



The Greek ID Cards Conflict: a Case Study on Religion and National Identity against the Challenges of Increasing EU Integration and Pluralism

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Introduction

Greece is like the daughter of a mixed marriage. As the first EU member-state of Orthodox tradition and due to its religious, cultural and historical profile, Greece has a dual outlook both to the West and the East. It did not directly experience the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment and is the only Orthodox country not to have lived through Communism. It is also at the origins of the classical tradition but also ambivalent towards the western world. Because of that, Greece has a somewhat exceptional socio-religious profile compared to the Western European religious model of secularisation and religious modernity/postmodernity.

Greece is also one of Europe's more homogeneous countries in religious and ethnic terms: according to official statistics approximately 95 per cent of the 11 million Greek population are Orthodox Christians. However, it is estimated that up to 10 per cent of the Greek population may hold non-Orthodox religious beliefs. Greece is also receiving an increasing number of immigrants: this recent influx will challenge the Helleno-Orthodox

link that is so often used, especially by the Church itself, when reflecting on the role of Orthodoxy in what it means to be Greek today, with the identification between citizenship and religion and the assumption of Orthodoxy as a marker of Greekness.

According to Article 13 of the Constitution, freedom of conscience and religious worship are guaranteed for 'known' religions (Judaism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestant denominations). Proselytism is illegal. If belief in God among Greeks remains relatively high, they have a largely passive attachment to the Church, with churchgoing reserved mostly for special occasions and religious/national holidays. Orthodoxy is a strong cultural, spiritual and historical frame of reference even for Greeks who are not religious.

Orthodoxy is also prominent in church-state relations. According to the Greek Constitution Orthodoxy is the 'dominant' or 'prevailing' religion. The Constitution grants the Greek Orthodox Church legal and financial privileges. The Church is supported financially by the state, which pays the salaries of all clergy, and is generally viewed as a homogenising and unifying force, particularly in moments of crisis. However, throughout modern Greek history state and Church have collided. Civil marriage (1982) and divorce (1983) were established by a socialist government but after much conflict and debate. The potential separation of Church and state remains under discussion. Another case where state and Church recently collided is the conflict over removing religious affiliation from Greek ID cards.

The starting point for this Leverhulme-funded study is the 2000 controversy over whether to remove religious affiliation from national ID cards. The study also aims to take into account the recent and ongoing crisis within the Church with the implication of various members of the clergy and the Archbishop of the Greek Church in a series of corruption scandals in 2005. The identity cards case study acts as a lens through which to look at Greece as an example and as a stepping stone from which to reflect on the links between religion and national identity in the European Union, as a cultural reality.

The ID Cards Conflict

The policy of recording religion on state ID cards originated in 1945, as a way to distinguish atheists (who at the time were usually Communists) and Orthodox (who were moderate or pro-government citizens). The policy of registering religious affiliation on ID cards remained unquestioned and in effect until 1985, when the issue became a political and partisan power game. In 1986 the socialist government passed legislation according to which the

declaration of religion on a new type of ID cards became optional; it was reversed in 1991 when the conservative party passed a law rendering the registration of religion on ID cards mandatory. At that time, the Church and religious organisations had opposed the removal of religion from ID cards, partly because the new ID cards would also include a personalised identification bar code containing the number 666, considered a symbol of the evil spirit. In 1997 Greece signed the intergovernmental Schengen Agreement (for the free movement of persons within the EU without customs or passport checks). As the Treaty stipulated that ID cards could be used as a travel document within the EU, Greece came under pressure to issue new bilingual ID cards. In May 2000, after announcing plans actually to implement the privacy protection law of 1997 and proceed with the issue of new ID cards removing religious affiliation, the socialist government was criticised for not having prepared the ground, namely the Church and public opinion, on the issue. According to a number of legal opinions, the specific law of 1991 stipulating the mandatory registration of religion on ID cards was still into effect, and thus could not be abolished by the general law of 1997 on privacy protection. As a result, in 2001 the Archbishop organised a campaign and a six-month church referendum collecting 3.5 million signatures requesting the voluntary declaration of religion on ID cards and calling for a national referendum on the issue. The ID cards crisis came to an end with the interventions of the Greek President and the Council of State, which upheld the government's decision to remove religious affiliation, and with the 2002 European Court of Human Rights rejection of the referral of the case by three Greek theology professors, after having reviewed it as inadmissible.

