

## ORTHODOXY IN BULGARIA AND RELATED RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL EVENTS AND THEIR USE FOR THE NEEDS OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN SOUTHWESTERN BULGARIA

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### Abstract

*Religious tourism, both everywhere in the world and here in Bulgaria, is the oldest type of tourism. The people of the past were extremely religious, so by undertaking pilgrimages, they hoped to be healed physically or mentally, to be purified, and thus to come closer to God. Drawing a parallel with today's practice of religious tourism in the country, it should be noted that it is becoming more and more profane and alien to true worship.*

*The spiritual and material cultural heritage of Orthodoxy in Bulgaria as an object of pilgrimage tourism provides great opportunities for development in the country. The purpose of this study is to present the results of a study on the communication policy of monasteries in southwestern Bulgaria as a factor in the development of religious tourism in southwestern Bulgaria. The survey was conducted among visitors to monasteries in southwestern Bulgaria through the use of questionnaires and structured interviews on site when entering or leaving religious sites.*

**Keywords:** religious tourism, religious and cultural events, pilgrimage tourism, communication policy

**JEL Codes:** Z0, Z3

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### Introduction

Describing pilgrimage (religious tourism) as a definition and understanding by the tourism industry and by the Church, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by the term religious (and pilgrimage in particular) tourism. In this regard, as pointed out by a number of foreign scholars (Sommer, A., & Saviano M., 2007) as well as the Bulgarian scientist Encho Kostov, a tourist traveling for religious purposes is a person who leaves his permanent residence for a period not exceeding half a year to visit holy places or religious centres (Kostov, 2000). Religious tourism should generally be understood as the type of activity that satisfies the needs of tourists who want to break away from everyday life and travel to meet religious needs. It originated in those times when the first religions appeared and is the most ancient form of tourism.

In general, religious tourism is divided into two main types:

- pilgrimage tourism also known as pilgrimage;
- religious tourism focused on leisure and learning;

According to theologians, there is an important difference between these two varieties. The purpose of worship is not to meet other people or to see landmarks, but to meet and get to know God Himself. „Because the worshiper does not go to meet other people, not to visit landmarks, natural or historical, but travels to meet God“ (Dimitrov, 1998, pp. 4).

The religious tourism focused on leisure and learning involves visits to religious centres, where tourists can see the existing sites - functioning religious monuments, museums,

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attend services or participate in religious events such as the procession, meditations and others without being religious or engaged in professing a particular religion. The image of the mass tourist implies consumption, triviality and entertainment. He is at odds with the worshiper, known for sobriety, often asceticism, engaged in a deep religious process and, above all, serious. It can be assumed that the wide mass of religious tourists both before and now belongs to the general flow of tourists who visit religious sites, among other things, and do not perceive them as the main destination in their journey (Heinze, 2000, p. 61).

Regardless of travellers' motivation of the, in a broader aspect all trips that are aimed at visiting places of worship can be considered religious tourism.

### **1. Literature review**

There are several types of definitions of religious tourism in the German-language version of the same edition (in German, the term "spiritueller Tourismus" replaces it most often). According to Karin Berkeman, a specialist in cultural history, religious tourism is a spiritually and physically motivated tourist journey of people seeking union with God, the meaning and values of life (Berkemann, 2006). A similar definition is proposed by the theologian Herbert Poensgen: „a form of tourism motivated by the pursuit of intangible values, spiritual healing, unity of material and spiritual and the notions of the afterlife" (Neshkov, 2008, p. 30).

Encho Kostov defines it in the following way: "Specialized type of cultural tourism - a tourist trip motivated by the satisfaction of religious needs through the consumption of religious values" (Kostov, 2000, p. 21). Simply put, religious travel satisfies religious needs that cannot be met without religious values.

According to Kazakov, religious tourism is „a specialized type of cultural tourism, which aims primarily to get acquainted with religious values and their material carriers, their awareness and understanding" (Kazakov, 2002). According to the same author, the development of this type of tourism is possible in those countries whose world-famous cult monuments, revered by the followers of the respective religion are the reason for the formation of large and constant in time visitor flows. There is also no consensus among theologians and tourism professionals on whether a distinction should be made between true believers (pilgrims) and tourists. According to Kazakov, such a division is incorrect because no tourist is forced to visit a church or monastery. Crossing their threshold, he instantly becomes a worshiper who is open to his surroundings and is ready to learn by accepting information from it.

Aleksieva and Stamov define religious tourism as a type of specialized tourism that meets religious and spiritual needs, as well as related art, cultural, historical and other values (Aleksieva & Stamov, 2003). This type of values is also of interest to non-religious tourists, including those with a foreign religion, who nevertheless show interest in culture and art in general.

In his book "Tourism and Religion", Vukonic distinguishes between "movable objects" (icons, coffins, relics), which in his opinion are not of great importance, and immovable ones, which are in the form of buildings. (Vukonic, 1996, p. 60).

Vanya Vasileva summarizes that "religious tourism is a type of alternative tourism, which is associated with visiting various religious sites, provoked by the religious and spiritual needs of travellers" (Vasileva, 2007).

According to Dillard, research in the field of religious tourism is limited to separate, often closely specialized scientific works. There are very few publications that comprehensively address the topic of religious tourism and religious travel (Dillard, 2015).

The definitions for religious tourism presented in this way include the performance of religious practices and religious rituals related to the sites visited as the main motivation for practicing religious tourism. It should be noted that religious tourism is also a specific economic activity in which, although the tourist product in the form of travel to and / or residence in the relevant religious site, is often “disguised” solely as a “spiritual experience”, it is offered and exists only because of the respective interest and specific attitude of tourists who identify themselves as worshipers or believers.

## **2. Historical development of religious tourism**

Pilgrimage or religious tourism originated in the times when the first religions appeared. It is the most ancient form of tourism. Such journeys began with visits by shamans from a particular tribe and continued initially with visits to sacred places from pagan and then monotheistic religions. There is evidence such as stone buildings, dolmens and paintings in Europe, Asia, America and Australia for this phenomenon since prehistoric times. According to Neshkov, in this phenomenon “we find a kind of dialectical connection between the childhood of human civilization, its present and future. The beginnings and early manifestations of the social phenomenon itself, which it signifies, can hardly be registered, arranged, dated (in time) and systematically studied in space. The origin and early forms of religious tourism are related to the evolution of travel and its transformation into tourism. The development of the hospitality industry began with hospices in medieval Europe, which were in fact the forerunners of modern hotels. In addition, it is indisputable that tourism is historically integrated with religion” (Neshkov, 2009).

According to Encho Kostov, “among the peoples of the early highly developed cultures, religion and political power were closely interrelated. The Hittites planned annual festivals and pilgrimages at the same time as their king, and even military campaigns were interrupted. While gatherings and ceremonies in ancient Rome had more political, sporting, and entertainment significance, the celebrations of the ancient Greeks were strictly religious in nature” (Kostov, 2000, p. 73).

