

## Swiss Religious Heritage: Experiencing Sacred Heritage through Tourism

By Christian Cebulj and Anna-Lena Jahn, column “Research in Graubünden”, originally published in German in the daily newspaper “Bündner Tagblatt”, March 12, 2026, p. 3.



Sacred buildings are key attractions in cultural tourism and attract many visitors. Image: © Agentur EBP Zürich

Religion and tourism intersect in many ways. Pilgrimage routes are booming, cathedrals and monasteries rank among the main attractions in cultural tourism, and city churches offer oases of calm amid the bustle of urban life. In many of Switzerland’s touristically significant sacred buildings, the number of people attending guided church tours often exceeds the number of those participating in religious services. Sacred spaces exert a strong attraction, particularly for people who may be secular yet still feel a spiritual connection. These are

some of the reasons why the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO approved the research and development project Swiss Religious Heritage: Experiencing Sacred Cultural Heritage through Tourism. The Theological University of Chur is participating as a research partner in the project, which runs for one and a half years from July 2025 to December 2026 and is funded through the Innotour programme.

With its research focus on religion, culture, and tourism, the Theological University of Chur aims through this project to strengthen cultural tourism in Switzerland by making offers related to churches, monasteries, pilgrimage routes, and sacred cultural landscapes more visible and accessible for tourism, regardless of their religious or denominational affiliation. In addition, the project also supports forms of spiritual tourism. Initiatives such as churches along the Grand Tour of Switzerland, open air church services, health tourism, pilgrimage routes, or churches along cycling routes illustrate the growing range of activities at the intersection of religion and tourism.

Beyond strengthening cultural tourism, another objective of the project is to contribute to sustainable value creation within the tourism sector. In the first phase, a situation and needs analysis was conducted in order to identify the most effective instruments for achieving these goals. As part of a nationwide survey of providers, more than 600 stakeholders from tourism destinations, churches, monasteries, and associations across Switzerland were consulted. The survey revealed structural challenges but also identified resources for further development. These insights will be addressed and implemented in the second phase of the project.

After hosting two well attended research conferences in 2024 and 2025, the Theological University of Chur will organise another international networking conference in Zurich on 9 and 10 June this year. The event will bring together representatives from tourism organisations and churches. A key aim is to foster dialogue between theory and practice. Fundamental questions of the geography of religion will be discussed alongside practical examples such as an Interreg project from the Lake Constance region, museum education initiatives in the Abbey District of St. Gallen, and visitor surveys conducted at the Monastery of St. Johann in Müstair.

The project is led by the association Kirchen + Tourismus Schweiz KTCH, founded in 2020 to connect church communities with tourism organisations. The implementation partner is the Zurich based agency EBP. Its experienced team works in the fields of economy and society, design and communication, and information technology and carries out the project in close coordination with the association. The research project Religion Culture Tourism at the Theological University of Chur, led by Professor Christian Cebulj and including the forthcoming doctoral dissertation of research associate Anna Lena Jahn, provides the project's scientific support. The work is also accompanied by an advisory group. The Theological University of Chur is a member of Academia Raetica and benefits, particularly in the tourism canton of Graubünden, from the network of participating research institutions.



Project leader Prof. Christian Cebulj  
Theologische Hochschule Chur  
Image: provided



Research associate and doctoral student  
Anna-Lena Jahn  
Theologische Hochschule Chur  
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