

# Potential and Opportunities for the Development of Religious Tourism in Western Crete, Greece

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## Abstract

The tourism industry is a flourishing global industry with an increasing number of people travelling each year all over the world. Religion used to be since ancient times a motivation for people to travel, visit and pray in holy places and sites. Religion tourism is also growing nowadays while many people visit holy and sacred places for pilgrimage or for seeing religious monuments which are important for their faith. The island of Crete is a famous tourism destination in eastern Mediterranean basin with mild climate, plenty of sunshine, sandy beaches and many natural attractions visited by more than five million of tourists every year. Crete has also many religious, cultural and historical monuments established during the past twenty centuries from different civilizations which are attractive to visitors. The possibility of developing religious tourism in western Crete has been investigated and its impacts on the local stakeholders have been identified. The existing infrastructure in the island favors the development of religious tourism while the local policies support it. The Orthodox Christianity recognizes the links between religion, society and ecology and the development of religious tourism should be combined with ecological sensitization and/or social activities. The implemented SWOT and PESTEL analyses indicated that the potential for the development of religious tourism in western Crete is high resulting to many socio-economic benefits to local stakeholders. The tourism product of the island, which is currently focused on the “sea and sun tourism”, will be differentiated and enriched with the development of cultural tourism. Our results could be useful to policy makers and to local stakeholders who wish to promote the religious tourism with simultaneous promotion of environmental sustainability in the island.

**Keywords:** Crete-Greece; culture; ecology; monuments; Orthodox Christians; religion; tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

Religious tourism is developing fast nowadays following the increase in the global tourism market [1]. Visits to religious and sacred places were the main motivation for travelling in the ancient times [2]. Nowadays, believers visit religious sites and monuments either for pilgrimage or for sightseeing getting aware about the historical, religious and cultural value of the monuments [3,4,5,6]. Religious tourism is a form of cultural tourism which is important for regions having holy and sacred sites as well as religious monuments with historical and cultural value [7]. The importance of religious tourism in the socio-economic development and to tourism industry in several regions has been highlighted by many researchers [8,9,10]. The island of Crete, Greece is a popular global tourism destination accepting more than five mil. tourists annually. Western Crete has many religious and cultural monuments created during the last two thousand years from different civilizations and cultures including Christian Orthodox, Christian Catholics, Jews and Muslims [11].

*The aims of the current research are:*

- a) *To investigate the possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete, and*
- b) *To assess the benefits of religious tourism to local stakeholders.*

The text is structured as follows: After the literature review the characteristics of the tourism industry in Crete are stated while some important religious monuments in western Crete are mentioned. Next, the development of religious tourism worldwide is examined and the contribution of the Orthodox Academy of Crete in the development of religious tourism combined with environmental sensitization activities is presented. In the following two sections the possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete are examined, using SWOT and PESTEL analysis while the benefits to local stakeholders are highlighted. The text ends with discussion of the findings, the conclusions drawn and the citation of the references used. The current work is innovative due to lack of similar studied regarding the development of religious tourism in western Crete while it fills the gap regarding the development of various forms of thematic tourism in the island. It could be useful to several stakeholders of the local tourism industry, to local communities, to religious authorities in Crete as well as to public authorities in the island.

## 2. Literature survey

The literature survey is separated in two sections. The first is related with the development of religious tourism worldwide and the second with the religious tourism in Greece.

### *2.1 Development of religious tourism worldwide*

The evolution of religious concept over the years has been studied [2]. The author stated that religious tourism is related with both the mass tourism and the alternative tourism while it empowers the local communities. He also mentioned that it has some negative effects including commercialization of the religion, the commodification of products related to pilgrimage et cetera. The progress and the future prospects of tourism have been studied [12]. The authors stated that religious tourism has evolved beyond pilgrimage and encompasses the meaningfulness of

