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## Religious Tourism as a Development Factor for Peripheral Areas: The Case of the Polish-Czech Border

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** This article presents selected results of studies on the impact of religious tourism on the development of peripheral areas on the example of the Polish-Czech border area. The study subject was determining whether religious tourism can be a factor conducive to local development.

**Approach/Methodology/Design:** The study was conducted based on data available in public statistics and analysis of available literature of the subject. The study covered 2 sanctuaries: St. Anne Mountain (Góra Świętej Anny) and Turza Śląska, located in the southern border area of Poland, in the communes of Leśnica and Gorzyce.

**Findings:** Religious tourism is not perceived as a development factor in strategic documents of the studied Communes. Increased border traffic and growing spending by foreigners in the border area point out to the development potential of different forms of business in the Polish-Czech border area.

**Practical Implications:** The study has proven that it is necessary to create an integrated tourist product based on cultural, social and religious values of the region in order for the religious tourism to develop.

**Originality/Value:** Proposed solutions are to contribute to a growth in the quality of services offered to religious tourists in both studied Communes.

**Keywords:** Religious tourism, peripheral areas, regional development.

**JEL classification:** O12, R11, R58.

**Paper Type:** Research article.

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## 1. Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the forms of tourism that has been developed over years, and currently, it is gaining more and more enthusiasm. Among areas attracting believers from all over the world, we can find places of importance to Christians, Jews and Muslims. Many of them combine large religions and have a global dimension. Other are local and important for communities in respective countries or regions.

In spite of a growing tendency of secularization of social life, pilgrimage is one of popular forms of emphasizing one's attachment to faith in Poland. The fact that annually approximately 7 million people visit the main religious centers in Poland can prove the constant popularity of tourism motivated by religion. It means that religious tourism involving almost 38 million people can be regarded as an important part of the dynamically developing tourism sector. Many pilgrimage destinations in Poland have a long tradition in attracting believers from the country and abroad. Without doubt, these are Jasna Góra, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, Licheń or Łagiewniki. Apart from these most popular places of worship in Poland, there are numerous smaller centers of cult connected with the coexistence of Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the territory of Poland for centuries.

## 2. The Scope and Methods of Research

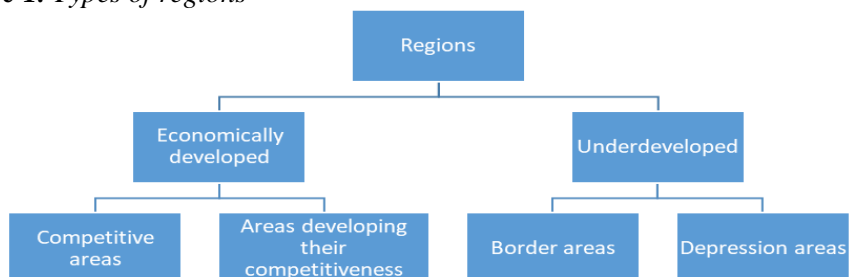
The purpose of this article is to present the role of religious tourism in the development of peripheral areas. The presented study is a part of a broader scientific project aimed at verifying the following hypothesis: *“Tourism is an essential development factor for peripheral areas”*. Research was conducted based on data available in public statistics, studies by the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics and analysis of available literature of the subject. Research based on CATI methodology, including 30 interviews with entrepreneurs, was of key importance from the point of view of verifying the research hypothesis. The study covered 2 sanctuaries: St. Anne Mountain (Góra Świętej Anny) and Turza Śląska, located in the communes of Leśnica and Gorzyce in the southern border area of Poland.

## 3. Tourism as a Development Factor for Peripheral Areas

Efforts aimed at delineating the borders of a territory which the man or a group of people claimed their own is strongly rooted in history. For centuries, borders reflected aspirations of nations to hold control over a given territory and served the purpose of isolation or protection. Their clear isolation function caused that border areas are considered to be problematic areas. The peripheral nature of border areas has been consolidated for years (Olechnicka, 2004). Due to the divisive function of borders and buffer-like nature of the border area, they were considered to be peripheral areas with significantly lower development dynamics (Figure 1). For

centuries, borders made daily contacts difficult, and often even prevented them (Malkowski, 2011; Przybyła, 1995; Miszczuk, 2013). They constituted an administrative barrier impeding the development of commerce, movement of capital or people (Krok, 2006).