For Hinduism in South Asia, rivers and streams, especially the Ganges, are the most important attraction for pilgrims. In Buddhism, places of worship are mostly associated with the life of the Buddha, his activities and the various legends surrounding his personality. Lamaism (a special form of Buddhism) is practiced in Tibet and has its own religious centre in Lhasa. Although no longer practiced today, pilgrimage in to the sacred mountains Buddhist China was widespread. In Japan, unlike China, worship is strongly developed. The tour of 33 sacred places, which are not only objects of mass tourism, also attracts real worshipers.

With the emergence of monotheism in religions, worship changed its character. Believers began to visit not only very famous temples, but also places marked and associated with significant events. In Christianity, the concept of “worship” arises in connection with pilgrimage to places associated with the name of the Savior. In its original sense, worship is a visit to the Holy Land. From time immemorial, many people have wanted to see Bethlehem, Jerusalem, where several religions meet (as far as the major religions are concerned, Christians, Muslims and Jews revere the territories of ancient Palestine for the Holy Land) to travel with other believers on the way to Golgotha, as well as to tour other places described in the Old and New Testaments. After the conquest of Jerusalem by the Seljuks (1079 AD), the pilgrims turned more to Rome, where the holy places of the martyrs for the faith were visited. For political reasons, pilgrimage to Rome also dried up. Then Santiago de Compostela, famous for the tomb of St. Apostle Jacob became the largest centre of attraction for pilgrims from the medieval Western world. A typical example of religious worship is the tourism associated with Lourdes in France. The small town in southwestern France lies at the foot of the Pyrenees.

Known for its Roman Catholic tomb, where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared several times in 1858 at St. Bernadette's, today millions of people worship it every year, driven by faith in the miraculous healings of the water flowing from the tomb.

From a historical point of view, worship originated with the ancient Jews. A striking example of true pilgrimage is found in the Old Testament Bible. Father Abraham, the ancestor of all nations, left his homeland, Ur of the Chaldeans, and, at God's suggestion, set out in search of the Promised Land, which the Lord had promised him (Gen. 12: 1-5). He established such places of worship as Shechem, Bethel, the wooded Mamre. Later, Jerusalem arose in a similar way.

Religion and related beliefs, rituals and holidays have been, and still are, an important motive for travel. According to M. Neshkov, some of the most popular modern tourist destinations are associated with "ancient cult and religious places: the temple of Hathor (goddess of music, love, destiny and the sky, guardian of the pharaohs and distant lands) in Lower Egypt; the sanctuaries at Dodona, Delphi, Olympia, Eleusis, Epidaurus, and others in Greece; the town of Bodh Gaya (one of the four most important places of worship for Buddhists, along with Kushinagar, Lumbini and Sarnat in India), associated with the life and teachings of the Buddha; Jerusalem (the symbol of God's tomb in Israel); Rome with the papal residence in the Vatican; Mount Fuji (a sacred place for Buddhists, revered as a gateway to the afterlife in Japan) and many others" (Neshkov, 2008, p. 25).

Also, the presence of relics of famous saints, such as the example of those of the greatest Bulgarian saint, St. John of Rila Miracle Worker, preserved in churches and monasteries, appeared and continues to appear as a powerful centre of attraction not only for the local population, but also for all Christian nations, attracting many pilgrims and ordinary tourist visitors. The tomb of the Bulgarian saint together with the Rila Monastery became a place of worship, the cult of him spread very widely over the centuries, as the Rila Monastery is currently the largest site of religious and cultural tourism in Bulgaria and Southwestern Bulgaria in particular.

In modern conditions, not only in Bulgaria, but also in a number of tourist destinations around the world, it is quite difficult to distinguish religious tourism in its pure form from tourism related to cultural and historical heritage. An exception in this direction are perhaps the objects of relatively new religious cult practices such as the "prophecies of Fatima" or visits to the Forest of the Cross and the newly built temple and monastery complex of Orthodox worshipers. In any case, in order to be able to talk about successful religious tourism, we should talk about tourism, whose sites are well known and popular, not only in the tourist destination in which they are located, but also outside it.

### **3. Evolution of Orthodoxy and its spiritual and tangible cultural heritage**

The main traditional religion in Bulgaria is Orthodoxy, which, looking back in time, dates back to the very birth of Christianity in our lands. Here is the place to mention that the apostle St. Andrew Protocletos along our entire Black Sea coast, touring its shores and founding the first dioceses there. Another interesting fact is the finding of the relics of St. John the Baptist in 2010, discovered during excavations in the Black Sea town of Sozopol (BNR, 2012).

It is no coincidence that the Apostle Paul himself, crossing Macedonia, passed through today's Bulgarian lands and ordained the first priests, as required by the newly adopted tradition, choosing for this purpose men with proven faith and virtues. These are the first burning hearths of the Orthodox faith in the Bulgarian lands. At the same time, the Christianization of the entire local population is quite a long and complicated process. Pagan beliefs and practices for a long time hindered the adoption of Christianity as a single

monotheistic religion, which eventually managed to soften to some extent the cruel barbaric order among the population and help people rise above their purely animal instincts.

It is well known that only at the beginning of the fourth century through the so-called Edict of Milan (the first document in the world affirming religious tolerance) Christianity was officially recognized as one of the equal religions in the empire (Kolev, 2015, p. 57). Until then, Christianity had been brutally persecuted, with its supporters being barbarically tortured and eventually spectacularly killed to edify all present. Emperor Constantine and his mother Elena contributed the most to the adoption and legalization of the Orthodox faith. Finding part of the holy cross on which the Son of God Jesus Christ was crucified, Queen Helena went to Jerusalem and built the Church of the Nativity on the site of the Cave of Bethlehem, where the God-man Jesus Christ was born (Kolev, 2015, p. 51). In this way, she made a kind of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, setting an example for other Christians to visit them as well as to worship and pay homage to Christian relics (such as consecrated icons depicting the image of Jesus Christ, his mother, as well as the images of martyrs, great martyrs and monks who begged for their faith) and also of fragments of their relics, which had great healing power and were imbued with the grace of Christ.

An extremely important historical event for Bulgaria is the official baptism of the Bulgarians by Prince Boris, which began in 864 and is a complex and difficult process of accepting and establishing Christianity as the official state religion in Bulgaria. The acceptance of the Christian faith was obligatory for all, but it was a far-sighted political decision of the Bulgarian king in order to unite all ethnic groups inhabiting the lands of Bulgaria at that time. "Another important reason is the so-called "Deep Peace", which was concluded in 863 in the city of Constantinople between Byzantium and Bulgaria. With this treaty, Bulgaria accepted Christianity from Orthodox Constantinople, not from Catholic Rome" (Wikipedia, January 12, 2021). Also, some of the Slavs who had already joined Bulgaria had long been Christianized.