a destination. They also mentioned that in several studies the visitors' motivations were related to spirituality, faith, curiosity, discovery, cultural attraction et cetera. The opportunities and challenges of religious tourism in Uganda have been studied [9]. The authors stated that religious tourism generates social-religious and economic benefits. They also mentioned that there are gaps in policy planning and in the institutional framework which should be addressed and improved. The importance of religious tourism from the tourism industry perspective has been studied [1]. The authors stated that the niche product of religious tourism is going to grow fast according to the tourism industry perspective. They also mentioned that according to the UNWTO (2017) there are about 300 to 330 million tourists visiting the world's key religious sites every year. The "Mosque tourism" as a key characteristic of Islamic religious tourism has been analyzed [13]. The author stated that the modernization of Arab countries and the increasing Muslim population has increased the Islamic tourism. This is an intra-Arab and intra-Muslim tourism with increasing economic interest. The author stated that one of the most important activities of Muslim tourists as a religious practice is to visit Islamic religious monuments and sacred sites including mosques. The religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem have been explored [14]. The authors stated that religious sites are simultaneously sacred and secular places. They also mentioned that religious tourists have multiple experiences related to discovering new things, connecting spiritually and emotionally, interacting and belonging, relaxing and finding, as well as finding peace and mental engagement. The emotional experiences related with religious tourism in Jerusalem have been studied [15]. The authors stated that the emotional situation of religious tourists is crucial for the fulfilment of their expectations and their satisfaction. They mentioned that the emotional situation is influenced not only by space factors but also by temporal and religious factors surrounding the visitor. The different forms of religious tourism have been studied [3]. The author stated that tourism motivated by religion is probably as old as the religion itself while it is a global phenomenon in religion history. He also mentioned that religion journeys always were multidisciplinary journeys even when the religious factors seemed to dominate. However, he added, in modern societies the religious motivation seems to be less important than in ancient societies. The sacred sites and the rituals in the ecosystem of religious tourism have been studied [16]. The author stated that a conceptual approach of religious tourism includes an ecosystem with a sacred/divine resource accompanied with material and immaterial things. Religion tourism can be also conceived as an ecosystem with sacred resource(s), producers and consumers of rituals and performances as well as religious visitors. The international tourist arrivals in 2017 have been increased by 7% [17]. The organization estimated that the international tourist arrivals reached a total at 1,326 mils in 2017. The impacts of religious tourism on carbon emissions in Italy have been estimated [18]. The authors analyzed Italian data from 1997 to 2017 using mathematical modelling. They stated that religious tourists in Italy have lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared to conventional tourists while direct foreign investments and the use of energy in transportation have significant impacts on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The religious tourism and the secular pilgrimage with reference the "La Sagrada Familia", Barcelona, Spain have been compared [5]. The author investigated whether the majority of more than 3 million tourists visiting annually the world-known religious building are attracted from its cultural or its religious characteristics. He stated that cultural motivations prevailed to religious in the majority of travelers for visiting "La Sagrada Familia". The pilgrimage and religious tourism in Islam have been studied [4]. The author stated that Islam is the second largest religion after Christianity with 1.8 billion believers worldwide. He mentioned that religious pilgrimage in Islam is what is described in Quran, the *Hajj*. Apart from the *Hajj* religious Muslims travel to several sacred places and monuments while this type of traveling can be conceived as religious tourism. The

relation between religious tourism and archaeology has been studied [6]. The authors stated that religious tourists visit sites of current and/or past religious significance. They also mentioned that there is an inherent complexity and nexus between religious tourism and archaeology while archaeological sites serve as attractions to religious tourists. The carbon footprint of religious tourism related with pilgrimage to Mecca, *Hajj* has been evaluated [19]. The author stated that 2.79 million pilgrims visited Mecca in 2011. He estimated that the emissions of each visitor were at 60.5 kgCO<sub>2</sub>-eq per day while the share of long-haul air transportation, in the total emissions, was at 60%, of accommodation at 18% and of food at 13%. The relation between religious tourism and sustainability has been investigated [20]. The author stated that religious tourism means an appropriate moment to let the body relax and nourish the spirit. He also mentioned various examples of “*religious light tourism*”, categorized as responsible tourism, which results in environmental and social sustainability since it is often less affected by seasonal trends and social crisis.

