

Article

# Tourism Accessibility and Its Impact on the Spiritual Sustainability of Sacred Sites

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**Abstract:** Religious heritage sites are defined by their nature, both religious and non-religious (historical, social, cultural, etc.), as being pilgrimage destinations, as well as tourist attractions. The main aim of this paper is to determine whether there is a relationship between tourism accessibility and the concept of spiritual sustainability. Spiritual sustainability is presented in the paper by analyzing the concept of a sacred place and the connection it may have with tourism development. The authors have attempted to distinguish the elements determining the tourist and religious (spiritual) attractiveness of several pilgrimage sites as destinations for religious tourism, proposing a model for analyzing the connection between the two concepts studied. Two European regions have been compared—Pomerania (Poland) and Catalonia (Spain)—by analyzing 30 sacred sites (15 per region) using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The results show that a lack of accessibility positively affects the spiritual sustainability of the sites. In other cases, the impact that accessibility can have depends on the management system.

**Keywords:** religious tourism; sacred sites; spiritual sustainability; accessibility

## 1. Introduction

Religious tourism, and, to a certain extent, pilgrimages, take place in a specific and defined geographical space, which is part of the broadly comprehended cultural landscape. The range and shape of that space are determined by its dynamic nature and are the result of changes in the motivation, behavior, and needs of the tourist (users of the space). Sacred places (in the context of religious tourism) may be of a universal nature, where the tourist comes into contact with the broadly comprehended phenomenon of religiosity [1]. However, they can also be approached from a wide perspective (a tourist's interest in religion, both in terms of faith and the history, art, or symbolism), a narrow one (the religious motive is dominant, but assumes the existence of other secondary motifs), and a specialist one (the closest to the notion of “pilgrimage”, where the most important and often sole motive of travel is the desire to commune with the sacrum). A sacred place, often referred to as a holy site or sacred site, is defined as the result of the individualization of landscape perception and its nature, both the religious and historical, social, geographical, and cultural [1,2]. Therefore, it can be both a strictly motivated destination of wandering (pilgrimage), as well as a place with dominant features of regional or local culture and historical or religious heritage elements [3].

Sacred places represent one of the most important elements of the religious tourism space and religious landscape, constituting a subject of interest for tourists and pilgrims. Their functioning, shape, and boundaries are a result of the influence of both the elements of the *sacrum* and the broadly understood *profanum*. Despite the complexity and great diversity in the understanding of *sacrum* in the tourist space, one can point to the functioning of certain bridges connecting the elements and affecting

its attractiveness (tourism and religion) [4]. One of these bridges is the proper interpretation of the place, referring, on the one hand, to its character and religious and spiritual values, and, on the other hand, to its importance as an element of the religious and cultural heritage of the region. The concept of spiritual sustainability is closely related to the perception of the identity and meaning of religious sites [5,6].

Accessibility is another important issue for both religion and tourism. As it will be developed in the following section, accessibility refers not only to physical access to the sites [7], but also to emotional and intellectual accessibility, regarding the perception that visitors have in terms of the narratives and the values of the sites [8,9]. Depending on these elements, the perception and even the significance of the site determine the character of the space [6]. A skillful combination of these elements should not disturb the character of the place and its unique *genius loci* [10]. The functioning of a holy place in the geographical and tourist space largely depends on its significance in the religious or social consciousness of the pilgrims. Extremely important elements, and in many cases, decisive ones, for the attractiveness of the object could be its location, communication accessibility, and pilgrimage and tourist activity management [11–13]. Large and significant religious tourism places, such as Fatima [14], Lourdes [15,16], Częstochowa [17,18], and Santiago de Compostela [19,20], have developed as global pilgrimage centers, thanks to efficiently functioning infrastructure and good communication accessibility. Smaller religious centers and places situated in marginal areas, located slightly off the beaten track in comparison to mainstream pilgrimage activity, have developed similarly.

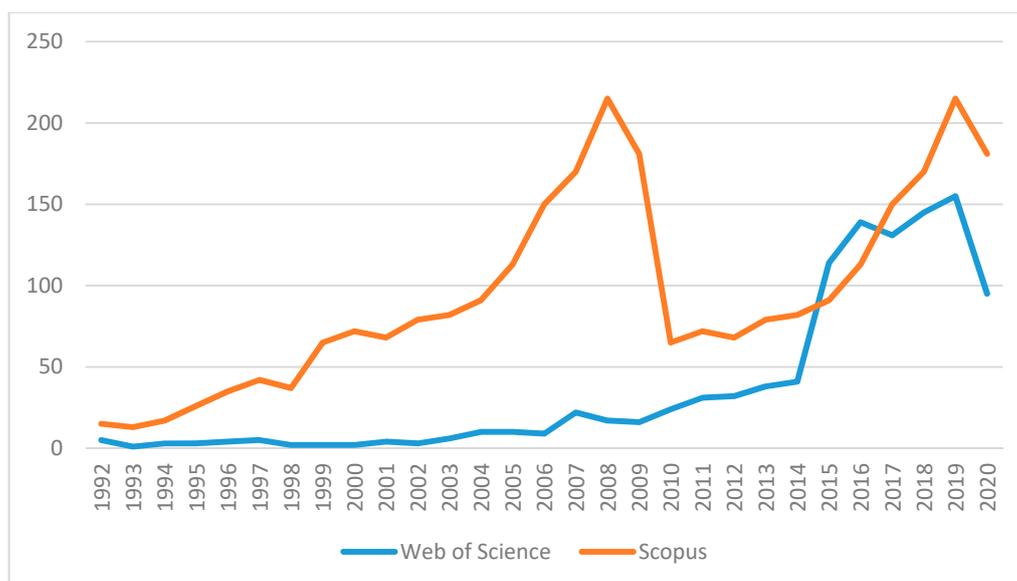
The main aim of this paper is to determine to what extent tourism accessibility can help to preserve the spiritual sustainability of sacred places. For this purpose, the concept of spiritual sustainability will be proposed and explored. Furthermore, the authors have attempted to distinguish the elements determining the tourist and religious (spiritual) attractiveness of several pilgrimage sites as destinations for religious tourism, proposing a model for the classification of sacred buildings related to their importance in tourism and the perception of the spiritual values of the site. The paper is structured in different sections. The first section includes a literature review on the state of the art regarding religious tourism sites and the concept of spiritual sustainability. The literature review sustains the methodology proposed, which is highlighted in the second section. Following the methodology, the results are presented, and conclusions and discussions are proposed in the last section of the paper.

