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Constructing Difference: The Mosque Debates in Greece

Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas

After two decades of immigration, contemporary Greek society is characterised by cultural and religious diversity. We argue here, however, that the challenges posed by migration-related diversity are not yet sufficiently addressed in institutional or normative terms. Rather, dominant national self-understandings remain mono-cultural and mono-religious, while accommodation of this diversity is not yet approached in inclusive and integrating ways. Media and parliamentary debates regarding the construction of a mosque in the capital, Athens, are explored in this context. Dominant understandings of Greek national identity are discussed in this article, together with the ways in which difference is framed in current public discourses, and the actors and values that structured the debate on the accommodation of the religious needs of Greece's Muslim immigrant population.

Keywords: Migration; National Identity; Religion; Greece; Mosques

Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges

Greece's history, national politics and society have been determined by the country's position at the crossroads, both geographically and culturally, between East and West. Greek national identity (Roudometof 1999; Tsoukalas 1993), foreign policy and relations with other—particularly neighbouring—countries are profoundly influenced by this positioning (Heraklides 1995). Greek identity inter-digitates the legacy of the classical period, its Byzantine tradition and Eastern Orthodox heritage, with 'Western' Enlightenment, particularly as regards modernity, nationalism and the nation-state (Tsoukalas 2002). Its particularity lies in the existence of two competing universalisms: that of ancient Greek culture on the one hand, and of Eastern

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Orthodoxy on the other. Its Ottoman past, at times, is perceived as a threat towards its identity and independence. In present-day Greece, this is reflected in much-improved though still tense relations with neighbouring Turkey, and an uneasy perception of Islam. An underlying East–West tension may thus still be discerned in Greek identity and politics.

Entrapped between Hellenism and ‘Romanity’ (Tziouvas 1994), the positioning of modern Greece has been considered to be *of* but not *in* Europe (Triandafyllidou 2002). Its accession to the European Economic Community/European Union formalised Greece’s Western belonging and confirmed that Western Europe has been its main political and cultural reference since the creation of the modern Greek state in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Greeks tend to look at other *Europeans* as ‘others’ and as ‘different’ to the foundations of Greek tradition and collective identity (Anagnostou 2005; Kokosalakis 2004). This perception is frequently mutual from other EU member-states, particularly on matters of foreign policy.¹ Legacies of the past, territorial insecurities and antagonistic identities in the Balkans have not been easily understood by Western and Northern EU member-states, and have often been exaggerated in Greek politics, largely for domestic political reasons.

The new European context at the turn of the twenty-first century poses new challenges to Greek national self-understandings. Four issues in particular have triggered shifts and affected understandings of *difference* and *identity* in Greece.

The first issue is the European Union’s deepening and widening processes. The inclusion of Greece in the first phase of the Euro zone implementation, on 1 January 2002, was more than an economic accomplishment; it has also been used as a symbolic referent of Greece’s belonging to ‘core’ Europe (Psimmenos 2004). Moreover, the 2004 enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe and the eastward shifting of the EU geopolitical, cultural and religious borders have made Greece inevitably less peripheral in the European landscape (Triandafyllidou and Spohn 2003). Both developments make Greek national discourses more firmly anchored in Europe, overcoming to a certain extent the idea of an ethno-religiously defined, compact and unitary national identity with little place for cultural or ethnic diversity.

The second factor, too, is EU-related. EU enlargement policy towards Turkey and the Balkans has opened yet another identity and geopolitical challenge for Greece. Enlargement is considered a vital factor that will contribute to and consolidate stability, democracy, good neighbourly relations and peace in South-Eastern Europe. As such, it has been defined as a core priority for Greek governments, supported by a solid consensus across the main political parties. Eurobarometer public opinion results, however, indicate that this consensus is not as equally widespread among Greek public opinion, which favours EU enlargement to South-East Europe, but is rather reluctant about the entry of Turkey to the EU, even if the latter fulfils all the accession criteria.² Predominantly Muslim Turkey, a historical threatening Other for Greece, stirs unresolved identity and geopolitical questions and confuses the *East* with the *West* from a traditional Greek nationalist perspective.