## ***2.2 Religious tourism in Greece***

The effect of religiosity on depression in the rural population in Crete has been investigated [21]. The authors examined the impacts of religiosity, spirituality and the sense of coherence on depression of the population in a small village in Crete. They stated that highly religious residents and residents with high sense of coherence were characterized with lower depression levels. The rich religious heritage of Crete mapping the religious monuments with photos and historic data has been reviewed [11]. The authors have categorized the religious monuments in Crete chronologically as follows: a) Early Christian and early Byzantine period, 1<sup>st</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century, b) Arab occupation (826 - 961), c) Middle Byzantine period (961- 1204), d) Venetian occupation (1211 – 1669), e) Turkish occupation (1669 – 1898). The residents’ perception of religious tourism and the socio-economic impacts on the island of Tinos, Greece which is visited by many religious tourists every year has been studied [8]. The authors stated that the majority of the residents welcome religious tourists to the island and perceive the socio-economic impacts as positive. They also mentioned that the economic considerations override other concerns by local residents. The possibilities of developing religious tourism in western Crete, Greece have been examined [22]. The author stated that western Crete has many religious monuments with long history which attract visitors either for pilgrimage or for sightseeing motivated by religious, spiritual, historical and cultural reasons. He also mentioned that the possibilities of developing religious tourism in Crete are currently positive while it will allow to many tourists to visit, during their vacations in the island, the numerous religious and cultural monuments in the broader area probably combined with visits in archeological sites and in places of unique natural beauty. The religious tourism in Greece related with Mariam pilgrimages has been studied [7]. The author stated that since ancient times it was a firm belief that praying in holy and sacred places is more efficient and desirable. They mentioned that there are numerous churches and monasteries in Greece dedicated to virgin Mary, the holy mother of God, which attract many visitors and pilgrims every year. The development of religious tourism in a mountainous area in central Macedonia, Greece has been investigated [10]. The authors stated that the area of mount Paiko in central Macedonia is poorly developed while it has rich religious and cultural resources. They mentioned that the development of religious tourism will support the local rural economy, which is based on agriculture, adding a supplementary source of income. Several good practices regarding sustainability in the Orthodox Academy of Crete have been presented [23]. The author stated that the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew accepts that “*The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical*”. He also mentioned that the Orthodox

Academy of Crete has implemented many ecological activities including: a) The realization of many national and international seminars on sustainability issues, b) The installation of a solar-PV system at 50 KW<sub>p</sub> on the roof top of the Academy's buildings, c) The sensitization of the local society regarding energy cooperatives and energy democracy, d) The promotion of energy autonomous churches, and e) The implementation of various environmental sustainability projects. The environmental activities of the Institute of Theology and Ecology of the Orthodox Academy of Crete have been reported [24]. The Institute of Theology and Ecology of the Orthodox Academy of Crete has developed: a) the museum of Cretan Herbs with a collection of about 6,000 Cretan herbs, b) the Cretan walks, where visitors can walk in the countryside through half-day tours, and c) The establishment of a solar-PV system installed on the roof terrace of the buildings of the Academy generating a significant amount of its annual electricity demand. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew [25] has declared that "*the ecological crisis as a global challenge can only be addressed through international sensitization and mobilization*". He also mentioned that "*the combination of ecological and social activities constitutes the hope for our future because we can only have sustainable development and progress when we are simultaneously concerned about the integrity of creation and the protection of human dignity and human rights*". Three educational programs for adults related with the European cultural and ecclesiastical heritage have been developed by the Orthodox Academy of Crete [26]. The first program is titled "*Religious paths in northwestern Crete*", the second "*A common European cultural heritage*" while the third "*Living Orthodoxy*". A spatial analysis of religious tourism in Greece has been realized [27]. The authors stated that the prefectures of Attica, Korinthos, Dodecanese and Cyclades host the greatest number of Pilgrimages and religious sites. They have identified ten active monasteries and eleven religious' sites in the Prefecture of Chania. They also mentioned that other forms of alternative tourism like cultural tourism, rural tourism, winter tourism et cetera can be combined with religious tourism to strengthen its demand and increase the flow of religious tourists. The possibility of offsetting carbon emissions due to energy use in the Orthodox Academy of Crete has been examined [28]. The authors estimated the annual energy consumption in OAC at 264,257 KWh or 31.31 KWh/m<sup>2</sup> while the electricity had the highest share, at 95.76%, in the total energy consumption. They stated that 32.47 % of its total energy consumption is currently generated from a solar-PV system with nominal power at 50 KW<sub>p</sub> installed at Academy's premises. The carbon emissions due to incoming tourism in the island of Crete have been evaluated [29]. The annual carbon emissions have been estimated at 488.77 kgCO<sub>2</sub> per visitor while the carbon emissions per tourist per overnight stay in Crete were evaluated at 12.1 kgCO<sub>2</sub> per night spent. Transportation to and from the island had the highest share in the total carbon emissions, at 80.69%, followed by accommodation at 13.01 % and by other activities at 6.30%. Although several studies regarding the development of religious tourism in Greece have been published quantitative data related to religious visitors in Crete and in Chania are lacking. Published research related with ecological practices of the local monasteries which are very important in the current era of climate change and sustainable development are also lacking.