## 2. Religious Tourism, Accessibility, and Spiritual Sustainability

After reviewing the different approaches that have been adopted in religious tourism studies, two realities can be stated. On one hand, there has been a growing interest in the topic, especially since the 1990s, and on the other hand, it has been approached from the perspective of different disciplines.

After exploring the main databases in the field of social sciences and humanities, it was found that the number of publications in international journals dealing with religious tourism has grown exponentially. Figure 1 shows the evolution of published papers based on the Web of Science and Scopus if the term religious tourism is searched. A very significant increase occurred after 2014, except for 2008 in the case of Scopus, which exhibited a significative increase, but decreased immediately afterwards. The search can be refined by looking for specific topics, such as pilgrimage, a pilgrim's or religious tourist's motivations, and impacts, among others. Figure 1 demonstrates the importance this field has acquired in the last year as a topic of academic interest.

In line with this importance, at the beginning of 2000, a specific worktable for religious tourism was created by the ATLAS institution dedicated to research on tourism. Since then, the number of publications has multiplied, as well as the number of congresses and international conferences. For instance, the publication of the acts of the First Congress is remarkable [21] and has led to the appearance of articles in international academic journals, such as the *Journal of Cultural Geography* and *Annals of Tourism Research* in the United States, *Geographia Religionum* in Germany, and *Cahiers du Tourisme* and *Cahiers Espace* in France, ending with the development of specialized journals, such as the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the publications on religious tourism. Source: The authors based on data from Scopus and Web of Science.

There is a group of studies focused on pilgrimage as a central theme. Inspired by the work of Durkheim and Eliade on the separation of sacred and profane, the first theories explored pilgrimage from a sociological approach [22], giving rise to the publication of other relevant works, where the links between pilgrimage and tourism were explored [23–25]. It must be said that works on specific sanctuaries and pilgrimages have also been published in certain regions and countries [15,20,26,27]. Furthermore, increasing numbers of experiences and cases of study of pilgrimages have been recognized in the international field, such as the Camino de Santiago [28–32] or the Hajj [33–36]. It goes without saying that, in this area, there is an extensive bibliography at the local level and in non-English languages, which would be a reason for conducting a more in-depth study.

However, regarding religious tourism, most of the documents (especially those published in the 1990s) seek to study the concept of religious tourism, and there are currently a large number of studies. Beyond conceptualization, we can talk about studies that have researched the phenomenon from different perspectives. For example, from defining what is religious tourism, the relationship that it can have with spiritual tourism [4,37–40], different management systems [13,41,42], the impacts that it generates in certain areas [43–46], and the relationship between religion and political instability [47–50] have been discussed. Several studies have even focused on motivations and conflicts of use between tourists and residents and on impacts, whilst very few studies have examined the complex management issues related to important pilgrimage sites where tourism and religion meet [51] or focused on the concept of preserving the meaning of the sites, except for the works of Schakley [52].

The main contribution of this paper is the proposal of the concept of spiritual sustainability and an analysis of to what extent this concept can be influenced by the accessibility of sites, especially regarding visitors' (both pilgrims and tourists) perception. The authors propose a methodological model that allows different data to be collected from sacred places and the interrelation between different aspects to be analyzed, taking into account the motivation of the visitor and the spiritual sustainability of the site.

To define the concept of spiritual sustainability, first, the idea of sacred sites and their connection with spiritual values has to be presented. The term sacred has been studied from different perspectives (ethnology, sociology, philosophy, and theology, to name a few). It is a complex concept that can be defined and studied from different perspectives, including sociological, phenomenological, and hermeneutic perspectives, but ultimately, it can be defined as the opposite of profane [53,54]. The first theories about the sacred appeared in the field of ethnology and sociology. They were born in

the heart of the French School of Sociology represented by Durkheim, Mauss, and Hubert, who define the sacred as a set of forces that are born of collective consciousness and play a decisive role in the structuring of society [55–58]. However, one of the main contributions comes from the field of the phenomenology of religion, where the sacred is studied by emphasizing human beings as individuals and not as members of a society and highlighting the experience of the sacred. The sacred is a completely different universal element (*ganz andere*), representing an a priori category in humans [59,60].

Mircea Eliade applies an integral method that combines history, phenomenology, and hermeneutics and proposes a notion of the sacred as an absolute reality. His work supports the existence of a spiritual unity of humanity and proposes the term *hierophany*, meaning that the sacred, in the act of manifesting itself, brings us closer to the divine. The sacred can manifest itself in various ways, but always through symbols, and this is evident in the sacred places themselves [61,62].

The concept of place can be defined as a meaningful space to which people are linked; places, apart from having a location (they must be located in some physical space) and a visual material form, must also have some relation to humans, being intimate spaces where the experience is particularly intense [63]. This is especially applicable to sacred places. The essence of a place is its definition as the deep center of human existence [64]. The concept of the center is also important in defining the sacred; the symbolism of the center is one of the main representatives of the sacred that can be found in the location of sacred sites (for example, sacred mountains or religious buildings placed in the symbolic center of the community) or in the symbolic representation of the sacred (such as in buildings, sacred objects, or sacred art) [62,65]. A pilgrimage is also defined as a journey to the center, while tourism represents a journey in the opposite direction, meaning that it is a superficial activity [25].

A place has two fundamental characteristics: It has a temporal dimension and it is a social construction [66]. Regarding the first characteristic, sacred places have a meaning and also a materiality (a specific natural environment, religious constructions, etc.). All religions construct space and time through their specific ontological commitments, and from this, it follows that, to understand the nature of religious landscapes, representations, and practices, it is necessary to contextualize it in their temporal and spatial framework [67]. Symbols in sacred places are manifested through space (site) and time (rituals) [62]. Religion includes not only the beliefs, customs, traditions, and rituals that belong to a particular society, but also the collective and personal experiences of people in the search for realization or meaning [53,68]. In sacred space and time, the believer lives a special atmosphere, where there is a feeling of being with a superior force—the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [60].

The second characteristic refers to socially constructed spaces [69] and to understand the construction and meaning of sites, it is vital to recognize that religious practices, both in terms of institutional organization and personal experience, are fundamental not only for the spiritual life of society, but also for its constitution [67]. The experiences derived from rituals are not only individual, but can also be collective, and are influenced by the site where they take place [62]. Ceremonial activity has been maintained for millennia in many holy places; at some sites, worship was already celebrated in the Neolithic era, and this has been maintained, despite the passage of several civilizations, until today, for example, Christian sanctuaries [70]. Therefore, religion can be perceived as a transient form, while the essence of the place can be seen to transcend space and time [71].

