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Islam in Greece:
Religious identity and practice among indigenous Muslims and Muslim immigrants

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Introduction

This paper is based on background and preliminary information of our study of indigenous and immigrant Muslims in Greece which started in March this year and is funded by the AHRC.

Research on Muslims in Europe has highlighted the importance of three issues: the politics of recognising religious diversity, the tolerance (or not) of public claims to Muslim identity and whether governments allow the construction of mosques in European cities (Cesari 2005; Maréchal *et al.* 2003). After September 11th, March 11th and July 7th², these issues have become more prominent, closely linked to questions of immigrants' integration while also reflecting the global politics of terrorism (Modood *et al.* 2006). Islamophobia is often at the heart of the politics of recognition of Muslims in European public space and policy (Vertovec 2002). This has serious implications for the provision of services for Muslim communities and the subsequent conflicts that arise over the construction of Mosques³. Such debates are influenced by the symbolic images these buildings have in the wider community (Eade 1996) and 'are illustrative of wider negotiations of cultural diversity' (Maussen 2005:30), religious expression and belonging (Gale & Naylor 2002). Moreover, discourses over EU enlargement, especially regarding Turkey, have stressed Christianity as a central element of European identity.

While Western European countries received the majority of their Muslim populations between 1950-1970, Southern Europe has recently emerged as an important destination for Muslim migrants, with new 'religious townscapes' changing the Christian physiognomy of its cities (Fonseca & Esteves 2002). Within the context of the Southern European shift towards immigration, Greece offers an interesting example where such "new cultural encounters" (King 2001) are manifested in unique ways.

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² Referring to the three major terrorist attacks in the West since 2000: the Twin Towers in New York and other targets in the US (9 September 2001), the Madrid trains (11 March 2004) and London transport (7 July 2005).

³ The latest in a series of conflicts of this kind in Europe took place last November (2009), when the majority of the Swiss public voted against the construction of minarets in Mosques.

The majority of immigrants in Greece come from the neighbouring Balkans and the former Soviet Union. Albanians constitute more than half of the migrant population but, partly due to historical peculiarities of Islam in Albania, they appear to be either largely non-practicing or converting to Orthodoxy as a strategy to cope with discrimination and xenophobia (Kapllani 2002; Hatziprokopiou 2006)⁴. Similarly, even migrants arriving from former Soviet countries with significant or predominantly Muslim populations (e.g. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), they are in their vast majority of Greek ethnic origin and Christian Orthodox religion, whom the state treats as repatriates (Diamandi-Karanou 2003). Nevertheless, the picture emerging out of the recent migration trends and the de-facto transformation of Greece into a multicultural society includes the arrival and settlement of many migrants, as well as of a small number of refugees and asylum seekers, of more 'distant' geographical and cultural backgrounds. A significantly sized 'group' among them is that of migrants coming from countries that are predominantly Muslim.

Migrants and indigenous Muslims

Tracing the 'Muslim' population in official statistics is difficult and reveals methodological constraints (Brown 2000). The limited and marginally reliable Census data (NSSG 2001) count them at about 7-8% of all foreign nationals. Among those, some 3.1% is from Mediterranean countries (predominantly Turkey 1%, Egypt 1%, Syria 0.7%, Lebanon 0.2% and Morocco 0.1%); another 2.1% is from South Asia (Pakistan 1.5% and Bangladesh 0.6%); 1.2% are from other Middle-eastern countries (mostly Iraq 0.9%, Iran 0.1% and Jordan 0.1%); 0,6 from predominantly Muslim African countries (Nigeria 0.3%). the vast majority of them living in Athens. Beyond Census data, estimates on the total number of Muslims in the capital vary between 120,000 (Tzilivakis 2006) to 200,000 (Jahid 2006)⁵.

