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RELIGIOUS NEEDS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the question of the relationship between tourism and religion, which can be characterized by competition, mutual influence, being complementary and even co-habitualness. Tourism and religion are competitive by nature given that both 'compete' over people's growing leisure time (Smith 1992). Alternatively, they can be complementary or co-habitual if the religious tourist manages to combine them within the time framework of his/her leisure time. The way these relationships are shaped is also influenced by the way the tourism industry perceives and addresses the tourists' religious needs.

Tourism and religion can also impact on tourist behaviour; for instance, religion influences the choice of destination, tourist product preferences, and the offering of religion related opportunities and facilities to tourists. Similar to other tourism subgroups religious tourism should be seen more in the context of the current competitive environment, in which the tourism and hospitality industries are constantly searching for new customer segments. In this context the tourism industry often inhibits a competitive relationship, where tourists feel they have no other alternative than to compromise on their spiritual beliefs in favour of a tourist experience. Instead, tourism and religion should pursue a complementary if not co-habitual relationship. For this purpose, accommodating the religious needs of any faith and further studies addressing these needs, are required.

Although religious needs are deemed less important in a dominantly post-modern secular if not atheist market, more people with a religious affiliation (religious tourists) are expected to become tourists, especially in developing countries, where tourism is still at an incipient stage (Rinschede 1992). Moreover, more religious tourists join multifunctional journeys especially to Western industrialized countries like Israel, which involve dominant religious factors along with other tourist motivations (Weidenfeld 2006). Similar to other tourism subgroups, e.g. elderly, gay, and disabled tourists, the special desires of religious tourists need not be marginalized. Given that religion and tourism can be competitive by nature, it is plausible to question whether tourists who practise their religion at home do so in a similar way while away from home.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A small number of papers addressing the needs of religious tourists focus on the pilgrim's needs and ignores the ordinary tourist, who is neither very religious nor engaged in a spiritual-religious journey; Fleischer and Nitzav (1995) provide some explicit conclusions and operational recommendations concerning the religious needs of Christian pilgrims in the tourism industry. Hoffmann (1994) does likewise concerning the Jewish ultra-orthodox tourism segment in the Israeli hospitality industry, and the research of Mansfeld et al (2000) on Moslem tourists is the first - and to the best of our knowledge, the only one - which addresses the religious needs of the Moslem tourist in the hospitality industry in Israel. Weidenfeld (2006) studied the religious needs of Christian tourists in the hospitality industry by examining the religious requirements of "the tourist, who is religious" (Vukonic 1996) i.e. the tourist, whose primary motivation is not necessarily a religious journey. Weidenfeld (2006) suggested that employing Christian workers at a hotel, providing information on religious activities and institutions as well as the provision of a Bible in a hotel room occupied by very religious Christians would satisfy additional important needs.

A more generic paper focuses on adhering to religious groups' food service requirements, including those of Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians as a marketing tool for hotel operators and suggests prohibitions, preparations and services (Dugan, 1994). Unfortunately, more recent studies in tourism, such as Shackley (2001, 2003 & 2004), Timothy and Olsen (2006), have largely ignored the religious needs in the tourism and hospitality industries, although this issue has already been raised by the tourism and hospitality industry press. For example, Heyer (2008) elaborates on the massive and rapid development of 'Sharia-compliant hotels', which follow the existing trend of Sharia-compliant banking, insurance, and more.

The absence of studies concerning the religious aspect of the hospitality product can well exemplify this lacuna. Its marketing and design are good examples of a tourism product that has not been paid due attention by scholars and hoteliers (Weidenfeld 2006). Hoteliers for the most part sell the same product to all tourists regardless of their special desires. They rarely go one step further towards tailoring the hotel product, in general, and the hotel room, in particular, to the special requirements and preferences of any specific group of tourists (Heo *et al* 2004).

FINDINGS

A study highlighting the importance of satisfying religious needs in order to increase the level of satisfaction of potential Moslem tourists hosted by the hospitality industry was conducted in Israel (Mansfeld *et al* 2000). Following the Israeli – Jordanian peace accord of 1994 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority - a new form of tourism appeared. Non-Arab Moslem pilgrims (for the most part from Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Turkey) began visiting Israel as a part of their traditional pilgrimage (whether *Hajj* or *Umra*) to Mecca and Medina. The numbers of these visitors kept growing, and towards the end of the 20th century, approximately 100,000 Muslims visited Israel annually for short periods of time, lasting between twelve hours and a few days. The methodology used by Mansfeld et al was rather eclectic and involved a very comprehensive literature review on Moslem ethnic minorities in Europe and North America, pilgrimage and tourism in Islam. It also included face-to-face in-depth interviews with Jewish and Palestinian tour operators, hoteliers and tour guides in Haifa,

Nazareth and East Jerusalem, as well as participant observations with groups of Turkish tourists visiting Israel.

Based on the Koran and on the writings of several scholars that have highlighted the urban nature and emphasis of Islam (cf. Ritter 1975 in Mansfeld *et al* 2000: 77), Mansfeld et al. recommend development of infrastructure for Moslem visitors in cities rather than in rural tourism settings. Furthermore, Mansfeld et al (2000) give explicit recommendations for the hospitality industry in Israel, stemming from the following particular needs of Moslem tourists:

- 1) Providing accommodation close to Moslem sites is required, in order to absorb an increasing number of Moslem pilgrims and tourists, particularly in Jerusalem, the most popular destination in the Holy Land.
- 2) Placing 'Mecca stickers' in every room when occupied by Moslem pilgrims. Mecca stickers are stickers with ornamented arrows pointing towards Mecca, and hence – the Moslem visitor knows the direction of the prayer. Such stickers or tiles are common in hotels in Moslem countries, but in a place like Israel, they might also have the opposite effect among certain non-Moslem visitors, and therefore the recommendation was to use stickers (temporary signs) rather than tiles (permanent signs).
- 3) Placing a copy of the Koran in every room. Once again, the Koran can serve as a temporary sign that can be replaced with another temporary sign – the Bible.
- 4) Providing food which complies with Moslem dietary laws.

DISCUSSION

It is argued that more studies should be conducted within hotels, where hospitality environments and their special tourist segments e.g. religious tourists of various religions can be identified and separately examined, in light of the need to personify the hotel product. However, religious needs are not confined to the hospitality premises, but are also relevant to other tourism businesses and facilities in other tourism sectors such as attractions, airports, visitor information centres, and food outlets. The authors suggest that the relationship between tourism and religion constitutes a valid and important area of research and that satisfying religious needs in the tourism industry should be taken into consideration in the marketing process. Each religion and its denominations should be subject to further comparative research in terms of the religious tourists' needs and tolerance towards satisfying the needs of other religions. For instance, there is a need for further investigation into the effects of the theological differences between Catholics, Protestants and other Christian denominations and how those differences might affect Christian tourists' preferences as customers. The Islamic equivalent in this case is more culture- than theology-oriented, and can be reduced to cultural characteristics such as food, music and staff dress code.

Additional research into the effect of catering to guests' religious needs in a hotel on the level of satisfaction of tourists affiliated with various religions could be useful for the hospitality industry; exploring and understanding the particular religious needs of tourists at a multi-religion destination is a real challenge that should be addressed. Catering for religious needs implies the need for further debate on the extent to which the

tourism product should be differentiated and personified to respond to the specific requirements of various tourism segments. This was demonstrated by empirical studies conducted in relation to the religious needs of Christian and Moslem tourists and to a lesser extent, of other religions. It is argued that this topic should be further pursued and studied in relation to other religions, additional religious needs, and other tourist products and needs that affect the tourism industry.

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