The experiences that visitors have in sacred sites may include different elements, such as spirituality and faith, among others, such as accommodation, food supply, transport, and cultural activities [13,52,72,73]. An important concept to consider is that of the atmosphere of the place [52], meaning that there are places where there is an intersection between the physical and the spiritual that commutes the human being in the deepest sense, regardless of their beliefs, religious or not [70]. This sense of the place is related to the emotional and subjective link that people have to a specific site [63], but also to the meaning that a sacred place has for a specific community [52,74,75]. A sacred place links the spiritual and the material and can be defined as an area of special spiritual significance to people and communities [76]. For this reason, managing visitors' experience in a sacred place is difficult because it includes tangible and intangible elements. To maintain the spirit of the place and

positively influence the visitors' experience, it is necessary to reflect on aspects such as authenticity, visitor management, the impact that visitors have on the site, the quality of the visit, and access to sacred spaces (including other spaces and services that can be offered) [13,51,52,72].

According to the authors, progressive globalization (also in the context of religious and cultural tourism), as well as the intensive development of transport and communication, has significantly facilitated and intensified global tourist activity, regardless of the leisure form, as well as the destination and motivation of the journey undertaken [77–79]. Easy and quick access to sacral heritage objects may change their specific *genius loci*, sense of *sacrum*, and spiritual significance, as a place of pilgrimage destination, representing important factors in the context of the sustainable development of sacral heritage tourism [48,80,81].

The interests that different groups can have in one place can be economic, political, religious, or moral, among others, so when the interests of different groups are contradictory in the same space, the places can become foci of intense conflicts [82]. This point is well-demonstrated concerning sacred places [83,84]. Narrative is an important tool for adding meaning to a place; naming a place is a way of making the invisible visible [63], and some narratives organize sites [85]. It is important to compare spiritual/religious narratives and tourist narratives in order to observe to what extent the sense of the place can be modified [66]. Religious understanding of a place creates a set of spaces, while tourist interpretations produce different types of spaces. This simultaneity of places offers abundant opportunities for overlap and convergence in terms of what is sacred to devotees, and what is aesthetic to and commodified by tourists [81,86]. This phenomenon is particularly evident in regions with significant tourism development, where the marketing, promotion, and creation of tourism products are primarily focused on leisure, active tourism, and urban and cultural tourism [80]. Religious tourism, despite its important function in the space, is marginal here. Existing large pilgrimage centers become more attractive because of their history and architecture, rather than for their spiritual and religious values [6,23,48].

Today, sacred places in Europe represent an important part of European heritage, and part of it is related to religious buildings [23]. In Europe, there are some half a million religious buildings, including churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues, and most Europeans consider them an essential element of European identity [87]. In most cases, the original function of these sacred places is linked to religion and spiritual values, but there are other functions, such as education or tourism [88]. Spiritual values include those values related to religion, traditional faith, or belief systems [70]. Although the concept of spirituality has evolved to include elements such as the search for a harmonious relationship with oneself and with "others", such as people, animals, or nature, it may also include one's relationship with God/a higher power [89]. Sacred places are bridges that help people to connect with the spiritual dimension [90,91].

The concept of spiritual sustainability refers to the preservation of the original meaning and function of sacred places. When it comes to sustainability, since the publication of the Brundtland Report [92], emphasis has been placed on three dimensions: Economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions. In the case of sacred places, the authors propose a fourth dimension: The spiritual one. Several authors have pointed out that the environmental crisis we are facing today is the result of a spiritual crisis in human beings [93,94] and that a change of values is needed in order to follow the path to sustainability [95]. Sustainability is a holistic concept that cannot be treated as a single specialization, as its essence is that everything is related to everything [40,95–97]. In this paper, sacred places will only be analyzed from a spiritual perspective, but the authors are aware of the importance of considering the other dimensions of sustainability. Spiritual sustainability refers to the preservation of the spirit of a place, the original use, and the sacredness of the site. Spiritual sustainability can be at risk when spaces are desecrated. There are two ways in which a sacred place can be desecrated: Defilement and dispossession [84]. In the first case, it can happen when the sacredness or the purity of the space cannot be preserved anymore, for example, because of visitors behaving disrespectfully [51,72,84] or because sites become excessively commodified and the sacredness can no longer be perceived [52,81].

The second case happens when locals are not able to perform rituals in sacred places [84] or even when sacred objects are decontextualized, for example, sacred images that have been removed from churches and are kept in museums [88]. These are unsustainable examples related to spirituality. The concept of spiritual sustainability refers to the preservation of spiritual values of sacred places by offering services to pilgrims and devotees, avoiding excessive transformation of the site to adapt to tourism needs, and making visitors aware of the spiritual values of the places. In Table 1 the connection between accessibility and the use of religious heritage is shown, considering that sacred use is related to religious values while profane use is related to other functions that heritage may have, like tourism.

**Table 1.** Relationship between accessibility and use of religious heritage. Source: The authors.

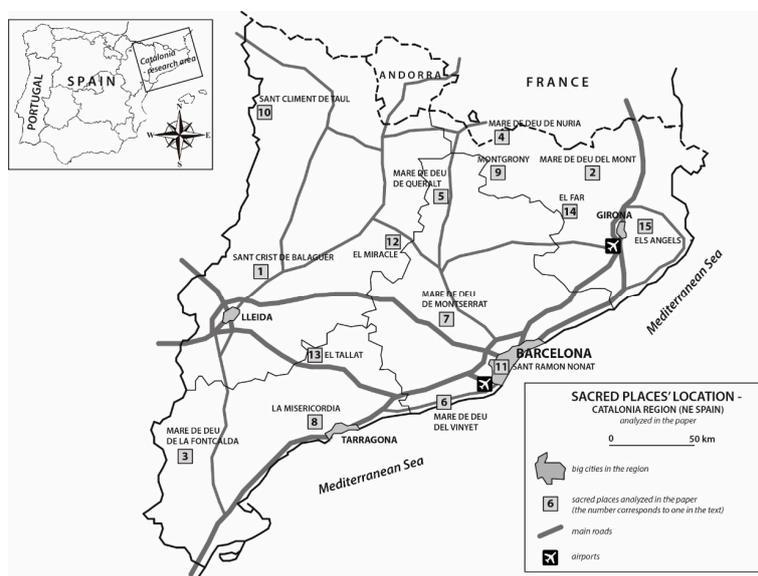
		Use	
		Sacred	Profane
Accessibility	Physical	Access conditions to sacred space (transport facilities, opening hours for religious activities) [11,48,52] Religious services (mass, space for praying ... ) [11,12,48,51,52]	Access conditions to the destination [7,80,98–100] Other services (accommodation, shop, restaurants ... ) [51,80,81]
	Emotional/Intellectual	Religious celebrations and events [23,51,81] Information on religious values (interpretation tools) [9,10,12,81]	Cultural activities and events (music concerts, conferences ... ) [23,99] Guided tours and information emphasizing the historic and cultural values [10,51,81]