The groups with longer presence in the country, as well as more recently formed refugee communities, have established associations, mostly in Athens, often with the assistance or support of Greek civil society organisations. In general, migrants from Muslim countries are employed in low-paid jobs, and are often the victims of prejudice and discrimination (Antoniou 2003). According to a 2007 opinion poll, only 52% of the respondents agreed to the construction of a Mosque in Athens (while 77% agreed for - Christian - migrant communities to have their own churches – Spyropoulou 2007). So far, Athens has no formal mosques or cemeteries for Muslims. After a long debate that revealed historically exclusionary perceptions of Islam in Greek national identity, the state recently agreed to the building of a mosque in the capital (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2009). In the meantime, Muslims in Athens practice their religion around self-organised places of worship, in private flats, basements or storerooms. There are at least 26 such informal Mosques operating in the Greek-capital, located mostly in areas of central Athens with high concentrations of Muslims (particularly in the deprived neighbourhoods of downtown, western and north-western

⁴ In contrast to other nationalisms in the Balkans (e.g. Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian), whereby (Christian) religion formed an essential element primarily as a means of differentiation with Islam, the dominant Ottoman faith, Albanian nationalism stressed ethnic criteria rather than religious ones, also as in an attempt to incorporate religious diversity. In addition to this, according to Kapllani (2002), the Albanian variety of Islam has been historically a moderate and tolerant one, originating in the Bektashi movement in the Balkans. Lastly, under hardliner communist leader Enver Hoxha, religion was officially banned in Albania, which in 1967 was proclaimed the world's first (and only) atheist state.

⁵ The last few years have witnessed sharp increases in the number of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, coming in their majority from Muslim countries. Between January 2000 and October 2007, nearly 22000 undocumented migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia and Egypt, have been apprehended in Greek sea borders (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2008).

Athens). In June 2007, an ‘Arab Hellenic Centre for Culture and Civilisation’ was launched, partly funded by a Saudi businessman’s donation, including, for the first time, a formal prayer site.

The Pakistani community, constitute one of the oldest and certainly the largest group from a Muslim country. Their population has grown from 1,911 people in 1991 to 9,945 in 2001, approaching 15,478 in 2006 (Tonchev 2007: Table 8.4.1). According to the Ministry of Interior statistics, there were 12,126 Pakistani migrants holding a valid residence permit in 2007, 47% between 31-40 years of age and another 26% between 21-30 years old. This is a predominantly male population: out of 13,325 Pakistani migrants who were insured with IKA by January 2009 (the largest Greek social security fund), only 47 were women. The community have recently been at the epicentre of public discourse, as Pakistani migrants have been targets of several violent racist attacks and police raids in recent years.⁶

However, what makes Greece an even more interesting case is the presence of an indigenous Muslim minority, located in Thrace (Northern Greece). As is the case with national minorities across Europe, this small Muslim community (approximately 120,000) was formed by the movement of geographical boundaries rather than through migration. Its status and rights are determined by the Lausanne Treaty, signed between Greece and Turkey in 1923, which recognised them as a religious minority. However, the minority consists of three different ethnic groups, Turks, Pomaks and Roma, who may share the same religion but have internal linguistic and cultural differences (Evergeti 2006). The formation of their diverse identities in opposition to the dominant Greek Orthodox narrative has not been without tensions and conflicts, especially for the Turkish community, part of which (especially the educated elite) identifies with the secularism of (Kemalist) Turkish politics. Muslim (and especially Turkish) identification represents for the Greek majority the non-European “Other” against which the “Europeanised” national identity has been “officially” defined (Polis 1992).

In contrast to newly arriving immigrants, the Muslims of Thrace are Greek citizens with constitutional and religious rights. They have their own religious institutions and minority schools (both regulated by the Greek state), several associations and unions, and full civil and political rights, including the recognition of Sharia law where the local Muftis arbitrate mainly family and inheritance issues. Nevertheless, since its establishment the Muslim minority in Thrace has been subjected to discrimination and exclusion (Evergeti 1999; 2006), while the region is among the least developed in the EU. These factors have contributed to internal migration of many Thracian Muslims to Athens (Madianou 2005).

Most of the Thracian Muslims came to Athens in the mid 70s and early 80s, and the majority have settled in the areas of Gazi and Plateia Vathis both located in downtown Athens, close to the areas where Muslim migrants now chose to live⁷. This internal migration movement was reinforced both by the lack of jobs in Thrace as well as by a state policy that started in the early 80s and aimed to encourage members of the minority in Thrace to find employment in the public sector in other towns. However, it seems that the policy’s ultimate goal was to weaken the Muslim presence and their political participation in Thrace (Antoniou 2005).

⁶ On 7 October 2007 a gang of more than 50 extreme-right activists attacked the house of four Pakistani migrants in the Rendis district of Athens, while a similar event took place on 30 December that year with eight Pakistani migrants being attacked and bitten up, also in their home. Moreover, since the 2004 Athens Olympics, tight police monitoring of informal Mosques in Athens in the eve of the terrorist attacks in the United States, gave way to a controversy involving the illegal kidnapping of 28 – apparently innocent - Pakistanis by Greek authorities in order to handle them to the CIA for interrogation. These incidents were reported in the Antigone Annual Report on Racism (Theodoridis 2007).

