

Gender, Migration and intercultural Interaction
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National Case Study

Thematic Study on Religion (WP 6)

Greece

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Context of the research: The “exceptionality” of Muslim migration

Public debates on the question of religion and migration in Greece have primarily focused on the impact of Muslim migration on Greek society. The central issue in dispute that has spearheaded this debate in the past decade has been the proposal for building an official Islamic mosque somewhere in the area of metropolitan Athens¹. This is the focal point that has brought together all the political positions that have dominated the debate on the public role of religion in Greece in the past years:² the negative reaction, but also the acknowledgement and vow for tolerance of the official Orthodox Church in the face of the public presence of heterodox religious communities in the Greek national space, the secular counterargument deploring the Greek state's multiple entanglements with the Orthodox church, the growing activism around the articulation and struggle for migrants rights, the multicultural argument condemning Greek national ideology's fixation with ethnic homogeneity.³

This relatively unheated mosque debate seems today all the more outdated after the emergence of some vehement public reactions to a number of recent events. The current debate in Greece on religious freedoms, the relationship between religion and the state, and inter-religious dialogue seems to have been exploded by a series of animated occurrences, where migration has also acquired a central place.

For one thing, there have been growing reports on acts of racist violence and discrimination experienced by Muslim migrants.⁴ There have been several incidents of racist violence against Pakistanis in many regions of Athens, while the recent tearing up of the Koran during a regular identity check of an Afghan migrant by a Greek policeman has spearheaded the first mass demonstration of a religious character in the center of Athens that brought to the forefront the problem of religious discrimination.

¹With the exception of Western Thrace, where official mosques operate legally due to the official status of the Muslim minority inhabiting the region, there are no other institutionalized Islamic places of worship in Greece. As a result of the influx of Muslim migrants several informal mosques have been constructed and operate in a semi-official status as “cultural centers” all over the country. See, for example, a preliminary research on mapping the informal mosques in the municipality of Athens conducted by a research centre of the Greek Orthodox Church in Antonios Papantoniou, “Muslim Migrants in Athens” (in Greek) [Μουσουλμάνοι Μετανάστες στην Αθήνα] *Ekklesia* May 2009, 348-360 and in the project's website <http://www.kspm.gr>.

²A concise summary of the mosque debates can be found in Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas, “**Constructing Difference: The Mosque Debates in Greece**” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35, no. 6 (2009): 957 – 975.

³2 laws stipulating the construction of the mosque have been voted by parliament, but none has been implemented so far. Law 2833 in 2000 proposed the establishment of a mosque in the district of Paiania, whereas a new Law voted in December 2006 proposed that it would be built in Elaionas.

⁴See, along these lines, the question submitted by MP Fotis Kouvelis to the Minister of Interior and to the Minister of Education in March 2009 at <http://www.syryza.gr/ekloges-kai-boyli/koinoboyleyitiki-istoria-1/organomenes-prakseis-bias-enantion-allodapn-se-aigaleo-kai-kolono>.

What is also striking is that during the recent public debate on the reform of the citizenship law and the enlargement of voting rights in local elections,⁵ the disagreements of high officials of the Greek Orthodox Church and right wing politicians have primarily invoked the presence of an internal Islamic threat. The principal objections against the proposed law have centered around the possibility of a large numerical increase of Greek citizens of Muslim faith (outrageous figures mentioned by opponents of the law have ranged from 200 thousand to 1 million Muslim believers who would acquire Greek citizenship) and the subsequent possibility for Muslim Greeks and migrants to influence the results of local elections. "How will you react if the next leader of your party is a Muslim", asked sarcastically the leader of the right wing LAOS party during the parliamentary discussion on the law, addressing the ethnic Greek leader of the left wing SYRIZA party who criticised the law as not being radical enough.⁶

High ranked members of the clergy have also publicly intervened to ask for the withdrawal of the reform, focusing also on how it will serve to magnify the Islamic threat to Greek society. The bishop of Piraeus, for instance, claimed in a written statement, that "no one in their right mind would want to see the increase of the Muslim Greek minority by recklessly granting citizenship to Muslim migrants, who will then demand, as it happens in Greek Thrace, that the Islamic sharia law should apply to the entire Greek territory".⁷ Or, as Anthimos, Orthodox bishop of Thessaloniki, has even more alarmingly put it: "[if the law is not withdrawn], al-Qaida branches will flood Greece...You just cannot bring 700 thousand Muslim migrants to Greece and then grant them citizenship without asking the Greek church about it".⁸ Migration, in this context, is connected to an Islamic attack against the predominance of Orthodox christianity within Greek national space, and the possible internal erosion of the Greek nation.

These extreme reactions brought a rapid response by the Greek archbishop who has been keen from the outset of his tenure to repudiate the ghost of the repeated involvement of his predecessor in the affairs of the Greek state.⁹ The Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church issued a balanced statement which primarily states that the citizenship law lies outside the jurisdiction of the Church while it stresses that in its own domain the Orthodox Church has accepted aliens and migrants as equal members, since the church moves beyond particular languages and nationalities and is in essence the unity of everything.¹⁰ The bishop of Messinia has also given a short interview to a Greek newspaper, where he stressed the

⁵The draft law went through an open online deliberation before it was submitted to parliament. See http://www.opengov.gr/types/?option=pol_symmetoxi1. 3.442 user comments were published in total (from all the online deliberations initiated by the Greek government so far, this was the one with the higher rate of participation). Around 75% of these comments were negative, criticising and asking for the withdrawal of the law, while many of those referred to the ghost of the Islamic threat the the law is supposedly enacting.

⁶See Greek Parliament Minutes, 8 February 2010 at <http://www.parliament.gr/ergasies/praktika/txt/syne100208.doc>

⁷Metropolis of Peiraeus - Press release, 14 January 2010 at <http://www.imp.gr/Nea.htm>

⁸"A 'Holy War' on migrants" (in Greek) ['Ιερός Πόλεμος' για τους Μετανάστες], *Avgi*, 7 February 2010 at <http://www.avgi.gr/ArticleActions/show.action?articleID=522646>

⁹The heavy political involvement of the previous Archbishop Christodoulos culminated in the so-called 'identity card crisis'. The Orthodox Church objected to the replacement of the old identity cards with new ones where the reference to religious belief was excluded. See the critical discussion in Yannis Stavrakakis, "Politics and Religion: On the 'Politicization' of Greek Church Discourse", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 21, no.2 (2003): 153-181.

¹⁰*Second meeting of the Holy synod in February 2010* at http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=1164&what_sub=d_typou

multicultural character of contemporary Greek society, the need for respecting alterity, while he refused to differentiate between ethnic Greeks and second generation migrants who have been raised in Greece and have studied in Greek public schools.¹¹ In spite of the obvious observation, that the Greek Orthodox church is divided over the issue, it is clear that the growing preoccupation with Islam as a potential destabilising force is changing the ways in which migration is framed in Greek public debates.

In the context of these events, public debate in Greece has become structured through an open racialisation of specific nationalities of Muslim migrants, most notably Pakistani, Afghan, Bangladeshi, Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian migrants. It is also worth noting that this debate places particular emphasis on the cultural and racial difference in the dominant representations of Muslim migrants, where gender is also playing a central role. Muslim migration is predominantly portrayed in the Greek context as a male migration with a surplus. This surplus is being embodied by the presence of actual or potential female victims of male Islamic practices: the scarce presence of Muslim migrant women in Greece and the potential female victims that might arise through future family reunification or possible future intermarriage.¹²

When again during the parliamentary discussion on the reform of the citizenship law, the leader of the LAOS order referred to the threat that the growing presence of men Muslim migrants and would be citizens poses to the existing legal order due to their adherence to the Islamic law and the subsequent demeaning treatment of women, the prime minister hastened to answer that integration of all migrants (including earning Greek citizenship) are dependent upon their adherence to the Greek political and civic values, and only then he went on to add that Greek society is in a phase of transition towards a multicultural society.¹³

The belief in the exceptionality of Islam seems, thus, to be dominant in the Greek case. The question of the relationship between different migrations and religions other than Islam has largely remained outside the scope of public debate although non-Muslim migrants constitute the vast majority of foreigners living in Greece. More so, there is an increasing ethnicisation of the purported Islamic threat, where specific nationalities of Muslim migrants like Pakistanis, Afghans, Bangladeshis are associated with a more backward and politically dangerous Islamic faith, whereas Muslim migrants coming from other countries, for example from the Balkan states, are treated with much more easiness and understanding, as if they are not truly Muslim or not Muslim enough.

Religious Spaces in Athens

Public religious spaces in Athens are predominantly associated with the Orthodox Church. Most Athenian neighbourhoods are characterised by the presence of a central orthodox church and several peripheral smaller ones. The Orthodox churches are spaces of socialization and points of spatial reference in each neighbourhood for both religious and non

¹¹«The Church does not exclude anyone...» (in Greek) [Η Εκκλησία δεν εξαιρεί κανέναν...], *Kathimerini*, 17 January 2010 at

http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_politics_2_17/01/2010_387197

¹²See Christos Demertzopoulos, Aimilia Salvanou, Helen Kambouri, *Culture, Identity and Movement: a study in the social anthropology of the everyday life and popular representations of migrants from Pakistan in Nea Ionia* (Athens: Latsis foundation, forthcoming), ch.2.