While accessibility is a key issue for both sacred and profane uses, easy access to religious sites for non-religious purposes may affect the global perception of the site affecting the spiritual sustainability. As shown in Table 1, those issues related to the sacred use are positive for the spiritual sustainability of the sites; while those promoting other uses may affect negatively the spiritual sustainability. Numerous research works and scientific publications point to several indicators determining the nature of tourism spaces (including religious tourism spaces) and its significance in terms of the development of various forms of tourism. Most of them include the motivation for travelling, tourist and transport accessibility of the place, and development and adaptation of the infrastructure to the needs of developing forms of tourism [98–100]. Accessibility is one facet of the person-environment relationship [101]. It is a highly relative concept; a comprehension of environmental elements is only possible by relating environmental factors to the person component, as individual interpretations influence the perceptions on what counts as accessible. The differences between the terms accessibility, usability and universal design may help better understanding these concepts [102]. While accessibility and usability are usually used to determine the observed performance, with usability being more centered on individual interpretations; universal perception is highlighted as a more process-oriented approach instead of a focus on results. At its core, universal perception incorporates aspects of accessibility and usability from the beginning and represents a less stigmatizing concept [103]. Thus, it may affect the satisfaction of visitors in the context of perceiving a place as attractive for a suitable form of travel, including the spiritual or religious motivated journeys [104]. In recent years, there have also been many publications on sacred objects and religious tourism places, indicating, at the same time, separate factors shaping the significance of these objects in the region's tourism space [12,13,23,48,66,105–108]. In addition to motivation, which is a universal factor that determines the development of all forms of tourism, these factors include the religious identity of the place; the availability of sacral services; the possibility of attending various religious practices; and a location in a place suitable for tranquility, praying, and other aesthetic and spiritual experiences [10,13]. In the following section, the authors propose how these concepts can be studied to determine whether there is a relation between tourism accessibility and spiritual sustainability.

### 3. Methodology

As mentioned in the section above, the concept of spiritual sustainability refers to the preservation of spiritual values of sacred places by offering services to pilgrims and devotees, by avoiding excessive transformation of the site to adapt to tourism needs, and by making visitors aware of the spiritual values of the places. To explore the relationship between religious sites, tourism accessibility, and the visitor's perception, the authors conducted a research study using comparative methods related to the scoring of several issues at each of the analyzed sites. The research process involved several stages, which the authors carried out comparably in two different tourist spaces: The regions of Catalonia (NE Spain) and Pomerania (NW Poland). The choice of two apparently completely different European regions was the result of them having similar conditions for space development in terms of religion, culture, history, and geography.

The first stage of research included the appropriate selection of objects representative of the analyzed region in terms of both geography (diverse location) and semantic significance (places of varying importance—local, regional, national, or global). According to the authors' idea, there is a need to distinguish and indicate sacred places, which are important objects in the spiritual experience of believers, and an attraction of a historical, architectural, or cultural nature. It is also important to indicate places where the spiritual significance is the only factor that attracts the pilgrimage activity. For other reasons (poor accessibility or a lack of infrastructure), this place is overlooked by tourists, often contributing to economic stagnation and a lack of development prospects. The problem concerns particular regions affected by a strong seasonality phenomenon (like coastal regions of central and northern Europe), as well as places exposed to conflicts of overtourism–undertourism, such as Barcelona and the Costa Brava coast vs. central parts of Catalonia [109]. As a result of these considerations, 15 religious and pilgrimage tourist destinations from each of the studied regions were selected for comparative analysis (Figures 2 and 3).

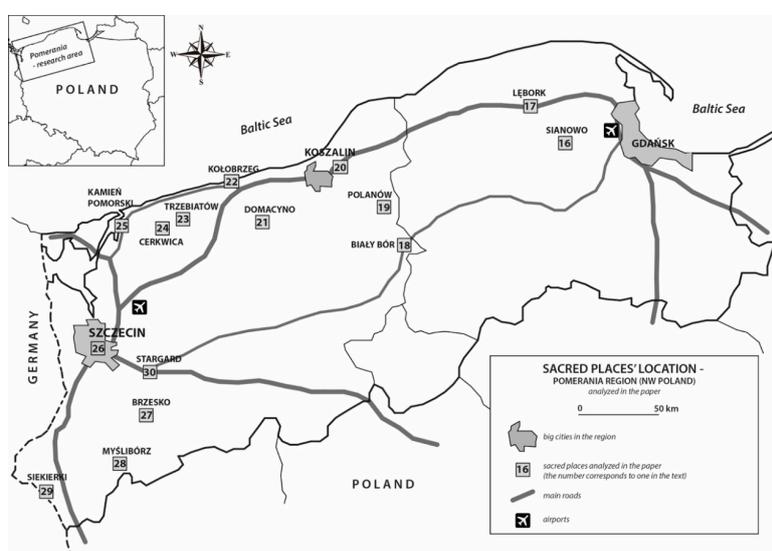


**Figure 2.** Location of the sacred places in Catalonia (NE Spain) analyzed and described in the paper.

Source: The authors.

The second stage included an analysis of the structure of tourism, motivations of visitors, and the accessibility (e.g., concerning transport, opening hours, individual perceptions, etc.) of the place, as well as the variety of activities offered on-site. For this purpose, the authors used the optimal and comparative content analysis method frequently employed in geographical studies by scoring points gradation. The advantage of this method, besides its high comparability, is the independent selection of appropriate evaluation criteria [110–112]. As mentioned above, the concept of spiritual

sustainability refers to the preservation of the original meaning and function of sacred places. To define it and its functions for the development of religious and spiritual tourism, the factors that determine the perception of a place using appropriate scoring of valuation were recognized and identified. These factors were grouped into two groups: One involving the factors that determine the religious importance of the site and the second including the factors that determine the relevance of the site in terms of the tourist activity, as shown in Table 2. Every single factor was scored in relation to specific criteria and strictly defined values to make the results comparable and objective. Score calculation of the value points was conducted to differentiate the religious and tourist significance of the site. The data employed for the analysis and scoring were collected using different research methods, including field research conducted by visiting the sites, interviews with both religious visitors and tourists responsible for each site, an analysis of secondary sources of information (including official websites), and surveys among visitors of the sites regarding the main motivations of their visits.



