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*Academic Research Paper*

## **Religious Tourism and Local Development: A Bibliometric Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose* - This study investigates the relationship between religious tourism and territorial development, highlighting the role of places of worship, spiritual itineraries, and local traditions as catalysts for the socioeconomic and cultural regeneration of regions. Religious tourism is characterised by a strong sense of identity and the capacity to activate often-overlooked endogenous resources, including abbeys, sanctuaries, hermitages, and devotional routes. The research aims to examine how these resources contribute to local development, integrating cultural heritage, community involvement, and economic stimulation, while also assessing the potential of religious tourism to strengthen regional cohesion and resilience.

*Design/methodology/approach* - The study employs a bibliometric approach to analyse the evolution of scholarly research on religious tourism and territorial development from 2000 to 2025, using the open-access Dimensions database. Keyword co-occurrence and international collaboration networks are examined to identify thematic trends, methodological shifts, and the emergence of new actors in the field. The analysis highlights changes in the research landscape, including the transition from descriptive and exploratory studies toward more complex, interdisciplinary, and policy-oriented approaches. Additionally, the study explores how global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic,

have influenced research priorities and methodological sophistication.

*Originality/value* - This research provides a longitudinal overview of the field, demonstrating how religious tourism has evolved into a strategic tool for sustainable territorial development. By linking thematic evolution with collaborative network transformation, it identifies emerging research actors, methodological innovations, and key areas for future investigation. The study offers new insights into the intersection of cultural heritage, local economies, and social cohesion, advancing understanding of the field's global development.

*Practical implications* - Findings show a growing scholarly consensus around the role of religious tourism as a potential lever for local development, heritage enhancement, and community engagement. The study underscores the importance of fostering international collaboration and knowledge sharing to enhance policymaking and governance. Insights from this research provide an overview of emerging research directions and conceptual frameworks that may inform future academic investigations and policy discussions concerning the role of religious tourism in territorial development.

**Keywords:** territorial development; religious tourism; bibliometric analysis; network analysis; pilgrimage

**JEL Codes:** Z32; R11; Z12; R58

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## 1. Introduction

In the past, the concept of religious tourism was associated with pilgrimages and journeys motivated by faith. Only recently has it expanded its conceptual scope to include experiences related to cultural heritage, territorial identity, individual spirituality, and personal well-being (Sharpley, 2009; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Over time, religious tourism has been shown to generate substantial flows and significant impacts on destination territories (Doganay, 1992; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). From this perspective, religious tourism can serve as a strategic instrument for local and regional development, particularly in rural and peripheral areas, where it can foster the development of endogenous resources and strengthen territorial resilience (Butler, 1999; Dredge et al., 2011).

In this context, the territorial assets represented by sacred sites, shrines, pilgrimage routes, and religious events are closely linked to the history and identity of local communities and are often associated with tangible and intangible heritage of high symbolic value (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Olsen, 2013). Such assets, if appropriately enhanced, can act as catalysts capable of triggering processes of territorial development, enabling local entrepreneurship to benefit from a favourable environment for growth and for the promotion of marginal areas, within a conservation-oriented approach to the cultural and religious heritage embedded in the territory (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2014).

Recently, within tourism studies, religious tourism has been assuming a prominent role, giving rise to a diverse, extensive, and interdisciplinary body of literature. All these analytical perspectives (geographical, economic, sociological, anthropological, and managerial) have examined religious tourism to investigate visitor motivations, socio-economic impacts, the management of religious heritage, and destination development strategies (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Raj & Griffin, 2015). At

the same time, the literature on territorial development has highlighted the fundamental role played by collaboration among local actors in forming networks and devising strategies for tourism-induced territorial development (Valeri & Baggio, 2021; Baggio, 2017; Casanueva et al., 2016).

Despite the wealth of contributions on these two aspects, studies examining the intersection between religious tourism and territorial development remain fragmented. Much of the literature is based on case studies or qualitative analyses of specific geographical contexts, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of the field's evolution. In this context, bibliometric analysis emerges as an effective methodological tool for mapping the structure and dynamics of scientific production, identifying the main thematic streams, the most influential authors, and the networks of academic collaboration (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014).

The study proposes the following two research hypotheses:

**H1:** The thematic structure of the literature on religious tourism has evolved over time in relation to changes in territorial development models.

**H2:** The network of international scientific collaborations in the field of religious tourism and territorial development has changed over time in terms of structure, intensity, and the geographical distribution of relationships among researchers.

