

“Prevailing Faith”: The Church of Greece and Immigrants

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There is a dissonance in the discussion of the Church of Greece (hereafter the Church) and immigration. On the one hand academics and immigration experts often omit the Church as an actor or hark back to the identity card and mosque issues and the presence of publicly funded religious education to extrapolate a nationalistic presence at best and a xenophobic one at worst. On the other hand, clergymen argue that the Church supports the integration of immigrants with crucial programs and indeed Church-inspired efforts in Athens, the countryside and the islands frequently surface in the press. But as one expert put it, “If you asked a migrant about the Church, they would know nothing of these programs.”

Neither side is incorrect. The Church put immigrant integration on its agenda but it has yet to effectively communicate and execute that agenda. The reasons are numerous. Chief among them is that there has been an internal debate over whether to do “good works in secret” or to be a public advocate. A close second reason is that the hierarchy has yet to effectively support and coordinate *ad hoc* individual parish efforts. The Church has also discredited itself of late with a financial scandal related to its philanthropic work, which, it appears, has inadvertently hampered the efforts of the whistle-blowers who also wish to positively improve the Church’s role with migrants. The Church is indeed doing its work in secret, but more due to a lack of competence than as a principle. As a result, it has yet to unleash its potential to form public opinion and improve material assistance on a mass level.

Evaluating the Church’s role in immigrant integration inevitably leads to a discussion of the Church’s role in the state. As of now, the Church is a major state partner due to their traditional familiarity and bureaucratic integration. Based on interviews and observations, the Church itself does not appear threatened by supporting the inclusion of people from other ethnic backgrounds and religions. This support appears contingent, however, on whether that support maintains or improves the Church’s relations with the state. The Church has received a great deal of funding for philanthropic work and land used for that purpose can be freed from potential confiscation. However, other reforms that would aid immigrant integration at the expense of the Church’s influence such as secularizing increasingly diverse public schools has and will meet stiff opposition. For better or worse, that opposition will likely be mounted more quickly and broadly than the Church’s piecemeal advocacy of immigrant integration.

The Changing Challenge of Immigration

For the sake of ease, we can discern two periods of immigration to Greece – the Southeastern border of the European Union – since 1989: the 90s phase and the 00s phase (loosely defined). The *90s phase* featured mainly, but not exclusively, flows of immigrants from the former communist bloc that were often Orthodox, co-ethnic or closely related in ‘Balkan’ culture. *The 00s* phase has seen the regularization and/or reduction (legally or practically) of flows from Eastern Europe as those countries have stabilized, a spike in immigrants and/or asylum-seekers from the Middle East, Asia and Africa as those regions have suffered tumult, and other Southern European states (i.e. Italy, Spain) close their borders. Where the first phase of immigrants found employment and a comparatively easier integration, the second phase has arrived from farther afield to a stagnant economy.

The “new newcomers” are almost exclusively non-Orthodox. Based on experiences earlier this decade, it would seem safe to assume that the Church would be anti-immigrant. So far that has not been the case for either the previous Archbishop Christodoulos or the current Archbishop Ieronymos. In fact, Christodoulos seems to have laid a foundation from 2002-2008 that Ieronymos is building on with a different approach. (More below)

The Church as a ‘Social Institution’

Defining the Church of Greece for the sake of discussion is difficult. In the context of Greece, it is too large in terms of financial resources (7 million euros of profit last year, owns some 900 million euros of land) and too dominant in relation to other religious groups (97% of Greek citizens are nominally Orthodox) to be viewed merely as a religious organization. The Church is incorporated into the state apparatus but still enjoys enough autonomy that we cannot categorize it as just an arm of the state. Likewise, the Church is an actor within civil society but it is too massive, too engrained in public culture to be compared alongside non-governmental organizations. Thus, the use of the term *social institution* here then is meant to encapsulate the Church’s role within Greek state, society and history.

‘Tradition’: History and Theology

There are two types of tradition at play in this discussion. Critics view the Church’s relationship to state and society as a vestige of ‘tradition’ rooted in the country’s Byzantine heritage and the fact that it did not experience the Enlightenment. ‘Tradition’ (with a ‘big T’),

however, is viewed in a different context by the Orthodox Church and it is currently used to *favor* immigrant integration. To be certain, the Church always looks for some precedent in scripture or patristic texts to justify its actions and the Church does not have a coherent social gospel akin to Catholicism, Protestantism or Islam. However, the miraculous works of Christ in the gospels, the letters of the Apostles, the writings of the Church Fathers, the legacy of church-state welfare cooperation in the Byzantine (and even the Ottoman) era offer material that justifies assisting the needy whatever their racial or national distinction. The late Archbishop Christodoulos even likened Christ to a ‘refugee and a foreigner’ in 2003.¹ Differences in perception of tradition are at the heart of the dissonance.

Another factor in the dissonance is that Church practice and theology requires humility. Among the verses usually cited are “Do thy good works in secret” and “the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing.” When taken in combination with the need to provide discreet services, the Church’s offerings seem invisible sometimes even to the beneficiaries themselves. This approach, while scripturally sound, is confusing to like-minded organizations and fails mobilize Greek society *en masse*.