**Figure 1.** *Types of regions*



**Source:** *Prepared by the authors.*

Many geographic, economic and social factors determine the peripheral nature of a given area. According to Martinez, border areas are characterized by five processes: transnationalism, sense of separation and dissimilarity, ethnic conflicts and accommodation zone, immigration zone and place of international conflict and accommodation (Martinez, 1994).

According to the experience of the authors, the peripheral nature of a border area does not refer to its distance from decision-taking centers, but primarily to a lower quality of life resulting from insufficient economic development, monocultural economic functions or low quality of social capital. For this reason, it is necessary to take actions aimed at boosting social and economic processes in border areas. The problem related to developing new economic functions in border areas and the need to maintain a wide range of their social functions identifying communities inhabiting border areas is becoming an extremely interesting direction in economic research (Kłodziński and Okuniewski, 1993; Sammel, Prochorowicz and Majewska, 2013).

The need to stop presenting border areas as declining and doomed to marginalization is connected with noticing unique values of these areas. In line with changing functions of borders, new development directions of the current development model for these areas should be taken into consideration. The multifunctional development model for border areas should become one of the basic elements of policy focusing on peripheral areas in Poland. It concerns in particular taking into account higher accessibility of these regions, which affects their attractiveness. This applies to availability of resources, new investment opportunities or search for innovative forms of developing the competitiveness of border areas.

Contemporary multifunctional development concepts stress the significance of the development of services (Cheba and Szopik-Depczyńska, 2017). Their development leads to raising the quality of life for the residents by increasing prosperity, availability of basic consumption goods, development of infrastructure, etc. Strong emphasis on the priority significance of the multifunctional development model when implementing strategic objectives for border areas provides an opportunity to use their unique potential.

Southern border areas of current territory of Poland are an example of interaction of many cultures, traditions and religions. This area is an interesting cultural phenomenon. Different religious groups: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Orthodox believers, meet within a small area. Communities embracing different values coexist there in peace. It creates conditions for the development of a competitive tourist product, which may become an essential development factor for the peripheral area. At the same time, due to secularization of the Czech society, a vast majority of preserved places of worship are located on the Polish side of the border. They have become an important factor of cultural and religious integration of the Polish-Czech border area.

#### 4. Religious Tourism

Religious tradition and heritage are being redefined in the contemporary world. One of the forms of manifesting one's attachment to faith is religious tourism. Consideration of pilgrimage as the meeting point of the sacred and the profane is an interesting research process. It requires a multi-faceted approach to the current dimension of religiousness, taking into account centuries-old traditions and a number of other economic, social and cultural conditionings. Travels to places of religious worship originated in prehistoric times (Puşcaşu, 2015; Olsen and Timothy, 2006). They stemmed from beliefs and religions, accompanying the man closely in subsequent stages of development of culture and civilization (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Participation of Poles in a pilgrimage



**Source:** Prepared on the basis of: *Czy tylko Jasna Góra? Doświadczenia pielgrzymkowe Polaków (Only Jasna Góra? Pilgrimage Experiences of Poles)*, Survey Report No. 114/2017, CBOS.

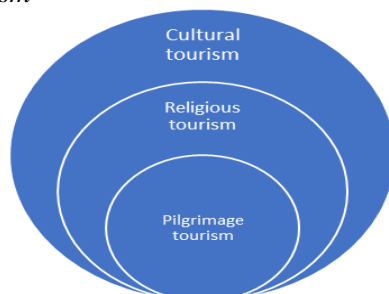
They can be regarded as one of the oldest manifestations of human migration, including also tourism. According to estimates, nowadays, approx. 300 million people make pilgrimages, of whom over a half are Christians. Poland is one of the countries where the movement of pilgrims has been constant from the beginnings of Poland's statehood, and pilgrimage is an element of our culture, identity and economy of individual regions of Poland. The oldest sources indicate that pilgrims from the Polish-Czech border area visited Jasna Góra Monastery already in the 15th century. A survey carried out in 2017 indicates that 32% of Poles declare that they went on a pilgrimage at least once in their life, and 18% went on several pilgrimages. The notion of religious tourism as part of widely understood tourism is not clearly defined. It is due to the complex nature of this phenomenon reflected in numerous reasons for which religious tourists go on a pilgrimage. According to Smith, religious tourism should be perceived as a certain continuum, encompassing numerous and diversified activities and entities, from the participant of a 'holy' pilgrimage to a tourist who is completely secular or 'alien' in religious terms (Smith, 1992). Therefore, it seems that religious tourism can be understood as a journey for religious or religious and sightseeing reasons, the main purpose of which are:

- destinations connected with the history of religion;
- places of religious worship;
- places of religious events;
- sacred buildings (both historical and contemporary).

The notions of 'religious tourism' and 'pilgrimage tourism' are often perceived in literature as synonyms. Gaworecki believes that it is not fully justified, because the main purpose of religious tourism is participation in religious events, however, it does not exclude other purposes, e.g. sightseeing or religious purposes combined with sightseeing (Gaworecki, 2007). Other researchers studying issues connected with religious migration point out that it is necessary to distinguish between religious tourism and pilgrimage (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Di Giovine, 2011). They demonstrate that the priority in pilgrimage is the religious interest usually connected with prayer, penance and other forms of worship both underway and in the pilgrimage destination (Figure 3). For this reason, we should assume that pilgrimages constitute a specific type of tourist trips (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2008). The main components of religious tourism are (Zioło, 2011):

- a person on his/her way – i.e. belief in the presence of the sacred, acts of religious worship and petitions, worship, thanks;
- active meeting with the sacred in destinations of religious worship – i.e. the atmosphere of a religious place, accessibility of religious worship destinations and the rank of these places;
- tourist and religious space – i.e. transport accessibility, natural and cultural values and an additional tourist offer.

**Figure 3.** Religious tourism



*Source:* Prepared by the authors.

It would mean that religious tourism is a wider notion than pilgrimage, which apart from the sphere of the sacred encompasses also the sphere of the profane identified as the need to visit places of religious importance, also in order to get to know them. This way, we can arrive at the conclusion that not each journey to a religious cult destination should be regarded as pilgrimage. However, it does not change the fact that the character of visited places may influence the deeply spiritual nature of experiences of people visiting centers of worship of different religions. John Paul II also paid special attention to spiritual values of religious tourism, indicating that tourism, and especially religious tourism, contributes to the development of a dialog between civilizations and cultures (Ostrowski, 1997).

## 5. Religious Tourism as a Region's Development Factor

Contemporary economy is becoming more and more globalized. Shopping abroad or holidays spent traditionally abroad are not surprising any more (Malkowski, 2019). Religious tourism is also a form of activity of societies (Vukonic, 2002). High mobility of contemporary societies, accessibility of even distant areas in terms of transport make this branch of the economy develop in a dynamic way. Pilgrimage is developing as one of the most important religious practices in modern world.

However, a contemporary religious tourist cannot be identified with a medieval pilgrim. Nowadays, pilgrims look for spiritual experiences and expect sensations connected with aesthetic aspects and sightseeing, but most of all look for high-quality services. This is why, different forms of modern tourism, including also religious tourism, have a huge potential for the multifunctional development of peripheral areas.

The concept of multifunctional development is based on efforts to incorporate complementary functions into the economic space. Functional diversification is beneficial for the development of peripheral regions. On the one hand, implementation of a model assuming the creation of different new sources of income for the communities living in border areas enables improving the quality of lives of

the residents, while on the other hand, it further determines the process of searching for new economic functions in the region. One of such new functions, which are rapidly developing in the region of the south border area of Poland, is religious tourism. Religious tourism is connected in a natural way with the movement of tourists, thus, constitutes an important part of economy. It is an important social and economic phenomenon that can be used in developing the region's competitiveness on the basis of local resources. Areas where centers of worship, places connected with the history of religion or attractive sacred buildings are located become beneficiaries of increasing tourism movement in a special way.

