Visitors often arrive seeking healing for physical or psychological conditions, with many reporting subjective experiences of improvement. The demographic profile typically reflects the shrine's geographic region but includes international visitors once the site gains wider recognition.

These shrines reveal the process through which new sacred spaces become institutionalized. Initially characterized by spontaneous grassroots devotion centered on visionaries, successful sites gradually develop ecclesiastical infrastructure, official recognition processes, and tourism facilities. This transition often creates tension between original visionaries and institutional authorities who seek to control the narrative and presentation of miraculous claims (Motychak, 2022, p. 78). Marian shrines also demonstrate the interplay between traditional religion and contemporary spiritual seeking. While doctrinally orthodox in origin, these sites often attract spiritually eclectic visitors seeking experiences beyond rationalistic frameworks. The emphasis on healing, personal transformation, and direct supernatural intervention appeals to modern spiritual sensibilities while remaining within traditional religious structures (Predko, & Maksymenko, 2023, p. 23).

Religious tourism raises profound questions about the possibility of transcendent experience in an increasingly secular and disenchanted world. Philosopher Charles Taylor's work on the "immanent frame" of modernity suggests contemporary society has constructed a worldview where transcendence becomes increasingly difficult to access or express. Yet religious tourism's continued popularity indicates persistent desire for experiences exceeding the boundaries of secular rationality (Dubisch, 1995, p. 45). Sacred sites function as deliberate ruptures in the immanent frame spaces where different ontological possibilities remain accessible. The pilgrim temporarily steps outside modern assumptions of a closed materialist universe into environments structured to facilitate encounters with transcendent reality. This philosophical liminality partially explains why religious tourism attracts not only traditional believers but spiritual seekers and even secular individuals curious about experiences beyond ordinary reality (Eade, & Sallnow, 1991, p. 61).

The religious tourist thus navigates between enchanted and disenchanted worldviews, between traditional religious frameworks and contemporary spiritual eclecticism. This navigation itself constitutes a philosophical act an embodied questioning of the boundaries between immanence and transcendence, between materialist and spiritual interpretations of reality (Predko, & Predko, 2020b, p. 136). The tension between authentic spiritual experience and

commodified religious tourism raises philosophical questions about the relationship between economic exchange and sacred value. Critics argue that commercialization inevitably degrades holiness, transforming sacred sites into spiritual theme parks where shallow experience replaces genuine encounter. Yet empirical research suggests more complex realities, with meaningful experiences occurring despite commercial mediations (Predko, & Predko, 2024, p. 71).

Philosopher Erich Fromm's distinction between "having" and "being" modes of existence provides a useful framework. Religious tourism can operate in either mode as acquisition of spiritual experiences and sacred souvenirs (having) or as transformative engagement with ultimate reality (being). Most religious tourists navigate between these modes, sometimes consuming packaged experiences while also opening themselves to genuine encounter. This philosophical tension manifests practically in visitor behavior and site management. Religious tourism developers face ethical questions regarding appropriate commercialization levels, balancing economic sustainability with spiritual integrity. Meanwhile, visitors develop strategies for accessing authenticity within commercialized environments seeking off-hours experiences, engaging with local devotees rather than tourism professionals, or creating personalized rituals within standardized frameworks (Rinschede, 1992, p. 75).

Technological developments continue reshaping religious tourism through virtual reality pilgrimage experiences, augmented reality overlays at sacred sites, and digital communities of practice connecting global pilgrims. These innovations raise philosophical questions about the necessity for authentic holy encounters. Can virtual pilgrimage deliver a meaningful spiritual experience, or does holiness require physical presence? Early research suggests virtual religious experiences supplement rather than replace physical pilgrimage. Digital pilgrims report meaningful experiences through virtual prayer walls, livestreamed rituals, and remote participation, yet typically view these as preparatory or complementary to eventual physical journeys. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these digital adaptations, with many traditional pilgrimages developing online alternatives that may persist as accessibility options (Konversky et al., 2021, p. 449).

Augmented reality applications increasingly mediate on-site experiences, providing historical context, translation services, or visualization of past architectural configurations at archaeological religious sites. These tools simultaneously deepen visitor understanding and potentially distance them from direct experience by inserting technological interfaces between pilgrim and sacred space. Religious tourism faces growing sustainability challenges as visitor numbers threaten the physical and spiritual integrity of sacred sites. Mass tourism at locations like Angkor Wat, the Vatican, or Mount Kailash raises concerns about environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and diminished spiritual experience through overcrowding (Rinschede, 1992, p. 87).