### 3. The tourism industry in Crete

The island of Crete is a popular and famous global tourism destination in the eastern Mediterranean region. More than 5 mil. tourists visit the island every year enjoying their vacations in an idyllic environment. The arrive in the island with airplanes and ships using the three airports and six main seaports of Crete. The island has many high-quality tourism facilities including many luxury and five-stars hotels which though are unevenly allocated. The

majority of tourism accommodations are located along the northern coastline of the island which is densely populated while the south coast and the mainland are undeveloped. The most of the visitors are attracted by the local mild climate, the unique sandy beaches and the blue sea while they are characterized as “*sea and sun tourists*”. Apart from the “*sea and sun*” tourism other types of tourism are also developed comprising agro-tourism, mountain tourism, cruise tourism, scientific conference tourism, cultural tourism, gastronomy tourism et cetera. The annual duration of the tourism period in Crete is around seven months, from the beginning of April until the end of October, although efforts are being made for extending the arrival of tourists during the winter months. Crete has many traditional villages in the mainland, gorges along the mountains and sandy beaches of unique natural beauty. It also has a long history over the last four Millenium where many civilizations have temporarily conquered and lived in the island leaving their monuments to remind their presence. The Minoans, the ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Venetians, the Turks and the Germans have come and left their footprints in the island. The historical, archeological, religious and cultural monuments build and left over centuries have been renovated and they are nowadays accessible to visitors. The hospitality of the locals, the famous and healthy Cretan cuisine with many delicious dishes, the local culture, the local music and dances attract many visitors who enjoy them during their staying. The flourishing tourism industry in the island has a share more than 50% in the regional domestic product contributing significantly in the local employability and prosperity.

#### **4. Religious monuments in western Crete**

The island of Crete is located at the crossroads of continents and civilizations and it has an extraordinary number of religious monuments created during the last two Millenia. They consist of an invaluable religious and cultural heritage in the island. The history of these religious monuments dated since the early Christian and early Byzantine period and continued until the end of the Turkish occupation in 1898 [11]. The most of them currently operate as Christian Orthodox monuments although some of them were built and used in the past from Christian Catholics and Muslims during the Venice and Turkish era. Before the second world war there were few Jews’ synagogues in Crete used from the Jews’ communities in the island. During the last decades the majority of these monuments have been renovated and they are easily accessible to tourists who want to visit them for spiritual, cultural, historical and ethical reasons. A small number of these magnificent religious monuments located in western Crete are listed in table 1.

**Table 1:** Several religious monuments located in western Crete

Name and type of monument	Location	Age	Characteristics
The cathedral of the city of Chania	It is located in the city center	Middle of 19 <sup>th</sup> century	It used to be a small temple in the 11 <sup>th</sup> century, a storehouse during the Venetians era and a soap making laboratory during the Turkish era. During the last 150 years it has been a landmark of the city's history.
Monastery of the holy trinity of Tzagarolon	It is located in Akrotiri peninsula 16 km east of Chania	It was built in the 17 <sup>th</sup> century during the end of Venetian empire in Crete	Venetian style monastery
Monastery of Gouverneto	It is located in Akrotiri peninsula 30 km east of Chania	During the 16 <sup>th</sup> century	Venetian style monastery with old frescos
Monastery of Gonia	It is located approximately 26 km west of Chania nearby the Orthodox Academy of Crete	During the first half of the 17 <sup>th</sup> century	It has a small number of monks and a valuable old library and museum.
Monastery of Chrysoskalitissa	It is located 72 km south-west of Chania nearby a gorgeous beach	During the 17 <sup>th</sup> century	It is located in a protected Natura area nearby Elafonisi a site of extreme natural beauty while it hosts a small museum
Monastery of Chrysopigi	Near the city of Chania	In the 16 <sup>th</sup> century	Nuns' monastery, it has traditional monastic arts, spiritual books while nuns are active in organic farming
Holy Monastery of Korakies	Near the city of Chania	In the 16 <sup>th</sup> century	Nuns' monastery,

