

NEW WAYS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR RELIGIOUS TOURISM ATTRACTIONS – A CASE STUDY OF DEBRECEN, HUNGARY

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Abstract: Religiously motivated travel is one of the oldest forms of tourism, which involves millions of people even today. However, churches are visited not only by believers but also by secular tourists who are motivated by learning about the history and culture of a religious building, monument or site. Many of Hungary's diverse religious heritage sites now offer complex visitor experiences as a result of recent tourism developments. The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate the opportunities of co-creating visitor experiences in churches and other religious tourism attraction through a case study approach. After a literature review on different aspects of religious tourism, three religious tourism attractions were examined, which may be considered as outstanding examples of the touristic use of religious heritage. A qualitative approach was utilized to explore the perspectives of tourism professionals concerning the interpretation of the church heritage. On-site observations and in-depth interviews with a tourism stakeholders (museum managers, guides of the exhibitions, museum pedagogy experts) were implemented to explore the potential of interpretation and experience co-creation at the chosen religious sites. The results indicate that the key to the survival of church heritage attractions is to incorporate modern innovations into museum practice, while respecting and complementing the heritage value. In the case of religious tourism, respect for sacred space is of paramount importance, and the tourism function should not negatively impact on the primary function of religious practice. Although the limitation of the present study lies in the fact that the demand side was investigated through on-site observation, the results may have implications for tourism experts working to find a second purpose for churches as tourism attractions.

Keywords: religious tourism; interpretation; heritage attractions

JEL Classification: Z32, O52

1. Introduction

Churches, religious monuments and sites as well as festivals and events, can be religious tourism attractions, but in many cases, they are also popular destinations for cultural tourism, and their visit is not necessarily motivated by religious reasons alone.

Visiting sacred buildings and places of worship can have a unique spiritual meaning for religious people, but can also have spiritual significance for non-religious visitors (Bartha, 2006). In our fast-paced world characterized by globalization and secularization, the individual's personal quest for happiness, peace and harmony is becoming dominant, which may motivate tourist to take part in spiritual travels to escape from everyday life (Domjáné Nyizsalovszki & Csáfor, 2023). The need for tranquillity and spirituality is steadily growing globally, although it is not always connected to a religious community (Gadácsi, 2022; P. Szászfalvi, 2018; Nair & Dileep, 2021). Churches are visited not only by religious believers but also by tourists with a cultural motivation seeking authentic and unique experiences (P. Szászfalvi, 2018). In addition to the well-known and frequently visited religious sites, the tangible and intangible values of religious heritage are often key elements in the offer of tourist destinations. At the same time church attendance in Europe is declining at most places and several churches have closed in Western Europe after their religious community had dissolved. Old churches belong to the historical heritage of a country, therefore there is often a considerable effort by local communities to find a new purpose for these buildings. Churches are often turned into community centers, tourist offices, apartments, restaurants or even pubs in Western cities in order to avoid demolition (e.g. Dublin, Tourism Centre, Church Cafe Bar and Restaurant in Dublin, Ireland, Champing Beaumaris, in Anglesey, Wales, etc.). Although churches have to face similar challenges in Hungary, giving churches and religious buildings a secular purpose is still not common. In our days, Christian denominations aim to maintain the original purpose of the churches, while opening the doors to a wider audience; the visitors motivated by cultural interest.

Our research is urged by the major tourism developments of the last decade in Hungary. Many of Hungary's diverse religious heritage sites now offer complex visitor experiences as a result of recent developments (MTÜ, 2021). The key to the success of religious tourism attractions is the cooperation between the tourism sector and churches. In the case of the historic churches, there is a clear desire to innovate and open up for tourism opportunities. The maintenance of the historic buildings consumes considerable financial and human resources, which would also require some form of profit-making economic activity in addition to the support of the community members. The maintenance and preservation of monumental buildings, some of which may be several centuries old, can be partly ensured by tourism revenues, and can also help to transmit values and traditions to the general public (Varga, 2011). In this case, the development of the revenue-generating capacity of religious tourism attractions is therefore motivated not by economic interests or profit-making, but by the need to preserve heritage (Raffay, et al., 2013). Following the latest trends, other tourism products, such as active tourism attractions and products, have been integrated into the tourism development practices of certain religious communities. Cycling tourism is often a good link between spiritual and active tourism. The churches of Eastern Hungary are visited by many cyclists who are also interested in the religious tourism attractions of the region, following the thematic route called the Route of the Medieval Churches. It has been recognized that religious buildings, especially churches, can be used for cultural purposes as well, such as concerts, lectures and concerts (P. Szászfalvi, 2018).