According to a survey carried out in Poland, 58% of pilgrims said that the reason for their pilgrimage was the desire to pray in a specific intention. As many as 48% of the respondents point out to exceptional spiritual experiences connected with the participation in a pilgrimage. Approximately one-fourth of pilgrims went on a pilgrimage for curiosity. Touristic reasons were the priority for almost 20% of pilgrims. The concept of tourism as a local development factor is very broad (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999; Álvarez-García, Durán-Sánchez and Río-Rama, 2018; Sharpley, 2001). It includes the tourist infrastructure, meeting tourists' needs, making tourist attractions available, marketing of destinations, tourist information, transport, quality and availability of accommodation and restaurants (Joppe, 1996). Generally, we can look at religious tourism as a phenomenon influencing local development from the social, cultural, spatial and economic perspective.

The survey showed that as many as one-third of Poles (32%) declare that they participated in a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetimes (regardless of its form and purpose), including 14% who participated once and 18% more than once. According to available analyses of pilgrim movement in Poland, Poles make pilgrimages primarily in parish groups. It applies to as many as 56% of people who have ever participated in a pilgrimage. Only 30% of pilgrims indicated that the pilgrimage was organized by a group of friends. Individual pilgrimage is not a widely spread phenomenon in our country – only 7% of all pilgrimage participants chose this form of pilgrimage.

Every year, places of worship in Poland are visited by over 7 million people, who become the consumers of a number of services and products accompanying this form of tourism. Thus, religious tourism can be a factor influencing a region's capacity to generate ever higher income and increasing the quality of life of the region's inhabitants. It is possible as a consequence of actions aimed at creating an attractive tourist offer addressed to participants of religious tourism.

Development of different forms of tourism, including religious tourism, in border areas is possible thanks to fast technical development and dissemination of knowledge and innovation. Due to the economic aspect of this undertaking, a

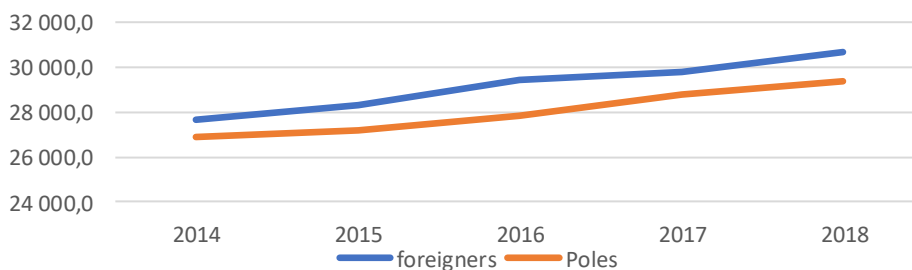
religious tourist should be regarded as a fully fledged consumer. Tourists having religious motivations expect high-quality tourist services connected with the stay in places with special religious values, and also additional accompanying attractions.

Tourism is an important development factor included in the debate on local development conditionings in border areas. It would be purposeful to conduct studies on the significance of religious tourism for the development of specific peripheral areas. Two sanctuaries located in the Polish-Czech border area were covered by the research. Saint Anne Sanctuary located on St. Anne Mountain in the Commune of Leśnica and the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima in Turza Śląska in the Commune of Gorzyce. Both sanctuaries are important places of worship for the local communities as well as the biggest tourist attractions on the local scale. However, analysis of strategic documents in both studied Communes showed that the potential of religious tourism development was not analyzed as a local development factor.

The development of tourism is the main strategic objective in the Commune of Leśnica Development Strategy for the years 2011-2021. However, the document authors do not perceive religious tourism to be an opportunity for the Commune's development. The Commune of Gorzyce did not create a complex tourism development concept. The available Tourism Development Program for the Commune of Gorzyce was drawn up in 2003 and has never been updated. It includes a number of projects of which some relate directly to the development of religious tourism. It does not however perceive religious tourism as the Commune's development direction. Neither does it refer to the issue of creation of a new tourist product based on the potential of religious tourism.