Source: [11]

## 5. Development of religious tourism worldwide

People were traveling since antiquity for religious reasons and not for entertainment and holidays. The globalization, the growth of the average people's income, the availability of more leisure time, the improvement in transportation technology and the desire of people to visit other places, to meet other cultures and civilizations facilitate the traveling of a continuously increasing number of people. International tourism is growing rapidly nowadays including religious tourism which is considered as a form of thematic tourism. The concept of religious

tourism encompasses two tourism sub-types: a) "*pilgrimage tourism*" related with faith and spiritual motives and participation in religious rituals and events, and b) "*sightseeing tourism*" related with viewing important religious monuments combined with visits in cultural and archeological sites and learning their history and culture. Many travelers when visiting a destination combine their vacations with sightseeing in religious monuments and in cultural, archeological and historical monuments or in sites with unique natural beauty having more experiences during their holidays. The approach to religious monuments, like monasteries, churches et cetera, has been facilitated due to improved transportation and to renovation of the monuments in order to be easily accessible to visitors. Travelers visiting religious monuments have positive economic impacts on local communities and on local stakeholders. Territories with limited other resources are trying to promote their religious heritage as an additional pillar of income. Therefore, there are many reasons that religious tourism is growing rapidly following the growth of international tourism. Local authorities often support, with financial and non-financial measures, the development of religious tourism in order to enrich the local tourism product and to promote the investments in this field. Additionally, they assist in the renovation of old religious monuments in order to preserve the cultural heritage for the future generations in their territories. Assuming that the domestic and international visitors to key religious sites in 2017 were at about 330 mil to 330 mil [1] and the international travelers in the same year were at 1,326 mil. [17] the tourists visiting the key religious sites in the world during 2017 represent about 22.62% to 24.89% of the international travelers. Lack of data does not allow the calculation of travelers visiting the minor religious sites but, in any case, the number of tourists visiting major and minor religious sites and monuments is high.

#### **6. The Orthodox Academy of Crete and its contribution in the development of religious tourism in western Crete**

The Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) is a welfare Institution, which functions as a Research and International Conference Center that emphasizes on the relations between religion and society. It operates under the spiritual auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and it functions in canonical relationship with the Holy Metropolis of Kissamos and Selinon (Church of Crete). The OAC is located in a seaside area of exceptional beauty, next to the historic Holy Monastery of Lady of the Angels (Gonia) (17th century), 24 km from the city of Chania and 39 km from Chania International Airport "Ioannis Daskalogiannis". The OAC has hosted more than 2,800 Conferences and it has accommodated the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, a significant historical ecclesiastical event.

The OAC organizes the following specific religious programs and routes:

"Religious Paths in Northwestern Crete"

The participants, in the course of a guided tour, visit places of archaeological, ecclesiastical and historical interest, like the Rotonda (6th century), close to which is also the early Christian church of Agios Stephanos (4th century) and the Holy Monastery of Gonia (17th century), which was mentioned above. The participants have the chance to attend a lecture on the Church history of Crete and to be introduced to the technique of icon painting (traditional materials used, egg tempera, powder colors made from natural sources, et cetera). The program ends with a



discussion. (Duration about 4 hours).

#### “Living Orthodoxy”

This is a one-week-program, for the duration of which the participants stay at the OAC’s premises in single or double rooms with full board (traditional Cretan Cuisine). There are two different variants to choose from:

##### Orthodox Tradition and Culture

This is the OAC’s oldest and most successful program with a special emphasis on religious tourism. Thousands of non-orthodox people from many different countries, especially church leaders of the Roman-Catholic and the Protestant Churches, but also university teachers and students of theology, pastors and members of parishes, have taken part in this program.