Third, over the last two decades, ethnic, religious and linguistic minority rights have increasingly been a pressing matter in Europe due to the concurrence of two factors. On the one hand, regional legal and institutional frameworks—such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Convention on Human Rights—have made progress in promoting the recognition and protection of minorities across Europe. This progress has also, hesitantly, crept into the Greek socio-political reality, influencing debates and policies on the position and rights of minorities in Greece. Greece's religious and linguistic minorities have been a very sensitive matter, the Muslim minority being protected by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, and others disregarded and ignored. This 'sensitivity' has been described by a Greek analyst of political culture, Nikiforos Diamantouros (1983: 55), as an indication that the process of national integration has remained incomplete. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the re-shuffling of nations and borders in the Balkans have brought minority matters to the top of political agendas in Greece's immediate neighbourhood and in Greece itself. Defensive nationalism was re-ignited, irredentist claims, real or perceived, were pronounced, and the wars in the Balkans—at Greece's borders—in the 1990s increased the need to address minority matters. Today, formal and informal discrimination remain serious concerns, although majority-minority relations have developed positively since the early 1990s.

Finally, since 1989, Greece has become host to a large number of immigrants mainly from the Balkans (Albania and Bulgaria), Central and Eastern Europe (Romania, the Ukraine and Russia) and, increasingly, Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China). Immigration poses a challenge to dominant Greek nationalist discourses, gradually obligating state institutions and public opinion to recognise that Greek society has become *de facto* multi-cultural and multi-ethnic.

The four dimensions outlined above heavily influence the context within which these debates took place, and the position of the state, other actors (i.e. the Greek Orthodox Church) and wider society. Hence, we discuss the dominant understandings of Greek national identity and, in relation to this, the ways in which difference is framed in current public and political discourses. Secondly, we outline the main parameters of most recent challenge to Greek national identity—immigration. The third and longest section of our paper analyses parliamentary debates and media coverage of the establishment of a mosque in downtown Athens. In conclusion, we assess the main understandings of migration-related cultural difference in Greece and how this has impinged upon dominant national self-understandings among Greek media and political elites.

National Identity and Difference

While the early currents of Greek nationalism in the late eighteenth century were marked by the influence of the Enlightenment and its ideals, the first decades of Greece's independence defined the nation in predominantly ethno-cultural terms, through references to common ancestry, culture and language (Kitromilidis 1983,

1990; Veremis 1983). The dominant narrative—constructed by Greek historiographers in the late-nineteenth century—was founded on Greece's classical past, continued with Christianity and the Byzantine Empire and concluded with Greece's subjugation to the Ottoman Empire and the national resurrection from 1821 onwards. The Greek national community was thus presented as *unique* in both its singularity and its universality. Moreover, the united and unique national community was invented and further reinforced through state policies in military conscription, education and culture throughout the twentieth century.

Greekness has been defined as an amalgamate of (belief in) common ancestry, cultural traditions and religion. This triple self-definition provided also for a triple boundary that distinguished Greeks from their neighbours to the west (Roman Catholic) and east (Muslims and Jews) because they were Christian Orthodox, and from those in the north (the Slavs) because of their claim to classical Greek culture. Modern Greece saw itself as the natural heir of the ancient Greek civilisation—as if culture were an object, and the nation its owner (Handler 1988: 142). This feature made this relatively small and economically under-developed country in the south-eastern periphery of the continent into a central symbol of the construction of a European civilisation (Tsoukalas 2002). Although territorial and civic features have also gained importance through the consolidation of the national territory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Greekness has often, even today, been defined as a transcendental notion in Greek public discourse (Tsoukalas 1993).

During the 1990s, we witnessed an increased fetishisation of Greekness and an increasing emphasis on ethnic and cultural features of national identity (Triandafyllidou 2007). More recent studies, however, that look into the first years of the twenty-first century, note that a more flexible understanding of Greek national identity among citizens and elites is emerging. Kokosalakis (2004) and Anagnostou and Triandafyllidou (2007) suggest that the increasing salience of European policies and symbols—such as the European currency—and the actual experiences of belonging to the Europe Union reinforce a civic and political value component in Greek national identity. In sum, the dominant discourses of defensive ethnic nationalism registered in the 1990s have recently given way to more open definitions of the nation, where civic and territorial elements play an important part.