Testing these two research hypotheses will provide a theoretical and methodological foundation for advancing academic research and supporting territorial development policies.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Religious Tourism: Definitions, Typologies, and Conceptual Evolution

Religious tourism encompasses the voluntary and temporary movement of individuals or groups to destinations with religious or spiritual significance, motivated, to varying degrees, by devotional, identity-related, or experiential needs (Griffin & Raj, 2015). From this definition, several elements that characterise religious tourism can be identified:

- i. The voluntariness and temporality of the journey.
- ii. The presence of sacred buildings and religious sites attracts tourists.
- iii. The primary motivation for the travel.

These elements help to understand the complex nature of the phenomenon.

Regarding the first point, tourism is, by its nature, a voluntary form of migration, as individuals are free to decide whether to participate in tourist flows. Specifically, people freely choose where to spend their leisure time outside their homes. This movement is also temporary, as it occurs during a specific period of the year, after which the tourist must return to their place of residence (UNWTO, 2008). For those seeking spiritual meaning in their lives, travel occurs seasonally for faith-related reasons.

The most evident link between tourism and religion is the presence of sacred buildings and sites that attract tourists. These sites are visited for spiritual, historical, artistic, and cultural reasons, highlighting the complex nature of religious tourism, which fulfils both spiritual and cultural needs. Nolan and Nolan (2018) identify three fundamental categories of religious tourism attractions:

- i. pilgrimage shrines, which attract tourist flows motivated by religious purposes.

- ii. religious tourist attractions, characterised by religious, historical, and artistic significance.
- iii. religious festivals, which integrate ritual and social dimensions.

Finally, the quest for the meaning of existence drives people of faith to seek purpose through their spiritual journeys. For these individuals, annual vacations have shifted from being solely a use of leisure time to enhance family connections (Eade & Sallnow, 2000) to a period dedicated to enhancing the quality of their own lives (Ratzinger, 1995). In relation to this holy perspective, free time and leisure are a unique and unified gift from God to people. Throughout the history of many of the world's religions, faith has inspired large-scale movements, as seen in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

Within this framework, pilgrimage represents the paradigmatic model of religious mobility and one of the oldest expressions of spirituality. Traditionally defined as a journey to a sacred site undertaken for devotion (Coleman, 2002), the pilgrimage is increasingly emphasised in contemporary literature for its transformative dimension. In this regard, Wiederkehr (2001, p. 11) argues: *“A pilgrimage is a ritual journey with a hallowed purpose. Every step along the way has meaning. The pilgrim knows that the journey will be difficult and that life-giving challenges will emerge. A pilgrimage is not a vacation: it is a transformational journey during which significant change takes place. New insights are given. Deeper understanding is attained. New and old places in the heart are visited. Blessings are received. Healing takes place. On return from the pilgrimage, life is seen with different eyes. Nothing will ever be quite the same again”*. From this definition, it becomes clear that pilgrimage is not merely a visit to a site but a profound experiential and spiritual process. This profound motivation influences choices regarding modes of transportation, accommodation, and the distances travellers are willing to cover.

This centrality of experience in religious tourism is also evident in cultural tourism. The literature highlights that these forms of tourism share an experiential dimension grounded in interaction with the art, history, and traditions present within a specific territory (Hall & Zeppel, 1990). While cultural tourism focuses on the consumption of artistic, cultural, and historical manifestations (Zeppel & Hall, 1992), religious tourism can be understood as an experience in which the sacred is central (Christou, 2005; Richards, 1996). In less developed areas, religious practices, rituals, and traditional cultural productions serve as strategic resources for territorial development.

## 2.2. Religious Tourism and Territorial Development

Religious tourism is often conceived as a form of sustainable mobility that seeks to integrate with local communities. As highlighted by Sharpley (2009), religious tourism generates flows less affected by seasonality than other forms of tourism and promotes interaction between visitors and local communities. Furthermore, pilgrims often possess an ecological awareness that encourages them to respect the environment and the communities they engage with (Mróz & Kolasińska, 2025).