It consists of meetings with local priests and parishes and lectures on Orthodoxy, with special focus given to history, liturgical life, iconography, monasticism, orthodox spirituality, the role of men and women in church life, the issue of Orthodoxy and Ecumenism, but also the eminent and crucial topics of our time, like the relation of the orthodox Church and Europe, or the relations of Church and society.

##### Traveling the colors of the icon

The participants learn about the traditional ecclesiastical art of painting icons, on a theoretical as well as practical level: lectures and presentations on the history of icons, the theological meaning and importance of an icon, the different schools of iconography, et cetera, but also visits to churches and monasteries form the theoretical part. On the practical level, after an introduction to the technique of iconography and the traditional materials used (egg tempera, powder colors made from natural sources, et cetera), people learn to paint an icon. At the end of the course, each participant may take the icon painted with them. (Duration: One week).

##### Iconography Seminars

This ecclesiastical art has been cultivated at the Iconography workshop of the OAC for many years now. On the one hand through the painting of icons and on the other hand through informing groups who visit the OAC or are guests of the Institution, but also through organized seminars, for people from Greece as well as abroad.

Furthermore, the eco-tourists could be interested in the environmental initiatives of the OAC and could, also, visit a characteristic good paradigm that is the Holy Patriarchal and Stavropegic Monastery of Chrysopigi on Crete. In this Monastery, the Nuns are living frugally by respecting the creation, based on a tradition of centuries. The relationship between us -as human beings- and our relationship with nature have to be reconsidered on a spiritual basis.

## **7. Possibilities of development of religious tourism in western Crete**

Western Crete has many historical religious monuments dated several centuries ago which have unique

characteristics [11] that attract not only religious visitors but also tourists who want to visit them during their vacations. Although the majority of tourists visiting Crete are “*sun and sea visitors*” there is a significant tourism segment that prefers to combine its holidays with cultural, archaeological and other local experiences. In the belief of the Orthodoxy Church the religious activities should be interconnected and intertwined with ecological and social activities. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stated in his recent message that “*In the divine liturgy, the natural and material world, along with all the senses, participates in an inseparable way.....The world does not exist against, is not an object of man, but is assumed and communed*” [25]. Current practices in the Orthodox Academy of Crete and in Monastery of Chrysopigi, Chania indicate that they have integrated the environmental sustainability concept in their daily life and practices. The development of religious tourism in western Crete is feasible and desirable. It could be combined with the promotion of ecological tourism sensitizing the visitors on both religious and ecological issues creating a hybrid religious-ecological tourism model. For the development of religious tourism guided tours can be organized in western Crete offering the opportunity to domestic and international tourists to visit the local religious monuments during their vacations. These guided tours should be combined with visits in local areas with ecological interest sensitizing them regarding environmental sustainability and ecological issues. It should be noted that several local monasteries are currently active in organic farming, in the promotion of renewable energies, in environmental education at cetera. The factors which affect the development of religious tourism in western Crete are evaluated with SWOT analysis. The analysis examines the inherent characteristics regarding the local strengths and weaknesses affecting its development as well as the external characteristics which might positively or negatively affect it like opportunities and threats. The strengths and the weaknesses have been revealed while the opportunities and the threats have been also identified. The results of SWOT analysis are presented in tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2:** Strengths and Weaknesses of religious tourism in western Crete

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p><u>Policy planning</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Freedom of worship in the country</li> <li>2. Recognition of the fact that the development of religious tourism will enrich and improve the local tourism product</li> <li>3. Support from the local and regional authorities</li> </ol>	<p><u>Policy planning</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inadequate regulatory framework to guide the promotion of religious tourism,</li> <li>2. Inadequate policies supporting financially the development of religious tourism.</li> </ol>
<p><u>Local resources</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There are many local religious monuments dated since the last two millennia,</li> <li>2. Very good mapping and documentation of the local religious monuments,</li> <li>3. The local religious monuments are well preserved with easy accessibility,</li> <li>4. Significant religious events all over the year,</li> <li>5. There many local tourism facilities for the visitors,</li> <li>6. Guided tours are offered to visitors to some religious monuments,</li> <li>7. Many religious monuments are located nearby important historical and archaeological monuments.</li> </ol>	<p><u>Local resources</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inadequate religious tourism marketing,</li> <li>2. Limited statistics and data for religious visitors,</li> <li>3. Lack of specialized training of the tour guides in religious tourism,</li> <li>4. Lack of coordination among local religious authorities regarding the promotion of religious tourism.</li> </ol>
<p><u>General</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Large internal market for religious tourism,</li> <li>2. There are financial resources for the renovation of religious monuments.</li> </ol>	<p><u>General</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited religious tourism packages designed and promoted by tour operators,</li> <li>2. Commercialization of the religion,</li> <li>3. Commodification of products related with pilgrimage,</li> <li>4. Commercialization of the local culture.</li> </ol>