Against this background of national identity formation and dominant nationalism discourses, difference in Greece is understood at two inextricably tied levels: ethnicity/nationality and religion. These two aspects emanate from the very definition of Greekness that successfully combined the particularism of the nation with the universalism of Greek Orthodoxy. Greek understanding of difference is mobilised and enacted with regard to both native minorities and immigrant groups. It is the historical experience of nation formation and difficult relations with neighbouring countries and their co-ethnic minorities within Greece that have shaped the Greek notion of ethnic and religious difference. As we show below, however, these historically shaped notions are today also projected towards the immigrant populations and relevant immigration legislation.

The dimension of ethnicity incorporated into the Greek definition of national citizenship is predominantly based on *ius sanguinis*, particularly reflected in the absence of provisions for second-generation immigrants. Thus, on the one hand, immigrants of ethnic Greek descent, like Pontic Greeks, were granted citizenship immediately on arrival—subject to proof of their Greek origins—regardless of whether or not they spoke the language or were familiar with Greek customs and mores. On the other hand, children born and bred in Greece of foreign parents are considered aliens because they cannot claim Greek ancestry.

Regarding religion as a dimension of difference, the Orthodox Church of Greece is constitutionally recognised as the ‘prevailing’ religion in Greece,³ while Islam enjoys a status as the religion of the autochthonous Muslim minority of Western Thrace (in north-eastern Greece). The only other recognised minority under public law is the Jewish one. These distinctions in themselves have restricted religious freedoms in Greece and have led to a series of discriminatory legal and administrative practices that relate to the rights of religious groups (see also Christopoulos and Tsitselikis 2003; Psychogiopoulou 2007).

The particularity of the Greek approach to religious difference and more specifically to the recognition of Islam arises mainly from the treaty-based protection of the Muslim population of Thrace. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne frames the protection of the Muslim population’s religious rights in minority rights terms⁴ and is heavily influenced by the bilateral political relations between Greece and Turkey. National security matters and tense Greek–Turkish relations consequently set the stage for the majority population’s perceptions and concerns with regard to—particularly religious—‘difference’.

Migrants and Muslims

The 1989 geopolitical changes and Greece’s EU membership have converted Greece, a traditional migrant sending country, into a target destination for large numbers of mainly undocumented immigrant workers from Eastern and Central Europe (and to a lesser degree from Africa and Asia). Most have settled in Greece and, through repeated regularisation programmes (1998, 2001, 2005 and 2007), have become a largely legal immigrant population. Between 1991 and the 2001 national census, the immigrant population grew exponentially from less than 2 per cent of the total population to estimates placing Greece in one of the top positions in Europe in terms of immigrant percentage of the whole population. Economic immigrants are estimated to be 1.2 million, including co-ethnic returnees—i.e. about 10 per cent of the total population and over 12 per cent of the total labour force (Cortese 2006; www.statistics.gr).

Main nationalities among the immigrant population include over 500,000 Albanian citizens, 150,000 co-ethnic returnees from the former Soviet Republics, 110,000–120,000 Asians (of whom around 40,000–50,000 Pakistanis, 20,000 Chinese and Filipinos, and 10,000–15,000 Bangladeshis and Indians; see Tonchev 2007),

47,000 citizens from the EU15 member-states (registered in 2001), 40,000–50,000 Poles (Christou *et al.* 2007) and at least as many Bulgarians. At the 2001 census, there were also approximately 20,000 Georgians, 17,000 Russians and 10,000 Ukrainians registered. It is estimated that the actual size of these immigrant groups is significantly larger today, eight years after the census, in spite of there being no recent data available.

Immigration poses an important challenge to the dominant Greek nationalist discourse. The recognition of Greek society as *de facto* multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, both on the part of state institutions and of the native society, has been urgent because of the growing need for suitable policy responses. Unfortunately, Greece's immigration policy continues to remain largely reactive, fragmented and extremely limited in measures promoting integration. Moreover, any efforts at encouraging immigrant acceptance in Greek society are largely predicated on a model of segmented assimilation: migrants are expected to assimilate culturally while socio-economically being largely confined to the secondary labour market, where jobs are insecure, informal, under-paid and low-skilled.