¹³See Greek Parliament Minutes, 8 February 2010 at <http://www.parliament.gr/ergasies/praktika/txt/syne100208.doc>

religious inhabitants, since they offer many social as well as strictly religious services, i.e. mass, social support, catechism, customary ceremonies for marriages, baptisms, Easter and Christmas celebrations. Other Christian religious sites (catholic, protestant etc.) are scarce in Athens and they are mostly to be found in official temples built in the centre of the town, where religious communities from different neighbourhoods gather. In specific occasions However, the absence of official Islamic mosques constitutes a unique characteristic that distinguishes the religious space of Athens from those of other European cities. According to the Greek law, the construction of a religious site by a non Orthodox Christian religious community requires a permit from the Ministry of Education and Religion, which is subject to the approval of the Greek Orthodox Church.¹⁴ Although the Greek Church has approved, in recent years, the construction of a central Islamic mosque in Athens, these plans have not been realized. The continuous postponements of the erection of religious sites devoted to the Islamic faith in Athens cannot be reduced to mere bureaucratic or economic complications, but should be attributed to an ethno-religious conception of space that constructs the capital city of the state and the symbolic centre of Greek nationalism as a space devoid of an Islamic religious influence.¹⁵

Because of the absence of mosques in public space, the Islamic presence in Athens is mostly private and linked to specific migrant communities. Islamic religious sites are usually hidden from the public eye operating in a semi-illegal mode under the banner "cultural centres".¹⁶ Most mosques are operating in unsuitable private places, such as residential apartments, warehouses, shops or garages. Although Islamic religious holidays are not recognized as public in Athens, there is a customary celebration of Eid Al Adha organized each year in a sport stadium of Athens located far from the city centre. Although the participation of Muslim

¹⁴See Law 1363/1938 and Law 1672/1939. Although the Ministry is responsible for the issuing of the permit and in principle the Orthodox religious authorities have only an advisory role. In practice, however, they exert considerable influence in those decisions.

¹⁵ A further symbolic gesture on the part of the Greek state has been the renovation of the Islamic mosque in Monastiraki which now functions as a tourist attraction. Reconstructing the mosque as a monument which no longer functions as a religious site, reaffirms the predominance of the Greek Orthodox religion in public space –accepting Islam only as a past influence which is strictly limited to the cultural sphere and does not threaten the presumed ethno-religious homogeneity of the city.

¹⁶ See the mapping of Islamic religious sites operating in the municipality of Athens undertaken by a research project in 2007 in 2007 http://www.kspm.gr/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=55&Itemid=93. According to islam.gr, there are sixty places of worship operating in Athens and more than 40 Imams. The same source argues that only five of these mosques are run by the Pakistani community and five by the Baghlahedshi community, while the vast majority is multinational. It is worth noting that in 2007, a Muslim Mosque has been created in the Moschato area near the Pireus port, after a donation of a Saudi Arabian businessman <http://www.islam.gr/cgi-bin/pages/page3.pl?arlang=Greek&rcode=090415145833&argenkat=%C1%F1%E8%F1%E1>. Although very little research has been conducted on these sites by academic researchers, Muslim female informers that participated in the research insisted that the vast majority of these sites is reserved for males only. Furthermore, according to informers, the mosques tend to be dominated by specific nationalities of migrants, who run them and finance them through the contributions of their members or donations from abroad. It is worth noting also that according to islam.gr in 2009, "the number of mosques has begun to decrease gradually due to the increasing differences, with the insistence of some mosques to perform Prayers at their campuses, whereas others hold congregational Prayers in other areas in Athens". <http://www.islam.gr/cgi-bin/pages/page3.pl?arlang=English&rcode=100129124049&argenkat=%C1%F1%E8%F1%E1>

migrants in this event is massive, the choice of location -secluded and isolated from the everyday life of Athens- manifests the deliberate marginalisation of Islam from the Athenian public space.¹⁷ Overall, the ethno-religious predominance of Orthodox Christianity results into the marginalization of other religious faiths and the limited visibility of Islam in the Athenian religious landscape. This limited visibility of Islam in public space is in sharp contrast with its over-representation in public discourse. In other words, while Islam is almost absent from the actual space of the city, it is present everywhere in public debates on migration and religion as an omnipresent threat looming over the city.

Goal of the research

The lack of public engagement with the relationship between religion and migration outside the scope of Islam characterises also the state of the existing research in the area of migration studies. Apart from some scattered articles or research projects, religions other than Islam have not been really given serious attention by researchers on the field.¹⁸ It is also indicative that in articles or reports where the relation between Orthodox Christianity and migration enters -albeit, usually briefly the scene-, this often occurs in order to narrate the religious catechism that zealous Greek nationals offered to the newly arrived Albanian migrants which often resulted to their Christian baptism. This phenomenon is then explained as depicting the will for assimilation coming either from Albanian migrants themselves or from ethnic Greek believers or in other writings as constituting a strategy on the part of migrant individuals for attaining more security in their everyday lives.¹⁹

Our goal in this research is to challenge the notion of the exceptionality of Islam in the Greek context. This task is not pursued through an analysis of Islam in Greece per se, but on focusing on what is omitted by the exceptionality thesis. Instead, of calling into question the stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam that permeate public discussions, instead of analysing the diversity of migrant Muslim communities in Greece or trying to uncover the

¹⁷See, for instance, “Muslims celebrate Hadj” [Μουσουλμάνοι γιορτάζουν το “Χατζ”], Eleftherotypia, 28 November 2009

¹⁸See the EU funded research project Welfare and Values in Europe (WaVE) that examines the values expressed by majority religions in their interaction with minority communities. See, particularly, the reports on Greece: Nikos Kokosalakis and Effie Fokas, “WaVE state of the art report - Greece: Overview of the National Situation” at <http://www.waveproject.org/output/State%20of%20the%20Art%20Reports/WaVE%20State%20of%20the%20Art%20Part%20B.12%20Greece.pdf> and Effie Fokas, “WaVE case study report – Greece: Thiva case study report” at http://www.waveproject.org/output/Case_Study_Reports/D9_-_Thiva.pdf.

¹⁹See, for instance, Harris Athanasiades, Archontia Mantzaridou, Nikos Marantzidis, “Transnational Migrants' Views on Multiple Citizenship in Greece” in *Multiple State Membership and Citizenship in the Era of Transnational Migration*, eds. Pirko Pitkanen and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman (Rotterdam: Sense publishers, 2007); Ifigeneia – Evlampia Kokkali, “Albanian immigration and urban transformations in Greece: Albanian migrant strategies in Thessaloniki, Greece”, paper presented at the 2nd LSE PhD Symposium on Modern Greece, London, 2005; Maria Efthymiou, “Old challenges put to the test: the Greek Orthodox flock and the Church of Greece in an era of global – and local – change”, presentation at the conference *The Greek Orthodox Church in the Modern Era*, Haifa, 2 March 2007; Ricky van Boeschoten, “We are Foreigners Here’: Migration, Gender, and Everyday Practices” (in Greek) [‘Είμαστε Ξένοι Εδώ’: Μετανάστευση, Φύλο και Στρατηγικές της Καθημερινής Ζωής], presentation at the conference *Multiculturalism and Migration*. Panteion University, Athens, 23-24 October 2006; and Lois Lamprianides and Antigone Lymperaki, *Albanian Immigrants in Thessaloniki: Routes of prosperity and sideroutes of public image* (in Greek) [Αλβανοί μετανάστες στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Διαδρομές ευημερίας και παραδρομές δημόσιας εικόνας] (Thessaloniki: Paratirits, 2001).

potential empowering impact that Muslim practices can have in the context of migrancy, we aim to show that when it comes to the question of religion and migration, Islam is not really all there is.

The multiple dynamics that weave religion and migration together encompass much more than Islam in the Greek case. We will then try to take into account some of these missing forces that the overwhelming preoccupation with Islam has sidelined. In this direction, the becoming public of migrants' religion will be portrayed as a far more widespread and diverse phenomenon, encompassing other religious faiths, a complex interrelation among these faiths, migrants of other nationalities, and crucially the more ambiguous role of the dominant religion in Greece and its official church. In this respect, our research is a step towards reassessing the construction of religious identities as a tool for the integration of migrants in the Greek public sphere.

In this study, we have focused mostly on the relationship between religion and migration from two former communist states, most notably Albania and Bulgaria, in order to analyze issues usually marginalized in public debate. These nationalities represent the two largest groups of foreigners residing in Greece (Albanians as "third country nationals" and Bulgarians as "EU citizens").²⁰ Instead of looking at migrants from these nationalities as homogeneous categories, we have tried to see the diversity of religious identities represented within the same nationalities as well as the multiple processes of movement in terms of religious beliefs, cultural practices and social attachments that occur during the lives of individual migrants. More specifically, amongst both Albanian and Bulgarian migrants there are broad identifications with Christian Orthodox, Catholic and the Islamic faiths as well as with atheism. What is even more interesting, however, is that there are shifts in religious identity, which are both inter-generational and emanating from personal experiences and migrant trajectories. Furthermore, gender plays an important role in the composition of these groups since amongst Bulgarians there is a tendency towards independent migration of females while amongst Albanians there is a tendency towards family migration.²¹

This focus allowed us to challenge from the outset the racialisation of certain categories of migrants and take into account the diversity of migrant identities and movements. In parallel, it has opened room for a discussion of religiosity as a dynamic social practice determined by collective and personal experiences, rather than as a static identity determined by specific ethnic, racial, national and cultural traits. By collecting the narratives of different migrants we explore the processes through which individuals and groups originating from societies where atheism was institutionalized until the 1990s come to form beliefs about religion and engage in performative acts that shape their relationship within a society where orthodox Christianity is institutionalized and officially accepted as the dominant religious faith.

²⁰According to 2008 official statistics: 303,225 Albanian and 27,182 Bulgarians have received valid stay permits by the Ministry of Interior. See Thanos Maroukis, "Undocumented migration. Counting the Uncountable. Clandestino Country report – Greece" at http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_greece_final_3.pdf

²¹See Koula Kasimati and Loukia Mousourou, *Gender and Migration: Theoretical References and Empirical Investigation* (in Greek) [Φύλο και Μετανάστευση: Θεωρητικές αναφορές και εμπειρική διερεύνηση] (Athens: Gutenberg, 2007)

Research methods

The research was carried out by means of a combination of semi-structured interviews with women and men and focus group discussions with women of Albanian and Bulgarian origin. These qualitative methods were considered much more appropriate for this particular case study than quantitative methods (such as questionnaire surveys or collection of figures from official sources) because they allow respondents to describe in their own words their religious beliefs, experiences and practices and convey their own meanings to religious concepts. On the one hand, the scarcity of academic research and publications on the relation between migration and religion in Greece and, on the other hand, the recent islamophobic turn in public discourse dictated that pre-selected choices and categorizations (used in quantitative methodologies) were likely to be biased and to undermine the quality of the research. Instead, the research team opted for an open set of questions in both interview questionnaires and focus group thematics, which allowed respondents to “make their own meanings” of gender, religion and migration.