Source: own estimations

**Table 3:** Opportunities and Threats of religious tourism in western Crete

Opportunities	Threats
<p><u>Policy planning</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognizing the option of developing religious tourism for diversification of the local tourism product,</li> <li>2. Strong will and support of the local authorities to promote religious tourism,</li> <li>3. Possibilities of new investments in religious tourism.</li> </ol>	<p><u>Policy planning</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diseases and pandemic outbreaks,</li> <li>2. Major environmental disasters due to climate change, earthquakes, et cetera</li> <li>3. Unexpected events due to terrorism, war, et cetera.</li> </ol>
<p><u>Local resources</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase of supporting activities and additional experiences nearby the religion monuments,</li> <li>2. Use of digital technologies for the promotion and advertisement of the local religious heritage.</li> </ol>	<p><u>Local resources</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduced competitiveness of the local religious product compared with other religious tourism destinations.</li> </ol>
<p><u>General</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creation of new jobs and employment,</li> <li>2. Possibility of development synergies between religious, cultural, and archaeological tourism,</li> <li>3. The global tourism industry is increasing including religious tourism,</li> <li>4. Increasing tourist arrivals in the prefecture of Chania and in the island of Crete.</li> </ol>	<p><u>General</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decrease of tourists willing to visit local religious monuments due to decline of Christian Orthodox visitors.</li> </ol>

Source: own estimations

The characteristics that indicate the potential for the development of religious tourism in western Crete have been evaluated through a PESTEL analysis. This analysis examines the Political, Economic, Social, Technological and Legal factors which affect the development of religious tourism in western Crete. The results of the PESTEL analysis are presented in table 4.

**Table 4:** PESTEL analysis regarding the development of religious tourism in western Crete

Factor	Characteristics
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Political stability in the country,</li> <li>b) Political will from the local authorities to support the development of thematic tourism and religious tourism in Crete.</li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Possibilities of achieving state financial subsidies for renovation of religious monuments,</li> <li>b) The monasteries can have revenues selling locally made foodstuff, souvenirs and artifacts to visitors,</li> <li>c) The tourism-related income will be increased.</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Religious and cultural tourists are willing to visit religious monuments in Crete,</li> <li>b) The local societies favor the development of religious tourism,</li> <li>c) Visitors in religious monuments will have the opportunity to know the mainland and its unique beauty which is not developed like the coastline in Crete,</li> <li>d) New jobs will be created locally.</li> </ul>
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) New technologies including Internet can provide information about the religious heritage and promote the development and marketing of religious tourism.</li> </ul>
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Visitors in the religious monuments will be aware about the nexus between religion and ecology in Orthodox Christianity and they will be familiar with ecological practices used in many monasteries,</li> <li>b) The religious tourists will be attracted from the beautiful natural sites of the island,</li> <li>c) They do not create any adverse environmental impacts.</li> </ul>
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The current legal framework in Greece does not hinder the development of religious tourism.</li> </ul>

Source: own estimations

### 8. Benefits from the development of religious tourism in western Crete

The development of religious tourism in western Crete is going to have positive impacts to the local stakeholders including religious authorities, monasteries and churches, the local tourism industry and the local authorities and societies. These benefits are presented in table 5.