Therefore, it seems that in the case of both self-governments, strategic analysis of the possibility to use this form of tourist activity as a factor enhancing competitiveness was not conducted. The movement on the Polish-Czech border growing year by year proves that there is a potential for increasing the number of tourists visiting both sanctuaries (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Crossings of the Polish-Czech border in thous. in the years 2014-2018



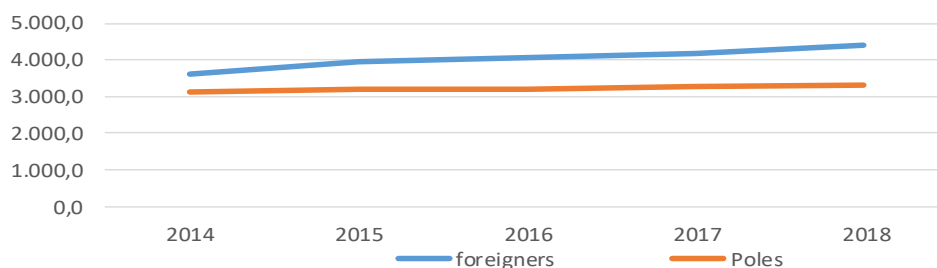
**Source:** Prepared by the authors on the basis of the Border Guard data.



Surveys carried out among local entrepreneurs showed that religious tourism is an important and even very important factor of local development. 67% of the respondents expressed this belief. More than 60% of the respondents indicated that there were religious tourists among their customers. According to the surveyed entrepreneurs, average spending connected with the purchase of products or services by tourists range from PLN 30 to 50 (80% of answers). Among the products and services bought by tourists, devotional items and food products were usually indicated. According to the entrepreneurs, the estimate number of religious tourists visiting both sanctuaries was 50 thousand people per year. It means that the revenues of both Communes connected with services for religious tourist can reach even PLN 2.5 million per year. It is a considerable amount in the budgets of both studies Communes. For example, PLN 8.3 million was spent for investment in the Commune of Gorzyce in 2018, while in the Commune of Leśnica slightly more than PLN 12 million. According to available data, we should expect that in subsequent years the tourist spending in both Communes will continue to grow.

Analysis of spending by tourists crossing the Polish-Czech border shows that they increased from PLN 6,747.6 million to PLN 7,728.3 million in the period 2014-2018, i.e. by over 14 percentage points. An increase in spending by foreigners crossing the Polish-Czech border is especially visible. It grew from PLN 3,633.2 million in 2014 to PLN 4,406.3 million in 2018 (Figure 5). Based on data from 2018, 10.2% of foreigners crossing the Polish-Czech border say that leisure and recreation are the purpose of their visit .

**Figure 5.** *Spending by people crossing the Polish-Czech border in thousands PLN*



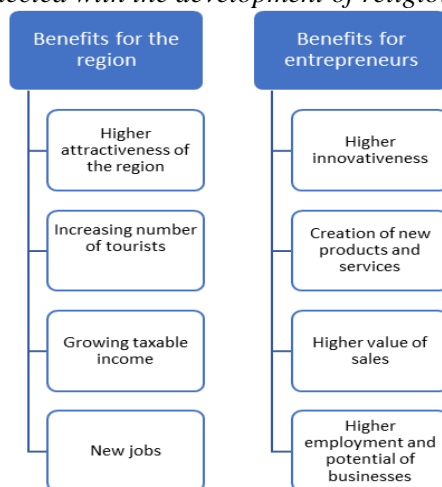
**Source:** *Ruch graniczny oraz wydatki cudzoziemców w Polsce i Polaków za granicą w 2018 roku [Border Traffic and Spending by Foreigners in Poland and Poles Abroad in 2018], GUS, Warsaw, 2019.*

A vast majority of people crossing the Polish-Czech border say that they spend money in the distance of 50 km from the border (over 90% of answers in 2018). According to entrepreneurs, the number of pilgrims visiting both sanctuaries has been permanent in recent years, although it differs depending on the season of the year. The major number of tourists visit the sanctuaries between May and September. The pilgrims are primarily Poles. Since the sanctuaries are located in a

border area, there are also Czech and German tourists. In the opinion of the respondents, services addressed to religious tourists in both Communes (Leśnica and Gorzyce) should be developed. More than 70% of the respondents claimed that they were interested in participating in the creation of a comprehensive tourist product based on religious tourism. An expected effect of these activities according to the respondents (based on the popularity of answers) will be (Figure 6):

- dynamic growth of the number of tourists attracted by the desire to experience spiritual and aesthetic sensations;
- dynamic growth of the local economy as a consequence of expenditure on construction and extension of the tourist infrastructure in the Commune;
- creation and maintenance of jobs;
- gaining importance by the Commune as a center stimulating local and regional cultural development.