**Figure 3.** Location of the sacred places in Pomerania (NW Poland) analyzed and described in the paper.

Source: The authors.

The factors have been grouped in two areas, the religious and the tourist significance of the sites. As seen in the literature review, the religious significance of the site concerns to those aspects that are related to the original use of sacred sites, to their spiritual values and functions, while the tourist significance refers to other profane uses. The factors determining the religious significance are the pilgrim accessibility, the availability of the sacral services, the official statement of the site, the presence of significant blessing or reliquary and the religious motivation. Pilgrim accessibility refers to the opening hours of the site for religious purposes (like praying) and to the availability of specific information on religious uses or services. Sacral services availability refers to the celebration of different liturgical acts, like masses, but also other religious events like pilgrimages or religious celebrations. For determining the factors conditioning the tourist significance of the place it was analyzed the tourist and transport accessibility, the tourist services available in the site, the fact of being part of a heritage declaration and the motivation. Tourist services influence the perception of the site and the visitors' experience. As mentioned in the literature review several authors have reflected on how to balance the need for tourist services and the preservation of the spirit of the place. Tourist services include information services, guided tours, parking places, souvenir shops, gastronomic assets, museums, and interpretation centers. If for the religious significance the official statement was taken into account, for the tourist significance the fact of being part of the regional, national or world heritage is also important because sometimes the fact of having a type of heritage label or state influence in the perception of the place.

**Table 2.** Factors analyzed in the research process and valuation scoring criteria. Source: The authors.

Factors Analyzed	Scoring
<b>A. Factors determining the religious significance of the place</b>	
<b>A1. Pilgrim accessibility</b>	
0—no accessibility, object (place) permanently close for any visitors, no information provided on the religious values of the site;	0–5 points
1—space open occasionally, limited only during services a few times a month, and very few information on the religious values;	
2—space open regularly a few times a month, not only during services, with limited opening times, and few information on the religious values;	
3—place open regularly, available for pilgrims (tourists) on specified dates and on request, with some information on the religious values;	
4—objects (place, space) open for public visits during weekdays and weekends on-demand, with limited opening hours, with information on the religious values;	
5—place accessible, without any limits and providing full information on the religious values.	
<b>A2. Sacral service availability</b>	
0—sites with only punctual masses (once per month, once per year) or with no liturgical functions;	0–5 points
1—regular masses only on Sundays;	
2—regular masses only on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays);	
3—places with regular masses every day and (on request) services for pilgrims (special blessings, communion, etc.);	
4—sites having regular and special masses (on request) and/or additional services for pilgrims;	
5—sites where masses, special liturgical acts, blessings for pilgrims, confessions, or similar celebrations are available on the site every day or almost every day.	
<b>A3. Sanctuary official (bishopric) statement (yes/no)</b>	0 or 1 point
<b>A4. Significant blessing or reliquary</b>	
0—no special blessings for pilgrims or reliquary presence;	0–3 points
1—sites with random special blessings and/or no reliquary;	
2—sites with special blessings or reliquary presence only available during times of celebration;	
3—places with special pilgrim blessings on request, regardless of time, and with a saint's(s') reliquary presence.	
<b>A5. Religious motivation</b>	
0—responders declared non-religious motivation as the main one;	0–2 points
1—responders declared their religious motive as equal to their non-religious one;	
2—responders declared their religious motive of travel as the main one.	
<b>B. Factors determining tourist significance of the place</b>	
<b>B1. Tourist accessibility</b>	
0—no accessibility, object (place) permanently closed for any visitors;	0–5 points
1—space open occasionally, limited to only during services a few times a month;	
2—space open regularly a few times a month, not only during services, with limited opening times;	
3—place open regularly, available for tourists (pilgrims) on specified dates and on request;	
4—objects (place, space) open for tourist visits during weekdays and weekends on-demand, with limited opening hours;	
5—place accessible, without any limits.	
<b>B2. Transport accessibility</b>	
0—no public transport or private car access;	0–3 points
1—very random public transport or access, mainly with a private car;	
2—only one means of public transport available several days a week;	
3—various public transport available during the whole week.	
<b>B3. Tourist services</b>	
0—no tourist services;	0–5 points
1—basic services like information or signs;	
2—two or three types of services available on-site, including parking, toilets, and/or information;	
3—well-developed basic services like parking places, information, signs, and/or guides;	
4—different types of services available on a seasonable basis;	
5—different types of services like information services, guides, guided tours, parking places, souvenir shops, gastronomic assets, museums, interpretation centers, and so on, available all year round.	
<b>B4. Part of the regional/national/world heritage (yes/no)</b>	0 or 1 point
<b>B5. Non-religious motivation</b>	
0—responders declared religious motivation as the main one;	0–2 points
1—responders declared their religious motive as equal to their non-religious one;	
2—responders declared their non-religious motive of travel as the main one.	

The third and final stage of research included a comparative analysis of the attractiveness and tourist and religious significance of individual objects. The authors believe that a comparison of the attractiveness and significance of the analyzed places, together with the motivation of pilgrims (tourists) travelling there, allows for the distinction of specific groups of destinations differentiated by their perception—spiritual tourism, religious tourism, and heritage tourism. According to the concept of the spiritual sustainability of destinations presented in this publication, the visitor’s motivation and the authentic, intangible religious influence of the place are the most significant factors impacting its perception as an important and symbolic sacred space. However, in order to assess its attractiveness for religious tourism, these factors must be balanced by those related to tourist development (accessibility, service and information, interpretation offered, etc.). The presentation of this balance and its interpretation to highlight places with a great potential for spiritual experience, as well as to indicate places with high values related to their cultural or touristic features, has become the main aim of this stage of research. This stage is therefore the final result of the two previous ones and forms the basis for building a model defining the character and perception of sacred spaces in tourism lining spiritual sustainability and tourism accessibility.

#### 4. Results and Findings

The final scoring of analyzed sites is presented in Table 3. To compare the results obtained, a graph was developed for obtaining a better understanding of the results obtained (Figure 4).