When it comes to Orthodoxy in Bulgaria, it played the biggest role in the life of the Bulgarians during the Turkish slavery in our country. Here we must mention the Bulgarian churches and monasteries, in which Bulgarian literature, heritage and culture have been preserved for centuries. Thanks to the two brothers St. Cyril and Methodius, and later to their students, especially to St. Kliment Ohridski, the Bulgarian alphabet and Old Bulgarian literature were created. Prince Boris's dream of an autonomous Bulgarian church and worship in his native language came true. This was the Old Bulgarian language, which was later incorrectly renamed Church Slavonic and is still used today for the regular celebration of the "Holy Eucharist", i.e., liturgy in our Orthodox churches. Also very significant is the fact that the Old Bulgarian language is the first after Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Gothic, to which the texts of the Bible and other scriptures in Europe have been translated (Kolev, 2015, p. 65).

That is why the alphabet of the Slavic peoples has its roots in Bulgaria, which enters the role of missionary and baptizer of the entire Russian people. This is, in fact, the great mission of the Holy Apostolic Princess Olga, who was of Bulgarian origin and introduced Christianity to Russia, baptizing "our Russian brethren".

Only the Bulgarian monasteries and churches kept pure and intact Bulgarian literature, language and culture. Much later, during the Bulgarian Revival, they changed their function and from centres preserving the Bulgarian script became secret hiding places, where the pre-liberation training of the Bulgarian people was carried out, led by the revolutionary and national hero of our country Vasil Levski.

#### **4. Religious tourism in Bulgaria**

Religious tourism, both everywhere in the world and here in Bulgaria, is the oldest type of tourism. The people of the past were extremely religious, so by undertaking pilgrimages,

they hoped to be healed physically or mentally, to be purified, and thus to come closer to God. Drawing a parallel with today's practice of religious tourism in the country, it should be noted that it is becoming more profane and alien to true worship. This fact has its logical explanation. During socialism in Bulgaria, Christianity was stigmatized and partly persecuted, as atheism is the basis of communism as a philosophy of life and a kind of social and political regime (Tsoneva, 2012, p. 38). It is no coincidence that communism is perceived as the newest religion for nations, placing not God but man at the centre of the universe, which dates back to ancient Greece and the Renaissance. All these facts, as well as the urbanization and secularization of the Bulgarian population during the totalitarian regime of Todor Zhivkov are the main reason for the Bulgarian people to withdraw from Orthodoxy and stop participating in its sacraments, as well as the regular attendance of Sunday and holiday services (liturgies), which are performed in Orthodox churches according to the church calendar and tradition of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), which is autocephalous (independent) and chooses its own head (patriarch). The severance of the connection with it led to the collapse of the entire value system of the Bulgarians, to the ossification of morals and manners among the majority of the population. However, after the socialist regime, it became somewhat fashionable to restore the old Orthodox churches in the country as well as to build completely new ones. This rise and growth in the religious consciousness of the Bulgarians led to a visible change concerning the appearance of religious tourism in our country. Monasteries and churches have once again become an important attraction for both the devout worshiper and the religious tourist, and last but not least for the ordinary secular tourist, who admires the old-time architecture and iconography of the Orthodox church. A concrete example can be given with the largest and most beautiful Bulgarian monastery, Rila (one of the three stauropegial monasteries in the country) nestled at the foot of Rila Mountain, which enchants every visitor and plays the role of a business card for Bulgaria, known abroad for its beautiful orthodox monasteries and churches located among picturesque areas and pristine nature. This same monastery as the rock monasteries in the valley of the Rusenski Lom River in Northern Bulgaria are on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The other two Bulgarian stauropegial (i.e., under the direct subordination of the Bulgarian patriarch) monasteries are the Troyan and Bachkovo monasteries. The solemn feast of the Assumption of the Mother of God is celebrated especially solemnly in the holy Troyan monastery. People from all over the country gather here on this day and take part in the worship service, worshipping at the same time the miraculous icon of the Mother of God "Holy Mother of the Three Hands", which is taken out of the temple every year on this day so that as many people as possible can see it. Nowadays, most of them are looking for a solution to their problems through it. The monastery has an extremely interesting history related to the Apostle of Freedom Vasil Levski, who had his own hiding place here and visited the monastery many times, hiding from the persecuting Turks. That is why a museum exposition related to the life and work of Vasil Levski, the brightest and greatest Bulgarian person, is arranged in this holy place.

The Troyan Fair should also be noted as an interesting secular event. People from all over Bulgaria come here every year to present their goods and thus establish business contacts and profit from the sales made during the exciting and big fair. This secular event attracts more secular tourists who want to participate in the three-day festivities, visiting the monastery without any religious motives or motives.

The Bachkovo Monastery is also famous for its miraculous icon of the Most Holy Mother of God. According to legend, this miraculous icon is a copy of the legendary icon of St. The Virgin, painted by ev. Luka flew alone from Georgia to the monastery. It is interesting

that the temple holiday „Assumption“, which is celebrated on August 15 every year is the same for all three major stauropegial monasteries in the country.

An important prerequisite for the development of religious tourism in Bulgaria is the promotion of the so-called temple holidays not only among the Bulgarian population, but also for guests from abroad. Their secular name is also known as church councils, because on a specific date in the church calendar, which celebrates the birthday or death of a famous Orthodox saint, the transfer of holy relics or an important event in the life of the church, the temple with the same name celebrates its temple feast. Another ancient custom since pagan times is the slaughter of a lamb, whose blood symbolizes the sacrifice of God's lamb Jesus Christ on the cross for the salvation of all people regardless of gender and origin (Zidarova & Pavlov, 2009, p. 29).

Animal sacrifice is especially characteristic of Judaism, where the blood of the animals was sprinkled on the altar in the temple and thus the priests begged for mercy from their supreme God (Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion after Zoroastrianism, which was imposed and spread first among the Israelites as God-chosen people) (Kolev, 2015, p. 34).

That is why it remains an ancient custom to prepare a lamb sacrifice for health on the temple holiday of a church or monastery. This tradition has long met with disagreement from people who have different views on this kind of event. These are primarily Protestants, Catholics, and mostly supporters of the teacher Peter Deunov, who considers the sacrifice obsolete from the Old Testament church, but is deeply rooted in Bulgarian life, religion and culture.