From this perspective, numerous studies highlight the role of religious tourism as a strategic means of enhancing territorial resources of a cultural and spiritual nature (Cerutti & Piva, 2015; Notarstefano & Gristina, 2021). The presence of these attractors can create opportunities for territorial growth when entrepreneurial potential is stimulated, social capital is shared, and local actors establish networks among themselves (Raj & Griffin 2015). Religious pilgrimage routes play a significant role, serving as an expression of sustainable tourism that distributes economic

benefits across the territories involved and contributes to the regeneration of rural and marginalised areas. In this regard, the UNESCO Conventions on the protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, together with the principles promoted by ICOMOS, provide an important interpretative framework by emphasising that the conservation, safeguarding, and enhancement of heritage should be closely linked to local development, community participation, and sustainable tourism management. These international frameworks reinforce the view that religious heritage is not only a cultural asset to be preserved but also a strategic resource for fostering inclusive and sustainable territorial development

From a historical perspective, the link between pilgrimage and territorial development appears well established. As Nolan and Nolan (1992) emphasised, visitors to religious attractors require a well-structured system of services, ranging from the fulfilment of basic needs to more advanced forms of tourism offerings comparable to those of conventional tourist destinations. Thus, over the course of history, pilgrimage routes have contributed to the development of cities and communities with a distinct spiritual identity, as well as to the development of infrastructure and services, particularly in the hospitality and catering sectors, designed to support pilgrims on their journeys.

In the contemporary context, the dual spiritual and cultural significance of the attractors characterising this type of tourism renders the tourism system complex and challenging to manage. The reason lies in the differing needs of the two types of tourists (religious versus cultural), reflecting an ongoing tension between the need for silence and prayer and the desire for conversation and social interaction. It should be noted that the significant increase in the flows of pilgrims and religious tourists, documented by various studies (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2014; Griffin et al., 2022), has contributed to the revitalisation of numerous destinations, both traditional and emerging, demonstrating that religious tourism generates substantial economic benefits at the local level.

An aspect that should not be overlooked is the potential for this form of tourism to produce negative effects, including overcrowding and pressure on local infrastructure, particularly in the absence of adequate planning and governance mechanisms (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Therefore, the contribution of religious tourism to territorial development is not automatic but depends on specific institutional conditions, stakeholder management capacity, and the adoption of sustainability-oriented strategies (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dos Anjos & Kennell, 2019).

From the foregoing, it is evident that religious tourism is a dual phenomenon: on the one hand, it represents an opportunity for territorial development and economic growth; on the other, it requires careful regulation to prevent adverse effects. This characteristic reflects the phenomenon's combined nature, situated at the intersection of spiritual, cultural, and economic dimensions, and underscores the need for integrated analytical approaches to understand its implications for territorial development. Within this framework, a bibliometric analysis of the field enables the systematisation of these dynamics and the identification of the main evolutionary trajectories of the literature.

### **3. Materials and methods**

The methodology employed in this study is based on a bibliometric analysis of the international scientific literature, aimed at examining the evolution of research on religious tourism and its contribution to territorial development (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Bibliometric analysis primarily allows for the examination of publication patterns, the identification of the most influential authors, emerging research topics, and the co-author network (Das et al.,

2024).

These advantages of bibliometric analysis are particularly valuable given the interdisciplinary and fragmented nature of the field of religious tourism and its impact on territorial development. Bibliometric analysis thus allows for overcoming the limitations of traditional qualitative analyses, providing a structured representation of the research field and enabling the identification of evolutionary trends, thematic clusters, and scientific gaps. This approach provides insights into how the scientific literature has conceptualised and analysed the contributions of different forms of religious tourism to territorial development, highlighting the most-investigated themes, contexts and research trajectories.

The dataset was constructed by considering the main recurring themes in the literature. Specifically, the two conceptual macro-areas are religious and spiritual tourism and territorial and local development. Based on these categories, a search string was created and applied to the “*Dimensions*” database within the “*Full Data*” fields. The search string used includes combinations such as: ("religious tourism" OR "spiritual tourism" OR "faith tourism" OR "pilgrimage tourism") AND ("local economic development" OR "income generation" OR "local economy") AND ("economic growth" OR "economic impact\*" OR "economic effect\*" OR "economic contribution\*" OR "economic role\*").

This methodological choice helps to reduce informational noise arising from occurrences of the terms in unrelated fields, such as historical, theological, or anthropological studies not directly connected to the tourism phenomenon. This choice also justified using the “*Full Data*” mode to avoid overly restrictive results selection that would occur with the “*Title and Abstract*” fields. Indeed, the relationship between religious tourism and local economic development may not be explicitly stated in the title or abstract but may emerge within the full text. Extending the search to the entire available content thus allows for the capture of additional empirical evidence, ensuring a more comprehensive analysis.

The dataset was refined using the ANZSRC 2020 classification by selecting specific disciplinary subfields, including Tourism (3508), Applied Economics (3801), Urban and Regional Planning (3304), and Human Geography (4406), with the aim of ensuring thematic relevance and further reducing informational noise (ANZSRC, 2020).