The last decade has seen a significant increase in the amount of funding available for the sector, which has helped to regenerate or create a number of church-related attractions in Hungary. Economic indicators (job creation, ticket revenue, number of visitors, etc.) have emerged as criteria for development tenders, which can only be met if the operators develop programmes and attractions with a business approach and in line with demand trends (Raffay et al, 2013). In our research, we analyze the religious tourism offer of the city of Debrecen, with special attention to the methods of interpretation of ecclesiastical cultural values. Although a plethora of work highlight the diversity of religious tourism attractions, the challenges and opportunities of religious tourism development in Eastern Europe have been left ambiguous.

Our aim is to present and evaluate religious tourism attractions that can serve as a model, i.e. that interpret the ecclesiastical heritage in a way that reflects the latest trends in visitor management, builds on the active participation of visitors and provides unique experiences. Furthermore, the present study also provides empirical insights into the challenges and opportunities arising from presenting the ecclesiastical heritage to the secular tourists.

2. Literature review

2.1 The concept of religious tourism and its demand side

Religiously motivated travel is one of the oldest forms of tourism (e.g. visits to churches or shrines, pilgrimages, etc.), which has attracted large crowds from ancient times to the present day. In a narrower sense, only pilgrimages, processions and other religious events can be included, where the focus of the faithful is on spirituality and transcendental experience, with tourist services playing a secondary role. This interpretation focuses on the transformative nature of religious tourism, which allows the tourist to grow spiritually during his or her journey, to become a 'different person' (Pécsek, 2023). Today, however, the concept is becoming more differentiated, and visits to churches and religious institutions, as well as cultural events in churches, can now be included in the concept of religious tourism (P. Szászfalvi, 2018). In a broader sense, it is therefore a form of travel in which 'believers and non-believers visit religious sites, not as sacred places, but as cultural, historical or artistic sites' (Varga, 2011). According to the latter approach, religious tourism is a product of cultural tourism, in which travelers are motivated by the search for values of artistic, historical, architectural and/or ethnographic significance. The demand for religious tourism is made up of two main segments: religious tourists who wish to experience their faith in a sacred place, and whose motivation is linked to their religious life, and secular tourists, who are motivated by the desire to visit built heritage sites and monuments, such as churches (Varga, 2011). According to the latter approach, the second group is much larger, as religious tourism attractions are also part of the global cultural heritage, which may therefore be of increased interest to non-believing travelers and motivate cultural trips. Nowadays, religious heritage sites are also domestic destinations for cultural tourism (Raffay et al, 2013).

There is also an increased demand for adventure and exploration with religious elements from active tourism visitors who want to complete their trip with a spiritual experience (Gadácsi, 2022). Hungary's National Strategy for the Development of Tourism identifies cultural culture, natural attractions, gastronomic experiences and

retreats as motivating factors for secular tourists (MTÜ, 2021). Religious tourism is also closely linked to heritage tourism, since learning about religious heritage and 'discovering the roots' can be both an important motivation for travelers and a unique attraction for the region, thus strengthening the competitiveness of the destination (Gonda, 2016). Heritage tourists are motivated by the desire to see built cultural heritage and to experience intangible cultural heritage, such as traditions and festivals (McNulty & Koff, 2014; Liritzis et al., 2015). Travelling can give tourists a sense of belonging to their homeland, while also creating intercultural awareness (Chang, 1999). In addition to social and cultural impacts, heritage tourism can also have positive economic effects by increasing employment opportunities and generating additional income for local society (Silberg, 1995). The religious attractions aiming to meet the needs of the differentiated demand (spiritual or cultural) need to introduce new, modern interpretation modes of the existing religious heritage.