Initially, contacts for personal interviews were made through Albanian and Bulgarian migrant associations, the press and personal acquaintances. One of the main difficulties that we had to face in the process was that many Albanians considered the theme of the research as irrelevant to their own experiences. In particular, well-educated Albanian men and women between the ages of 30 and 40 were very critical of our attempt to research this particular topic and declined to give us interviews. The vast majority of men that we have contacted replied to our request to interview them with phrases such as “there is nothing to say about this topic”, “we, Albanians are not really religious”, “we cannot say much about religion because we do not know anything about it”. But amongst women too there was puzzlement and reluctance to talk about this issue. When we contacted a highly educated Albanian woman (who is the head of a cultural association and is conducting research on migrant integration in Greece), she explained to us that the topic we have chosen as the focus of our research was irrelevant to the Albanian migrant experience. She added that, in her opinion, if Albanian researchers were involved in the project, this topic would not have been chosen in the first place. Similarly a well educated Albanian woman who works as a journalist agreed to give us an interview provided that we do not use it in the analysis. The denial or reluctance of many respondents to be interviewed made it difficult to expand the sample to different categories of migrants and especially to include more migrants who were atheist because they believed that they had nothing to say about the topic or that the topic was altogether wrong. After the first series of interviews, however, the snowballing method was used in order to get in contact with potential interviewees. Many agreed to talk to us after they had been informed by previous interviewees that the questionnaire required them neither to be religious nor to “know” things about religion. The interviews were conducted in different places chosen by the interviewees, such as coffee houses, houses, and workplaces. The interviews were in Greek and lasted from 1 to 1.30 hours.

Focus group discussions proved to be a more appropriate method to include both Albanian and Bulgarian respondents irrespectively of their religious faith. This was mainly because potential participants were assured that they did not have to talk

during the discussion if they did not have anything to say about religion. However, there was a differentiation in terms of gender: most men of both nationalities that we have been in contact with declined to give us interviews, while many Albanian and Bulgarian women were willing to participate in the focus group discussions. One factor that contributed to that gender differentiation was that we contacted many Albanian women who had participated in focus group discussions that we organized in the past and already knew how these work. As some of them explained to us, they felt more comfortable to express their opinion and talk with other women of the same nationality and the Greek moderators, rather than simply “explaining” things in an interview. It was only on one occasion when a group of Bulgarian women who were all members of choir and had already agreed to be in the focus group cancelled their participation. Before the arranged meeting, the Bulgarian director of the choir called us to request that he should be present in the discussion. When we explained to him that this was not possible because these were all-women's groups he refused to “give permission” to the members of the choir to take part in the discussion. He replied to us that he was a very religious man and was afraid that the discussion would be biased against religious beliefs. Nonetheless, in general the open method of the focus group discussion gave more significant results than private interviews because women were able to debate concepts and meanings amongst themselves and the moderators more effectively than in the interviews, where questions often assumed meanings that were not shared by the interviewees. The focus group sessions took place in a room located at the Centre of Gender Studies at UPSPS University. They were mostly in Greek, although the partisans were encouraged to and often did speak in their native languages amongst themselves. They lasted 2.5 to 3 hours.

Respondents' profile

In total, 52 people participated in the interviews and focus group discussions. The sample was designed to include a heterogeneous amalgam of people from these nationalities, which would reflect the diverse religious faiths, as well as the tradition of atheism that prevailed in the countries of origin.²² From all the Albanians who participated in the research, ten declared to be christian orthodox, five catholic, two muslim and nine atheist. From all the Bulgarians that participated in the research, twelve were Orthodox Christian and fourteen were atheist.

Another factor that was important in the research design was legal status. All of the respondents were first generation migrants. However, Albanians (with the exception of two women who have acquired Greek citizenship as repatriates “omogeneis”) were recognized as “immigrants”, while Bulgarians due to the assession of their country of origin to the EU, were recognized as EU citizens.

Nonetheless, one of the main findings of the research was that religious and civic categorizations proved to be much more fluid than initially assumed. The categories “christian orthodox”, “catholic”, or “muslim” acquired in the narratives of both

²²On religion in Albania, see Miranda Vickers, “The development of religion in post-communist Albania”, in *Strengthening Religious Tolerance for a Secure Civil Society in Albania and the Southern Balkans*, eds. J. Pettifer and M. Nazarko (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2007). On religion in Bulgaria, see Carsten Riis, *Religion, politics, and historiography in Bulgaria* (Boulder, CO: east European Monographs, 2002)

Albanians and Bulgarians a very different meaning to the one commonly assumed in Greek public and academic discourse. In fact, the limits between religious identities were fluid and most practices described crossed religious boundaries. Thus, six of the christian orthodox and two of the atheist Albanians, as well as two of the Bulgarian atheists declared that they were of Muslim family background, but believed that “religion was one”. Furthermore, the category “atheist” proved to be much more widespread than commonly assumed, since there were elements of atheism in the narratives of almost all the respondents, even those who identified themselves as religious. Conversely, in the narratives of those who identified themselves as “atheist”, there were many references to religious beliefs and supranational superstitions. Legal status was also an ambivalent categorization since most of the Bulgarians who participated in the discussion had solved the problem of legalization but continued to be employed in migrant dominated sectors and to feel “foreigners” in Greek society.²³

The sample was also designed to include adults of different genders. However, as explained above, the male respondents proved to be much more reluctant than the female ones to give interviews and to participate in focus group discussions than female ones. As a result, the sample is overwhelmingly female: six Albanian women were interviewed and eighteen other Albanian women participated in the focus group discussions while there were only two men who agreed to be interviewed. Similarly, there were seven women from Bulgaria interviewed and eighteen other women who participated in the focus group discussions, while only one man from Bulgaria agreed to be interviewed. Two men who agreed to be interviewed were involved in religious professions, one as a priest in the Greek Church and the other one as an employee in a Greek Orthodox cemetery. Gender, therefore proved to be from the onset a much more significant factor that determined the respondents profile than religion or civic identities.

Basic premises and concepts

The global resurgence of religions

What has been termed as the 'global resurgence of religions' is posing pressing challenges for existing social theories and practices.²⁴ In short, religions seem to be fuelling yet another type of critique and opposition to the liberal modernist project. The liberal distinction between the private and the public that has served to confine the religious in the realm of privately held beliefs, the liberal inability of accommodating a thick cultural pluralism in the public sphere, its tendency to associate the politicisation of religion with acts of violence are some of the focal

²³See Marina Nikolova, “Policy paper: Bulgarian migration to Greece” (in Greek) [Κείμενο Πολιτικής: **Βουλγαρική μετανάστευση στην Ελλάδα**] (ELIAMEP, 2009) at http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/research_brief_eu_memberstates_gr_bulgarians1.pdf

²⁴The academic literature on the global resurgence of religion is proliferating. See, for instance, Peter Berger (ed.), *The De-secularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999) and Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

points of a religiously-driven criticism.²⁵

Coming to the European context, religious revivals are seen to have put into question the idea of a secular Europe: they have forcefully re-opened the religion versus secularism divide and have raised doubts over the viability of the liberal model of procedural democracy.²⁶ Especially after September 11th, the growing presence of public religions is increasingly depicted as a source of problems for European societies, putting their cohesiveness to the test and challenging the very political and civic values upon which the European project was based. Migration, in this perspective, is seen to have accentuated these tensions. Focusing again on Islam and particularly on Islam in Europe, migration is associated with the rise of the number of Muslims inhabiting European societies (either as citizens, would be citizens, legal or undocumented migrants), but also in contributing to movements of Muslim revivalism in several local contexts, but all located at the heart of European space, giving rise to what has been called European Islam.²⁷

The idea of a "global resurgence of religion" ultimately rests upon the belief that "we" all share a common understanding of what religion is. And this assumption, as Derrida argues, is conditioned upon a Western (Latin) definition of religion which is spread globally through the modern means of communication and transport.²⁸ Thus we have the emergence of global media affairs, like the Pope's aphorisms or the Rushdie affair or global terrorism, which cannot be localized in specific geographical contexts. This conviction that we all share a common meaning of religion, however, is simultaneously an admittance of our own insecurity over the multiple meanings that people may attach in different local and transnational contexts to religion. This is particularly significant when we consider the intimate relationship between religious and national identities, as well as the tensions that arise when migrants attempt to express their own religious beliefs in the public space of receiving societies. As the example of the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in France indicates, what is usually omitted from the relevant debates is the diversity of practices included in what is termed "wearing the hijab". Gender, ethnic and class factors play an important role in the ways in which religious practices become meaningful in different contexts. It is with these considerations in mind that we have tried to approach the theme of this case study. By conceiving religion as an open question (rather than as a term whose meaning we all understand and share) we have tried to understand what meanings migrant women (and men) attach to religion in general and religious practices in particular and how these may destabilise, challenge or even subvert established religious practices and meanings.

Contextualization of the relation between religion and migration

Contextualisation is critical in all efforts to analyse religious phenomena. The relation between religion and liberal secularism in Europe is diverse and depends on the local

²⁵For a good overview of these criticisms, see William Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and the contributions in the volume John L. Esposito and Michael Watson (eds.), *Religion and Global Order* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

²⁶For Islam in Europe, see Aziz Al Azmeh, *Islam in Europe: Diversity, identity and influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷On European Islam, see Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999).

²⁸See Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", in *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

context. The notions of secularism as well as religion should also be contextualised. For one thing, there is no secularism or religion in general, but French *laïcité* or Italian fragments of secularism²⁹ and respectively Christianity or Islam, or Buddhism.³⁰ For another, the exclusive association of religion with Islam obscures the analysis on the possible transformations that entrench different religions in Europe, and in particular the different versions of Christianity, which are currently undergoing multiple transformations influenced by migrant movements in particular contexts.

In Greece, the country where this report focuses, tensions between liberal secularism and Orthodox Christianity have pre-existed the advent of large migration flows in the 1990s.³¹ Migration has been a critical factor that both extends and deepens these dynamics. Apart from widening the scope of the existing liberal-secular versus religion divide in Greece by adding into the picture different religious traditions and groups (mainly in relation to Islam and Muslim migrant communities), it has also challenged the privileged position of an ethnicised Orthodox Christianity that celebrates its unbreakable link with the past as one of the foundations of Greek homogeneity. A characteristic example of this dynamic is the previously mentioned controversy over the reform of the citizenship law, which has sparked the debate within the Orthodox Church as well as between the Church and the broader political spectrum.

