RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN GREECE

ABSTRACT

The law on proselytism, the financial dependence of the Church on the Greek state, the homogeneous character of the Greek nation and society and the resulting linkage between citizenship, national identity and religion are important considerations when examining Greece's experience with religious pluralism. Lina Molokotos-Liederman provides a brief review of how Greece is managing religious diversity by addressing the legal framework pertaining to religious pluralism and religious demographics. The recent example of the construction of a mosque in Athens is used as a case study.

The modern Greek state, since its birth in the early 19th century, has incorporated many elements that have formed Greek identity: the antique / Hellenic and Byzantine / Orthodox heritage and popular tradition (including the Greek language and music) inserted in the context of western European civilisation. However, in this process, there is the challenge of reaching a balanced synthesis between some of the inherent contradictions or incompatibilities between the Hellenic and Byzantine/Orthodox heritage. The binary and dualist opposition between Hellenism (linked with modernity) and Byzantine Orthodoxy (associated with a somewhat anti-western tradition) is frequently used as a general framework with which to explain Greece's particularities to the outside world.

Due to its religious, cultural and historical profile, Greece has a dual outlook both to the west and east. It is at the origins of the classical tradition but also sceptical towards the Western world. In that sense, Greece may seem like the daughter of a mixed marriage. Greece's particular socio-religious profile compared to the Western European religious model of secularisation and religious modernity/ post-modernity is not without implications on its ability to manage and deal with pluralism and acting as a host country, integrating immigrant communities from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Legislative framework

The Greek Constitution is declared in the name of the Holy Trinity and Article 3 stipulates that the "dominant" or "prevailing" religion of the Greek population is Eastern Orthodoxy under the authority of the autocephalous Church of Greece, which is united spiritually with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Therefore, in Greece we see the existence of an official religion and no separation between Church and State, as they tend to mutually support each other. Greek Church and State relations are close and the State is responsible for the direct financing of the Church. The Church expects State protection through the Constitution and other legal and financial means, just as the State often depends on the Church, as a homogenizing and unifying force in public life, particularly in moments of national crises. The influence of the Orthodox Church, both as an institution and as a cultural, spiritual and political factor, is highly acknowledged by Greek political milieus, as an essential parameter in Greece's socio-political system (Makrides-Molokotos 2004). This situation tends to encourage a strong degree of clientellistic relations between certain political milieus and members of the clergy.

The Greek model in the treatment of religious minorities is more particular compared to other European countries insofar as Orthodoxy continues to enjoy unique privileges in public life (in education, rites of passage, government etc.). Greek Orthodoxy can be considered as the only truly free religion in Greece, while many other faiths are simply tolerated. The differentiation between "known" and not-known religions, and between "legal person of public law" and "legal persons of private law" creates conditions that preserve a monopolistic and preferential status for the Greek Orthodox Church with unfavourable implications for all other faiths.

The Church of Greece is a "legal person of public law" with exclusive territorial holdings to which the Greek state grants exclusive legal and financial privileges (including tax and military service exemptions for Orthodox clergy, teaching of the Orthodox religion in public schools, etc.) not applicable to non-Orthodox faiths. Judaism, Islam (Turkish minority in Thrace, under the Lausanne Treaty) and the Orthodox Church are also recognized as "legal persons of public law", but other religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Old Calendarists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Churches

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are considered to be "legal persons of private law". This distinction contributes to additional legal burdens on some minority religions. Freedom of religion is secured through Article 13 of the Greek Constitution, which legally guarantees freedom of conscience and religious worship only for "known" religions (Judaism, Islam, Old Calendarists, Catholic and Protestant Churches, Jehovah's Witnesses). However, there is no formal mechanism for a religious group to become recognised as a "known" religion, which is usually achieved only through the approval of a permit to operate a place of worship granted to a "known" religion.

If Article 13 also prohibits proselytism against or in favour of any religion, including Orthodoxy, in practice it has almost exclusively been used against religious minorities. The definition of proselytism can often be problematic, since the simple distribution of literature by non-Orthodox religious groups can be interpreted and prosecuted as an act of proselytism. As an example, in the Greek case against Jehovah's Witness followers, some members, who had distributed literature, were arrested or imprisoned in 1987, 1993 and 1996 after being accused of proselytism. Greece was subsequently condemned by the European Human Rights Court for violating their right to freedom of conscience and religious expression (see www.cesnur.org).