The analysis covers the period from 2000 to 2025, with English selected as the language to ensure comparability and standardisation of results. A total of 1,718 publications were identified.

To assess the potential for false positives arising from the use of the “*Full Data*” search mode, an additional validation procedure was conducted. A random sample of 172 publications (approximately 10% of the total dataset) was selected and manually screened. Twelve records were not accessible through available institutional or open-access sources and were therefore excluded from the assessment. The remaining 160 publications were examined to determine their thematic relevance to the relationship between religious tourism and territorial development. The screening process was conducted in successive stages. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess whether the study explicitly addressed religious tourism and its developmental implications. When titles and abstracts did not provide sufficient information to establish relevance, additional searches were conducted within the full text of the articles to verify the context and significance of the search terms. The assessment identified 14 publications (8.75% of the reviewed sample) as false positives, namely studies in which the search terms appeared only incidentally or where the primary focus was unrelated to the economic, territorial, or developmental dimensions of religious tourism. These

results suggest that although the use of the “Full Data” field may introduce some information noise, the combination of the search strategy, disciplinary filtering, and the subsequent validation procedure achieved a satisfactory level of thematic precision.

The bibliometric analysis was conducted by integrating descriptive analysis with network analysis techniques. The descriptive analysis enabled assessment of scientific output using indicators such as the number of publications, providing an overall view of the field’s structure and growth. The co-authorship network analysis enabled the examination of international collaboration dynamics among authors, offering insights into the degree of internationalisation of the research and its geographical structure.

For descriptive analysis and management of bibliographic data, the software available at [www.dimensions.ai](http://www.dimensions.ai) was used, while VOSviewer was employed to process and visualise bibliometric networks.

The construction of the network required defining edge weights. In our study, we use the *association strength* (Eck & Waltman, 2009), where the weight ( $w_{ij}$ ) is given by

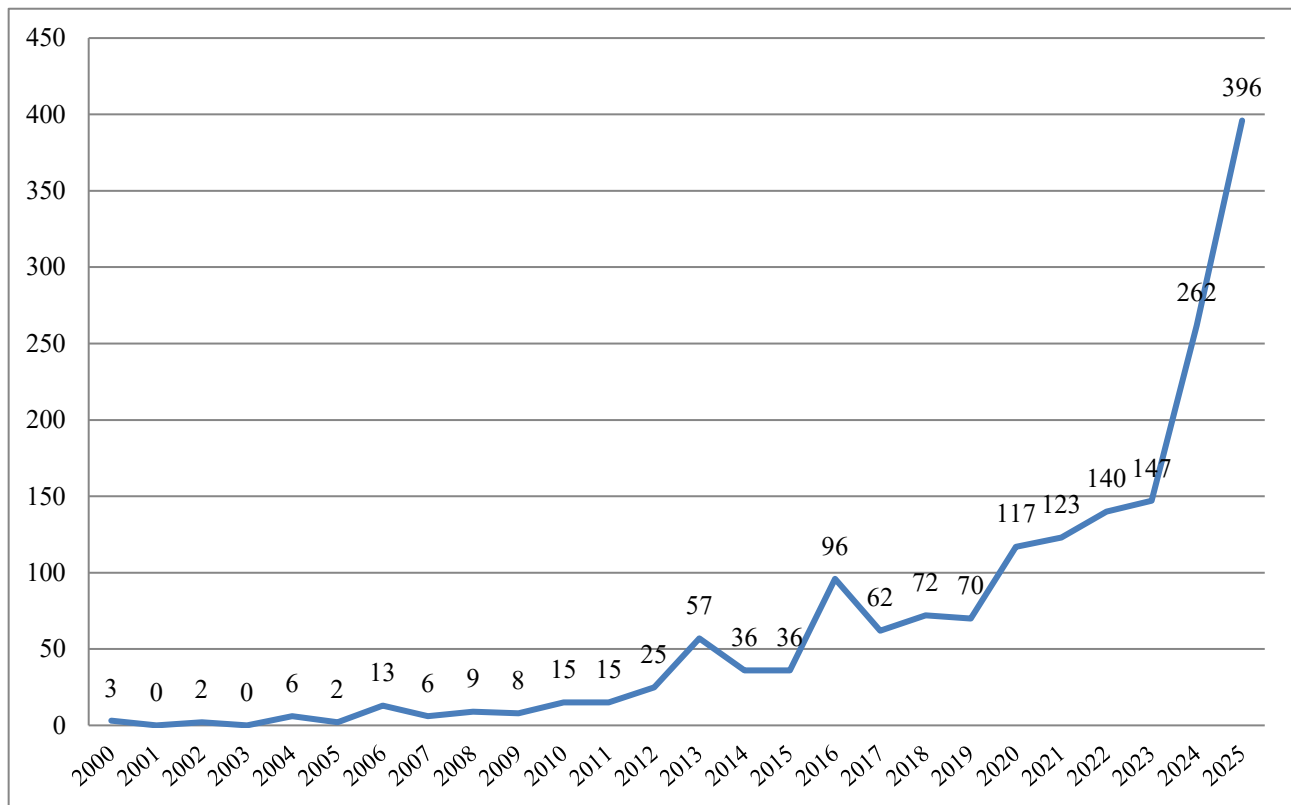
$$w_{ij} = \frac{c_{ij}}{w_i w_j} \quad (1)$$