2.2. New approaches to the interpretation of the ecclesiastical heritage

The spirituality of the built ecclesiastical heritage is of crucial importance, as it represents and presents the culture and identity of the destination to generations (Lee & Chhabra, 2015). The heritage value is captured by the tourist through interpretation, which conveys the knowledge necessary for a deeper understanding of the heritage in a creative and innovative way, often appealing to the emotions (Nuryanti, 1996). For a memorable visitor experience it is necessary to create a shared experience between the tourist and the service provider offering the programme. This means that the service provider's role is to involve the visitor in value creation, a process that is necessarily interactive and depends on the personality and cultural background of the recipient (Vargo & Lusch, 2018).

The main task of interpretation is to help individuals relate what they see to their identity (Kulcsár & Bodrogai, 2021), and it can also contribute to the development of positive attitudes towards culture among tourists (Weng et al., 2020). The main challenge of heritage tourism is the reconstruction of the past in the present through interpretation (Nuryanti, 1996), which can be done using a wide range of media, including digital tools (Happ et al., 2024). Some of the interpretive tools can be used for one-way communication, such as exhibitions, touch-screen information panels, audio-guides, while others can be used for two-way communication, such as guided visits or interactive digital games (Puczkó & Rátz, 2017). For heritage tourism sites, a particularly popular tool for guided visits is storytelling, which evokes people associated with the heritage asset, instead of listing factual historical information. Storytelling engages visitors not only intellectually but also emotionally in the experience. The presentation is often based on the history of the place, its people and events in the context of a historical period. At the same time, the visitor's willingness to engage is essential for a shared experience (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023; Vargáné Csobán & Molnár, 2022).

3. Materials and methods

The secondary research was based on a review of the national and international literature and a content analysis of the websites of the churches and religious institutions involved in the research. After a literature review on different aspects of religious

tourism, three religious tourism attractions were chosen for closer investigation, as they are considered the most outstanding examples of the touristic use of religious heritage and their touristic development has been recently implemented with a considerable amount of state funding. The Great Reformed Church of Debrecen, the iconic church building of the city and the Reformed College of Debrecen, the almost 500-year-old educational institution, have been the city's primary tourist attractions for decades. A qualitative approach was also employed to explore the perspectives of tourism professionals concerning the possible ways of interpretation of the church heritage, as well as the opportunities and challenges of the new interpretation methods. The primary data collection was carried out by means of on-site observations and 7 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a tourism stakeholders (a museum manager, guides of the exhibitions, museum pedagogy experts) of the Reformed Church and the Reformed College. Based on the observations, the offer of the religious tourism attractions included in the research was compared from different perspectives. The exhibitions and tourist spaces located in church-owned buildings were evaluated on the basis of the interpretative methods and tools used. The main criteria of our analysis were the use of digital and multimedia tools for presentation, innovative services based on ecclesiastical heritage values and interactivity, as illustrated by the information, descriptions, images and other information available on the websites of the sites studied.

The seven in-depth interviews were based on an interview protocol and a set of specific topics and questions. As for the participants' background information, 3 interviewees were males and 4 were females. Two of them work as tourism experts at the administrative offices of the Reformed Church in Debrecen, one as a museum manager, two as tour guides and three as museum pedagogy experts. All of the respondents have at least five years of work experience in tourism. The interviews were held between November 2024 and February, 2025 at the chosen religious sites. The interviewees were informed about the aim of the research and they were assured that their anonymity is protected. Saturation was reached when responses were repetitive and new perspectives did not appear. A thematic analysis was implemented after the interviews, following the six steps of thematic analysis procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4. Results

Debrecen, Hungary's second biggest city, often mentioned as the "Calvinist Rome", has a unique product offering, a significant part of which is its ecclesiastical heritage. It is crucial for the city's competitiveness in terms of tourism that buildings of historical, religious and monumental value are also attractive and interesting for tourists.