**Table 5:** Benefits from the development of religious tourism in western Crete

Stakeholder	Benefits
Monasteries and churches	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monasteries and churches attracting tourists will have the opportunity to sell their products including foodstuff produced in their own fields, icons and religious handcrafts having revenues.</li> <li>2. The philanthropical activities of the local church authorities will be increased.</li> <li>3. More financial resources will be used in the renovation of the religious monuments while the transportation and the accessibility to them will be improved.</li> </ol>
Tourism industry	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Differentiation of the local tourism product which is mainly based on the “<i>sea and sun</i>” tourism.</li> <li>2. Religious tourism will cover the requirements of a small tourism segment which wishes to combine its vacations in Crete with cultural and religious activities.</li> <li>3. Tour operators with transportation buses and tourism guides will participate in the realization of several religious tours having revenues from these activities.</li> <li>4. Cafes and restaurants located nearby the religious monuments will sell coffee and meals increasing their daily revenues.</li> </ol>
Local authorities and societies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The tourism-related employability and income will be increased.</li> <li>2. Religious tourists will visit, apart from religious monuments, historical, cultural, and archeological sites as well as natural sites with unique beauty increasing the tourist’s traffic to them.</li> <li>3. New shops will be developed nearby to religious sites offering specific products and services to religious visitors.</li> </ol>

Source: [22]

**9. Discussion**

Religious tourism is growing worldwide following the growth of the global tourism industry. The island of Crete is a popular tourism destination visited by millions of tourists for summer vacations. It has a rich cultural heritage with many religious and historical monuments which attract many religious visitors. Orthodox Christianity believes that religion is interconnected and interwind with ecology and social justice. Many religious organizations and monasteries in Crete have integrated the environmental sustainability in their daily practices minimizing their impacts on the local ecosystems. Therefore, the tourists who visit the religious monuments will be sensitized with the ecological practices used locally regarding the protection of the environment. Our results

indicate that the potential of development the religious tourism in western Crete is high while it results in many socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders. It can also differentiate and enrich the tourism product in Crete which is currently dominated by the “*sea and sun*” tourism. Taken into account the rich cultural heritage in Crete further development of religious tourism could be combined with the development of cultural tourism tailor-made to specific target groups of visitors. It should be noted that the carbon emissions due to religious tourism in Mecca in 2011 at 60.5 kgCO<sub>2</sub> per visitor per day [19] are significantly higher than the emissions estimated in Crete at 12.1 kgCO<sub>2</sub> per visitor per day [29]. The results could be useful to local religious and public authorities as well as to tourism industry taken into account the lack of similar studies in Crete. The results do not quantify the potential benefits and impacts on the local societies due to the development of religious tourism in western Crete. A limitation of the current study is the absence of quantitative data regarding the visits of religious tourists in several religious monuments during the previous years in the western part of the island. Unfortunately, quantitative data regarding the number of tourists visiting religious monuments in western Crete are not available. The lack of relative data does not facilitate the development of a concrete plan for the future growth of religious tourism in western Crete. The collection and analysis of quantitative data related to visitors in the local monasteries could be useful in the future for developing the appropriate policies supporting the growth of religious tourism in the island. Studies related with the current ecological practices in the local monasteries in accordance with the belief of the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew should be realized in the near future. Future research should be focused in recording the domestic and international tourists visiting the main religious monuments in Western Crete. Additionally, in the design of thematic guided daily tours offered to tourists combining visits to religious monuments and to nearby located natural sites with unique natural beauty which are also attractable to visitors.

## 10. Conclusions

The potential and the opportunities for the development of religious tourism in western Crete, Greece has been investigated. Western Crete has many important religious monuments with historical and cultural value which are visited from domestic and international tourists either for pilgrimage or for sightseeing and cultural reasons. The monuments have been constructed during the last two Millenia while many of them have been renovated during the last decades and nowadays are easily accessible to visitors. The implementation of a SWOT and PESTEL analysis indicates that the potential for development of religious tourism in western Crete is high. The development is going to have multiple benefits to all stakeholders in the area including religious authorities, public authorities, local societies and the tourism industry. There are going to be positive local socio-economic impacts while the tourism product of Crete is going to be enriched with the development of thematic tourism. Taking into account the believe of the Orthodox Christianity that religious activities should be interconnected with ecological and social activities the development of religious tourism in this area should be combined with the sensitization of the visitors regarding the severe global environmental challenges of our era. The local public and religious authorities can use our findings regarding the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats of religious tourism in western Crete in order to design better policies for its promotion.

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