The Church's reaction during the crisis can be interpreted as one of defensive fear that the removal of religion from ID cards might be the first step in gradually loosening the tight historic and political ties between the Greek Church and state, which it perceives as a symbolic undermining of Orthodoxy in Greek public life. If the Church did lose the battle of the ID cards in the short term, it was able to gain a negotiating card (3 million signed petitions) that may be a useful 'bargaining chip' in its future relations with the state. By capitalising on the conflict, the Church's intent has been to flex its muscles and warn politicians that it can still count on the support of millions of people with the power to mobilise the Greek population against or for any government. This message is particularly directed to certain liberal and leftist milieus in Greece which favour revising and delineating more distinct roles between the Greek state and the Church, the most drastic of which would be ending the payment of priests with state funds and proceeding with an administrative separation between Church and state. However, after the 2005 implication of the Church in a series of high profile corruption

scandals, the Archbishop's ability to mobilise people in the future has been dampened, due to his fall in popularity according to public opinion polls.

Most religious minority groups in Greece, including Catholics, Jews and Protestants, were explicitly against the inclusion of religion on ID cards. However, an unexpected finding was that the reactions among other Greek religious minority groups, namely Jehovah's Witnesses and the Turkish Muslim minority, due to specific circumstances, were not consistent with the undoubted and explicit negative reactions of the Greek Catholic, Jewish and Protestant minorities. The position of Jehovah's Witnesses was one of non-involvement, following a principle of neutrality on all state matters that do not affect or concern them directly. Among the Muslim minority in Thrace, local muftis supported the registration of religion on ID cards and possibly even signed petitions in the Church's referendum. ID cards listing a Muslim religious affiliation provide legal proof and a means for these communities to continue to benefit from the special privileges accorded to the Turkish minority (according to the Lausanne Treaty), such as education in special bilingual schools. Therefore, in the Muslim case in Greece, registering religious affiliation on ID cards acts not only as a useful official acknowledgment and proof of the Muslim/Turkish identity and population, but more importantly as a means of protecting Turkish minority rights. Given the specific historical circumstances in Greece, if Christian and Jewish minorities view religion on ID cards as a source of discrimination, for the Turkish/Muslim minority the argument is the reverse, a form of 'positive discrimination', since the registration of religion is a means of protecting their rights as a minority.

Methodology

The ID cards case study acts as a lens through which to look at Greece as an example and as a stepping stone from which to reflect on the links between religion and national identity in the European Union. There are four key recurrent themes in the Greek identity card conflict which are of particular interest. At a first level, the ID cards conflict concerned Church-state relations. The crisis confirmed the historic partnership between the Greek Church and the state, while at the same time revealing the tensions within this relationship. Beyond Church and state, the conflict also raised a debate touching the core of Greek identity, particularly the link between nation and religion and the relevance of Helleno-Christianity today. Taking the issue of religion and national identity and homogeneity a step further raises the question of religious pluralism. With Greece's increasing numbers of non-Orthodox minorities there is an increasing challenge for Greece to evolve from a 'monocultural' nation to a more diverse, multicultural society: the identification between citizenship and

religion and the assumption of Orthodoxy as a marker of Greekness are increasingly under pressure. The pluralisation of Greek society as a result of European and non-European immigration movements raises the question of the place of Orthodoxy within the European Union, through its enlargement towards the East with new member-states of a typically Christian Orthodox tradition (and possibly of an Islamic tradition with the possible entry of Turkey). It also raises the question of globalisation of Greek Orthodoxy itself through the diaspora.

