Secularisation in Cyprus: An Oral History Examination

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This paper concerns the religiosity of the Greek-Cypriot population. With the main secularisation narrative focusing largely on Western nations, this paper seeks to unveil the relationship between modernity, religious and national identity, and the history of the Orthodox-Christian Church of Cyprus, in order to shed new light into the realities of one of the most religious countries in Europe. It also seeks to establish that the Republic of Cyprus is undergoing a secularising phase in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The method of oral history analysis is employed to reveal the changing perceptions and cultural narratives on religion and the Church found within the Cypriot society.

Secularisation is broadly defined as the process by which religion increasingly loses its grip on people's lives with the coming of modernity. In the secularisation narrative, the Eastern Orthodox countries are believed to be more religious than Western Protestant and Catholic countries, and resistant to the secularising influence of modernity, largely because of the close connection between religion and national identity (Martin, 1978, p. 204). This study will place Cyprus into the secularisation narrative by affirming that national identity is pivotal to the enduring influence of religion in the island, but at the same time show how modernity has a rotting effect to its religious practices and values, especially of the younger generation. The evolution of modern Cypriot history and the Church's position created a collective identity, and although it has become somewhat limited, it still plays a very significant role in the social, political and economic life of the country (Vryonides, 2014). José

Casanova rightly points out that it is the historic relations between Church, State, nation, and society that need to be taken into consideration, and the focus should not only be on the levels of modernisation (Casanova, 2009, p. 214). One of the reasons the oral history method is employed in this research is because there are people still alive who have witnessed the coming of modernity to the Cyprus (some aspects being industrialisation, better transportation infrastructure, and access to higher education), in contrast with the United Kingdom, for instance, which started to modernise during the 19th century. Oral history also helps to create a wider and more nuanced understanding of the interplay between society and religion in 20th and 21st century Cyprus. For the purpose of this article, pseudonyms are being used to protect the interviewees' identity.

Looking at the statistics of the religious affiliation of Greek-Cypriots, the assumption that Cyprus is a religious country is not difficult to make. Out of a population of 667,398 Cypriot citizens, 650,215 belong to the Orthodox Christian Church (Statistical Service, 2014). Article II of the Republic of Cyprus' Constitution reads 'the Greek Community comprises all citizens of the Republic who are of Greek origin and whose mother tongue is Greek or who share the Greek cultural traditions or who are members of the Greek-Orthodox Church' (Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, 1960). Therefore, the Greek Cypriots are made to believe that Hellenism and Orthodoxy are intertwined and form part of their national identity (Hadjipavlou, 2007, p. 354). The Republic of Cyprus also held the highest percentage of people who agree that 'The place of religion in our society is too important' with 81% – almost double the European average (46%) (Eurobarometer, Autumn 2006, p. 40). The most religious countries after Cyprus were Greece (81%), Portugal (81%), Italy (74%), and Ireland (73%) and the authors of the report concluded that 'These are all countries where the Church as an institution has, historically, always been present and strong' and that is why the percentages are relatively high (Special Eurobarometer, 2005). However, one of my older interviewees, Marios (75) commented that the Greek Cypriots do not go to church as frequently as the Catholics and that 'We are not a religious people to the extent that the Church says we are' (Interviewee,

28/08/2015). At the turn of the century, 96% of the Greek-Cypriot respondents declared that they believe in God while, at the same time, only 8% said they attend church regularly and quite a high proportion said they never do (15%) (Greele, 2003, pp. 70-1) Therefore, the case of Cyprus is consistent with other Orthodox countries in Europe, where religious affiliation and belief in God are the highest in Europe and yet attendance is lower than the other major Christian denominations (Casanova, 2009, p. 208).