4.1 Tourism interpretation methods at the Great Reformed Church and the Reformed College

The Reformed Great Church of Debrecen is the iconic building of the city and the symbol of the Reformed Church in Hungary (Mátyás, 2020). Visitors can explore the building on their own or on guided tours, and take part in thematic museum education sessions, during which they can learn about the life of the Reformed in Debrecen from the 17th century to the present day. They can also visit several exhibitions presenting biblical stories and modern art. During the visit, the building can be explored through nine

stations. First, visitors will find various objects (e.g. the Governor Lajos Kossuth's former chair, an original Bible from the Middle Age, etc.) and related texts, both longer and shorter, which will help them to find out more detailed information. QR codes can also be found next to each object, which help visitors to receive further information on the exhibited objects. Moving through the exhibits, there are mock-ups of several significant Bible sites, which take visitors all the way to Debrecen, so they can get a closer look at the church from a church history perspective. The last stop on the tour is a chance to see the view of Debrecen from the towers, and the guided tours include a glass of wine, which may be consumed at the top of the church.

Although digital technologies are used in the presentation, but more important are the written texts that visitors can read on the information panels. Visitors can learn about the heritage values of the Great Church through interactive museum education and museum andragogy activities on various themes, including putting on costumes, short drama plays (Lajos Kossuth, Hungary's governor in 1849 reading the Declaration of Independence), quizzes, puzzles and other playful activities (Figure 1). These activities are led by museum professionals, who work full time for the church and are committed to co-create the experience with the visitors during the tours. The employees who were interviewed in our research claimed that personal relations are much more appealing to the adults and the senior visitors, who are reluctant to read QR codes and digital displays. The majority of the respondents felt that the sacred nature of the sites may urge people to avoid the use of technical devices and visitors prefer human contact to digital information.

The Reformed College of Debrecen, which has been in continuous operation since 1538, and it plays an important role in the life of the city as an educational and cultural institution. Its historical significance is due to the fact that in 1849 the Hungarian Parliament met here and the Declaration of Independence declaring the dethronement of the Habsburgs was prepared here. The museum also houses several permanent exhibitions. There is an exhibition on the history and traditions of the Reformed Church (Church History Exhibition), and on the famous students and teachers of the College and the historical traditions of the school (School History Exhibition). As in the Great Church, the exhibitions are complemented by information panels placed next to them. However, in addition to the static interpretation, there will be several interactive sessions to take part in the various experiential elements of the exhibition. Visitors can try out a period printing press, lift the students' ancient fire-fighting tool, the gerundium, and sit on the benches of a college classroom. They can also watch a short-animated video about student life in a dormitory and listen to interesting stories, sermons and poems through headphones.

Primary and secondary school students can enjoy museum activities and interactive adventure games, while adults can take part in guided visits, with a special emphasis on storytelling related to the exhibits, and learn about the story of the discovery of the Kaba meteorite, the everyday life of the students of the College. We found that the exhibition in the College has more interactive elements than in the Great Church, and uses a wider range of digital technologies, but again the presentation is mostly based on the written text.

The Szabó Magda Memorial House is a branch of the Debrecen Reformed College Museum, and it is dedicated to the life and works of the writer, Magda Szabó. Although it is not specifically a church historical monument, it is connected to the Reformed

church life in many ways. The memorial site invites visitors to an imaginary world, furnished with original bequests or period objects, and presents the typical places of the writer's life, the scenes of family life. The interiors bring to life the everyday life of the family, reconstructing the writer's former home on the basis of her autobiographical writings. The objects placed here come to life along with the texts that can be read next to them. In addition, the public spaces of the city and the most important stages of the writer's life in Debrecen are also shown. The fiction is presented through objects from the novels (e.g. a reconstruction of a dress and other props from the film *Abigél*). Virtual travel in space and time is given a prominent role, with a number of creative elements added to the exhibition to create a sense of time travel. Touchscreen installation (with images and text) is displayed to evoke the historical past. Digital tools are also used in the presentation. A virtual family tree of the author is displayed, but QR codes and touch screen installations are also displayed. A documentary film on the life of Magda Szabó can be seen in one of the rooms. The human voice also features in the exhibition, with the writer's voice coming from the handset of an old telephone. One of the exhibition's strengths is that visitors can touch and hold the objects on display (books that can be turned over, drawers that can be pulled out, a movable installation of urban sculptures). For kindergarten and primary school children, museum educational activities and interactive games are organized, based on a story by the author, while secondary school children can participate in museum lessons, and adult visitors can enjoy various museum events (e.g. Museum Night programmes, literary evenings, readings, etc.) and guided tours. Overall, although the exhibition relies in part on digital technologies and interactivity, they are not the main focus. Both in the exhibition and in the museum education sessions, it is the writer's texts, her legacy objects and family photographs that provide the best means of connecting with what is on display.