where  $c_{ij}$  represents the number of co-authored publications between authors  $i$  and  $j$ , while  $w_i$  and  $w_j$  indicate the total frequencies of the two nodes within the dataset, respectively. In VOSviewer, it is possible to construct a network based on association strength. Moreover, this software allows for a specific visualisation of the network, in which the distances between nodes reflect the strength of their connections: nodes that are strongly connected tend to be positioned closer together in the two-dimensional space.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Publication Analysis

The temporal distribution of scientific output provides an initial indication of the evolution of research in the fields of religious tourism and territorial development. The analysis of publications over time reveals a clear growth trend, particularly from 2016 onwards (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Publications from 2000 to 2025**

Source: Own elaboration based on Dimensions data ([www.dimensions.ai](http://www.dimensions.ai))

Indeed, between 2000 and 2015, an emerging phase of the field under study was observed. A substantial increase in publications in recent years suggests growing academic interest in the topic. The trend in publications indicates a transition from a niche research area to a more structured, interdisciplinary field, characterised by a progressive increase in both quantitative terms and thematic diversification.

## 4.2 Bibliometric Analysis of Co-Occurrence

The bibliometric analysis, based on the co-occurrence of keywords across the two periods considered (2000–2015 and 2016–2025), enables reconstruction of the evolution of the research field on religious tourism in relation to territorial development (see Figures 2 and 3). The observation of the *word clouds* highlights not only the persistence of certain central thematic cores but also the emergence of new theoretical, methodological, and applied orientations, reflecting the progressive maturation of the literature.

**Figure 2. Period 2000-2015**



**Figure 3. Period 2016-2025**



Source: Own elaboration

In both periods, the term *tourism* emerges as the dominant node, confirming its role as the conceptual pivot around which the entire research field is organized. Its recurring association with terms such as “*development*”, “*cultural*”, and “*economic*” suggests continuity in interpreting religious tourism as a phenomenon intrinsically linked to territorial development dynamics, with a strong cultural component and a significant economic impact. However, beyond this structural stability, the comparative analysis reveals profound transformations in the configuration of research themes.

In the period 2000-2015, the literature appears to be characterised by a predominantly exploratory and descriptive approach. The most recurring keywords, including “*development*”, “*economic*”, “*heritage*”, “*religious*”, and “*cultural*”, indicate a strong interest in defining the phenomenon of religious tourism and its connection to cultural heritage and local economic development. During this phase, religious tourism is primarily analysed as a tool for enhancing territorial resources, particularly religious sites and the cultural assets associated with them.

The presence of terms such as “*heritage*” and “*cultural*” suggests a pronounced focus on the identity and symbolic dimensions of territories, with an emphasis on heritage's role in shaping the tourism offering. At the same time, the prominence of “*economic*” and “*development*” indicates that the debate is strongly oriented toward understanding the potential of religious tourism as a driver of economic growth, albeit often from a macro-level perspective and not yet fully integrated with advanced analytical tools.

Other terms present, such as “*management*”, “*policy*”, and “*planning*”, while indicating an emerging interest in the managerial and institutional dimensions, occupy a relatively marginal position within the semantic structure of the period. This suggests that, at this stage, the governance of religious tourism had not yet become a central theme but was still an area of research in development. Similarly, the occurrence of keywords such as “*sustainable*” and “*environment*” is limited, highlighting that sustainability had not yet been fully integrated into the scientific discourse.

From a methodological perspective, the frequency of terms such as “*study*”, “*research*”, “*analysis*”, and “*case*” indicates a predominance of qualitative approaches and case studies. This is consistent with an early stage of the field's development, where the primary objective is to explore the phenomenon and to construct a reference conceptual framework.