Another unexamined dimension that this report brings to light has to do with how what that has been termed as the main obstacle to the secularisation of Greek society – the Greek Orthodox community and church – faces a double challenge by the presence of diverse migrant populations within Greek space. On the one hand, Greek Orthodoxy loses the monopoly of representing the sacred dimension in the Greek public space, although it still strives to retain its privileged public role. On the other hand, through the admittance of migrant men and women in the Orthodox community in Greece, the Church is pushed towards accepting its own domain as a space of intercultural interaction, while its self-representation as an ethnically homogeneous spiritual community is cast into doubt.

Gender, migration and religion

The question of gender is central to an understanding of this particular case study.³² What becomes important for the analysis is how migrant women and men of different faiths

²⁹For the notion of “fragments of secularism”, see Rubah Salih, “Muslim women, fragmented secularism and the construction of interconnected ‘publics’ in Italy” *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2009): 409-423.

³⁰See the discussion in Ole Weaver and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, “In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitisation”, in *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, eds. Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Fabio Petito (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

³¹Nikiforos Diamandouros, *Cultural dualism and political change in postauthoritarian Greece* (Madrid: Estudio / Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales, 1994), for instance, has narrated the history of post 1974 Greece as the struggle between an Eastern traditional Orthodox versus a liberal Western modernising camp.

assume and negotiate their religious identities and how they perform religious practices in the public and private spaces. The adoption of religious identities by migrant women especially constitutes a terrain of possibility: it can potentially play a role for the integration of migrant women in society, enable their participation in public life, and allow the contestation of existing gendered practices in the public or private space. Or it can become a means of reinforcing gender inequalities and asymmetries within migrant communities and amongst migrants and the host societies. Thus, the dynamic of the private/public dichotomy constitutes the principal parameter of the study.

The question of religion becomes also in this context a question of access (or barring access) to public space, and offers the possibility of intercultural interactions with other people of the same faith. Even more radically, religion might be also seen as a way to redefine the boundaries between the public and the private. In particular for migrant women, whose lives are often confined in invisible private spaces because of occupation in domestic space, lack of knowledge of language and customs of the host society, and illegality, religion can become a means of acquiring access to public space. Conversely one question that arises in this context is how feminine identities traditionally associated with the private may challenge public spaces. In different contexts religious practices may become the means by which migrant women organize in groups and go through processes of empowerment and emancipation.³³

Building on previous research done on Albanian and Bulgarian women working in the domestic sector in Greece,³⁴ we have developed a framework of understanding religiosity as part of everyday practices of migrant women. Everyday life constitutes the realm that encompasses the potentialities, but also the contradictions and the ambivalences characterising the efforts of migrant women to reposition themselves in the host country. In the realm of everyday life, religious practices can be seen as embodying multiple tactics for integrating into civic and political life and redefining their gender roles. In the Greek context, an important question to address with respect to religion is how feminine practices and identities traditionally associated with Orthodox Christianity and Church may be reinforced or challenged by migrant women whose presence in Greek society establishes a new intercultural context for the re-negotiation of gender identities in public and private.

Research questions

The main research questions include the following:

-What are the conceptions of religion in the country of origin? How do these affect present conceptions of public/private, masculine/ feminine?

³²See all the contributions in Annelies Moors and Ruba Salih (eds.), “**Muslim women' in Europe: Secular normativities, bodily performances and multiple publics**”, *Social Anthropology /Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no.4 (2009).

³³A pioneering study in this regard is that of Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁴ See Eleni Kambouri, *Gender and Migration: The everyday lives of Albanian and Ukranian Migrants* (in Greek) [Φύλο και Μετανάστευση: Η καθημερινή ζωή των μεταναστριών από την Αλβανία και την Ουκρανία] (Athens: Gutenberg, 2007) and Dina Vaiou et. al., *Interweaved Everyday Lives and Socio-spatial Transformations in the City: Migrant women and local women in the Neighbourhoods of Athens* (in Greek) [Διαπλεκόμενες καθημερινότητες και χωρο-κοινωνικές μεταβολές στην πόλη: Μετανάστριες και ντόπιες στις γειτονιές της Αθήνας] (Athens: L Press, 2007).

-How does religion affect the migration experience for women and men? How does migration effect religious practices?

-How does gender affects and is affected by every day religious practices?

-Are religious identities a tool for the incorporation/empowerment of women in local contexts and in transnational networks and public spheres?

-How women (and men) engage in religious contexts (mosques, churches, religious centres) and in public spaces in general and how these spaces are gendered?

Fieldwork

Religion in Albania and Bulgaria and the public/private divide

When asked about the public role and public visibility of religion, Bulgarian and Albanian migrants give responses that often allude to the past and the country of origin. Performing religion in the public sphere seems to be closely associated with their memories of the tenuous relation between religion and the communist regime. Although their migration represents a radical break since it transferred them to a new social reality, when it comes to the debate between secularism and religion they are overall reluctant to accept a thick public engagement with religion.

During the communist era in both countries of origin, religious institutions were either outlawed or marginalised and expressions of religious faith were strictly prohibited in public spaces. Albanian respondents often mention 1967, as the year when religion was officially outlawed. Although Albania was declared an atheist state before, it is in this year that religious sites were demolished and public space was constructed as strictly secular. As school children, the Albanian respondents remembered that they were taught the Darwinian theory of evolution. The Marxist motto "Religion is the opium of the people" was regularly sited in school classes, as Calliope, a teacher, recalled during a focus group session. Furthermore, many women remembered that when "Hodza was in power" they had to learn the phrase "Albanian's faith is Albanianism". The lack of religious education was coupled with the prohibition of all religious celebrations and rituals, such as baptisms, marriages and funerals. Two women from the city of Laçi in the Northern part of Albania remember that every year the Albanian army was guarding the empty space where the local Catholic Church formerly stood on the day of the celebration of the local saint to be sure than no one would approach it. All visible (and invisible) public signs of religious identity, including religious clothing, had to be cast out.

The narratives of Bulgarian migrants are quite similar showing, however, a less intensive persecution of public expressions of religion. The religious sites were not demolished, but their usages were transformed. Elena, an atheist, describes how some churches were transformed into national monuments/museums and the walls were painted with socialist themes. "They believed that anyone could paint pictures inside the churches". Secular communist education was the norm in Bulgaria, too.

“When I was in school in 1955-6, as a small child, 6-7 years old, I remember that we were told that religion was no longer a lesson. And I was happy because it was a difficult lesson and it was nice to have less to study...We were told not to go inside the Churches otherwise we will be kicked out of school”. (Katia, orthodox christian)

Schoolchildren were told not to approach churches and mosques. However, access to religious texts was still possible in higher education. Martina, an orthodox Christian Bulgarian and literature professor, remembers that as a student in the University she had to study religious texts as part of the ancient language classes. However, the class was taught in such a way as to emphasize the linguistic aspects of the texts. “We were taught to read them as books not as religious scripts”. Religious practices were only visible in public as far as they were interpreted through the lenses of the prevailing secularism. Occasionally, however, the tensions between the religious and the secular had subversive effects. Martina recalls a school visit to the local monastery of Rila. All her class had to sleep inside the monastery and attended the evening mass.

“There was a beautiful boy who could sing all the gospels. And we were thinking that it was a pity such a beautiful boy to become a priest. But we liked him and we liked the songs. We were not allowed to light a candle because our teachers were there. Some of them were giggling during mass, and a priest approached them and threw them outside the chapel. And we were all happy because the teachers were the uneducated ones and we were the educated ones”.

In both Albania and Bulgaria, however, the respondents noted local differentiations between towns and villages. For example, many respondents mentioned that despite formal prohibitions, in specific Albanian Muslim villages customs and religious dressing were tolerated in public. In Bulgaria, where there seems to have been more tolerance to public expressions of religion, in many villages there were priests and mass continued to take place in public semi-secretly. Stefka, for instance, remembers some more bold inhabitants of her village going to the church on Good Friday to perform the lamentation at the tomb service. One male respondent, a Bulgarian priest, attributed this ‘toleration’ of religion (as long as it was not publicly visible) to the influence of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov, then general secretary of the communist party, who, as he said, was a devout Christian in private, although she never publicly expressed her religious belief.

However in both Albania and Bulgaria religious identities were predominantly outcaste from the public space. Even women, from religious family backgrounds recounted stories, where members of their family were extremely careful not to display any indication of religious beliefs in public spaces -in the workplace, during the period of religious holidays- and advised them to do the same. In spite of formal prohibitions, thus, several religious practices were performed during the communist era, but they were usually strictly confined in the private sphere and usually after taking the necessary secrecy precautions. Most respondents coming from religious families narrated celebrations of the principal religious holidays (mainly Christmas and Easter for Orthodox and Catholic Christians and Ramadan for Muslims), the performance in secret of some rituals (baptism or religious funerals), or simply keeping up with religious customs in regards to food. For Christians this included painting red eggs and

eating lamb in Easter, while Muslims continued to fast during Ramadan and avoided eating pork etc.

In parallel, to the banning of religion in public during the Bulgarian and Albanian communist regimes, the existence of diverse religious identities and practices that were held secretly or semi-secretly in private persisted. Even if they were atheist, all the respondents could identify their religious origin and could tell with certainty whether they originate from a muslim, christian catholic or orthodox family. As Juliana, an orthodox christian, explained, "Although in Albania we had no religions, I knew who was *musulman* and who was christian. But we were all friends. We had a nice time with each other in Tirana where I lived. We had no problem, no difference. There were no churches but I believed in God. But we were not fanatic". Anna, an Albanian Muslim, who later converted to Orthodox Christianity in Greece, remembered that while religious practices stopped, her family's religious identity did not wither away.