Table 1: Summary of the tourist offer of the investigated attractions

	<i>Great Reformed Church</i>	<i>Reformed College</i>	<i>Szabó Magda Memorial House</i>
<i>Digital tools</i>	<i>QR-codes, films</i>	<i>QR-codes, short videos</i>	<i>QR-codes, virtual family trees, touchscreens, documentaries</i>
<i>Multisensoral experiences</i>	<i>–</i>	<i>stories can be listened to from headsets</i>	<i>voice of the writer can be heard from an old telephone</i>
<i>Interactive elements</i>	<i>touchable replica books, roleplay games, quizzes, putting on costumes</i>	<i>old classroom, which can be tested, movable objects (drawers, printing machines, etc.)</i>	<i>movable installations, books</i>
<i>Museum pedagogy programmes</i>	<i>for preschoolers, students, adults</i>	<i>for preschoolers, students, adults</i>	<i>for preschoolers, students, adults</i>

Source: Authors' own compilation, 2025

The interpretation methods used at the investigated sites were compared according to four criteria, as illustrated in Table 1.

4.2 Opportunities and challenges for employing the new approaches to interpretation

The need for tourism development at the ecclesiastical heritage

The interviewees highlighted that it had been recognized for many years that there is a need for visitor-friendly developments that respect the heritage value and the uninterrupted exercise of religious life. As one tourism expert explained „*We wouldn't like to see our churches standing empty and deserted or converted into secular buildings. But as many congregation members prefer online services, we fear that the buildings become out of use in the future*”.

The Reformed Church has recently launched a large-scale tourism programme focusing on built heritage sites (mainly churches), as there are numerous memorial sites, museums and public collections in the region. The aim of the programme, entitled "Religio et Patria - Freedom, Creed, Creation", is to present the ecclesiastical heritage to secular visitors and to integrate it into the tourist offer of the city and the region. The museum managers and the tourism experts of the church agreed that churches have been given new functions as cultural centers offering classical and modern concerts and performances.

Cooperation among tourism and church stakeholders

The museum manager emphasized that the ecclesiastical attractions are part of a single brand, which makes cooperation among the attractions and the tourism professionals of the city inevitable. In order to be competitive, it is necessary to develop a visitor-friendly environment, to have some kind of revenue-generating activity (e.g. admission fees, programme organization). In the museum manager's view, as a result of the cooperation heritage tourism development has brought the quality of the offer to the point where attractions and related services can be sold as a competitive tourism product. The greatest strength of the cooperation is that it makes the ecclesiastical heritage available to the public, and integrates the built and spiritual heritage of Debrecen and its surrounding region into a complex tourism product. A common ticket system was developed under the title "Debrecen is the city of the Reformation", which entitles visitors to enter the Reformed College Museum and the Reformed churches within 2 days. This scheme enables the attractions to be promoted simultaneously and encourages visitors to visit all of them during their stay. The tourism experts pointed out that as a result of the tourism programme implemented in 2024, around 50,000 visitors visited the Reformed churches and exhibition sites in Debrecen and the surrounding area, in addition to those attending congregational and liturgical events.

New ways of interpretation

The tour guide and museum pedagogy experts highlighted that interpretation of ecclesiastical sites can take many forms, but the basic requirement is to present the values with historical and ecclesiastical authenticity. The presentation of built heritage provides an opportunity for encounter with a church and religious communities, while culture brings visitors closer to Christian faith and ideals and makes ecclesiastical values of high artistic and aesthetic quality widely accessible. The cultural programmes also aim to appeal to the younger generation.

Religious tourism is also a kind of missionary activity for the historic churches, as they can bring the message of the churches closer to the people through their historical, cultural and theological heritage. The ultimate goal of religious tourism is not to attract more tourists, but to reveal the church's heritage through quality tourism services and attractions.