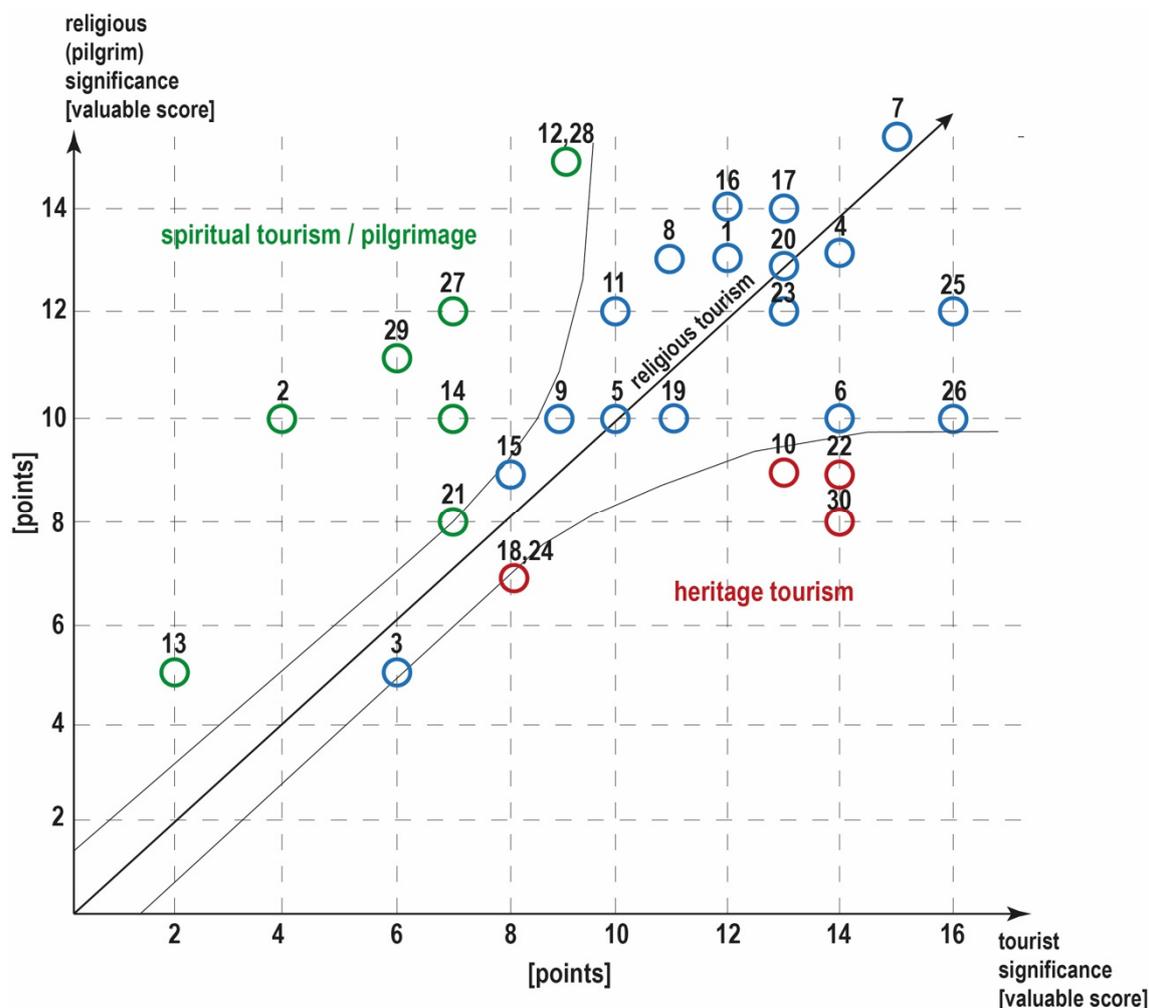


Figure 4. Perception of analyzed sacred places as objects of spiritual, religious, or heritage tourism, according to the relationship between their religious and tourist significance. Source: The authors.

**Table 3.** Scoring conducted by grading points of the analyzed sacred places due to selected criteria presented in Table 1. Source: The authors.

	Sacral Place (Analyzed in the Publication)	Factors Determining the Religious Significance of the Place						Factors Determining the Tourist Significance of the Place					
		A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	Sum	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	Sum
1	Sant Crist de Balaguer	5	4	1	1	2	13	5	2	4	1	0	12
2	Mare de Déu del Mont	3	1	1	3	2	10	3	1	0	0	0	4
3	Mare de Déu de la Fontcalda	3	0	1	1	0	5	3	1	0	0	2	6
4	Mare de Déu de Núria	5	4	1	3	0	13	5	3	4	0	2	14
5	Mare de Déu de Queralt	5	1	1	1	2	10	5	2	2	1	0	10
6	Mare de Déu del Vinyet	5	3	1	1	0	10	5	3	4	0	2	14
7	Mare de Déu de Montserrat	5	5	1	3	1	15	5	3	5	1	1	15
8	La Misericordia	5	4	1	2	1	13	5	3	2	0	1	11
9	Montgrony	5	1	1	2	1	10	5	1	2	0	1	9
10	Sant Climent de Taül—WHS	5	0	1	3	0	9	5	1	4	1	2	13
11	Sant Ramon Nonat	5	3	1	1	2	12	5	2	2	1	0	10
12	El Miracle	5	4	1	2	2	14	5	1	2	1	0	9
13	El Tallat	1	0	1	1	2	5	1	1	0	0	0	2
14	El Far	5	1	1	2	1	10	5	1	0	0	1	7
15	Els Àngels	5	1	1	2	0	9	5	1	0	0	2	8
16	Sianowo—Sanktuarium	5	4	1	2	2	14	5	2	4	1	0	12
17	Lebork—Saint James	5	5	1	1	2	14	5	3	5	0	0	13
18	Bialy Bor—Greek Catholic Church	2	3	0	0	2	7	2	2	3	1	0	8
19	Polanow—Holy Mount	5	2	0	1	2	10	5	2	4	0	0	11
20	Koszalin—Chelmska Holy Mount	5	4	1	2	1	13	5	3	4	0	1	13
21	Domacyno—Virgin Mary	5	1	0	0	2	8	5	1	1	0	0	7
22	Kolobrzeg—Cathedral	4	5	0	0	0	9	4	3	4	1	2	14
23	Trzebiatow—Sanctuary	5	4	1	1	1	12	5	3	3	1	1	13
24	Cerkwica—Well of St. Otto	3	3	0	0	1	7	3	2	2	0	1	8
25	Kamien Pomorski—Cathedral	5	5	1	1	0	12	5	3	5	1	2	16
26	Szczecin—Saint James' Cathedral	5	5	0	0	0	10	5	3	5	1	2	16
27	Brzesko—Sanctuary	3	4	1	2	2	12	3	1	2	1	0	7
28	Mysliborz—Shrine of God's Mercy	4	5	1	3	2	15	4	2	3	0	0	9
29	Siekierki—Sanctuary	3	4	1	1	2	11	3	1	2	0	0	6
30	Stargard—Virgin Mary Church	4	4	0	0	0	8	4	3	4	1	2	14