The subsequent period, 2016-2025, instead highlights a significant evolution toward greater

complexity and sophistication in the field of study. While maintaining the centrality of “*tourism*” and “*development*”, the word cloud reveals the emergence of new key terms that reflect an expansion of analytical perspectives. Among these, “*sustainable*” and “*sustainability*” assume a prominent role, signalling a paradigm shift toward more balanced development models that are attentive to environmental and social impacts.

The increased prominence of terms such as “*community*”, “*communities*”, and “*stakeholders*” highlights a growing interest in the participatory and inclusive dimensions of tourism development. In this phase, religious tourism is no longer viewed solely as an economic or cultural phenomenon but as a complex system involving a plurality of local actors whose interactions significantly influence territorial development outcomes. This shift reflects the adoption of more advanced theoretical approaches, such as those based on collaborative governance and participatory local development.

At the same time, there is a strengthening of themes related to governance and planning, as evidenced by the increased prominence of terms such as “*policy*”, “*planning*”, “*management*”, and “*strategy*”. This indicates that the field is increasingly aligning with the disciplines of territorial planning and destination management, integrating more sophisticated analytical tools and models to manage religious destinations.

Another element of evolution is the growing attention to demand segmentation and market analysis. The emergence of terms such as “*halal*”, “*hospitality*”, “*marketing*”, and “*experience*” suggests an increasing interest in diversifying the tourism offering and understanding the specific needs of different visitor segments. This aspect reflects a greater maturity of the field, which is increasingly oriented toward demand-driven approaches and competitive positioning strategies.

From a methodological perspective, the period 2016-2025 is marked by significant advancement. The presence of keywords such as “*data*”, “*model*”, “*analysis*”, and “*findings*” indicates a growing adoption of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, supported by empirical data and advanced analytical techniques. This development contributes to strengthening the field’s scientific rigour and enhancing its capacity to generate empirical evidence relevant to public policy.

Finally, the emergence of the term “*COVID*” highlights the field’s capacity to adapt to global events and incorporate new challenges into its research agenda. The focus on the pandemic’s impacts suggests a growing interest in the resilience of tourism systems and crisis management, topics that are likely to remain central in the future.

### 4.3 Co-authorship Network Analysis

The Co-authorship Network was constructed from the authors' nationalities in the articles examined in this paper, using formula (1). This approach enabled the creation of a network of cross-country collaborations, divided into two reference periods: 2000-2015 and 2016-2025.

#### 4.3.1 Country Collaboration Network (2000-2015)

In the period 2000-2015, the Country Collaboration Network shows a configuration characterised by low density, strong centralisation, and limited multilateral articulation (see Figure 4). Although the different visualisations of the network analysis offer varying graphical perspectives, they converge in depicting a research field still in the process of consolidation, where scientific interactions are

concentrated around a few dominant nodes.

**Figure 4.** Country Collaboration Network (2000-2015)



Source: Own elaboration

In particular, the central role of the United Kingdom and the United States is clear, as they serve as the network's main hubs. These countries exhibit high centrality in both the number of connections and their brokerage capacity, acting as nodes through which many international collaborations pass. This configuration reflects a core-periphery model, in which peripheral nodes are highly dependent on the main centres to access knowledge networks.

Alongside these dominant poles, there are countries with a secondary but not negligible role, such as Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia, which are connected to the central nodes but with limited interconnection. These actors contribute to the overall structure of the network but do not play an independent role in generating sub-networks or standalone clusters.

A particularly relevant aspect concerns the presence of peripheral and bridging nodes, including those of New Zealand, Israel, and South Africa. Although these countries have lower connection intensity, they sometimes serve as links between different parts of the network, facilitating partial access to diverse geographic contexts. However, these connections remain sporadic and insufficiently structured to achieve true global integration of the network.

From a geographical perspective, the network shows a marked concentration in Western and English-speaking countries, with a significant underrepresentation of other regions of the world. The marginal presence of countries such as China, Argentina, and Jordan suggests that, during the period considered, scientific production on religious tourism and territorial development remained strongly anchored in specific academic contexts, reflecting a limited internationalisation of the field.

The relationships between nodes are predominantly bilateral, with little evidence of complex multilateral collaborations. This indicates an early stage of scientific integration, in which cooperation occurs mainly among a few established actors rather than through extensive and articulated networks. The lack of significant connections between peripheral countries further highlights the absence of horizontal collaborative dynamics, reinforcing their dependence on the central nodes.