Areas of Interaction Between Church and Immigrants

Hierarchy vs. Parishes

The Archdiocese of Athens and the Synod have several large NGOs (KPSM, “Solidarity”) that are charged with providing material aid to migrants in the forms of food, clothing, shelter, Greek language lessons, etc. and to a lesser extent advocacy. Individual parishes offer some 800 charities (including “The Ark”), which are open to migrants. Priests in Athens, the countryside and the islands have, on their own initiative, offered aid, led community efforts (particularly on the islands) and gone to the media on behalf of migrants.

The two levels are not well connected. The Archdiocese of Athens has made the step of explicitly telling all parishes to assist migrants and is working on a new communications strategy that includes re-vamping the Church’s websites. One high-ranking priest described it as a never-ending, slow-moving process.

¹ S. Alexopoulos. 2008. “The Orthodox Church in Greece and the Challenges of Secularization, Immigration, and EU Enlargement” in *Religion: Problem or Promise? The Role of Religion in the Integration of Europe*. Ed. Simon Marincak

Social Welfare

Most of my research focuses on how the Church delivers aid, advocacy and other services (such as language instruction) that assist with immigrant integration. The resources devoted are immense but the execution is often poor both in terms of the Church's quiet assistance and the credibility it has lost due to malfeasance. I am also looking at ways the Church does not contribute positively but at the moment it has put the Athens mosque issue in the hands of the state and there has been little anti-immigrant or nationalist rhetoric - *from the Church*. However, there are 'Orthodox-inspired' groups, LAOS, *Chrysi Avgi*, who are not interested in immigrant integration and the latter has actually clashed with the Church.

Education

Greece allows all children to receive public education. However, the constitution states that public education is meant to cultivate religious sentiment and a later law requires catechism courses be offered. Minority students are permitted to opt-out of these courses but no substitutes are offered. The Church has shown no desire to concede ground on education, likely due to fears of more general secularization. Thus Orthodox religious education is a confusingly navigated barrier to the full immigration of children.

This area will merit increased attention since the recent European Court of Human Rights decision prohibiting the display of crucifixes in Italian classrooms will likely be applied to Greece at some point. Even Archbishop Ieronymos, who has taken a *laissez-faire* approach to issues of state, has stated clearly that he would oppose such a move.

Why is the Church Pro-Integration? (besides genuine altruism)

Free Market Faith

Anastassios Anastassiades has advanced the theory that the Church is preparing itself for a full separation of church and state using philanthropy to carve a niche for itself in the Greek social sphere.² Thus, once Church and State are separate the Church will still have a role and a fortified position. Extending these services to migrants would retain 'respect' for the Church. Certain laws have granted the Church more control over its assets (land) if they are directed toward charitable work. As Effie Fokas' fieldwork in Thiva and Livadeia indicates, people are more than ware that the Church is 'trying to win people to its side.'³

² A. Anastassiadis. 2004. *Religion and Politics in Greece: The Greek Church's 'Conservative Modernization' in the 1990s*. <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org/publica/qdr.htm>

³ E. Fokas. Forthcoming 2009. 'Religion and welfare in Greece: a new, or renewed, role for the church?', in eds. Victor Roudometof and Vasilios Makrides, *Orthodox Christianity in 21st Century Greece: The Role of Religion*

State privilege/leverage

In the opposite vein, the state has provided the Church with millions of euros to carry out social work at home and abroad. Plus, there have been accusations Church has tried to subtly use land freed up for philanthropic use for profitable purposes during the Christodoulos era. Another possibility that has arisen of late is the potential for the Church to use charity as leverage. In other words, threatening to cut off social services if policies are or are not implemented.

Warding off secularism

If the Church demonstrates it can play a viable role in a multi-ethnic, pluralist society then it can avert obsolescence and retain some of the controls it currently enjoys. This is of particular interest if the Church is to operate within the framework of the European Union.

Preliminary Conclusion

As Antonis Liakos has suggested, modernity and multiculturalism do not mean that there is no role for the Church of Greece. Immigrant integration is one case that would allow the Church to maintain a vital role even if it cedes some of its hegemony in the process. The movements underway within the Church indicate that this social institution can adapt to present circumstances but it can do so in a more effective manner, particularly when it comes to communicating its message. Material aid is important but there is a need for the Church to exercise a stronger, more coherent voice that will help push more effective policies through and change attitudes on the local level.

There are challenges in the near future that will test the Church's resolve that were not foreseen at the start of this research project. The decision by the European Court of Human Rights to take religious symbols out of public classrooms will force the Church to choose between immigrant integration and "the rights of the majority." Like the identity card crisis, the Church could dig in for a lengthy fight that it will likely lose eventually. The cost would be devastating to the Church's already bruised reputation. Successfully navigating a middle road would heal some of the damage from earlier this decade and enhance the Church's image in its support of immigrant integration.