It is well-established that sacred places are endowed with distinctive dimensions. They are places where a hierophany has taken place [62], or so is perceived by the community of believers [6]. Rituals and cult practices also mean to perpetuate the connection between what is transcendent and the human dimension, and contribute to the maintenance of the spirit of the place or the spiritual sustainability [3,4,52,66]. According to the results, sacred places in both regions have relatively high scores in terms of the religious significance, as most of the places obtained a score of 10 or more out of 16, with a few exceptions in the case of Catalonia. This allows the authors to say that all of the sacred sites analyzed maintain a religious significance. On the contrary, in the scoring of the tourist importance of the sites, the sacred places studied obtained more diverse scores ranging from 2 to 16, meaning that there are different situations regarding tourist accessibility and importance.

As can be inferred from the literature review, tourism accessibility does not only refer to providing access to sacred spaces to people suffering from any type of handicap (physical, sensorial, or mental). It also refers to the ability of any visitor to physically enter the space and to understand it intellectually

and emotionally [6,7,10]. Therefore, in the case of sacred spaces, accessibility is connected to allowing all visitors, both believers and non-believers, to perceive the sacredness of the place [4] and reinforce the idea of spiritual sustainability. Although this paper does not specifically focus on interpretation tools, it is important to note that individuals will do this through different processes and types of perception (emotional, intellectual, etc.) and narratives play an important role [63,66]. Since this perception of the sacred is at the core of a true experience of a religious space (and is linked to spiritual sustainability), it is important to keep monitoring how these places open up to the public: Services, interpretation, etc. The methodology proposed here aims to achieve this.

Taking a closer look at the examples presented here, the data show that three groups or typologies of visitors exist: The spiritual tourist or pilgrim; the religious tourist; and the heritage tourist (Figure 4). This reinforces theories that establish a distinction between pilgrimage and religious tourism, as they consider that pilgrimage implies a deeper experience that is usually more superficial in the case of religious tourism [25]. Despite this, pilgrimage is accepted as a form of tourism because it has the same characteristics in terms of the use of transport, services, and infrastructure and the basis for differentiating them is the intensity of the religious motivation [19,36,40].

Those sites placed in the group of spiritual tourism and pilgrimage are the ones that have high scores for the religious significance, meaning that they are sites where, even when there are some difficulties in accessing them, have a significant number of visitors (or pilgrims) going there for religious purposes, and that they offer different sacral services to them. In both regions, the places included in this group are small shrines, some of which are really difficult to access as they do not have public transport services and they are far from the main cities or tourist areas. These sites are recognized as very popular pilgrimage destinations, related to their spirituality and religious services offered. For example, number 12 is managed by a Benedictine community that offers accommodation and spiritual exercises to the host. Numbers 2, 6, and 29 became very popular destinations of walking pilgrimages, organized by church organizations with an intense participation of local communities. It is worth mentioning the local community's involvement not only in promotion of the site, but also in its religious and pilgrim character. In the interviews conducted with the managers of the sites, it was mentioned that most of the people attending these places are looking for a transformative experience and are aware of the religious and sacred values of the site. All of the touristic features (accommodation, information, or transport availability) remain in the background and do not affect the religious significance of the place much. The sites' locations far from main roads and popular tourist centers determine some additional activities and initiatives. Accessibility is not a necessary condition for the development of the site, as pilgrims and visitors go there for the spiritual and religious values and even though they have to make an effort, this is well-perceived. The quest for spirituality also includes overcoming challenges and difficulties in access can be considered a positive element [20,40,113,114]. They are maintained to attract visitors and give them a unique experience, based on the spiritual features and religious traditions of the place.

In both regions, most of the analyzed sites fall into the group named religious tourism. This group includes sites with different realities, but, in general terms, which have an important religious significance that is combined with tourist accessibility and services. The development of the tourist functionality of these places is mainly based on good transport accessibility and well-prepared infrastructural features. Sites included in this group are located close to main roads and access points (airports, railway stations, or so). In relation to tourism development, all of these places have developed an additional base, formed of components such as parking places, souvenir shops, gastronomic points, or information centers. Visitors' experiences at these sites are very diverse. Some of them have strong and transformative experiences, and others just enjoy the visit as part of their leisure time, but with no transcendent meaning (personal communication from managers of the sites). For example, number 7 is a monastery that receives 2.5 M visitors per year, combining religious and non-religious visitors, being one of the analyzed sites with a greater presence of international visitors. Apart from religious services at the site, there is a museum, several accommodation places, gift shops, and parking,

and everything is in the middle of a natural park. In Pomerania, there are a few places with significant meaning in terms of both religion and culture (numbers 23 and 25) and some of these places (numbers 17, 19, and 20) have also been recognized as important religious and historic sites on Pomeranian Saint James' Way. We can conclude that accessibility is important for tourism purposes and may negatively affect the perception of sites, as some of them may become excessively commodified and a large number of tourists can make perception of the sacred difficult [6,53,81]. On one hand, the sites are very well-prepared to receive pilgrims and offer them proper experiences and services; on the other hand, they are attractive sites for tourists as they have different tourist services, good transport accessibility, and cultural and historic values that attract visitors.

The smallest group in terms of numbers is the one named heritage tourism. This label does not mean that the only motivation for visiting these sites is cultural, but sacred places in this group are considered to be more important for their artistic or architectural features than for their religious values. In Catalonia, only number 10, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 2000, is in this group. In this church, there were fresco paintings from the 12th century that, for security reasons, were moved to the National Museum of Art in Barcelona and today, visitors can see a digital reproduction of the paintings in the form of mapping on the apse of the church. Site numbers 18, 22, 24, and 30 correspond to heritage tourism places in Pomerania, being perceived as typical attractive heritage and historical sites. For example, number 30 represents a National Heritage Site very popular among visitors from all over Poland, as well as Germany and Scandinavia, and number 22 is a monumental brick gothic cathedral with precious masterpieces of medieval art included in the European Route of Brick Gothic and Pomeranian Way of Saint James. Sacred places in this group have a lower religious significance compared to the other groups, and the sites have become more of a cultural attraction than a place of worship. The majority of these sites have interpretation tools that promote artistic and cultural values, but do not focus on religious or spiritual values [10,53,67,115]. The highest barrier is intellectual accessibility and there is a threat regarding spiritual sustainability, because part of the original meaning and significance of the building is lost as many efforts to interpret history and art are made, but do not transmit the sacredness of the place.