"Ever since 1967 Albania became atheist and I was 12 years old at the time. We could not say a word about those things. In school we did not learn anything. And so slowly they wained. But my parents are Muslim and my name is Aisha. Later in Greece I changed it to Anna. Perhaps in the villages they were more religious, but in Tirana it was a difficult thing to do. People were making fun of you if you said anything religious... 'Where is your mind? Where do you see it [religion]?' I could not see it, but I could feel it." (Anna, Albanian orthodox)

Occasionally in the narratives of the respondents, there are references to "communist" families, without any specification of religious origin, in particular in the Bulgarian context. Martina considered herself "lucky" because in her village there was a priest and she was baptized as a small child. Her husband who was from the same village was also baptized secretly by his grand mother. In the 1980s, however, when they decided to baptize their children, they had to do in secret.

"My father and mother in law were 100% communist. My father in law was a communist since 1921 and he even received pension from the state for his services. So we had to do it secret. When my son was one year old, my husband had to take him to the next village to baptize him with a god-mother that was not from our village. But it was not just for the parents-in-law. Because I was a professor and if they found out that I baptized my children, something bad would have happened. I do not know what, but I knew it was bad."

In general, however, private religious identities establish in the narratives of both Albanian and Bulgarian respondents continuity with the pre-communist past, which is reinvented in the post-communist period to reveal the true essence and historical continuity of their ethnic identity. "For Albanians God is one". In this re-construction, ethnic identity is founded on an almost romanticized tolerance of religious diversity, which is recalled nostalgically. As an Albanian respondent explains:

"When I was a child, before Hohza destroyed everything in 1967, I remember in Tirana a very big mosque and the church just opposite. They were very old. All came down. But before 1967, my best friend was a Christian from Koritsa. My grandmother was taking us to the church every Sunday and her grandmother to

the Mosque. But there was no problem. My mother was working in a kindergarten and she became a communist and slowly with the communist *activitat* it all wained. She kept it inside. She could not say a thing. It was a war. Propaganda. You could lose you job if you continued." (Anna, Christian orthodox)

Through these lenses, the legacy of the communist regime was not to erase religious identities but to confine them in the private space, in the family, where generations kept alive in secret the historical traditions of the past "without knowing anything about religion".

This confinement of religion in private space is gendered. Most of the stories refer to grandmothers, mothers and cousins that kept the religious traditions alive, baptising children teaching them how to pray, do the cross, cooking religious food, fasting or passing on the tradition. In an interesting twist, mothers and grandmothers, who maintain the continuity of religious faiths and ethnic identities across generations and political regimes in the private space, become in the eyes of contemporary migrant women more progressive than their male counterparts. As Valentina notes about her grandmother who baptised her in secret, they were "ahead of their time".

Migration and religion

For most Albanian and Bulgarian respondents, religion is described as a newly found object, something that they discover, rather than know. In particular for migrant women, newly found religious feelings and experiences are often an intriguing and interesting topic that they enjoy talking about in an interview or a group discussion. However, there are also many silences, especially amongst men. Albanian and Bulgarian migrants, who are unwilling to participate in the research or who prefer not to utter a single word as they sit in focus groups, communicate messages about their reservations or unwillingness to express religious identities, atheism, indifference or even contempt for religious beliefs in public. Both those who identify themselves as religious and those who identify themselves as non religious, however, accept that religion is something that they did not "know well" before migrating.

Knowledge

Lacking "knowledge" about religion is referred to as the main reason for their difficulty to express their opinion in public. Even well-educated migrant women, like Calliope from Albania or Tatiana from Bulgaria, who have studied the Bible and/or the Koran out of personal curiosity, express feelings of insecurity about their ability to talk about religious issues. This is mainly because "lacking knowledge" about religion describes how they position themselves in the context of the Greek public space as different. This difference stems from the migrant experience in the sense that they do not share the same codes, the same meanings with the host society.

Yet the presence of religious symbols, religious institutions, and places of worship and the performance of religious practices in public space is overwhelmingly treated as a positive outcome of the migration experience. It reminds migrants, even those who declared to be non-believers, of a right that has been denied to them under the communist rule. Thus, most respondents state that when they first migrated to Greece they "were curious" to learn more about religion, curious to visit a church or attend masses and rituals, to read religious books,

to observe religious practices like praying, going to confession, buying religious icons., they seem to have changed their attitude today

The first public encounters with religion, however, take place in the Orthodox Church, a place already determined by specific meanings and symbolism that newly arriving migrants do not share. As most respondents explain, this "lack of knowledge" produces a feeling of alienation from public space. Many women recall how astonished they were when they first realized that -as women- they had to **wear skirts in order to enter churches or monasteries**. Interestingly, however, it is not so much the fact that as women they had no access to the Orthodox Church unless they conformed to its rules, but the fact that they did not know the rules that made them feel as strangers. Others remember that not knowing how to light a candle, to do the cross or pray when they first arrived in Greece prevented them from even entering the churches. The fact that religious ceremonies are performed in a language that they do not master well contributes further to their feelings of alienation.

Catechism

As a result, many migrant women, who have become religious after their migration, consider the **mediation of Greek Christian women** who "teach" and "guide" them through these everyday religious practices as very beneficial and important. It is precisely by helping them to familiarize with these practices that migrant women acquire access to religion in public space. As Marina, an orthodox Christian nurse from Bulgaria explains:

"We knew nothing about religion in Bulgaria. I was not concerned about religion. When I arrived in Greece I slowly started to learn from the ladies, my employers. They took me to the Church. I asked around and I learnt. And now on Saturdays and Sundays I go to Church and I believe in it and I feel content. When I go back to Bulgaria I teach my grandson".

During the first years, learning how to light candles or improvising prayers offers comfort to some migrant women.

Only a small minority from the respondents, however, moves on to become religious in the Orthodox Church through **catechism**. Constantina, who was the most devout orthodox Christian from the entire sample, explains how learning these everyday practices helped her become truly religious. In her account "knowing" does not derive from learning but from regularly performing the same religious practices.

"It comes slowly and gradually. For me too it was difficult to understand initially because in Albania we did not know anything. But there were always religious people next to me, to guide me. Other Greek ladies and my priest. And if you read as I did the Albanian translation of the New and the Old Testament, your ear 'breaks' and you begin to understanding. And now whenever I have a problem I turn to religion. And I do not get angry, I do not shout. I pray in Albanian and in Greece. And I teach my son to do the same in order to become better than I ever was."

Constantina and her friend Kaiti have entered the local religious community developed around the Agios Nicolaos Orthodox Church in Kypseli. Constantina remembers that

when she "would have been lost" if "these religious women" that she met through the local priest were not there to assist her through her pregnancy. "I had a lucky star", she explains "I learnt Greek, I found God and managed to earn a good living". Constantina has managed to overcome her alienation and often expresses her religious faith in public. This becomes a source of pride for her. She has written several articles in the magazine of a religious organization for women and often speaks in public about all the benefits and aid she has received from the Greek Church.

Constantina's transformation into someone who can have access public space is mediated through her Greek benefactors, who act as a catalyst, at once opening up new social prospects (relations with Greek families, help in practical matters, such as doctors, information and occasional financial or other support) and providing a source of "knowledge" about religious practices. In order for Constantina to get access to public space, she must prove that she can master the predetermined meanings assigned by the Greek orthodox communities to religious practices and texts. In other words, her writings and public speeches are conditioned by her ability to become like a Greek through the patronizing influence of Greek women and it is not one of mutual recognition.

Name giving, baptism

The same guiding role is also attributed by other respondents to Greek employers, acquaintances and friends who insist on baptizing Albanian migrants. **Adopting a Greek name and/or baptism** became for many Albanian migrants a necessity when they first arrived in Greece. All of the respondents note that particularly at the beginning the pressure from Greek employers, friends and neighbors to acquire Greek names was strong. The inability to pronounce names and the questioning of origins on the part of Greeks forced most Albanians to adopt Greek names that they liked or sounded somehow like their own in order to be accepted as members of the Greek minority in Albania.

"But it is very important to say that there were many amongst us when we arrived here that were not Christian and we pretended that we were because they would not accept us otherwise. It is true. We have all lived this experience. That is why our names are Greek."

For Calliope, who -as he name suggests- is from an Albanian-Greek family but identifies herself as non religious, the pressure was not only to baptise, but also to attract other Albanian women to join the "catechism" that Greek women-employers organized every week. "I did not want to get baptized but the problem was that if you did not get into this filtering net, which is called religion it was impossible to move forward".

For many migrant women who are mothers, it is the experiences of discrimination of their children at school that force them to baptize their children. Thus, most mothers and grandmothers of both Albanian and Bulgarian origin, irrespectively of their religious beliefs, criticize religious biases and education at schools that continue despite the more liberal rules that have been imposed.³⁵ Calliope, for example,

³⁵"Religion" -but in practice Orthodox Christianity- was a mandatory class in all Greek schools till recently. Circulars distributed in 2008 by the Greek Ministry of Education stipulate that a student can be excluded from attending the class, if their parents simply sign a written statement. In practice,

remembers seeing by accident the class of her son going to attend mass in church. All the other students were walking in couples, while her son was left alone at the back because he was not baptised. "I started crying, I couldn't stop". Luda, another orthodox christian from Albania, narrates a similar story. In the opening day of classes, the school director gathered all the students and ordered them to stand in two rows: "All of you who are Christian Orthodox come near me and form a line. All of you who are not, stay opposite me". Discrimination on the basis of religion becomes an important concern for migrant mothers who seek ways to protect and disengage their children from being "singled out". They often say that it is migrant children themselves that desire to become religious by joining catechism, or going to the church in order to fit in. However, migrant women, and in particular Albanian women accommodate these pressures in ways that challenge the rules of Greek orthodox christianity but is in tune mostly with Albanian faith in one god. Mothers effectively do not pass on their own faith (Muslim or Christian) to their children but a tradition of tolerance for different faiths.

For Muslims the pressure is stronger to become Christian. Even Muslims who retained their religious identity during the communist regime had to change their names in order to be accepted when they arrived in Greece. Most of them have opted for baptizing their children in order to overcome the obstacles of social acceptance. The baptism of children from Muslim families in Greece, however, is often treated with contempt by orthodox and atheist Albanians. The following exchange from a focus group session shows how Muslim identities are re-negotiated in the face of social pressure, but also economic and social opportunity.