## **5. Most famous religious and cultural events in the country**

The most famous religious events that are repeated every year, although not always on the same date (the so-called movable and static holidays) are the Nativity of Christ and the brightest and largest Christian holiday for the Orthodox - Easter. According to an old Bulgarian tradition, during these days a Divine Liturgy is celebrated several times in every functioning Orthodox church and a large flow of people goes to churches and monasteries, even if they only light a candle, pray for health and greet "Christ is Risen". In second place in importance are the holidays of Christmas and Assumption. It is no coincidence that a large part of the Bulgarian temples bears these names, because the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary has been preserved in Orthodoxy for centuries. That is why the largest and most beautiful Bulgarian monastery "Rila" is also called "Assumption". And it is no coincidence that most miraculous icons are images of the Virgin and Child. Of all the saints who shone with holiness and martyrdom, in the foreground in Bulgarian history stands out St. George the Great Martyr. His feast is fixed and is celebrated every time on the sixth of May, and like all Orthodox events a lamb sacrifice is prepared. Two other saints, St. The prophet Elijah and St. Great Martyr Dimitar Mirotochivi are especially respected and revered by the Bulgarian people and other Orthodox nations. A large number of people gather on their holidays – Ilinden is celebrated in the middle of summer, and Dimitrovdan marks the coming of winter. In this direction we should not forget the feast of St. John the Baptist on August 29, when there is a strict fast, as well as the feast of St. Apostles Peter and Paul, which is preceded by a short fast (the so-called Peter's fasts). As a conclusion to this very brief retrospective, mention should be made of the religious events associated with the worship of Christian relics, often carried from one place to another. The best example of this kind of Christian worship are some of the finally transferred relics of St. Ivan Rilski (the greatest and most revered Bulgarian saint, who is also considered the patron saint of the Bulgarian people) in the religious monastery founded by him in the 10th century, and this memorable religious event is celebrated every year on October 19.

Bulgaria is extremely rich and world famous for its Orthodox churches. The number of all Orthodox monasteries here exceeds 160, while the Orthodox churches number in the thousands, and almost every settlement, even small villages, has a church built. This is due to the fact that in the distant past the Bulgarians were extremely religious and adhered to the centuries-old tradition, observing all the customs and rites, the roots of which for some of them come from early pagan times. A good example in this direction can be given by the so-called Nestinarstvo, which was came from ancient Iran (Kolev, 2015, p. 34). Nestinarstvo is an ancient pagan cult in which those who perform it after falling into a trance dance barefoot on embers. According to some researchers, the roots of the ritual lie in the pagan past of these lands and originate from the cult of the Sun among the Thracians (Wikipedia, January 12, 2021). Specially trained men and women step on red-hot ambers, holding in their hands the icons of St. Constantine and Helena, the first rulers who accepted and legalized Orthodoxy during their reign. This spectacular ritual has nothing to do with the confession of the Orthodox faith, but has long been accepted and practiced very often by our people in many different places and is rather classified as a cult and cultural tourism in our country.

Another important aspect that is related to the cultural events in our lands is the beautiful Bulgarian folklore preserved for centuries, which is unique in nature and has long been world famous and recognized by other peoples. It is no coincidence that Valya Balkanska's folk song "Delyo voyvoda has come out" was chosen to sound in space, as an authentic message from all mankind, which is a sufficient proof of the unique Bulgarian folklore and its cultural value not only for the Bulgarians, but also for everyone who experienced its magic. The long-standing national fair of Bulgarian folk art, which is held every five years in Koprivshtitsa, should also be mentioned here. Hundreds of ensembles with dancers, performers of folk instruments, amazing folk singers, as well as narrators of folk humoresques take part in it.

Not only Bulgarians, but also hundreds of foreigners regularly visit this exciting and authentic folklore festival, which is the most famous and the largest for all of Bulgaria. It is organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Koprivshtitsa.

Dozens of other examples of such cultural events can be given, but it should not be forgotten that they are closely intertwined with religious events in our country. In the past, the Orthodox Church was the main point of attraction for Bulgarians, where after the Liturgy, the people gather to see each other, exchange information, as well as to eat a sacrifice and have fun at the dance. The Rozhen Fair of Folk Art and Animal Husbandry is especially popular, liked and visited. Several thousand people from all over the country flock here to enjoy the unique atmosphere. In this way, the true patriots aim to awaken the patriotic feeling among the Bulgarians, so that together we can preserve the Bulgarian language and pass it on to future generations. The so-called family gatherings have the same idea, so that the Bulgarians scattered all over the world can gather in one place and remember their roots and family ties. This type of cultural event is becoming increasingly popular among progressive Bulgarian patriots. "Rozhen is becoming a place where once a year relatives and friends can share pain and joy. Imperceptibly, the generations turn these gatherings into a tradition, organizing family and friendly meetings of the Rhodope people - not only inhabiting the area, but also displaced in the interior of the country" (Atanasova, R., July 15, 2016).

It is becoming more and more fashionable for newlyweds to want to get married in an Orthodox church. Others dream of having a country wedding with authentic costumes, way of life and culture from the last century. Such is the case with the sister of the leader of the Bulgarian folk ensemble "Bulgare", who marries a foreigner and wants it to be a village wedding. The wedding attendees were so excited that they decided to reunite next year. This is how the idea for this type of festival was born, and for this purpose the organizers have chosen

the beautiful picturesque village of Zheravna, which nowadays has the function of a historical and architectural reserve. The national merriment of this place inspires the participants to gather here every year. Meanwhile, more information about this authentic type of event is given on the Internet and the initiators decide to gather here every year in order to promote Bulgarian folklore, life and culture, moving to the past, even if only for three days. That's what happens. Every year the number of participants increases significantly, and they are obliged to wear national costumes, not to bring mobile phones, modern bags and food from home. Ensembles and folk groups from all over the country have the opportunity to express their desire to participate and join this three-day nationwide celebration. Dancers from all over the country compete with each other, each group of them prepares its own short program, but the biggest spectacular show late at night remains the nestinari fire dance. After its completion, the greatest daredevils have the opportunity to check how it is on the frozen coals, and the fun lasts until three or four o'clock at night. At the disposal of the participants are adapted special places for camping or guest rooms offered by the local population in Zheravna.

Particularly popular, albeit since recently, as an important attractive religious centre is the unknown until decades ago Krastova Gora, which occupies an area in the central part of the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria near Krastov Vrah, from which it takes its name. According to the legend, a large monastery was built on this peak, in which a part of the Lord's cross was kept. "Today, this Christian sanctuary is a Christian pilgrimage centre of international renown, which is especially popular in celebrating the Christian holiday of the Cross" (Wikipedia, March 28, 2021).

In summary, Bulgaria, along with other Orthodox nations, is charged with the extremely important mission of preserving its Orthodox faith and passing it on pure and unsullied to future generations, while spreading it among the rest of the de-Christianized and globalizing world. It is no secret that almost all of Europe has long since lost its Christian image. There is a growing sense that gross materialism has completely taken over the minds and aspirations of Western Europeans, even more so for the American nation and, finally, for all the wealthy of all nationalities, seeking only prosperity and the exercise of all control over huge ignorant masses of people.