⁷ Interestingly, Thracian Muslims in Athens are divided in terms of their ethnic composition (Gypsies mainly in Gazi and Pomaks mainly in Plateia Vathis).

Once in Athens, they lose all access to Muslim institutions (pray sites, minority schools and the provision of Islamic family law), mainly due to the absence of such institutions outside Thrace (Troumbeta 2001; Avramopoulou & Karakatsanis 2002). As a result, these internal Greek Muslim migrants - approximately 11,000 (Jahid 2006) - often experience problems similar to those of recent Muslim migrants, marked by prejudice, exclusion and limited religious provisions.

Our Study

Our study explores the negotiations of religious identity and practice, and the politics of recognition of religious rights. Focusing on Pakistani migrants and indigenous Muslims in Athens we seek to understand the role of religion as a “marker”, possibly among others, of collective identification for these groups and the extent to which they relate to each other and the wider society. Greece provides an important case, because of its historical Muslim population, but also because it is seen as a country with a strong sense of national identity contrasting to its newly emerging multicultural reality (Clogg 2004).

The position of Islam in Greece, where the Church is not officially separated from the state, is often identified with the country’s Ottoman past and the Turkish/Muslim “Other”, against which the Greek national identity has, to an extent, been formed (Triandafyllidou 2000). This has resulted in xenophobic reactions towards certain ethnic and religious groups, including Muslims (Kafetzis *et al.* 1998). While some of these issues have been explored in the literature on immigrants in Greece (Iosifides & King 1998; Labrianidis & Lyberaki 2001; Hatziprokopiou 2006), questions of religious identification and practice remain neglected, and only partially addressed by the few studies so far comparing these groups (Antoniou 2003 and 2005; Troumbeta 2003; Triandafyllidou 2010). Moreover, issues concerning the meaning of religion for minority and migrant Muslims and whether they relate to each other in their struggle for recognition remain so far unanswered.

Our comparative rationale reflects the need for integrated accounts of “migrants” and “national minorities”. It aims to understand not only similarities and differences regarding religious practice, identification and representation at formal, mundane or symbolic levels, but also the patterns of interaction between these groups and their place within debates on Islam in Greece. The example of Greece and other countries (Bulgaria, Romania, or even Spain) suggest that Islam should not be regarded as something ‘new’ to Europe as it has been part of its history in the Balkans and elsewhere. The eastwards EU enlargement has brought issues surrounding national minorities back into the political agenda which, as in the case of immigrants, are framed in the contradictory terms of security versus rights (Sasse 2005). Comparing national and migrant Muslim minorities becomes even more significant as Europe extends further into countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the shift from multiculturalism towards more assimilatory views on integration in the ever-diversifying European North seems to be centred particularly on the presence of Muslims.

Methodologically speaking our study is based on qualitative and mainly ethnographic fieldwork in particular areas of Athens with high concentration of native and immigrant Muslims. Our aim is to explore issues relating to religious and ethnic identification, religious representation and practice, experiences of prejudice, strategies and alliances as well as to investigate how the two groups organise and negotiate their religious practices in informal places of worship, the rituals and symbols of religious expression, how they engage in the mosque debates, whether their struggles for religious recognition unites or divides them and whether such arguments are articulated differently by national Thracians and Pakistani migrants.

Our study is centred on two basic questions:

Firstly, how are religious identity and practice negotiated and organised, formally or informally, by the two groups under study?

In particular we are interested in the possible ways in which religion is a significantly important marker of identity among Pakistani and Thracian Muslims in Athens, and how these two groups might relate to each other, to other Muslims and the wider Greek society.

Furthermore we are trying to understand how various aspects of religious identity relate to space with respect to places of worship, and to the extent to which religious practices are mediated through specific ritual and symbols.

And secondly, how do Muslims in Greece negotiate and express their religious identities in a country where the Church is not legally separated from the state?

In particular we are exploring the political and institutional arrangements of ‘tolerance’ of Muslim institutions and the ways in which these two groups have positioned and mobilised themselves in relation to debates about the construction of the Athens mosque.

Finally we are collecting material on the experience of prejudice and discrimination among Muslims in Greece.

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