The Use of Oral History:

In this study, 10 people, 5 men and 5 women, were interviewed from three different generations: four between the ages of 20-25, three between 35-50, and three between 70-85. This method was chosen, not to extract factual information from the interviewees, but to trace the collective memory of people in the island with regards to religion; as Callum Brown has argued, 'Secularisation cannot happen until discursive Christianity lost its power' (Brown, 2009, p. 175). As Victor Roudometof has argued, 'the production and reproduction of collective memory [is] managed and maintained by the clergy, theologians and academics, propagated through official speeches, commemorative acts and other media and then duplicated through school curriculum and holidays' (Roudometof, 2010, p. 29). My interviewees seemed aware of this; Antonis (38), a religious army officer, said that 'Cyprus is the island of saints. It is in the Cypriot's DNA to be religious' (Interviewee, 02/09/2015), while Artemis (21), a lapsed Orthodox-Christian, has affirmed that '… we are all very homogenous, you know, we are Greek-Cypriots, we all have the same religion, we all live on the same island. We are very much unified over that' (Interviewee, 08/08/2015). The study of oral history also serves to shift the focus from the big institutions, such as the Church and the State, and bring the history of religion in Cyprus into, and out of, the community and make it more 'democratic' (Thompson, 1998, p. 26). It gives voice to the people muted behind a percentage since even the team responsible for the World Values Survey in Cyprus commented: 'The response of residents was quite enthusiastic with many individuals wanting to continue talking with the survey team members as no one had ever asked them detailed questions on diverse aspects of

their lives' (Yesilada, et al., 2010, p. 155). Oral history will, ultimately, facilitate a more nuanced narrative of the religious history of the Greek-Cypriot community.

The Church of Cyprus:

The first area to examine is the history of the Church of Cyprus since it is vital to understand its significance in the political, economic and social life of the Greek-Cypriot society. The Church of Cyprus is one of the oldest Orthodox-Christian Churches and was founded by St Barnabas the Apostle in the 1st century AD. Under Ottoman rule (1571-1878), the Archbishop became the representative of every Orthodox Christian on the island and was given the title of Ethnarch (the leader of the nation). These administrative powers, according to Archbishop Makarios III's biographer P. N. Vanezis, 'made the Orthodox churches political entities' and the Archbishop the *de jure* leader of the Greek-Cypriot community (Vanezis, 1971, p. 49). The role of the Ethnarch had been passed down to Makarios III and so it was the Greek-Orthodox Church who took leadership for the struggle for *enosis* (union) with Greece against the British Empire (1955-1959). After settling the independence of the island, the Archbishop was elected president of the newly founded Republic of Cyprus in 1960. The governments of the West were very critical of a person of the clergy also holding the highest position in a secular state. Vanezis asserted that, even though 'The whole history of Western Europe has been one of increasing separation between Church and State', 'Only people totally ignorant of history in its wider sense fail to understand that the East is not the West and must obey its own harmonic laws' (Vanezis, 1971, pp. 15, 49). The conflict between the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot communities, which ultimately led to the 1974 division of the island, was one of the reasons that religion remained strong among the Greek-Cypriots, according to sociologist David Martin (Martin, 1978, p. 53). The Church's interference in politics, therefore, comes as no surprise given its long history of representing its faithful. However, the World Values Survey showed that in 2010 72% of the Greek Cypriots agreed on limiting religious leaders' influence in politics (Yesilada, et al., 2010, p. 163). This illustrates a significant decrease in willingness to accept the political

influence of religious leaders compared with 1968, where Makarios secured his second presidency with 96% of the votes.

Figure 1 Caricature of the Archbishop, Caption Reads: 'Cyprus'. (Unkown source, 2016)

The new Archbishop Chrysostomos II had been discussed extensively by a number of this research's interviewees. A scandal erupted in the summer of 2015, where he had ordered a pool to be built on top of the Archbishopric building, and this had created a new dialogue concerning the economic power of the Church. The outrage was caricatured in the social media and the image at Figure 1 is taken from a fake Facebook event, where people would supposedly have a pool party for charity at the Archbishopric; the event was 'attended' by 5,400 people and this shows the extent of the impact the incident had on, especially, the younger people (Event created by Ηλίας Μαυροκέφαλος, 2015). Clio (23), a 'spiritual humanist', when asked what is her opinion of the authority of the Church, said: 'It's too powerful. It doesn't – I don't see its positive way, its positive touch anymore because, like, when I hear that that priest has a swimming pool on the top of their building, or I see them driving in fast, big cars