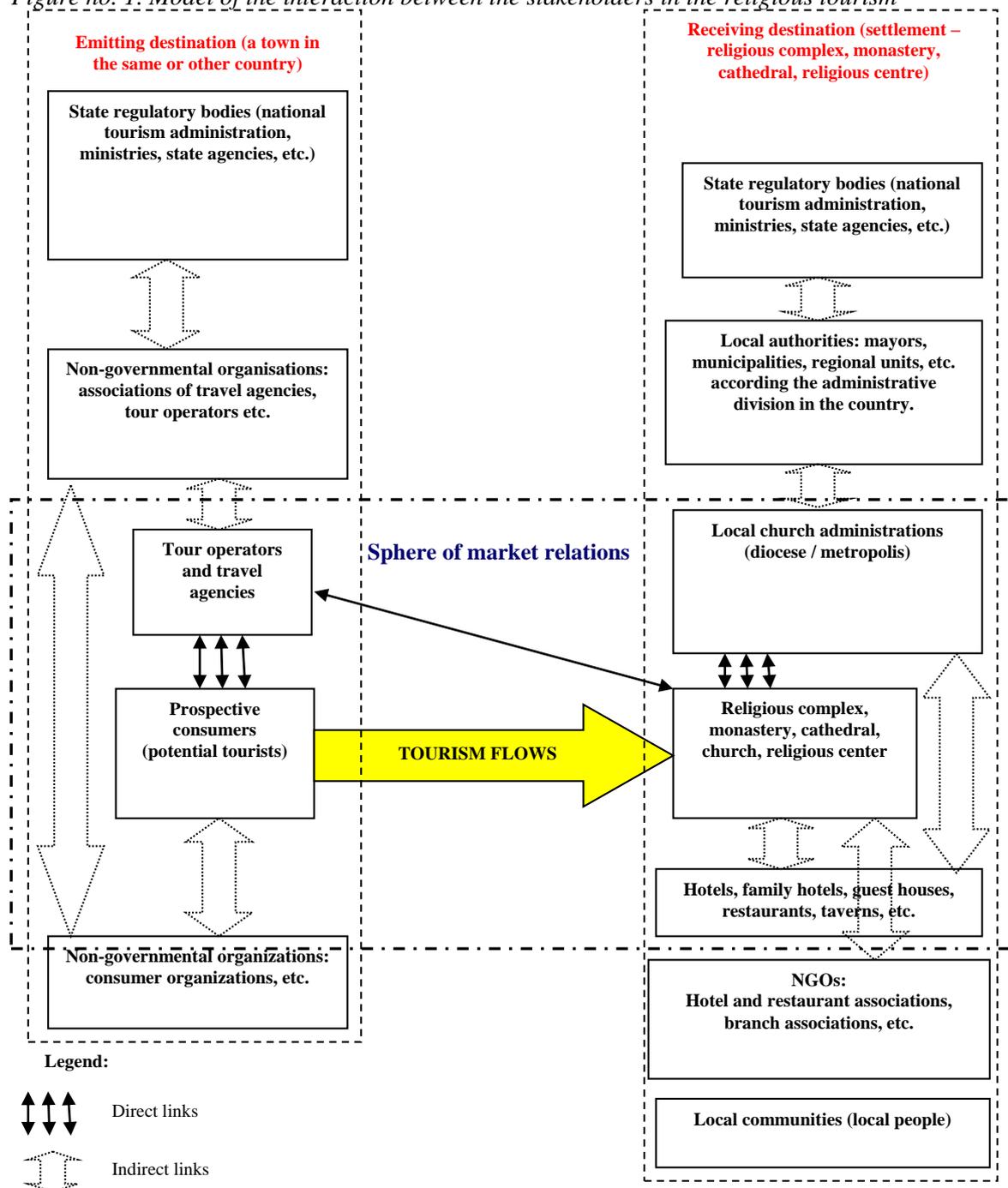
It is no coincidence that we use the word Orthodoxy when we speak of our Christian faith, that is, we glorify the Lord "in the right way", we have not renounced our deep Orthodox roots, and we adhere strictly to the Holy Scriptures (Orthodox Bible) and sacred tradition. Much could be written and thought in this direction about the role of Orthodoxy in the context of all other religions. That is why the most powerful miracle of God can be noted as a conclusion and this is the falling of the Divine fire in Jerusalem on Easter and lighting only the candle of the Orthodox Patriarch, which is sufficient evidence of the true value of our Orthodox faith and its Divine origin.

## **6. Research methodology**

The sites of the tangible movable and immovable cultural heritage of Orthodoxy in Bulgaria, incl. and Southwestern Bulgaria are subject to pilgrimage and religious tourism, both in terms of domestic and international inbound tourism. Here, however, it is necessary to clarify the essence of the concepts of religious and pilgrimage tourism.

For the needs of the communication policy of the monasteries in Southwest Bulgaria in 2015 a specialized survey was conducted among representatives of stakeholders in the development of pilgrimage tourism in Southwest Bulgaria. The figure below clearly shows who they are and the interaction between them.

Figure no. 1. Model of the interaction between the stakeholders in the religious tourism



Source: According to the model of Ruska Krasteva (2014, pp. 32)

Note: Adapted by the author, 2015

The survey was conducted through a structured interview based on a pre-prepared questionnaire, which covers questions divided according to 15 main criteria (Appendix 1). Each of the criteria covers several indicators, which in themselves represent separate questions in the questionnaire itself.

## 7. Results and discussion

Of particular interest from the above-mentioned survey is the information obtained under the following criteria:

1. Criterion №9 „Please assess the level of information provision in relation to the individual religious sites;

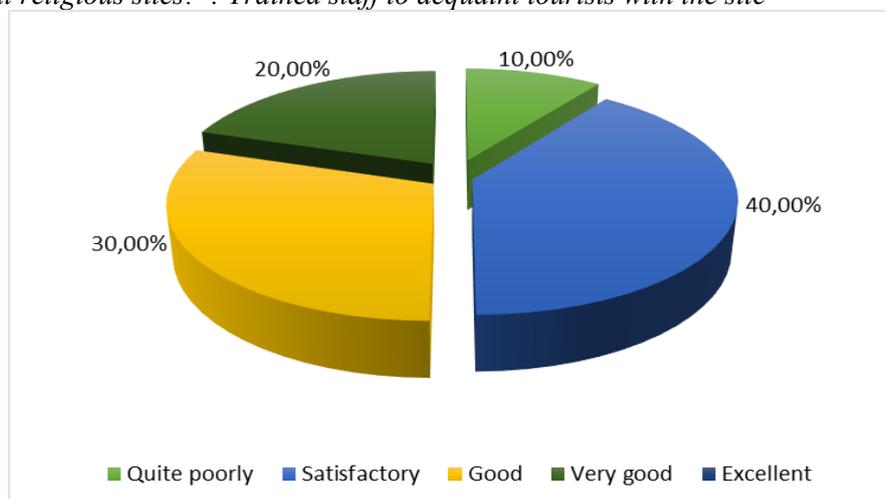
2. Criterion №11 „Please help us to understand how you evaluate the brand Southwestern Bulgaria - Centre for Religious Tourism on individual indicators! “;

3. Criterion №15 „Please give your assessment of your satisfaction with the religious tourist offer in Southwestern Bulgaria! “.