"Well there are many muslim women who have baptized their child and when they see me doing the cross they become aggressive. Nobody forced you to do it. They do it only for the clothes and the money. 'Mule' they say. Nobody forced you to baptize. They do it because they want to get the cross and then they go to an island and have their children baptized twice. With the richest god mothers. I prefer the woman who says that she does not want to baptize her child. It is more honest than the other who does the cross but has nothing" (Dafni, Albanian Orthodox Christian).

"This does not mean a thing. I have baptized one of my two daughters with a rich god mother in Ekali and she does not help us a bit. And the other two, I have baptized them with a poorer one and she is always there to help us. If my husband was muslim too, I would never do it. I would never baptise them." (Lilanda, Albanian Muslim)

As this exchange indicates, the decision that many migrant, in particular muslim and atheist, women take to baptize their children is not always the product of religious conversion but it is rather a social practice that allows them to forge intercultural links with Greeks not only for themselves, but also for their children. As Dafni says, from the point of view of Orthodox religious conventions, it may be considered a "deceitful" act because it is motivated by a desire for material goods. But, at the same time, the "deceit" can only be realized in the

refusal to attend seems to lead in many cases to the stigmatisation of the student. See Evie Zambeta, "Religion and national identity in Greek education", *Intercultural Education* 11, no. 2 (2000): 145-155.

context of a single dominant religion. As Lilanda explains, however, within the context of Albanian ethnic identity where "God is one", and Muslims can marry Christians, there is no deceit. It is rather the godmother who proves herself to act in a deceitful way in the sense that she refuses to "help" and "be there" for her godchild. Lilanda reverses the common sense hierarchy of religiosity in Greece and asserts herself as *more religious* than the rich orthodox godmother who simply claims for herself Christian credentials. By baptizing their children, Albanian women challenge the prevailing orthodoxy, asserting their multi-religious ethos in public religious practices of discrimination.

Marriages

Similar processes take place in **mixed marriages**. Elena was a widow from a Muslim family from Tirana, when she arrived in Greece in 1995. Her name was "Aisha" but she changed it to Elena as soon as she arrived. She remembers that both her neighbors and her employers told her that she should get baptized. She agreed to baptize her children two years later but refused to be baptized herself until the moment when she got married to a Greek man. "I wanted to believe in it before I do it". She finally decided to get baptized in order to have an orthodox wedding with a Greek man.

"It was his first marriage. And we had to get married in the municipality. And he wanted his first marriage to be in a church. And he says 'If you are not baptized, we must have a civil wedding'. And I was baptised normally" (Elena, Albanian orthodox).

As she explains this marriage solved her economic and social problems as well as the issue of the "papers", because she could finally be legal in Greece as the wife of a citizen. Although she follows her husband in orthodox religious ceremonies, she still believes that God is one and it does not matter if one is Muslim or Christian. From her two children one became a Muslim and returned to Albania and the other one remained in Greece as an orthodox "because she is now in a relationship with a Greek man".

Amongst Bulgarians, baptisms and name giving appear to be less common either because many migrants have already been baptized before arriving in Greece or because the social pressure is not as strong since Bulgarians are considered to be Orthodox Christians. However, there are Bulgarian women who have agreed to be baptized in Greece in order to marry Greek husbands. Elena and Sonia, for example, who are in their early thirties and otherwise identify themselves as atheist both explain that it was mainly their Greek husbands' families that wanted a religious wedding. Performing orthodox marriages, like baptisms, permit migrant women to conform to Greek customs, but they do not imply a religious conversion. In most cases, migrant women have to accept religious customs although they do not believe in them, while their male spouses do not force themselves to conform to Albanian or Bulgarian customs.

Miracles

The "discovery" of religion, however, takes place for most migrant women in private space. Unlike Constantina, most women who have become religious after migration "find" religion outside the church. In many cases, they describe how they have turned to religion "in difficult

times”, in deaths, illnesses, accidents, or bereavements. Even women who identify themselves as non religious engage in religious practices on such occasions. Valentina, a non religious woman from a catholic family, remembers how she went to the Greek Orthodox Church to pray for the first time after her daughter had an accident. Calliope, who originates from a Christian orthodox family but declares herself as non religious, recalls that after she escaped a car accident in Albania, she went into a mosque to thank god for saving her. Because religion is linked to specific events, conversion from a secular identity to a religious one is not linked to specific faiths. Because “god is one” it does not matter if one goes to the mosque or the church, if one knows the right prayers or the correct way to dress and address God.

What is more important is an esoteric search for the sacred, which reveals itself in a material form in everyday life. For this reason, **miracles** play a very important role in the discovery of religion especially amongst Albanian migrant women:

“I am from Tirana and I was not like that. But when I arrived here I had an accident and ever since I have become more religious. When I have a problem I go to the church. I was diagnosed mistakenly and I went to the church. They told me that I was going to die. I was afraid. But then it proved to be a mistake. I go to the church wherever I work. I don't care who the saint is. Wherever”.
(Elvira, orthodox christian)

Religious belief in this case does not stem from the repetition of religious practices, but mostly from the fact that there is “real proof” that God really exists. And because that proof is abstract, it cannot be localized neither in spatial terms nor in religious terms. “Wherever” Elvira says, implying at the same time an undetermined geographical location and an undetermined religious faith.

Several stories of miracles are narrated during the focus group sessions. Three women explain how individuals have been cured by Saint Antonios, the miracle saint of their native village of Laci.

“First there was this boy, my nephew who could not sleep, could not eat. He became a skeleton. And they took him to the place where the church stood, but the police was there and they would not let them climb the hill. So the boy slept in Sophia's house and the next day he was cured”. (Lilanda, Albanian Muslim)

“In 1997 a group of men stole money from the church. They took everything and went to a bar in a nearby town to count the money and split the earnings amongst themselves. A man with a bomb went into the bar. The bomb went off and the whole place exploded. They all died.” (Sophia, Albanian Catholic)

“My friend was a cripple. They tried to do a spell on him but nothing changed. We grew up together. We lived next door. So my mother told his mother to spend three Tuesdays at the church of Saint Antonios and he was cured. Science could not do anything to save him.” (Delia, Albanian orthodox)

These stories are treated by the migrant women who narrate them as real evidence for the existence of God, and, at the same time, they prove for them the oneness of God which should make the distinction among Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox Christians artificial.

Gender and every day religious practices

In Greek religious communities, hierarchies of gender, nation and class assign to migrant women inferior positions. More specifically intersections of gender, nation and class impose two interconnected positions for migrant women: either that of the apprentice of Greek religious practices (catechism) or that of the beneficiary of Greek religious charity and benevolence (baptism, marriage). In many cases, these positions are imposed by Greek women on migrant women who act as spiritual mentors or god mothers. In other cases, it is the men of the Church (priests) who assert their authority over the women of their congregation. Although religion is defined as a “woman's issue”, there are no examples of women, who have acquired positions of leadership in religious communities or of forms of emancipation that emanate from migrant women's engagement with religion in public.

In migrant ethnic communities too, religion is considered to be primarily a “woman's” issue. This gendering may be linked to the memories of past lives in the country of origin, where religious practices were attached to private space, and in particular to the family. Contemporary Albanian women, who are in most cases married, often acquire a similar role, pushing their male counterparts towards new forms of religiosity. Amongst Albanians there is an overall perception, thus, that women are more religious in the sense that they are more capable of opening up and learning about religious practices. As an Albanian orthodox male respondent who is employed in a cemetery exclaimed: “my wife always goes to church and wants to drag me and my son along. I say to her, I am with priests all day long, I have enough of it”. This pattern is reversed in the case of Bulgarians, where independent migration is more common. As it is indicated in the example of the director of the choir who refused to let some women to come alone to the focus group discussions, religion is often used to reinforce gender hierarchies. This incident shows that Bulgarian male migrants are the ones who commonly assume positions of leadership in the religious groups within the migrant community. In both Albanian and Bulgarian communities, the private public dichotomy corresponds also to distinct gender roles.

The association of religious identity with femininity and the private space is also manifest in the choices religious women make with regards to their clothing and dressing code. All of the women who participated in the focus group discussions and those who gave us interviews were against the wearing of the hijab in public. During one focus group discussion, Martha, an atheist, exclaimed that “it is humiliating for a woman to hide herself behind the veil”, while the others, amongst which there was a Muslim Albanian woman, agreed. Wearing Islamic religious clothing was also associated in a different discussion by a group of Bulgarian women with what they considered as “inferior cultures” that are prone to “fundamentalism”. Wearing the hijab was seen by most migrant women as a sign of an underdeveloped society and there

were no respondents who discussed it as a religious duty or a personal choice that a woman might wish to make. In an interview with an Albanian woman from a Muslim family who identified herself as Christian Orthodox, when the issue of the hijab was raised, she responded by saying that “In Albania, wearing the veil is something that only women from the villages did. Women from the city are more progressive”.

Although in the Greek law, there are no formal restrictions against wearing religious clothing in public –as is the case in other European countries- wearing the hijab is not a very popular practice. With the exception of Western Thrace, wearing the hijab is still considered as a “strange” and uncivilized practice. In this context, it is more likely that even migrant women who would like to wear the hijab in public would be reluctant to do so. In particular in Athens, the limited visibility of Islamic spaces of worship makes the choice to wear clothing linked to Islamic religious identities even more difficult to make. However, in the discourse of Albanian and Bulgarian women, what dictated their negative attitudes towards women wearing the hijab was also their perception of Islamic clothing as a sign of “backwardness”, provincialism or conservatism.

On the contrary, wearing the Christian cross was considered by most women as an acceptable practice –even two of the participants in a focus group who declared themselves as atheist said that they liked wearing the cross and had no problem to do so in public. As Dalia, a Bulgarian, said, “we see the cross as a fashion item, rather than as a religious symbol. We like it. Big or small”. The question of the cross was also brought to the forefront in relation to the baptisms of young children, where it was obvious that irrespectively of religious identity, most women and men appreciated it as a valuable asset. The cross was for the parents valued as an expensive “gift” and as a sign of the commitment of the godfathers and godmothers to assist the whole family economically and socially. In parallel, the cross was perceived as a symbol binding the child (and the parents) with the Greek ethno-religious community. Wearing the cross to their children meant for most women “dressing them well”. None of the respondents-male or female- expressed negative views about people of different nationalities who wore the cross. Nor were they ashamed of wearing it in public or when being amongst fellow migrants.