Climate change particularly threatens religious sites located in vulnerable coastal areas, mountain regions, or drought-prone zones. Rising sea levels endanger coastal temples in India and Thailand, while changing precipitation patterns threaten desert monasteries and water-dependent ritual sites. These environmental challenges necessitate adaptation strategies that balance conservation with continued pilgrim access. Sustainable religious tourism initiatives have emerged at various sites, implementing visitor quotas, timed entry systems, and environmental management practices. These measures seek to preserve

both physical environments and the possibility of meaningful spiritual experience by limiting visitor density and environmental impacts. However, such restrictions raise ethical questions about equitable access to holiness, potentially privileging wealthy visitors who can afford premium access options (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 88).

Religious tourism increasingly involves interfaith encounter as sacred sites attract visitors from diverse traditions. This trend reflects both growing religious pluralism within societies and increased global mobility. Historically exclusive sites now accommodate visitors motivated by comparative religious study, spiritual eclecticism, or cultural interest rather than traditional devotion. These interfaith dimensions create both challenges and opportunities. Site managers navigate complex questions regarding appropriate behavior for visitors from different faith backgrounds, sometimes implementing differentiated access policies or educational requirements. Simultaneously, shared sacred space creates potential for interreligious dialogue and understanding through common appreciation of holiness experiences.

Several intentional interfaith pilgrimage routes have developed in response to this trend, particularly in conflict regions seeking reconciliation. The Abraham Path through the Middle East traces the patriarch's journey through landscapes sacred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while peace pilgrimages in Bosnia-Herzegovina connect sites sacred to Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim communities. These initiatives reimagine religious tourism as a peacebuilding practice using shared appreciation for holiness to bridge ideological divides. The experience of holiness through religious tourism reveals persistent human yearning for connection with transcendent reality across cultural and historical contexts. Despite secularization theories predicting religion's decline, sacred travel continues attracting millions worldwide, adapting to contemporary conditions while preserving traditional functions.

Religious tourism illuminates fundamental philosophical questions about embodiment, authenticity, mediation, and transcendence in modern contexts. The pilgrim-tourist navigates complex tensions between commercialization and spiritual experience, between traditional religious frameworks and individualized spiritual seeking, between physical presence and digital mediation. These navigations constitute not merely consumer choices but philosophical engagements with ultimate questions of meaning, value, and reality (Albera, & Eade, 2015, p. 99). Sociologically, religious tourism patterns reveal changing dimensions of religious practice, gender dynamics, and globalization effects. The demographics of who visits sacred sites and how these patterns shift over time provides valuable insight into broader social transformations. As religions adapt to modern conditions, their sacred geographies evolve accordingly, with new sites emerging while traditional destinations reinterpret their significance for contemporary audiences.

Going forward, religious tourism faces significant challenges and opportunities through technological innovation, sustainability pressures, and interfaith encounters. How these sacred journeys adapt to these forces will likely determine the continued viability of religious tourism as a mechanism for accessing holiness in increasingly complex global contexts. The persistent appeal of religious tourism suggests that despite modernization's disenchanting effects, humans continue seeking experiences that transcend ordinary reality. Sacred sites persist as locations where such transcendence seems particularly accessible where the veil between immanent

and transcendent realms appears momentarily translucent, offering glimpses of holiness amid ordinary existence.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that religious tourism is not merely a matter of spiritual consumption or heritage appreciation, but a complex existential practice in which individuals seek embodied experiences of holiness. The integration of pilgrimage with commerce, media, and institutional frameworks reflects the dynamic ways in which sacred experience is both preserved and transformed in modernity. The role of ritual, architecture, sensory environments, and guided interpretation reveals that holiness is not located solely in the object or place, but emerges through interaction between space, belief, and intention. This raises several philosophical and sociological implications. Firstly, the notion of authenticity in sacred experience is not static but negotiated shaped by personal background, communal context, and institutional mediation. Secondly, the commodification of holiness does not necessarily negate transcendence, but introduces new tensions and paradoxes that pilgrims must navigate. Thirdly, religious tourism reveals ongoing re-enchantment within secular society: even in globalized, technologically mediated settings, the human search for the sacred persists in meaningful, adaptive forms. The multiplicity of motivations among religious tourists also challenges binary categories of "pilgrim" and "tourist". Instead, most participants engage in hybrid modes of travel where devotion, curiosity, healing, leisure, and cultural exploration intersect. Gender, globalization, and digital innovation further diversify these patterns, showing that religious tourism is both an individual spiritual journey and a mirror of contemporary social dynamics.