Demographics of religious affiliation

Greece is a relatively homogeneous country in religious and ethnic terms, especially compared to the more diverse ethnic and religious composition of some other European countries: according to official statistics approximately 95 per cent of the Greek population are Christian Orthodox (according to latest census the total population is 11 million). However, the degree of religious and ethnic homogeneity is changing gradually, as Greece is becoming a host country to an increasing number of immigrant populations from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. According to a study conducted by the Research Institute of Urban Environment and Human Resources at Panteion University it is estimated that there are 1,150,000 immigrants, thus approximately 10.3 per cent of the total population. Among the immigrant population there is a very strong concentration of Albanians (mostly male), representing 56 per cent of the total number of foreign nationals, followed by Bulgarians, Romanians and Ukrainians. On average, immigrants are 15-64 years, who tend to obtain work permits for at least 8 years and live in Athens; 17 per cent of the greater Athens population is composed of immigrant residents (Research Institute of Urban Environment and Human Resources 2002). Even if there are no official statistics on the religious demography of Greece's immigrant population, it is very likely that the recent influx of immigrants, some of whom are becoming Greek citizens, is challenging not only the demographic homogeneous composition of Greek population, but also the historic tendency to view Greek Orthodoxy as an indicator and marker of Greek citizenship.

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Given the increasing waves of immigration into Greece and the ongoing pluralisation of Greek society, particularly in urban centers, ethnic minority groups and immigration, often viewed in religious terms (Albanians, Pakistanis, etc. as Muslim immigrants), have become a common topic of public debate in the Greek media and in official government agendas. Given the high concen-tration of Albanians among Greece's immigrant population the Albanian minority is often at the focus of media attention; it is often referred to (or even stigmatized) as a problem that is discussed in terms of employment / unemployment and social welfare issues and security (crime) concerns.

The largest religious minorities in Greece include Muslims, Catholics and Protestants. As there is no definitive official data on the sizes of these minorities, we have to rely on a variety of combined sources, which include but are not limited to the *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group*, statements of representatives of the religious minorities themselves, and various studies on Greek minority groups (for example, Clogg 2002).

For the Muslim minority in Greece, the *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group* estimate that there are approximately 200,000 to 300,000 Muslims from Albanian, African, and Arab origins in Greece living mostly in large cities and the working class districts of Athens. According to the same source there are also approximately 90,000 Muslims (50,000 Turkish, 30,000 Pomaks and 10,000 Roma) in Thrace (Northern Greece). However, according to Ilhan Ahmet, Member of Parliament for Rodopi (Thrace), these estimates are higher with approximately 700,000 Muslims living officially in Greece (excluding illegal immigrants). Of those, approximately 150,000 live in Northern Greece (Thrace) and another 15,000-20,000 can be found in other parts of Greece; they are Greek citizens of Turkish origin (as a result of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which required the exchange of Muslims of Greece with Orthodox Christians of Turkey).

As far as Christian minorities, the number of Old Calendarists, who belong to an administratively non-recognized Orthodox Church is estimated at approximately 1 million, including 2,000-2,500 Old Calendarist monks and nuns and an additional 300 to 400 in Mt. Athos (Clogg 2002, p. 18; *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group*). The number of Greek Catholics living in Greece is estimated at approximately 53,000 (Clogg 2002, p. 39; representative of the Catholic Church in Greece, 2004; *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group*). However, adding the large foreign Catholic population (primarily from Poland and the Philippines) currently living in Greece the total figure is estimated at 200,000-300,000 Catholics. The Greek Protestant denomination in Greece includes roughly 20,000-30,000 Protestants in Greece belonging equally to three denominational groups: The Greek Evangelical

Church, the Free Evangelical Church and the more recent Pentecostal Church (Iatrides 2002, p. 56; Panayiotis Kantartzis, Pastor of the First Evangelical Church of Greece, 2004; *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group*). According to the Witnesses' own figure there are approximately 30,000 members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Greece (Clogg 2002, p. 56; representative of the Office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Greece).