The findings suggest that introducing technologically innovative solutions in interpretation may be necessary to grab the attention of the younger generations. As one of the museum pedagogy experts pointed out "Everybody *has their mobile phones in their hands all the time. We need to use those mobiles for edutainment, otherwise they just take selfies even in the church*".

Major challenges in the tourism development of the ecclesiastical heritage

The interviewees repeatedly emphasized their concern over the shortage of human resources. Several forms of interpretation, e.g. storytelling, personal presentations, museum pedagogy programmes and assistance with the digital tools require well-qualified professionals. For example, one respondent mentioned: "We do not have enough staff at the peak season, especially during the school trips' season." One respondent affirmed: "Then we never have enough time to exchange ideas with each other."

The lack of financial resources is the other major problem highlighted by the interviewees. Technological tools are still considered a new innovation with huge potential, however purchasing and implementing the modern, interactive digital tools in the tourism interpretation process requires a constant flow of funding, otherwise they become outdated very quickly. The long-term maintenance of digital tools required considerable funding, which is clearly recognized by the interviewees.

5. Conclusions

In our study, we sought to answer the question of how the Reformed Church uses methods and tools to present the religious tourism attractions it owns to visitors, and how it interprets the values of the cultural heritage of the Church to non-denominational tourists with a primarily cultural motivation. Based on field participant observations, in-depth interviews with experts and content analysis of the websites of the attractions studied, it was concluded that the tourism programme of the Tiszántúli Református Church District, Religio et Patria, and the religious tourism attractions of Debrecen offer a complex tourism experience diversified according to demand needs. In the case of churches, such as the Reformed Church of Debrecen, increased care must be taken when implementing tourism developments to ensure that the primary religious functions of sacred places of worship are not compromised and that members of faith communities who wish to practice their faith are not disadvantaged by the service provided to tourists. In contrast to many examples in Western Europe, where Christian churches have become empty, abandoned buildings, sometimes catering and event venues, the vast majority of churches in Hungary still function as active places of congregational life. The Great Church and the Reformed College are also national monuments because of their historical significance, so the spirit and dignity of the place must be respected in the activities that take place there.

We have found that the former interpretation based on one-way communication, the factual presentation of exhibited objects and the static means of presentation are

increasingly being replaced and complemented by storytelling. The stories conveyed are varied and do not only cover the themes of religion and faith, but also recall, among other things, the history of the school (everyday life in the Reformed College), the lives of prominent figures and the history of the school (the life of the Reformed College).), and linguistic curiosities (biblical sayings in the Great Church, the etymology of "gerund" in the College, excerpts from Magda Szabó's works in the Memorial House, etc.).

A novel way of meeting the needs of visitors to religious institutions is to integrate gastronomic and musical experiences into the complex tourist experience. A good example of this is the "Big Church in Love" programme, where, after a short organ concert, visitors can taste the wine of the Big Church while admiring the sunset on the panoramic walkway in the church's nave. A café-bookshop is also located in the Memorial Garden between the Great Church and the Reformed College, which also contributes to visitor satisfaction. In all three sites studied, great emphasis is placed on the introduction of interactive interpretation, with playful exercises and puzzles to make the thematic sessions more interesting for all ages.

Movable, touchable objects during the self-guided tours help visitors to become active participants in the exhibitions, not just spectators. Moving somewhat away from current trends, the use of digital tools (e.g. holographic projections, multimedia and VR tools) was also found to be relatively limited in the presentation of the ecclesiastical heritage. In our opinion, it would be worth considering a wider use of digital technologies, as the introduction of modern visual communication techniques can bring a number of benefits. On the one hand, they can be an effective complement to interpretation methods and, on the other hand, they can be used to stimulate the interest of younger generations.

It can be concluded that the key to the survival of heritage attractions is to incorporate modern innovations into museum practice, while respecting and complementing the heritage value. In the case of religious tourism, respect for sacred space is of paramount importance, and the tourism function must not in any way infringe on the primary site of religious practice. However, the sites mentioned in the study are examples of how the built heritage can be successfully transformed into an attraction promoting the historical and spiritual values of the church through the development of a tourism product based on a well-thought-out marketing concept.

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