One particular feature of incoming migration in the last 15 years is that it has led to the expansion of the Muslim population in Greece. Taking into account the size of the Asian communities in the Athens area (Tonchev 2007), there are at least 60,000 Muslim immigrants in Athens (mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi citizens), without including Albanian citizens. The Muslim population of Athens also includes 15,000–20,000 West Thracian Muslims. Since 1997 this latter group—composed mainly of Pomacks—has established a self-financing organisation called *Filotita* (the Pan-Hellenic Federation for Supporting Muslims in Greece) which claims to represent all Muslims in Greece.

Muslim immigrants have also established their own associations over the last ten years—such as the Cultural Association of Muslims (Antoniou 2003)—which exist alongside nationality-based associations such as the Association of Pakistanis and Muslims, or the Association of Shia Muslim Pakistanis. So far, however, there has been rather limited mobilisation on the part of the Muslim communities. Three main reasons may be put forward as explanations. First, a significant portion of Muslim immigrants, particularly from Asia, see their migration project as transitory, having left their families back home. Second, converts to Islam in Greece who could function as bridges between the Muslim immigrants and the host society are very few. Third, Muslim politicians and MPs (former or candidate) and the *muftis* of Western Thrace have shown virtually no interest in supporting the religious organisation of these immigrants (Antoniou 2003). This fragmentation, alongside their overall marginalisation in Greek society, has made their voice rather weak in the Greek public sphere. Letters, articles and comments appear in blogs over the internet, or are published occasionally in Greek and immigrant newspapers, but this is incidental and there has been very limited mobilisation on these issues.

Regarding the exercise of their religious rights, the Muslims of Athens have faced important obstacles to the establishment of an official mosque in the capital, an

establishment which, according to Royal Decree 1363/1938 and its amendment 1672/1939, is subject to a government permit issued by the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. This government permit is issued following a non-binding Opinion provided by the Orthodox Church of Greece (OCG). The government's decision is based on an assessment of whether or not the religion is 'known', that its worship is not against public order and morals, that there is no exercise of proselytism and that there is a real need for the establishment of a church or other place of worship (Council of State Decisions 721/1969 and 1444/1991)—a situation which offers the executive committee considerable leeway in its conceptual evaluation of the terms 'known', 'need' and 'proselytism'. Furthermore, it offers a potentially rather wide scope for interference on behalf of the OCG. These points have been the focus of litigation cases at the European Court of Human Rights (Psychogiopoulou 2007).

They have also been highlighted by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, both in the 2002 Report and in the 2006 Follow-Up Assessment Report.⁵ In particular, regarding places of worship, the Commissioner recommended amendment of the relevant legislation and the vesting of the Secretary General for Religious Affairs with the sole responsibility for setting up an administrative procedure that would comprise a public enquiry for all interested parties, including the local bishop, to express their opinions. However, given the particular relation between church and state in Greece, these recommendations have remained simply recommendations.

The establishment of a religious venue for the Muslim population in Athens is perhaps the most sensitive area in terms of popular perceptions and the way in which the state has attempted to respond to the religious needs of the growing immigrant population. The debates that surrounded the need to construct a mosque in Athens exemplified the difficulty of coming to terms with religious diversity in Greece. We look at this more closely in the next section.

The Athens Mosque Controversy

There are over 300 mosques operating in Greece today, mainly in Western Thrace, though a few are found in the Dodecanese islands of Kos and Rhodes, where about 7,000 Muslims live. Since Greece's independence from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, there has not been a single mosque in official operation in Athens and the wider Attica region. However, recent demands for the establishment of a mosque are not new (Tsitselikis 2004). The first provisions for a mosque to be built in Athens date from 1880. The issue was discussed again in 1913 and the relevant legislation passed for the construction of one mosque in Athens and four in other areas of Greece. These legal provisions were essentially ignored and the promised mosques never built. In 1934, special provisions were taken (Law 6244 of 25 August 1934) for the construction of an Egyptian mosque and the creation of an Islamic Foundation for Egyptian students who held Egyptian government grants. However,

this law also remained solely on paper, though its main aim was to improve Greek–Egyptian relations with a view to protecting the Greek diaspora in Egypt. It is also worth noting that the legal framework created in Thrace with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 made it more difficult in the post-1923 period to build mosques in other areas of Greece (Tsitselikis 2004: 281–3).