Of course, the information on these three criteria could not be fully summarized, so for the purposes of this publication a sample of the answers to those indicators, respectively those questions that most directly reflect the attitude of tourists and pilgrims visiting the monasteries in Southwestern Bulgaria to their communication policy (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

Unfortunately, the availability of trained staff to acquaint tourists with the religious site is less and less. Almost everywhere there is a hunger for this type of specialists, as religious tourism is quite poorly represented in those parts of our country that have not yet developed as well-known religious destinations.

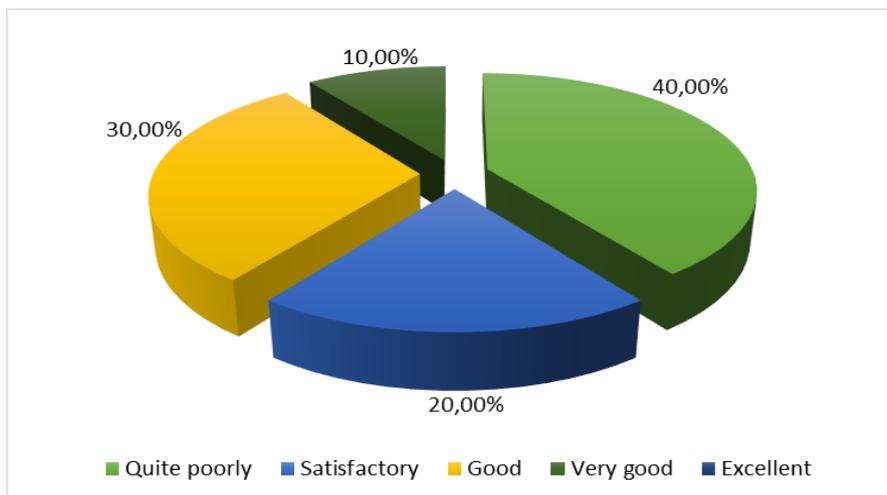
Figure no. 2. Criterion 9, Indicator 3: “Please assess the level of information provision in relation to the individual religious sites!”: Trained staff to acquaint tourists with the site



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

Unfortunately, the information provision regarding the individual religious sites in our country is under any criticism. Only 20% rate the availability of information portals websites as very good, while 40% of all give it the satisfactory rating. The lack of any attention and information about the lesser-known religious sites (and they are the largest part of the religious heritage of Bulgaria) shows only the carelessness of the state and local clergy, as well as their unwillingness to properly and successfully manage the entrusted their religious sites.

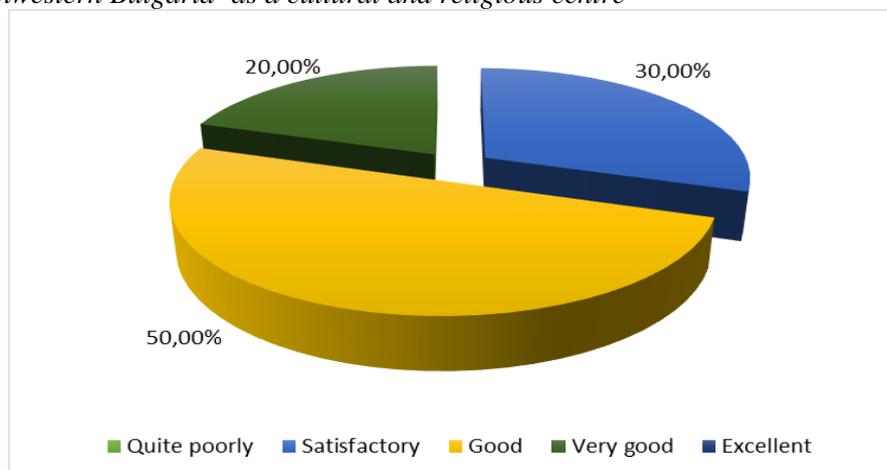
Figure no. 3. Criterion 9, Indicator 5: “Please assess the level of information provision in relation to the individual religious sites!”: Availability of information portals and websites to provide information on the sites



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

The positive PR that should be spread on social networks is assessed quite poorly. Only 10% and 20% give a very good and satisfactory assessment of this kind of positive information. 40% of all respondents have a poor grade and as many as 30% give a good grade.

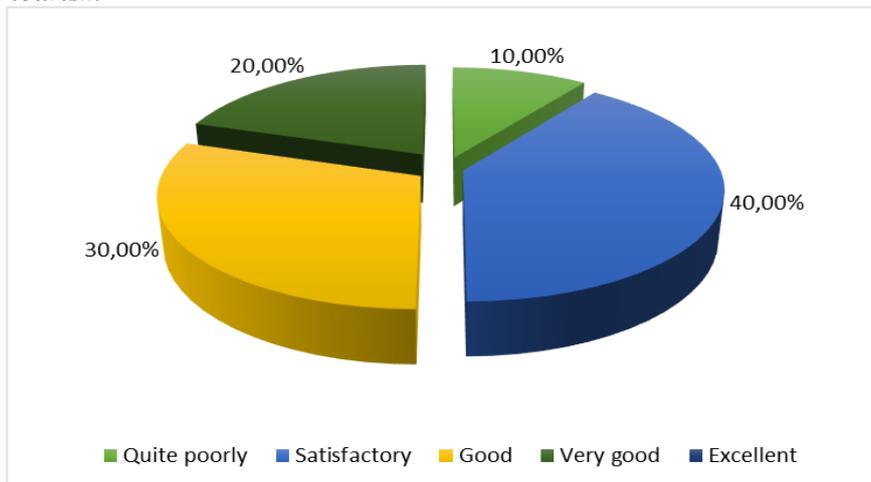
Figure no. 4. Criterion 11, Indicator 1: “Please help us to understand how you evaluate the brand Southwest Bulgaria - a centre for religious tourism by individual indicators”: Distinguished and known brand “Southwestern Bulgaria” as a cultural and religious centre



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

In Southwestern Bulgaria there are a number of important monasteries and churches, the most famous of which remains the Rila Monastery, and not only within our country. The Rozhen Monastery, the Hadzhidimovo Monastery, the Resilovo Monastery and many others are a strong centre of attraction for both the pilgrim and the religious tourist, as well as for the secular visitor. These religious sites really help this part of the country to connect with religious tourism. Expressed in percentages, 20% and 50% of all give a very good and good rating, 30% indicate a satisfactory result.