Religious dressing codes seem thus to be dictated by the prevailing ethno-religious trends that make public expressions of Christianity dominant in the everyday life of Athens, while Islamic expressions are still considered inappropriate for the public space. In that sense, there is continuity but also a break with the communist past. In the narratives of both Albanian and Bulgarian men and women there is also a persistent ethical issue that cuts across religious and secular identities. More specifically many Albanian and Bulgarian respondents expressed the opinion that religion –in general- is about an honest and proper way of living, which necessarily includes respectful and clean clothing. This was a common thread that united their communist past with their present religious or atheist identities. Irrespectively of religious faith, the rejection of hyperbolic or overtly sexualized clothing for women

was considered as one of the positive aspects of religion even by those who declared themselves as atheist. In this context, many criticized the insistence of some Greek churches and monasteries to prohibit women entering religious sites wearing trousers, but accepted the same rules that prohibited women wearing short skirts or shorts. In other words, “proper” clothing was conceived by both Albanian and Bulgarian women as a practice of covering up certain parts of women’s bodies (legs, breasts, bellies), which should be “hidden in all religions”, as Valentina put it, but not covering up other parts of the body (the arms, the head, the face or the hair), which were mostly considered as being the subject of more backwards cultural prohibitions linked to Islamic and in some cases even Christian fundamentalism.

Incorporation/in local religious contexts

There is only a very small minority amongst the respondents that frequents religious sites regularly and even fewer who have intercultural contacts in the religious sites that they visit. Most female respondents express an idea of religion as an esoteric process, realized through “good” and “honest ways of living rather than through going to church and attending religious ceremonies. Since for them discovering religion is linked to specific events, visiting the religious sites is an irregular, infrequent practice. When visits are more frequent this is caused by social rather than religious requirements and does not follow religious faith.

In this context, it is particularly interesting to examine the case of a Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Greece. Since 2005, a Bulgarian Orthodox priest started to perform mass in Bulgarian at an Orthodox church at the centre of Athens. Due to the practical difficulties emanating from the cohabitation with the local Greek Orthodox community (availability of the space of the Church for performing masses and other rituals) a new place of worship was sought. An abandoned derelict church at the western part of Athens (Agioi Anargiroi) was located and through the help of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian embassy and the local municipality, the church was assigned to the Bulgarian community and it was renovated to serve their needs. This church is being used in the past year by the Bulgarian priest and the Bulgarian Orthodox community. A mass in Bulgarian is performed every Sunday and during religious holidays, while two religious fairs take place on a yearly basis to celebrate St. John of Rila, the most important Bulgarian saint.

This Bulgarian church has become, according to the priest in charge, a space of intercultural interaction. On the one hand, the church has been consciously allocated by the official Greek Orthodox church– and the Bulgarian priest boasted his ties to the current Archbishop who, as he said, asks him frequently about the progress of his spiritual work and has promised to visit the Bulgarian church. On the other hand, ethnic Greeks attend regularly the church along with the Bulgarian migrants -mainly inhabitants of the neighborhood– and the priest explained that he reads some passages from the Bible in Greek, so that they too can follow. He also explained that he was asked by some of these Greek families if he could perform a couple of religious sacraments for them. Although he referred them to the Greek priest in the neighboring church, they refused and still wanted him to perform the mysteries – the sacraments were held in Greek.

What is interesting though is that despite the fact that inequalities of nation are being reversed, gender hierarchies are being reinforced. During the interview, the priest recognised the sensitivity of his spiritual and communal role because he was called upon to guide a community, which is composed mainly of female migrant believers. As he stated, his role is enlarged since he accepts frequent requests on the part of Bulgarian migrants to help them find employment or housing. On the spiritual dimension, he also complains that his role is difficult, since he has found that his congregation is almost completely unaware of religious dogma; he explicitly compared his spiritual work to that of "providing catechism to small children".

The fact that his congregation is composed mainly of "ladies" or females was treated as a trivial aspect of his job.

"Women are usually the ones who hold a family together. They usually feel the most urgent need to pray for their children or to pray when the family is in trouble. Men are different...They are tougher. But when a man finds God he will almost never leave his hand....Whereas women are not so persistent...They come and go to the church with more ease".

He, more than once, complained that Bulgarians were ignorant of religious matters and mentioned several examples of women who were trying to behave as if they were religious but in reality they were not: a migrant woman married to a rich Greek husband who tried to buy a position in the administration of the church or a woman who asked for communion although she was smoking outside the church during mass. In all such cases, he refuses to give his assistance. It is also striking that he commented -without being explicitly asked- on an incident that received special attention in the Greek media that of the rape of a Bulgarian female student by classmates inside a Greek state school. Although her mother had apparently asked him to help her daughter recover after the incident, he decided not to do so because "there was probably no rape involved because as he found out the girl had lied about being a virgin before the incident and when confronted by the police doctor, she argued that her hymen had probably broken when she was bathing".

Engagement in religious contexts

Although migration has played a primary role in their relation with religious traditions, the overwhelming tendency among respondents is to be reluctant on supporting the thick presence of religious political cultures the Greek public space. While, most respondents and especially those who are religious are content to enjoy in Greece the freedom of practicing religion freely in public, they highlight in detail public manifestations of certain religious practices that make them feel uncomfortable.

This is clearly illustrated in the distinction between what some respondents termed as a "loose" in contrast to a "fanatic attachment" to religious faith. Apart for a scattered reference to "women who close themselves inside monasteries", the category of "fanatics" was almost exclusively associated with Muslim believers; Albanian and Bulgarian migrants seem in many respects to reproduce the mainstream Greek discourse of the exceptionality of Islam. On the hand, when we referred to the Mosque controversy in Athens, the vast majority of respondents, including those who identified themselves as Muslim or non-believers, were in principle in favour of the building of the mosque. "We should respect all other religions".

“They, too, need to have their own place for practicing their religion”. The building of the mosque is legitimized on the basis of their ethical commitment to religious tolerance as a diachronic feature of Albanian and Bulgarian nationalisms.

Simultaneously, however, when specific practices of making Islam public were mentioned, they were condemned as being undemocratic, aesthetically frustrating, or showing contempt to the rights of women, respondents showed their aversion or even fear to the public display Islamic religiosity. Valentina narrates a story of being woken up every morning by the “yelling of the imam” of the nearby mosque in her house in Albania and exclaims “I hope the same thing won't happen if they get the mosque here”. Valentina tells another personal story that fits into the process of racialisation of Muslim migrants:

“It was late at night and I was with my son in the balcony of our house. We saw two Muslims praying in an open space, a playground, opposite our house. It was raining heavily. The one was naked from the waist up. My son said, 'look mom, Pakistanis’”.

Sonia, who works as a journalist in Greece describes one of the first images that shocked her when she migrated to Greece. She was at that time working for the radio and went to report a story at the port of Piraeus. She met there a 20 year old Albanian girl who was wearing the veil.

“When I saw the veil I was shocked. She spoke to me in Albanian...I couldn't believe she was Albanian. I asked her where she comes from and she answered that she and her husband were Muslims from the Northern part of Albania who have recently migrated in Greece”.

When opinions about the negative aspects of the public display of Muslim identities are expressed in focus group discussions, Muslim migrants keep silent or agree. When asked if they were offended, they reply that such public expressions of Islamic religiosity are not part of how they see Islam. Religious and ethnic identity was for both Albanian and Bulgarian migrants a factor that clearly distinguished them from other Muslim migrants. “We are not fanatics with religion like Pakistani, Muslims”, said Ariana. An Albanian Muslim.

When the discussion turns to Orthodox Christianity and its public presence in Greece, the views of Albanian and Bulgarian migrants are very diverse, but still express overall some uneasiness and cynicism. On the question of the Orthodox Church's social work some respondents mention that they have heard about certain churches that offered assistance but never asked for help. Eda, a non religious Albanian recounts a story she had heard about on television about “a good priest who opened his church to homeless migrants so that they could sleep inside. He said 'this is the house of God, and its doors are open to everyone’”. To this narration, other migrant women in the focus group beckon approvingly. Anna, an orthodox Christian, remembers that one of the first days when she first arrived in Argos, a rural town of Greece, she heard a knock on her door: «We learnt that you are from Northern Epirus. What are your needs? How can we help you? We are from the Church”, a Greek lady replied. Although Anna replied that they did not need anything, the Church brought them food, blankets, clothing and found a new house and furniture for them. As this case indicates, the welfare of the church was significant in particular areas where the local priests took the initiative to motivate their congregation. Migrants from Northern Epirus like Anna

received a more favourable treatment because they were part of the "Greek minority of Southern Albania".

Contrary to this description, most respondents state explicitly that they have never benefited from the welfare of the Church, although some had heard stories about other migrants that have, but mostly in remote rural areas of Greece. Although previous research has shown that the church's welfare provision is relatively significant for Greek welfare standards and the Orthodox Church takes pride in it, our respondents did in no way understand these efforts as a vital contribution to the public good.³⁶ Instead, the references to the church's welfare role often bring to their mind negative cases where priests have embezzled funds or have refused to provide help to migrants. Many domestic workers refer their negative impression of religious employers. Valentina, who has worked in the house of a Greek priest as a cleaner remembers how he attempted to trick her into cutting money from her salary. Instead of guiding them by their "honest behaviour" these experiences force them to forge a very bad opinion about the Greek religious establishment.

"I do not have a good opinion of priests. I was working for a priest and he had a big house and five children. And once he told me to go to the basement where he had a cellar. He called me because his wife wanted something from there. It was amazing what I saw in there. Oil, food. He was rich. And we had an agreement for 12.000 drachmas for 6 hours with his wife. He gave me the money in notes but they were folded. I took them and when I opened them I realized that they were much less. He thought that I was going to kiss his hand. He knew I was Muslim , but this was not his problem."

Albanian women of other faiths express mistrust for the church too.