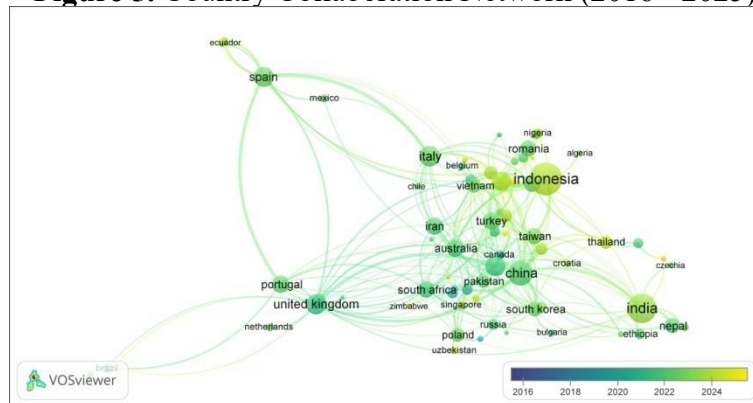
The temporal overlay analysis finally suggests the gradual emergence of new actors toward the end of the period, indicating the beginning of a process of opening within the field. However, this dynamic remains limited and does not substantially alter the network's overall structure, which remains strongly hierarchical.

Overall, the results indicate that, in the period 2000-2015, the field of religious tourism and territorial development was characterised by a collaborative structure that was limited in diversity, geographically concentrated, and dominated by a few academic centres. This configuration reflects an early stage in the discipline's development, in which knowledge production was driven by a small number of actors and international networks were still underdeveloped.

#### 4.3.2 Country Collaboration Network (2016 - 2025)

The analysis of the Country Collaboration Network for the period 2016-2025 highlights a profound structural transformation compared to the configuration observed in 2000-2015. While the previous phase was characterised by a sparse, hierarchical network strongly concentrated around a few Western hubs, the new configuration reveals a highly interconnected, geographically diverse, and polycentric system, reflecting the maturation and globalisation of the research field on religious tourism and territorial development (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Country Collaboration Network (2016 - 2025)



Source: Own elaboration

One of the most evident elements is the significant increase in network density. Unlike the fragmented structure observed in 2000-2015, the 2016-2025 network shows a much higher number of nodes and, above all, connections among them. Collaborations are no longer limited to bilateral relationships between a few central countries but take the form of a complex, multi-level network in which numerous actors actively participate in scientific production. This shift from a “centre-periphery” structure to a more networked configuration represents a clear indicator of the field’s growth and international diffusion.

A second notable aspect is the redefinition of geographical centrality. In the period 2000-2015, the United Kingdom and the United States were the main hubs of the network, exerting a dominant role in both scientific output and connectivity. In recent years, while these countries continue to hold a significant position, they no longer represent the system's sole centres. Instead, new high-centrality actors, such as China, India, and Indonesia, have emerged, playing an increasingly important role in the network’s structure.

Specifically, China emerges as one of the most connected nodes, with numerous links to both Western countries and other Asian contexts. This indicates not only an increase in Chinese scientific output but also a growing capacity to integrate into international research networks. Similarly, India

appears as a large, highly connected node, highlighting its growing role in shaping the scientific agenda on religious tourism, likely reflecting the phenomenon's significance within the country's socio-cultural context.

A particularly interesting case is that of Indonesia, which emerges as one of the most prominent nodes in the network. Its large size and high number of connections indicate substantial expansion in scientific output and significant engagement in international collaborations. This trend reflects a broader opening of the field toward religious-majority contexts and regions that had previously been marginalised in the literature.

At the same time, there is a noticeable strengthening of the presence of European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, which, while not attaining the centrality of emerging Asian actors, continue to play an important role as connecting nodes between different geographical areas. Spain demonstrates connections with both European countries and Latin American contexts, such as Mexico and Ecuador, suggesting a bridging function between linguistically and culturally affiliated regions.

Another notable shift compared to the previous period is the greater inclusion of the Global South. Countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, and Thailand are now integrated into the network with varying levels of centrality, indicating a process of democratisation in scientific production. This geographic expansion represents a crucial development, broadening the field's empirical and theoretical foundation by incorporating previously underrepresented perspectives.

From a structural perspective, the network for the period 2016-2025 is characterised by a greater presence of interconnected clusters rather than isolated sub-networks. Countries are no longer organised into separate groups but instead participate in an integrated system in which connections span geographic and cultural boundaries. This indicates increased multilateral collaboration and reduced dependence on individual hubs.