After comparing the results, no significant differences between Pomerania and Catalonia were identified, but some issues were recognized that can probably be applied to other religious sites. After reflecting on the reality of sacred sites, their tourist and sacral accessibility, and visitors' experience, it became clear that management tools should take into account the different perspectives to preserve the idea of the sacred. From the study, we can conclude that religious significance or meaning is present at almost all religious sites, but, according to the literature review and the results, in some cases, it may be decreased, risking losing the identity of the place. In these cases, we may say that there is a threat to the spiritual sustainability. Managers of religious sites should know whether visitors perceive the site more for its religious and spiritual values, or its cultural or touristic ones, and implement actions to preserve the sacred nature of the place and minimize conflicts between devotees and visitors to make the site more sustainable, regarding the authenticity of the site (spiritual sustainability).

In places where worship remains alive, it is important to apply measures to guarantee the worship of visitors. If the sacred site is located in a tourist setting, a priori, it probably receives more non-religious visitors than religious ones. Therefore, it is necessary to intensify the actions to guarantee that the tourists do not interfere with the sacred experience of the site and the celebration of the cult. However, as noted above, the non-religious visitor should be provided for in a well-balanced manner and should not impose on the pilgrims who traveled to the place to pray. The construal of the *sacrum* belongs to the individual predisposition of the visitor and constitutes a space to which the *profanum* is not admitted. The experience of visitors is closely related to their behavior and the behavior of other visitors. Although visitors should behave respectfully, this is not always the case. Visitors must behave appropriately, both to preserve the nature of the spirit of the place (remain silent, dress appropriately, not interfere with religious activities, etc.) and to preserve the place itself. Collaboration between different organizations, whether religious or secular or public or private, is fundamental.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

The comparison of the data obtained allowed the authors to explore the connection between accessibility and spiritual sustainability. The concept of spiritual sustainability was explored through analyzing the concept of sacred places and was defined as the preservation of the spirit of the place, the enhancement of religious and spiritual values, and the maintenance of the original meaning of the site. According to this, tourist behavior may positively or negatively affect the atmosphere of a place, depending on the level of awareness and the perception of the site, as well as on how managers present or adapt the site to visitors. Accessibility refers to both physical and intellectual or emotional access and was analyzed by taking into account (and comparing) religious and tourist services, such as transport or interpretation tools. The model proposed for the analyses allowed the authors to identify three groups of sites based on the relationship between tourism accessibility and spiritual sustainability.

The first statement that can be made is that a lack of accessibility may positively affect the spiritual sustainability of sacred places. This is related to sites in the group named “spiritual tourism” that obtained a high score for the religious significance of the site and lower score for the tourism significance and accessibility. According to the research results, accessibility generally does not affect the perception of the destinations’ sacredness, which is determined by the *genius loci* of the place dependent on the individual features. Spiritual and religious values were determined to understand the meaning of the place and the *genius loci*. The sustainable development of the sacred destination, based on its relation to local communities and their heritage identity, seems to be more important in site development than its widely understood accessibility. Most visitors at those sites are attracted by religious and spiritual values and accessibility is not perceived as a barrier for visiting the sites. Instead, it sometimes plays the opposite role, as the effort to reach the sacred place is seen as a test or sacrifice. A connection between spiritual sustainability and the difficulty of access can thus be established.

The second statement that can be made is that tourist accessibility, especially regarding physical issues, can positively or negatively affect the perception of the atmosphere of the place, depending on the management. Sacred places in the group of “religious tourism” exhibit a high score for both religious and tourism significance. Sites are recognized by their religious values, and offer cult services and other services to pilgrims and devotees. At the same time, the sites are easily accessible; they combine a good location with public transport and tourism services and infrastructure such as accommodation or restaurants. This results in a combination of factors that make sites attractive for visitors with different motivations and the number of non-religious visitors increases when it is easier to reach the place or visit it. This affects the spiritual sustainability of the site, because if there are no measures to preserve the sacred identity, it may be damaged by tourists approaching the site disrespectfully. Some of the sites analyzed had applied measures to keep the cult services separate from the tourist activities and use interpretation tools and other means to promote religious values of the site. In these cases, tourism development can be seen as positive and may help the development of the site, while not risking the spiritual sustainability. In other cases, access has promoted the development of tourist activities not related to religious values, such as sport activities and tourist infrastructure like hotels or gift shops. In these cases, visitors with religious motivations perceive the site as massified or commodified and they complain of a loss of meaning. In this case, accessibility is considered a threat for maintaining sustainable spirituality.

Lastly, intellectual or emotional accessibility (narratives) is extremely important for guaranteeing the spiritual sustainability of sacred places. Sites with a high score for tourism significance and low score for religious significance represent sites that are very well-recognized for their historical, architectural, or artistic values. The accessibility of the space, as well as the service availability, can widely influence the importance of the place not only from a tourist point of view, but also as a religious heritage site. This can be strengthened by additional features, such as heritage certifications (for example, a UNESCO declaration, inclusion in a cultural route, or other national and regional heritage declarations). The sites in the group “heritage tourism” are mainly related to this. Places in this group normally offer cultural-related services and activities (apart from the tourist ones), such as

interpretation tools and/or guided tours. An important element to consider here is the narrative of the site, because, in most of the cases, narratives focus on historic or artistic values, but not on the religious significance. At these sites, it is extremely important to maintain the religious function and to preserve the spiritual values; otherwise, they will become more like a museum or a theme park and the spiritual sustainability will be threatened.

The application of management measures should guarantee the sustainability of sites, preserving their sacredness. Sacred sites should offer an experience of having contact with God and an approach to the sacred. Furthermore, they should help visitors to have satisfactory experiences, not only from a religious point of view, but also as places of silence, shelter, hospitality, and culture understood in its broad sense and also places of ecology. Religious tourism, as a way of accessing these sacred spaces to learn about their essence, is a highly contemporary phenomenon. Today's visitors have all sorts of questions, and the sacred spaces offer spaces for welcoming, reflecting, and meditating that help people keep up with their day to day life. The sacred spaces, even in the framework of contemporary society, are points of light that can guide humans towards a better existence. In future studies, it would be interesting to consider, for example, the relationship that religion establishes with spirituality and ecology for a more holistic approach that allows us to understand sacred sites as places that can also help to promote sustainability.

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