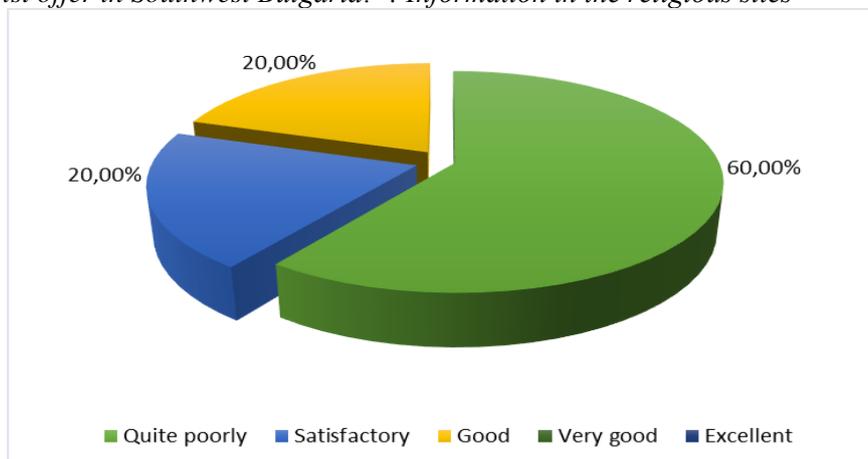
Figure no. 5. Criterion 11, Indicator 4: “Please help us to understand how you rate the brand “Southwest Bulgaria” - Centre for Religious Tourism by individual indicators”: Linking the destination with religious tourism



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

The key symbol of the brand „Southwest Bulgaria” is and remains, of course, the Rila Monastery, which is the largest Orthodox monastery on the Balkan Peninsula. Expressed in percentages, this means that 40% of the total result is rated satisfactory, 20% - very good, 10% - quite poorly and 30% give a good answer to the question.

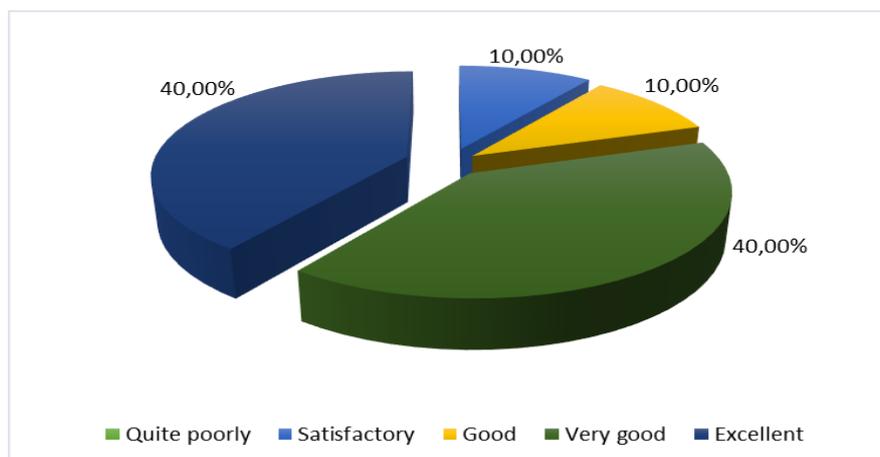
Figure no. 6. Criterion 15, Indicator 2: “Please give your assessment of your satisfaction with the religious-tourist offer in Southwest Bulgaria!”: Information in the religious sites



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

Expressed in percentages, 60% of all respondents have a poor grade, the rates good and satisfactory are 20% each. This means that there is a lack of any information about the lesser-known religious sites and most of the people visit only a little part of them because of the low trained staff to acquaint tourists with the site.

Figure no. 7. Criterion 15, Indicator 6: “Please give your assessment of your satisfaction with the religious-tourist offer in Southwest Bulgaria!”: Feeling of the uniqueness of the experience



Source: Author's elaboration (2015)

Despite all the problems accompanying the development and establishment of religious tourism as an important part of the tourist offer both regionally and globally, we must note that the feeling of uniqueness of the experience is very characteristic of the religious tourist offer in Southwestern Bulgaria. The results of the survey are as follows: The rates excellent and very good are 40% each, while 10% receive a rate of good and satisfactory, respectively.

According to the data presented above, the survey shows that there is a certain potential for the use of some of the available communication channels for the needs of religious tourism and especially the monasteries in Southwest Bulgaria.

Unfortunately, a developed communication policy for the needs of religious tourism is present only in the larger famous monasteries and temples on the territory of Southwestern Bulgaria, while the rest of them lag behind in this regard. There is a lack of basic information about their past, they remain on the periphery of tour operator interests without a good representation of pilgrimage and religious tourism, although these tourist sites have the potential to become an attraction for any interested tourist, while helping the economic development of the region where they are located.

## 8. Conclusion

The most ancient type of travel known to man for millennia is worship. The motive for the pilgrimage is the desire to visit religious centres, religious rites and holy places such as Jerusalem and Mecca.

From the perspective of tourist research, the religious journey can be understood as a continuation of the cultural one. In this regard, a strong public need for communication can be observed. The traveller confronts his culture and traditions, society and finally himself. This trend is complemented by the desire of many people to be balanced in their lives, as well as to have spiritual experiences during a pilgrimage. Religious tourist offers correspond to these tendencies. Over the years, a stable market has developed in this direction, which would justify the differentiation of religious travel as a separate tourist segment.

Increasingly, the packages of tourist services include sites of religious tourism, and tourist associations and councils as well as branch unions pay attention to this type of tourism. Our country has very good opportunities to provide a good tourist product and there are prerequisites for the development of this type of specialized tourism (Shopova, 2014, pp. 70):

- there is a significant resource - sites and events for religious and cultural tourism;

- there are no prohibitions and restrictions of a religious nature;
- there is freedom of religion;
- there is understanding and support from the government and society, as well as from church institutions;
- the possibility for combining the religious with elements of the cultural tourism is also favourable;
- there is a positive activity of foundations and public organizations.

There are foundations and travel agencies with an asset in the development of religious tourism in our country, which organize and offer sites and routes for cultural and religious tourism. There are tours with visits to monasteries, churches with unique icons and wooden iconostasis, synagogues, participation in interesting rites and customs.

Religious travel is only insufficiently observed. Theologians and the church as an institution deny tourism on the basis of its economic aspect and negative influences; its researchers underestimate its economic potential and place religious tourism in a scientific niche. Subsequent research had to be conducted primarily from a sociological or psychological perspective, so that the motives for embarking on a journey could be explored both independently and in relation to religiosity and spirituality. At the same time, the regional tourist wonders to what extent the theoretical basis could be transformed into a purely practical one.

How long the current state of the religious journey could last, time will tell. It is a well-known fact that from time immemorial man has felt the need to attain peace of mind and to turn within himself, which he satisfies in the form of travel. In this sense, religious travel is an expression of a primary human need, therefore religious tourism is and will remain an eternal theme for generations.