A particularly interesting aspect concerns the role of so-called bridging countries, those that connect different regions of the network. In this regard, countries such as Turkey, Singapore, and Australia appear to serve as intermediaries, facilitating the flow of knowledge between diverse contexts. This type of role was less evident during 2000-2015, when bridging functions were primarily concentrated in the central Western hubs.

The analysis of the temporal overlay (2016-2025) further indicates that many of the most recent nodes are associated with Asian and African countries, corroborating the trend toward increasing globalisation in the field. This observation suggests that the geographical expansion is not merely quantitative but also temporal, with new actors progressively entering the scientific system.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study analysed the evolution of the literature on religious tourism and territorial development using a bibliometric approach, based on keyword co-occurrence and analysis of collaboration networks among countries across two distinct periods (2000-2015 and 2016-2025). The results clearly show that the field of investigation has undergone a process of progressive maturation, moving from an initial exploratory and descriptive phase to a more recent stage characterised by greater theoretical complexity, interdisciplinary integration, and methodological sophistication, as well as by a profound transformation in the structure of scientific production at the global level.

In the first period, the literature appears strongly oriented toward defining the phenomenon and interpreting it from cultural and economic perspectives. Religious tourism is predominantly analysed as a tool for heritage enhancement and local development, with limited attention to governance, sustainability, and the involvement of territorial actors. This approach reflects the field's emerging nature, in which qualitative studies and case analyses prevail, with the aim of building a shared conceptual foundation. At the same time, the network analysis highlights a highly centralised collaborative structure, dominated by a few Western countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, with a core-periphery configuration and low relational density. This arrangement suggests a concentrated, minimally internationalised scientific production, in which collaboration dynamics remain underdeveloped and heavily dependent on established academic centres.

In the second period, however, a significant transformation emerges, redefining the role of religious tourism in territorial development dynamics. The increasing centrality of sustainability, the focus on local communities and stakeholders, and the strengthening of governance and planning-related themes indicate a shift toward more systemic, public policy-oriented interpretative models. Religious tourism is increasingly conceived as a complex system in which economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions interact, and in which the strategic management of destinations assumes a crucial role. This thematic shift is accompanied by an equally significant transformation in the structure of scientific collaborations: the network of countries becomes denser, more articulated, and polycentric, with the emergence of new global actors such as China, India, and Indonesia, and a greater integration of countries from the Global South.

Another relevant aspect concerns the methodological evolution of the field of investigation. The increased use of data, models, and advanced analytical techniques demonstrates a shift toward more robust, quantitatively grounded approaches that provide empirical evidence useful for both academic debate and the development of operational strategies. At the same time, the literature's ability to integrate global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights a growing focus on resilience, adaptation, and crisis management. In parallel, the greater complexity of collaboration networks suggests a strengthening of knowledge circulation processes, facilitated by the presence of bridging countries and by the increase in multilateral collaborations.

The results suggest that religious tourism cannot be interpreted solely as a cultural or spiritual phenomenon but must be considered a genuine strategic tool for sustainable territorial development. Its ability to generate economic impacts, enhance cultural heritage, and strengthen social cohesion makes it a growing area of interest for both scholars and policymakers. From an operational perspective, these findings highlight the need for more professional management of religious destinations and the integration of religious heritage into the strategic planning of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs). Such an approach should be supported by shared governance frameworks and common Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that monitor not only tourism flows and economic impacts but also heritage conservation, visitor experience, community well-being, and sustainability outcomes. Moreover, the transition from a centralised academic network to a more global and interconnected one implies that knowledge production is now more inclusive and representative of diverse geographical and cultural contexts, helping to move beyond Eurocentric approaches and to promote a more pluralistic understanding of the phenomenon.

However, several significant challenges remain, including the need to further integrate interdisciplinary approaches, improve impact measurement, and develop inclusive and effective governance models. Moreover, despite progress in the globalisation of research, regional asymmetries

in scientific participation persist, requiring further efforts to ensure greater equity in knowledge production and dissemination.

Looking ahead, research could benefit from a broader use of advanced methodologies, such as big data analysis and predictive models, as well as a deeper examination of local dynamics and territorial specificities. It will also be essential to continue developing more inclusive, multi-level international collaboration networks, capable of supporting knowledge co-creation and innovation in the field of religious tourism. In this context, the integration of thematic evolution with the transformation of collaborative networks is a key element for understanding the sector's future trajectories and for contributing to the development of more resilient, sustainable, and long-term-oriented policies.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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