and, like, why?' (Interviewee, 13/08/2015). Stella (51), a former history teacher, understood how the youth would react against the Church since 'the more it gets involved in the economy, and it loses its spirituality completely, I feel it also loses its influence among people' (Interviewee 24/08/2015). Antonis suggested that we cannot judge the whole of the Church based on the actions of an individual, because Churchmen are humans too and they are liable to 'passions' (Interviewee, 02/09/2015). These scandals, according to him, are happening because 'a large number of people are concerned with - unfortunately - not with the spiritual but with the secular' (Interviewee, 02/09/2015). Therefore, even if Cyprus is labelled one of the most religious countries in Europe, there is a very open and large criticism against the Archbishop, and many people, according to some of my interviewees, are repelled from the Church.

Society and Culture in Cyprus:

Has society, then, become secular? Historian Hugh McLeod defines a secular society as 'one in which religious language or practices or institutions, rather than being part of the taken-for-granted daily reality, which everyone is obliged to accept and come to terms with, whatever their personal belief or non-belief, become an option among several, a result of conscious individual choice' (McLeod, 2000, p. 14). If we were to look at the life of the island 40 years ago, we could hardly suggest that the Cypriot society was a secular one. Stella recounts that all aspects of life were dictated by religion when she was growing up:

> … [On] the Crucifixion day, for example, all restaurants, all coffee shops, everything was shut at night, and there was no Television. There was only, you know, classical music on radio, so it was part of the society you were growing in (Interviewee, 24/08/2015).

Cyprus in the 21st century, however, is at a transitional state. None of the interviewees in this research suggested that the religious life of the island has remained the same. Nicos (22) describes that he and a lot of his friends have strong doubts about the existence of any god, because 'we are in a transition – our generation – where people can be more free about their religious beliefs … we do not

feel that we have to be religious like our grandparents were' (Interviewee, 10/08/2015). Artemis says that 'Globalisation, Internet, all these things, they brought information to the island, you know, they shaked it [*sic*], in a sense. And society is reforming, society is changing … ' (Interviewee, 08/08/2015). Stelios (22), says that 'Yes, unfortunately, I believe that society is getting worse. It's getting worse: it's moving away from God. … Maybe in your eyes we are progressive, we are cool, it's better this way' (Interviewee, 11/08/2015). Here are three young people of approximately the same age and, even though each feels differently about the transition to a more secular society, they all perceive that the change is happening.

It is important to recognise that religion has lost its monopoly in the social life of its faithful, especially the younger generation. As Stella put it, it is not 'part of their lifestyle' to go to church, while in the past, people were not going out, so they would wake up to go to church and, thus, the church had become part of their 'social life' (Interviewee, 24/08/2015). Stephanos (50) suggested that, in the past, church-going 'was part of the programme; that's how it was. [People] would work the whole week, on Sunday they had to get up to go to church and take their children with them, from the youngest to the oldest' (Interviewee, 09/09/2015). Antonis believed that 'our youth, and Cypriots in general, are not close to the Church because of the evolution of society which creates more distractions, more passions, and we tended to seek our own interests more …' (Interviewee, 02/09/2015). Stelios believed that people now like to indulge and do not want to put some effort in fasting or prayer because, with modernity, they find everything they might need quite easily; '… food whenever I want it, any time I want it, with any woman I want… who cares', he said, describing his generation's mentality (Interviewee, 11/08/2015). This is consistent with Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce's assertion that technology reduces people's uncertainty about securing their primary needs, and, therefore, reduces their reliance upon faith (Wallis & Bruce , 1992, p. 14). However, even though fewer younger people attend Church, there is still high religious affiliation to the Greek-Orthodox Church because 'Cypriot society is very conservative' and religion is part of their tradition and of their national identity, as Stella suggested (Interviewee, 24/08/2015).