These core themes are addressed and examined through a qualitative analysis of: (a) newspaper articles (from selected Greek and international dailies) and some church and state documents that are indicative of the type and level of exchange of public information and debate on the ID cards issue and other relevant issues, and (b) interviews with selected journalists, intellectuals, academics and members of the clergy that can take the analysis a step further as they provide illustrations of wider arguments and perspectives that can lead to the larger themes relevant to this study.

Mapping of Opinions and Attitudes

I examined 390 opinion articles published in Greek dailies over the period 1993-2004. What specifically emerge from the mapping of all opinion articles are three large ideological orientations: negative, neutral/non-aligned, and positive/pro-dialogue orientations. These groups express opinions towards religion on ID cards but also towards the Church, the Archbishop, and the government.

More than half of all opinion articles were either explicitly critical of any inclusion of religion on ID cards or very critical of the Church and Archbishop Christodoulos. The newspapers with the highest number of such items were centre-leftist papers. Less than a quarter of all opinion articles were either explicitly favourable towards the inclusion of religion on ID cards, or very critical of the government's handling of the crisis and advocating a dialogue or compromise between state and Church on the issue. The newspapers which expressed the highest number of favourable positions were an ultra-conservative paper, followed by a conservative paper and a centre-left paper. Finally, only 15 per cent of the total number of opinion articles were non-partisan: while not advocating a specific position on the issue they either did not take specific sides, thus offering a more analytical or balanced perspective on the conflict, or were equally critical of both sides (Church and state). The newspapers with the highest number of non-partisan positions were a conservative paper and

two centre-leftist papers.

Meanwhile seven Greek public opinion polls conducted in 2000 and 2001 gave the average percentage of those in favour of the inclusion of religion on ID cards as 68.8 per cent, while only one quarter were critical. The discrepancy between public opinion polls and the mainstream daily Greek press raises some questions. Is elite media / academic opinion more critical of the link between Church and state and between nation and religion in Greece, and thus more eager to sever it, through a detachment of Church-state relations? Other more populist/popular segments of the press and commentators do not seem to share this view: are they aiming instead for the advancement of the Helleno-Orthodox heritage in Greece?

Analysis

I have looked more closely how each opinion group in the press articles has treated the core themes.

Nation and religion

Favourable towards religion on ID cards:

- Endorsement of an all-embracing view of Helleno-Orthodoxy in the formation of modern Greek identity.
- ID cards conflict as a first step in severing national unity and the link between nation and religion, leading to a detrimental secularisation of Greek society.
- Religion as a source of hope from the uncertainties of globalisation and a link to a Greece that is changing.

Non-aligned:

- Link between nation and religion as a strong element of identity is undermined by leftist milieus.
- Acknowledgement of Greek attachment to the Church as safe keeper of identity.
- Political gaps in addressing anxiety and uncertainty within society were filled by Church's advancement of the Orthodox argument, as a default safety net.

Critical towards religion on ID cards:

- Personal identity, different from ID cards.
- Autonomy of Hellenism and Orthodoxy with separate distinct contributions to the formation of modern Greek identity.
- No Orthodox exclusivity in national definition.

- Removal of religious affiliation from ID cards will give a more accurate picture of the number of true Orthodox believers in Greece.

Church and State

Favourable towards religion on ID cards:

- Close Church-state relations reflect the link between nation and religion.
- Right and duty of Church to public discourse on political and social issues.
- ID cards conflict as first step in a damaging future separation of Church and state.
- Inflexibility of government transformed conflict into a political and ideological confrontation, strengthening the Church.

Non-aligned:

- Confrontation between secular and religious ideology.
- Political and ideological inflexibility by the government.
- Political opportunism by the Archbishop in consolidating a public and political role.
- Need for public dialogue on Church-state relations with disengagement from political opportunism and 'clientilist' relations between Church and political parties.