**Figure 6.** Benefits connected with the development of religious tourism



*Source:* Prepared by the authors.

The observations carried out show that benefits connected with the development of religious tourism have a direct impact on the improvement of the economic situation on the local and regional scale.

## 6. Recommendations

The analysis of survey results and observation of the tourist services market in Poland and abroad demonstrate that it is necessary to further develop tourist services in the Polish-Czech border area. It should primarily concern a higher quality of the tourist offer, and also the need to create new products and services. This would

enable increasing the region's tourist attractiveness and the number of tourists visiting both Communes.

The development of services for religious tourists should go in line with the creation of an integrated tourist product based on a number of tangible and intangible goods and services constituting the object of market exchange. Tangible goods include mostly the tourist infrastructure and tourist attractions based on natural and cultural elements. When it comes to services, the tourist product includes accommodation as well as the restaurant, leisure and recreational offer. Religious tourists require diversification of the services offered to them, while keeping on increasing their quality. This is why, the investment activity should be connected with the creation of a diversified tourist offer. The surrounding is an important element of the tourist product in peripheral areas. It concerns in particular the availability of transport to especially attractive places and elements shaping the image of the place as attractive and tourist-friendly. All these elements build positive emotions, which are especially important in religious tourism.

Creation of an integrated tourist product is an element of marketing activity. Everything that tourists buy separately (e.g. accommodation, food) or in the form of a certain package of services is a tourist product connected with religious tourism. It is also a combination of what tourists do and the features of the equipment and services they use. It is the entire experience from the time of leaving the house until return. For the tourist product based on religious tourism to be prepared, an inventory of the existing tourist potential should be conducted, including among others:

- analysis of the region's tourist attractiveness from the point of view of natural, cultural, religious, environmental values and transport accessibility;
- analysis of the area development taking into account: quality and diversification of accommodation and restaurant offer;
- analysis of strategic documents from the cross-border, national, regional, district and commune perspective in connection with potential sources of financing of religious tourism projects;
- identification of the religious tourist's needs and possibilities of fulfilling them;
- establishing of partnership among self-government authorities, entrepreneurs, religious associations, leaders of social and cultural life.

## **7. Conclusions**

The growing tourist attractiveness is the effect of activities carried out by local entrepreneurs, local authorities and associations, who develop an attractive tourist

offer, and also of cultural and religious conditionings. As a consequence of this, the interest of tourists in local attractions has been growing. It translates into higher tax revenues, creation of new jobs, higher income from activity for local entrepreneurs. Religious tourism is a dynamically developing phenomenon characterized not only by the spiritual dimension. The contemporary tourist is a more and more demanding customer who wants to combine spirituality and sightseeing.

Religious tourism is a potential source of income for residents engaged in the creation of an attractive tourist product. The estimated number of religious tourists visiting both sanctuaries is over 50 thousand people annually. With an average value of spending amounting to PLN 50, it indicates the potential income for local entrepreneurs. Sanctuaries in small typically rural communes near the border were selected as the study object. Research showed that the current strategic documents in the Communes did not take into account religious tourism as an important development factor.

According to surveyed entrepreneurs, the sanctuaries on St. Anne Mountain and in Turza Śląska should become an element of the Communes' tourist product. It is necessary to create an attractive tourist product encompassing a number of innovative solutions consisting in creating new products and services in order to develop tourism. This will enable increasing the number of visitors and can result in higher spending by them.

Increasing the engagement of local authorities in creating conditions for the development of tourism in the Communes is an important factor of religious tourism development in both studied Communes. It would be purposeful to develop strategic development plans for the tourism sector in the Commune including the specific nature of religious tourism. The potential connected with the development of this specific form of cultural tourism requires also undertaking integrated promotional actions.

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