Figure 2: Statistics of 'Cyprus Atheist' official Facebook page (Email: Petros Attas to [Author], 22/12/2015)

Western nations, such as Britain, have a much longer tradition of atheist societies, some of them – such as the National Secular Society – even dating back to the 19th century. Organised non-belief is a very recent process in Cypriot history. In an email exchange with Petros Attas, representative of the Cyprus Atheist organisation, he wrote, 'People are still reluctant to come out as atheists. We aim to change that but it takes time and effort' (Email: Petros Attas to [Author], 22/12/2015). The respondents to this research were also aware of the difficulties of being a non-believer. Stella said that society expects people to be religious and that it comes as a shock to many when she would not follow religious norms:

> ... in the beginning, if I would say in my class that I'm not religious, kids would be shocked, but gradually if I told them that, I respect the fact that you're religious, so please pray, but don't expect me to pray along with you, I did not find any problems from parents or from, from children. ... ok it takes some courage, because in the beginning they might reject you whatever ... (Interviewee, 24/08/2015).

This is also evident from the small number of people currently registered in the organisation: 24 members, 16 male and 8 female; however, the organisation is still

very young as it was created in 2013 (Email: Petros Attas to [Author], 22/12/2015). The disparity between males and females is even greater in the statistics of the Facebook page: 72% of the people who 'liked' the group page are male, as seen in Figure 2. The 25-34 group also seems to be dominant, in both men (25%) and women (10%). The dominant age group is also the most likely to have a Facebook profile, making the results even less representative of the society as a whole. Recognising these pitfalls, however, a conclusion about more men than women being at least sympathetic towards atheists, can still be made. Furthermore, in 2008, 59% answered that 'I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it' and this was a substantial decrease from 2000, 96% (Smith, 2012, p. 7) (Greele, 2003, p. 3). In 1998, the percentage of people losing their faith was 0% and in only 1% of the respondents identified as atheists (Greele, 2003, pp. 56, 3). This percentage has risen to 1.9% in 2008 (Smith, 2012, p. 7). This shows that society has started to become more liberal than it was in the past and slowly, but steadily, starts to accept people of different religious beliefs.

Figure 3: Cypriot Students in Tertiary University Education in Cyprus and Abroad, 1999/2000 – 2009/10 (Statistical Service, 2012).

For a long time, Greek-Cypriot education had been solely in the hands of the Church of Cyprus and this is one of the reasons why there was such a high religious affiliation with Orthodox Christianity. Nicos has affirmed to the author in the interview that: 'all primary schools will go to church; during religious studies the only religion that you

are going to study is going to be Christianity. So, you are forced into a direction that Christianity is the right thing to believe' (Interviewee, 10/08/2015). Therefore, even if the Constitution claims that 'no single religion or creed is established as the official religion of Cyprus', Orthodox religious instruction is compulsory to practically all Greek-Cypriots students, because almost all of them get baptised and are, thus, members of the Orthodox-Christian Church (Emilianides, 2005, p. 238). However, with tertiary education almost quadrupling between 2000 and 2010, people start to draw away from the Church. For women, Marios says 'As [their educational level] rises in the population, (pause) less women would go to church on a daily basis' (Interviewee, 28/08/2015). He also remember that:

> In the past that women, and men, were practically illiterate... I remember in [1960] in the elections, on the ballot on the one hand there was Makarios and on the other Clerides, John Clerides, there were women [that] ... opened their ballot and crossed themselves and voted for Makarios. Why were they so religious? It was their level of education ... 55 years ago. Does a woman today go to the ballot, and the Archbishop is on it, and she crosses herself and votes for him? No, because (pause) her level of education has risen (Interviewee, 28/08/2015).

Furthermore, Clio said that one of the reasons she started losing her faith was studying in a University abroad: 'I would say when I first went abroad and I met people who were interesting to me but I did not know anything about their religion... It was the leaping point' (Interviewee, 13/08/2015). Empirical research on women in Cyprus has also shown that women tend to be less religious when they are young and educated: when asked 'Do you believe in God?', 58% of the 15-19 age group and 61% of those with higher education answered that they believed 'very much', while for women of 50 and over and those without education the percentages were as high as 95% and 96% respectively (Mylona, 1986, pp. 107-08).