Critical towards religion on ID cards:

- Orthodox majority claim in the Constitution is a political argument.
- Confusion between political and religious power undermines both Church and state, and democracy.
- Need for liberalisation of Church-state relations.

Human and Minority Rights

Favourable towards religion on ID cards:

- Majority rights, freedom to religious expression and self-determination.
- Adequate protection of religious minorities, so religious freedom is not dependent on removal of religion from ID cards.
- Pressure by minority groups undermines national homogeneity.
- Dialogue as a fundamental parameter of democracy.

Non-aligned:

- Religious freedom as a condition for political and social freedom, thus in favour to Greek Church.

Critical towards religion on ID cards:

- Religious freedom to privacy of religious beliefs.
- Religion on ID cards creates conditions for differentiating citizens leading to discrimination and inequalities.
- Democracy measured by treatment of minorities.
- Human rights not dependent on majority-minority ratio.

Greece, Orthodoxy and the EU

Favourable towards religion on ID cards:

- Orthodoxy as a spiritual shield for survival of the Greek nation against homogenisation and cultural absorption by the EU.
- Religion on ID cards as symbolic resistance to globalisation, the new world order and secularisation.
- Orthodox specificity of Greece in the EU to be asserted and affirmed as such.
- Orthodoxy as sustaining element preserving 'Greekness' in the EU.

Non-aligned:

- Insecurity among Greek population as a result of European integration process.
- Church's fear that European integration may accelerate secularisation and decrease its role in Greek society.

Critical towards religion on ID cards:

- Multicultural environment and composition of the EU is not a threat to national identities and cultures.
- A defensive Greek attitude in the EU can reduce its position to a passive member-state rather than an active partner.

Concluding Remarks

Comparing the argumentation of all ideological orientations in the conflict, one can see that those with a positive orientation place greater weight on Helleno-Christianity, on religion and national identity, as an all-embracing Greek specificity and difference that has to be preserved and asserted. They view the existing situation

of Church and state in Greece as a reflection of the strong link between nation and religion. Even if they cannot be considered as anti-European, they want to affirm Greece's Orthodox specificity in the EU, particularly as a protective shield against homogenisation. There is also an implicit belief that greater emphasis on the protection of religious minorities can be potentially detrimental to the preservation of a so-called Greek homogeneous identity. Those with a more negative orientation towards religion on ID cards see Orthodoxy as an integral part of Greek identity but limit the scope of Helleno-Christianity to Greece's historic heritage and the cultural and spiritual sphere. Even if that is still far on the horizon, they view ID cards not only as a first step in the liberalisation or loosening of the relationship between Church and state, but also as a further measure in curbing religious discrimination in Greece. Non-aligned positions remained generally neutral, striking a balance between being critical of both Church and state and analysing and acknowledging the key issues and stakes behind the conflict.

What has emerged so far from the ongoing analytical work of the press content analysis is a basic tension between two different visions of Church-state relations, of the weight of Helleno-Orthodoxy, of minorities, human rights and democracy, and of the role of Orthodoxy in Europe. However, there may be a third dimension, a more 'grey' area to explore (through an analysis of interviews). Can tradition and modernity not be mutually exclusive? What is the role of Orthodoxy in this? Within this perspective, capitalising on its geographical position, history and culture, Greece within the EU may be a bridge, a mediator, between the Muslim and Christian worlds, and between Eastern Europe and the Balkans and Western Europe. One question is whether Greece, including the Greek Church, can emerge from the ethnocentric and nationalist phase it has entered since the 1990s, and whether cooperation between the Greek Church and other Orthodox churches and non-Orthodox faiths is feasible, particularly with the future entrance of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey to the EU.

As this is an ongoing study, any dialogue and feedback will be much appreciated. Please direct all correspondence to:
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