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## Appendix

*Criteria for collecting information through the survey on the communication policy of the monasteries in Southwestern Bulgaria*

Criteria/indicators
<b>1. Please assess the degree of diversity of sites of religious cultural heritage included in the tourist offer of Southwestern Bulgaria</b>
1.1 <i>Religious cultural heritage sites</i>
1.2 <i>Religious sites of national importance</i>
1.3 <i>Religious sites of cultural and historical significance</i>
1.4 <i>Monasteries in which spiritual life is led</i>
<b>2. Please assess the level of availability of intangible religious and cultural heritage included in the tourist offer of Southwestern Bulgaria</b>
2.1 <i>Accommodation in a monastery, participation in its economic and spiritual life included in the tourist offer</i>
2.2 <i>Included religious events, participation in holiday services</i>
2.3 <i>Included traditional culinary practices, preparation and consecration of a sacrifice for a holiday</i>
<b>3. Please give your assessment regarding the way you perceive Southwestern Bulgaria as a tourist centre for religious tourism</b>
3.1 <i>As a quiet and safe place</i>
3.2 <i>As a collection of destinations that are associated with prestige</i>
3.3 <i>As an authentic and exotic place for relaxation and spiritual purification</i>
<b>4. Please rate the extent to which you perceive Southwestern Bulgaria as an active centre for practicing religious tourism</b>
4.1 <i>I am proud of the religious heritage that is located in this part of Bulgaria.</i>
4.2 <i>I would like tourists to get acquainted with this religious heritage.</i>
4.3 <i>I would like the place where I live to be associated with religious tourism.</i>
<b>5. Please assess the extent to which the state, local authorities and the local diocese and the tourism business interact successfully for the successful presentation of Southwestern Bulgaria as a centre for religious tourism</b>
5.1 <i>To support local churches and monasteries</i>
5.2 <i>Conducting joint events to promote religious tourism</i>
5.3 <i>Joint efforts to preserve authenticity</i>
<b>6. Please give your assessment of the religious events held in Southwestern Bulgaria</b>
6.1 <i>Annual religious events (religious holidays and services, sacrifices)</i>
6.2 <i>Annual events such as the display of holy relics and miraculous icons</i>
6.3 <i>Events related to the temple holiday of a monastery or church</i>
6.4 <i>Religious events of a cross-border and / or international nature</i>
<b>7. How would you assess the way in which the acquaintance with the religious heritage in Southwestern Bulgaria is formed? (According to the indicators presented in the table)</b>
7.1 <i>Understandable and pre-prepared as a program for visiting religious sites.</i>
7.2 <i>Involvement of tourists as participants in religious practices and rituals (throwing the cross, taking out the shroud, religious processions, etc.</i>
7.3 <i>Opportunity for tourists to participate in church celebrations typical for each destination in the Southwest</i>
<b>8. Please assess the specific features of Southwestern Bulgaria, which in your opinion distinguish it from other religious areas of Bulgaria</b>
8.1 <i>Significance of religious heritage</i>
8.2 <i>Significance of religious heritage</i>

8.3 <i>The type of products offered to religious tourism.</i>
8.4 <i>Relations with religious tourists and guests.</i>
8.5 <i>Manner of providing information on the religious sites included in the offer.</i>
8.6 <i>The opportunity to stand out from the mass tourists.</i>
<b>9. Please assess the level of information provision regarding the individual religious sites</b>
9.1 <i>Information on paper in foreign languages.</i>
9.2 <i>Availability of audio systems to enhance the impression (sounds, effects)</i>
9.3 <i>Prepared staff to acquaint tourists with the site.</i>
9.4 <i>Possibility to broadcast video material.</i>
9.5 <i>Availability of information portals and websites to provide information about the sites.</i>
9.6 <i>Availability of positive information in social networks about the sites.</i>
9.7 <i>Availability of audio guides and information consoles at the sites</i>
<b>10. Please assess the degree of inclusion of religious sites, events and intangible cultural and religious heritage in the overall cultural and tourist offer of Southwestern Bulgaria</b>
10.1 <i>Archaeological sites</i>
10.2 <i>Religious sites related to the history of the destination (district or municipality where the site is located).</i>
10.3 <i>Religious cultural sites.</i>
10.4 <i>Various cultural monuments of the destination of a religious nature</i>
10.5 <i>Various religious events.</i>
10.6 <i>Events in the field of intangible cultural heritage</i>
10.7 <i>Products typical of monasteries (icons, souvenirs, church literature, wines, foodstuffs, etc.)</i>
10.8 <i>Summer children's camps and Sunday schools.</i>
10.9 <i>Opportunities for participation in church choirs or courses in Orthodox Byzantine chants</i>
<b>11. Please help us understand how you evaluate the brand "Southwest Bulgaria" - a centre for religious tourism on individual indicators</b>
11.1 <i>Is the brand "Southwest" different and known as a cultural and religious centre</i>
11.2 <i>Having a clear idea of tourism offering in individual destinations</i>
11.3 <i>Existence of a clear image of the destination</i>
11.4 <i>Connecting the destination with religious tourism.</i>
<b>12. Please evaluate the individual aspects of the practice of pilgrimage and / or religious tourism in Southwestern Bulgaria</b>
12.1 <i>Opportunity to distinguish oneself from the mass tourists through spiritual enlightenment and spiritual enlightenment.</i>
12.2 <i>Gaining new knowledge about the religious heritage of each destination.</i>
12.3 <i>Experiencing positive emotions while getting acquainted with the religious and cultural heritage.</i>
12.4 <i>Opportunity for contact with other religions other than one's own religion.</i>
12.5 <i>Receiving high quality tourist services</i>
<b>13. Please rate the extent to which you perceive Southwestern Bulgaria as an exceptional tourist offer</b>
13.1 <i>Overlapping of the promised with the received.</i>
13.2 <i>Acquiring a sense of uniqueness.</i>
13.3 <i>Obtaining a specific benefit in practicing religious tourism in the individual destination.</i>
13.4 <i>Degree of persuasiveness in the offer.</i>
<b>14. Please rate to what extent the religious sites are connected in general sightseeing tours</b>
14.1 <i>Sites located close to each other and connected in a sightseeing tour.</i>
14.2 <i>Sites that are not in close proximity, but are connected in a sightseeing tour.</i>
14.3 <i>Sites located in different municipalities on the territory of the destination and connected in tourist routes.</i>
<b>15. Please give your assessment of your satisfaction with the religious tourism offer in Southwestern Bulgaria</b>

15.1 <i>Diversity of religious tourism.</i>
15.2 <i>Information in religious sites.</i>
15.3 <i>Quality of transport.</i>
15.4 <i>Quality of transport infrastructure.</i>
15.5 <i>Experience with foreign religions.</i>
15.6 <i>A sense of the uniqueness of the experience.</i>
15.7 <i>Comfort in providing shelter.</i>
15.8 <i>Level of service in the monasteries.</i>
15.9 <i>Level of service in the places of eating.</i>