Διάγραμμα 1.9. Συνολικό Ποσοστό Γονιμότητας, 1975-2011
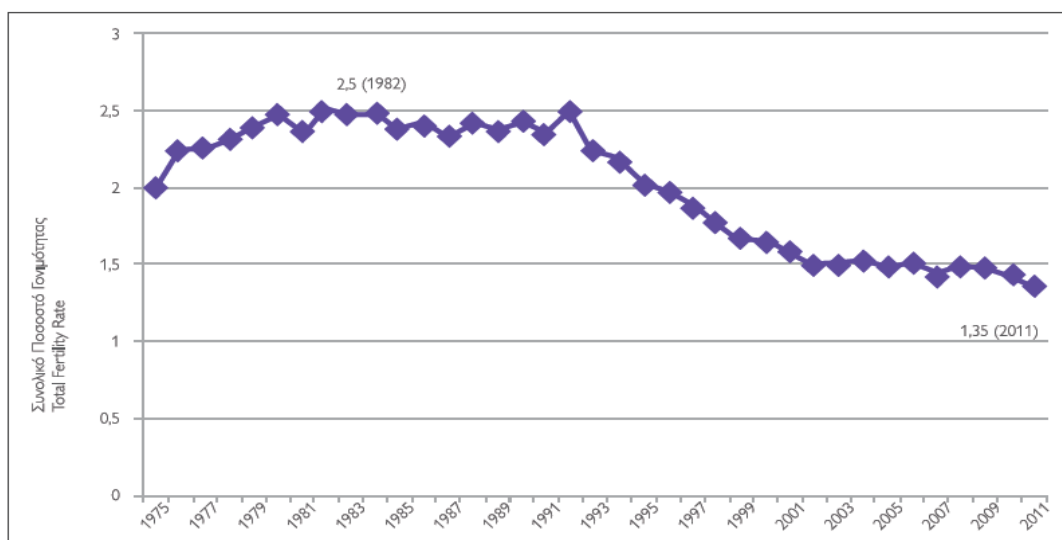**Graph 1.9.** Total Fertility Rate, 1975-2011

Figure 4: Total Fertility Rates, 1975-2011 (Statistical Service, 2012, p. 18)

Gender and Sexuality:

The interviewee Stella believes that 'as a woman I cannot be religious. Because no religion teaches equality … between men and women' and that 'Maybe in secular society we have earned a lot, but through our religion we haven't. The leadership will always remain male. Why? Is this equality?' (Interviewee, 24/08/2015). Callum G. Brown has argued that secularisation is a 'gendered process' (Brown, 2013, p. 50) because more women than men attend church and, therefore, religion suffers most when women become indifferent to it. According to Brown, Britian underwent secularisation in the 1960s because women began to be less accepting of the identifications and constraints of the Church; something which is indicated by the sexual liberation movement (Brown, 2009, p. 10). Lia Mylona in 1986, pointed out that 'The influence of the church on the social position of women continues to favour the perpetuation of the patriarchal attitude' since obedience, respect and submission to the husband was still prominent (Mylona, 1986, p. 106). Katerina (81) remembers that women in the past would not go to work but stay at home and attend to their children

and even to their animals; society then was based on agricultural production (Interviewee, 09/09/2015). Antonis believed that:

> … Work had given woman many things she did not have in the past, but in many cases, concerning the family, it has turn into a boomerang against the family, and families started to deteriorate. … They pulled her away from the Orthodox Christian faith. A woman in the past spent her time in the house, she had more time to deal with her children, and with the Church, and with prayer (Interviewee, 02/09/2015).