Religious tourism remains a powerful and resilient channel through which individuals encounter holiness in an increasingly disenchanted world. Despite the pressures of commercialization, institutional framing, and global transformation, sacred sites continue to offer pilgrims spaces of meaning, transcendence, and communal belonging. The adaptive nature of religious travel, incorporating tradition, innovation, and personal experience, ensures its continued relevance in the 21st century. This study contributes to the understanding of religious tourism not only as a socio-cultural practice but also as a lived phenomenology of the sacred. By analyzing how holiness is experienced, mediated, and embodied across traditions and geographies, the research highlights the enduring human longing for connection with the transcendent—a longing that persists even amid modern fragmentation. Future research may further explore comparative interfaith pilgrimage, the ethics of sacred space preservation, and the theological implications of virtual sacred experiences in a post-COVID world.

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ДОСВІД СВЯТОСТІ: РЕЛІГІЙНИЙ ТУРИЗМ У СУЧАСНОМУ СУСПІЛЬСТВІ

Вступ. Досліджено феномен святості через релігійний туризм у сучасному суспільстві, розглянуто його філософські засади, соціологічну динаміку та еволюцію практик. Наголошено, що релігійний туризм являє собою унікальне перехрестя духовності, комерції, культурної спадщини та особистих пошуків трансцендентності. Спируючись на такі теоретичні засади, як *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* Рудольфа Отто та концепція ієрофанії Мірчі Еліаде, порушено питання про те, чому певні фізичні локації визначаються як священні і як вони формують духовний досвід паломників.

Методи. Основною дослідження є міждисциплінарний набір якісних методологічних підходів, які дозволяють комплексно охопити феномен святості в контексті релігійного туризму. Зокрема, герменевтичний підхід використано для інтерпретації богословських і філософських текстів, що розкривають сутність і прояв святості. Особливу увагу приділено концепціям *mysterium tremendum*

et fascinans Рудольфа Отто та ієрофанії Мірчі Еліаде, а також релігійним нарративам і паломницьким свідченням. У свою чергу, структурно-функціональний метод дозволяє дослідити роль релігійного туризму у підтримці духовної ідентичності, соціальної єдності та морального порядку. Прикладом слугують хадж в ісламі чи культ марійських святинь у католицизмі. Для розкриття особистісного досвіду святості залучається феноменологічний метод, який фокусується на сенсорних і емоційних переживаннях паломників у сакральних просторах, таких як Єрусалим, Люрд чи Варанасі. Додатково психологічний підхід допомагає проаналізувати внутрішні мотивації релігійних мандрівників, їхні пошуки зцілення, надії чи емоційної рівноваги, що особливо проявляється під час паломництва до місць марійських об'явлень. Зрештою, комунікативний підхід дає змогу дослідити, як сакральний досвід передається через мову, нарративи, релігійних гідів, а також сучасні цифрові медіа – зокрема в контексті віртуальних паломництв і онлайн-спільнот, які набули поширення під час пандемії COVID-19.

Результати. Показано, що досвід святості опосередковується через чуттєве залучення, символічний простір і спільну участь. Сакральні місця функціонують як архітектурні та нарративні фасилітатори духовної трансформації. Дослідження висвітлює напруженість між комерціалізацією та автентичністю, показуючи, як паломники орієнтуються в інституційних межах, економічному тиску та особистій відданості. Гендер, глобалізація та цифрові технології ще більше змінюють досвід паломництва, створюючи плюралістичний та гібридний релігійний простір.

Висновки. Доведено, що релігійний туризм залишається життєво важливим шляхом до переживання святості в сучасному світі. Виявлено, що, незважаючи на процеси секуляризації та комерціалізації, паломництво продовжує відображати наполегливі пошуки людством сенсу та трансцендентності. Сталість сакральних місць постає як нагальна проблема, що вимагає балансу між збереженням і доступом до них. Феномен релігійного туризму, таким чином, ілюструє адаптивну і тривалу природу залучення до сакрального в сучасному суспільстві.

Ключові слова: святість, релігійний туризм, паломництво, сакральні місця, духовний досвід.

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