Finally, after the eradication of most of the Greek Jewish population during WWII, estimates account for approximately 6,000 Greek Jews remaining in Greece with only three regularly active synagogues (Moisis Konstantinis, President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece; Clogg 2002, p. 64; *Greek Helsinki Monitor* and *Minority Rights Group*).

Case study: constructing a mosque in Athens

The Muslim case in Greece, and more particularly the issue of administration and construction of mosques is a lens through which to examine how Greece has been dealing with issues of religious pluralism. While Muslim communities are growing due to the increasing flow of Muslim immigrants, particularly in Athens, mosques are found only in regions with traditional Muslim communities, such as Western Thrace. Although such places of worship operate freely in Western Thrace, the Greek Government retains and exercises the right to appoint muftis, who acting as a religious leaders and Islamic judges, they have official functions in civil matters (e.g. marriage and divorce, etc.). One other factor behind the Greek State's insistence to appoint one official mufti is the concern that a popular elected mufti would be susceptible to mobilising the local population with the risk of political uprisings and territorial claims by Turkey. For this reason, there are two muftis in Greece; the Greek government officially appoints one; the other (commonly called "pseudo-mufti" by the Greek government but considered the real mufti by the local population) is elected by the local community but has no real administrative duties. This has been a sore issue among the Turkish minority in Thrace, which has contested appointment by the State and demanded that the local community be responsible for his election. Therefore, there is an insistence by the Turkish minority to be able to elect its own mufti to represent the community in order to have a say and contribute to the selection of their religious leader.

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In contrast to the 300 mosques operating in Western Thrace and despite the fact that there are approximately 100,000 people of Arab or Muslim background living in Athens, the city lacks an official mosque. The construction of a mosque in Athens has been pending since the late 1930s, when the construction of mosques was authorised by law upon approval by the local metropolitan and the Ministry for Education and Religious Affairs. In the various attempts since then, efforts to proceed to the construction of the mosque have been delayed due to supposed bureaucratic hurdles. In 2000, with the prospect of the Athens Olympic Games, the socialist government decided to finally proceed to the construction of an Islamic cultural centre and mosque in Peania (20 kms north-east of the capital and near the Athens airport). The issue received national and inter-national press coverage due to the gained momentum as a result of the Athens Olympic Games.

Although the mosque would be financed by Saudi Arabia with an imam from Cairo's Al Azhar University, Greek officials would oversee it. The Church of Greece, through its Archbishop (Christodoulos), had given its blessing for the construction of a mosque, as a place of worship, but objected to the creation of a cultural center. The construction was delayed because of a variety of factors, including the fact that the conservative mayor of the town, supported by the local bishop of Peania, argued that since the designated area belonged not to state jurisdiction but to that of the municipality, the construction plans had not received proper building permits. They also felt that having a minaret alter the traditional skyline of the town, in close proximity to the airport, would give a misleading impression to first-time visitors in Athens. To voice their protest, the local residents erected a three-meter cross at the highest point of the proposed location. The Muslim population in Athens is therefore still obliged to worship in informal mosques (warehouses converted into places of worship) operated informally on Fridays by various imams. According to some views, the lack of an official place of worship may pose security risks due to the possibility of underground mosques becoming a breeding ground for terrorist cells.

Concluding Remarks

The existence of an official state church in Greece and its close relationship with the State does not in itself imply or result in a lack of religious tolerance or religious liberty. If Greece has not had a history of religious violence, the law on proselytism, the financial dependence of the Church on the Greek state and the clientellistic relations between political milieus and members of the clergy, have negative implications on the treatment of religious minorities. Furthermore, the homogeneous character of the Greek nation and society and the resulting linkage between citizenship, national identity and religion are important factors that collectively contribute to Greece's negative, or at best mixed, record, on managing religious pluralism in a variety of areas, including the free exercise of religion, equality before the law, education, etc.

Mentalities towards immigration and religious/ethnic minorities can evolve towards a progressive openness of Greek society. However, ongoing economic concerns and anxieties (including unemployment) can transform the

course towards openness into a lengthy process with as many steps forwards as backwards. As we cannot foresee any fundamental changes in the above mentioned situation in the near future, it seems that the European Courts of Human Rights may be one (the only?) way for religious minorities to use as recourse in the resolution of specific conflicts or acts of discrimination within the overall and ongoing process of managing religious pluralism in Greece.

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