As it has been argued by Penny L. Marler, women's role in Western countries has shifted from 'from home-making to self-making' in the the 1960s, while Cyprus began to experience this later on (Marler, 2008, p. 23). As Maria Hadjipavlou explained, intercommunal conflict and nationalistic rhetoric silenced women's demand for better position in society and, therefore, Cyprus did not experience the 'second-wave' feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (Hadjipavlou & Mertan, 2010, p. 247). Greater sexual liberation started to be evident in Cyprus as well over the past 20 years which signifies a more liberal and secular mindset; this is indicated by Figure 4, which shows the falling fertility rates between 1991-2011. Stelios lamented that 'Unfortunately, as years go by, it is a big issue. There is an exacerbation of this phenomenon. … [T]hey base the relationship on carnal desires' (Interviewee, 11/08/2015). Therefore, women are less willing to abide by the restrictions of the Church, who wants them to remain chaste while unmarried and to be good and attentive mothers afterwards.

In the 1990s, priests and nuns gathered outside the parliament to chant 'this is the island of saints not homosexuals' (Smith, 16/10/2001). Attitudes towards homosexuality are good indicators of the change in Greek-Cypriot thinking from religious to more liberal. Marios remembers that 'In the past it was considered a taboo. Homosexuality was a taboo. Someone was ashamed to be the relative of a homosexual person. Gradually, however, with the evolution of society, – you need to see the person as he is, not as you want him to be' (Interviewee, 28/08/2015). Archbishop Chrysostomos, in a meeting of the autocephalous Orthodox churches, declared that 'the Church must be unequivocal in condemning homosexuality' and that 'We should, in my opinion, position ourselves on issues of relaxation of morals

increasingly promoted by secular, mostly Christian governments in what is considered the advanced world' (Anastasiou, 09/03/2014). This shows that he is aware of the secularising influence that comes with modernity. To change people's attitudes, the Accept-LGBT Cyprus hosted two gay parades in the summers of 2014 and 2015. Stella welcomed the parade because it started a conversation about homosexual rights and that this was 'one great victory against the backwardness of the Church' (Interviewee, 24/08/2015). She says:

> [D]espite the huge opposition of the Church against the gay parade, … you had lots of people taking part in that parade, supporting them, and then you had small groups of ultra-Orthodox, backward people dressed in black, with the crosses… (Interviewee, 24/08/2015).

The Church, in its attempt to bar the civil partnership agreement from passing, declared that 'Laws that are foreign to our people's customs should be avoided' (Ιερά Αρχιεπισκοπή Κύπρου, 2015, p. 18). A 2014 survey, however, showed that 53.3% of Cypriot citizens think that civil unions, including among homosexuals, should be made legal (Anastasiou, 09/03/2014). The fact that the Parliament passed the civil partnership agreement in 2015 indicates a big break from the religious way of thinking. Modern Cyprus took baby steps to move from homosexuality being a 'taboo' and a 'perversion' to allowing homosexuals to live together by law (Cyprus College; Alexandrinou, Gogo, 06/05/2006, p. 20).

Conclusion:

This paper sought to show that, even though the overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriots identify themselves as religious, their behaviour and attitudes are somewhat conflicting with this notion. In the 21st century, they are more likely to criticise the Archbishop and less willing to follow the leadership of the Church concerning political matters. The religious way of life is less appealing to the youth and to women since they began to enjoy the fruits of modernity, such as nightlife, higher education, and work. The rise of organised atheism and the legalisation of civil partnership between homosexuals, even though very recent, are stepping stones towards a more secularised society. All these factors indicate that the reason why Cyprus has still high

levels of religious affiliation is because religion has become part of the culture, tradition, and nationality of the Greek-Cypriots; an unsurprising result when its long religious history and years of conflict against other cultures are concerned. Sociologist Marios Vryonides had arrived at the same conclusion by looking at the Greek-Cypriots' levels of trust, social solidarity, acceptance, and volunteerism (Vryonides, 2014). This paper only scratched the surface of the complex relationship between the Greek-Cypriot society, the Church of Cyprus, and the Orthodox-Christian religion and further research needs to be done in order to unveil this relationship in other areas of study as well.

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