"What I have observed is that the worse people go to the church here in Greece. For example there was this lady and she had a black heart and I was asking myself why she goes to the church. And then when you had to work for her she was the worse person. She took your soul. And we were saying that she goes to church in order to get God's forgiveness. I had three women employers who were like that. Their souls were black." (Elinda, Albanian Catholic)

Even Bulgarian respondents, who expressed their initial enthusiasm for public manifestations of religion, when they first arrived in Greece, tend to highlight their negative aspects either in relation to their personal experience or to the way they approach religious matters. Stefka from Bulgaria mentions that she is always astounded by the fact that believers cross themselves when they pass by a church – In her opinion it is "hypocritical". Several Bulgarian women note that the custom of "giving money to the Church" for baptisms and marriages is

³⁶See the report Fokas, "WaVE case study report – Greece: Thiva case studyreport" on the welfare provisions of the Church targeting migrants in the city of Thiva. The Church takes pride in the solidarity it offers to migrants, which comprises of offering shelter to people in need in a special guest house it has built, of providing daily food rations in specific areas – some with large migrant concentration, in operating schools that offer Greek language courses for migrants, donating clothing, appliances and other material goods. See <http://www.solidarity.gr/> for the various welfare activities of the Church. It is also characteristic that the Greek primeminister invited the Greek Archbishop during the open ministerial cabinet when the new citizenship law was officially announced. The Archbishop stressed again in this occasion the role of the Church as a welfare provider for migrants.

"not religious". Priests and other religious clerics benefit from these donations without offering back spiritual guidance.

Intercultural-interreligious interactions: Hybrid religiosities/ Hybrid practices

For Albanian women, forms of hybrid religiosity are being forged challenging the established orthodoxy of the Greek Church. Lilanda's example is telling: a Muslim woman who is married to a Christian catholic Albanian. She has never been baptized despite pressures from her husband's family and her Greek employers because she "promised her father that she would never change her faith". In Greece, she goes to the church every week. When she returns to Albania she visits mainly the Catholic miracle church of Saint Antonius. Since her three children are baptized as Greek orthodox, she also goes to the church on Christmas and Easter. One of her daughters has become an atheist. Yet during a focus group discussion she is the one who admits that she goes to the church more often. Her weekly visits to the church are with her Greek employers, who ask her to accompany the child she is baby sitting. Whenever she goes to the church, she prays and lights candles, but she refuses to accept communion. Although the family knows that she is muslim, they want her to go with them to the church. She enjoys going to the church because she believes that god is one, as her mother did before her. But she also enjoys the fact that the Greek family respects her for what she is and do not push her to take communion.

Lilanda's Muslim encounters with Christianity determine her everyday life in ways that surpass and destabilize inequalities of gender, nation and class. When she goes to the Greek orthodox church as a Muslim woman, she manages to renegotiate her own identity, vis-à-vis her Greek wealthy employers - "who come to respect her and accept her for what she is"- but also vis-à-vis the Albanian friends and family who might accuse her of "hypocrisy" and "deceit". This practice reproblematises the assumption that Greek orthodox churches are ethnically homogeneous spaces where the same language, attitude and religious faith are practiced. Although Lilanda's religiosity is not visible, because she denies wearing clothes that have a Muslim or a Christian symbolism, it is provocative and daring.

For many women, however, these hybrid religiosities are impossible in the context of Greek public space. Hybrid religious practices become possible only in a transnational context. The miracle church of St Antonios provides a vivid example. Three women from the same family (one orthodox, one catholic and one muslim) talk about their faith in the miracle church of Saint Antonios in Albania during a discussion. During the communist regime, the actual building of the church was demolished. Each year, when the day of the saint's celebration was approaching, on the 13th of July, "the entire Albanian police force was gathering on the hill" to prevent people from celebrating this religious event. Sophia, whose house is located on the road that leads to the top of the hill where the church was located, remembers that on this day many people of all faiths would spend the night in the open air on the hill in search of a miracle. Ever since the church was rebuilt, she explains with pride, "Muslims, Orthodox and atheists, they all visit the Church asking for a miracle". Several stories of miracles are narrated during the session. While Sophia and Delia refuse to go the Greek Orthodox Church, they all regularly make phone calls to their relatives back in Albania to light candles to the miracle church of Saint Antonios church. This transnational practice implies, as in the case of baptism, mistrust for Greek religious communities, but also a nostalgic attachment to the religious tolerance of their memories. Hybrid religiosities as they are

practice in a transnational fashion, on the contrary, provide the context for esoteric searches that challenge the meanings attached to religion in Greek society.

Potential impact of the research

Religion is an understudied concept in the academic literature on migration in Greece. There are indications stemming from the growing concern with Muslim migrants in the dominant Greek public discourse that research on religion and migration will start to blossom, but that it will primarily focus on Islam. This study cautions against this seclusive approach, it challenges the notion of the exceptionality of Islam. In this respect, this work might be useful in showing a way forward and as background material to those researchers who will strive to approach the dynamics among religion, migration, and gender in Greece without silencing the multidimensionality and diversity of religions. Encompassing solely the Albanian and Bulgarian migrant communities and selecting a relatively small sample of interviewees who live only in Athens makes this study narrow in scope. In spite of its limitations, however, this research urges that we take religious identities seriously in our thinking about migration policies. In the Greek context, political collective actors involved in the struggle over the design of migration policies – the state, political parties, civil society organizations, the church, anti-racist organizations – tend to treat religion, if at all, through a black or white approach, as either an antithetical force to their political vision or as a value to be recognised and that should occupy its rightful place in the public sphere as it is. Our research intends to problematise this type of mono-dimensionality. From the starting point that religions are also what migrants make of them, religions should embody for political actors involved in migration policies forces not to be ignored, but also forces not to be thrown in pre-fixed conceptual and political categories.

Conclusion: The re-invention of religion

This study has highlighted a series of openings and closures. Openings and closures that relate to the possibilities of intercultural interaction in the Greek context and the challenging of established gender roles. Religion, or better religions, has been the lens through which these dynamics were analysed. We researched and discussed religion through the narratives of migrant Albanian and Bulgarian women (and men) that live in Greece. We chose not to theorise about a pre-given concept of religion, but to treat religion as fluid and contested conceptual milieus, seeking the multiple meanings that migrants bestow on religious beliefs and practices.

Respecting their own meanings rather than trying to interpret how migrants make sense of religious beliefs and practices, opens up alternative possibilities for understanding the dynamics between gender, migration, and religion. The closures and openings relate to a great extent to the contestation of meanings about what religion is or should be. In this respect, the experiences and discourses of the migrants under study are primary. Moving

from a secular communist country to Greece, a state where religion has an entrenched role in the public sphere is critical to their understanding and practice of religion. In many ways, their meanings do not conform to established Greek views. This non-abidance results to pressures to assimilate in the existing Greek Orthodox community and, in some cases, to practices of resistance against these pressures.

In a way, Albanian and Bulgarian migrants found religion through their migration to Greece and are inclined to discover it, or better to re-invent it from scratch. This attempt of re-reading religion, of re-interpreting the practices and traditions of the Greek Orthodox community they encounter has a radical potential. It serves, for one thing, as a critique towards existing religious norms. Migrants do not “know” the established processes of approaching, performing, and understanding religion. They are invited to “learn”, or more accurately to be “taught” by members of the Greek Orthodox community. Some do learn, but many do not conform, not just yet. Predominantly, migrants are not guided in the ways they approach religion by what Slavoj Žižek terms “cynical reason”.³⁷ Cynical reason has to do, in this case, with the growing detachment of the Greek community of believers from belief itself; believers who do not believe too much, who have doubts or who outwardly not buy into religious doxa, but who nevertheless perform religion as if it was based on an ultimate truth. Cynical reason is embodied in the performativities of Greek Orthodox Christians who do not believe in the transcendental grounding of religious practices, but they are still doing them. They still take part in religious rituals, pray, marry in Church, baptise their children, receive communion, and at the same time declare they do not take them too seriously; they know that the Bible is not accurate about many things like in its narration of the beginnings of human species, but still find some good ethical guidance in it, they know that St. Paul may not have really seen Christ on the road to Damascus, but still think that it tells a good story of his conversion to Christianity.

Albanian and Bulgarian migrants' re-invention of religion is constituted, on the contrary, through a more traditional approach to faith. Migrants, at least some of them but not necessarily those who declare they are believers, show an obstinate fascination with religion's otherworldliness. Those who become interested to read the Bible or the Koran in order to see what Christianity or Islam is all about, do so with reverence, as if the Holy texts were really as if these texts conceal and might reveal to them a path to transcendental truth. Those migrants who narrate instances about the performance of miracles, but even those who listen to their stories, do so with a passionate attachment to the inner truth that these miracles reveal, as if miracles embody a real suspension of the workings of the visible, material world and open up a trajectory for understanding the divine. We could say that religious migrants from former communist societies tend to take religion to the letter, that they have a devout faith in religion's transcendental truth, even if they are non-believers.

Not all migrants perform this type of re-inventing of religion of course. Our research has shown that the dividing lines between those who do and those who don't, reflect – and sometimes too closely- gender lines. Narrations that illustrate the will to rethink about religion from anew are performed mainly by women. Men, especially Albanian men, are either inclined to try to throw back religion to the mundane, refusing to talk publicly about religion as if it were an unimportant public affair, stating that this a feminine domain. Or other men, especially Bulgarian men, view women's' attachment to religious faith as threatening and

³⁷Žižek actually borrows the term “cynical reason” from Peter Sloterdijk. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 28-30

push for their assimilation to established religious communities. Claiming that migrant women do not know anything or do not know enough about religion, they tend to silence the meanings women give to the notion of religion and are willing to teach them how things should be really done, how religion should be performed correctly. Gender, in all these types of strategies, is central; a masculine reaction that aims to stop or to outstrip the feminine gesture of re-inventing religion from its significance.

Intercultural interaction in the Greek religious sphere rests then not upon the possibilities of integration of migrants or of the recognition of their cultural difference. It lies, instead, in answering their radical gesture of putting the very concept of religion into question, of challenging the ways through which religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with the dominant modes of life in the contemporary Greek society.

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