More recently, in 1984, Sudanese students of Muslim faith asked for the building of a temple in the Goudi area in central Athens, to cater for their needs. The Greek authorities denied that specific permit but accepted that mosques could function to cater for the needs of the Muslim population of Athens with a view to ensuring social harmony in the neighbourhoods where Muslims lived. This legacy of laws voted but not implemented and the policy of denying a permit but allowing for the operation of prayer rooms remained the prevalent practice until recently.

During the past two decades, with the arrival of increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants, prayer rooms have proliferated in Greece's capital (Tsitselikis 2004: 285). Informal sources put the number of prayer rooms at over 100, mainly located in private apartments, basements, shops or storage facilities. In June 2007, an Arab Hellenic Center for Culture and Civilization was inaugurated in the Moschato neighbourhood of Athens which, although not an official place of worship, is functioning as a formal one. With a capacity for 2,000 persons, three prayer halls and six *imams*, the centre was set up by private initiative (funded by a Saudi Arabian investor and run by an Egyptian) to serve as a community centre in which to hold meetings, ceremonies and Islamic prayer.

Ambassadors from Arab states have been lobbying the Greek government to construct a mosque in the capital for over thirty years. However, the event that provoked significant public discussion was less the claim of the Muslim immigrant communities to have an official place of worship and more the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. In effect, in the context of preparing the 2004 Games, the need to provide a space for athletes and visitors belonging to the Muslim faith brought the 'Athens mosque' to the forefront of political agendas and the press.

Law 2833 was voted in 2000, providing for the establishment of a mosque in the eastern Athens suburb of Paiania. The law stipulated that this mosque should be constructed with the collaboration of the Greek public authorities and representatives of Arab countries. It was never put into practice. A second draft law on the subject of establishing a mosque was submitted to parliament in late 2006 by the ruling Conservative party New Democracy. This bill proposed the establishment of a mosque in Eleonas, near the centre of Athens. It stipulated that the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs would be exclusively responsible for its construction and finance, and it would be managed by an Administrative Board appointed by the same Ministry. The mosque would be constructed on public premises and the Ministry would be responsible for all related expenses.

In the following sections we analyse the press and parliamentary debates on the topic.⁶ We identify the main actors involved, the themes debated and the central political and value questions raised in the press. Our analysis of the parliamentary

debates focuses on the argumentation put forward by the different parties with a view to highlighting the dominant understandings of identity and difference and of how migration-related religious diversity should be accommodated in Greece.

Debates in the Press

Five quality daily newspapers, including their respective Sunday editions if these appear under a different title—*Rizospastis*, *Eleftherotypia*, *Ta Nea*, *To Vima* and *Kathimerini*—have been included in the analysis of the press discourse.⁷ These newspapers were reviewed electronically by searching their online electronic archives. Our analysis covers the period between January 2004 and December 2006 and includes news reports and editorials by each newspaper. Sixty-five articles, focusing specifically on the mosque question, were identified and analysed in terms of the main themes, the actors reported in the coverage and the political questions raised.

The articles of the Communist party newspaper—*Rizospastis*—mainly provide for news reporting. In the other four newspapers there is a strong similarity in terms of the issues covered, the positions presented and the subjects analysed. Out of the five newspapers, *Eleftherotypia* has accorded the most attention to the overall debate, publishing 26 of the 66 news stories analysed.

Actors and Themes

The actors the most frequently cited by the press include religious authorities (the OCG and in particular Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and the bishop of Paiania), state authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs), local government (the Mayor of the City of Athens and the Mayor of Paiania) and some, though more limited, reference to Muslim organisations (and specifically to representatives of the Pakistani immigrant community). Clearly, the debate is dominated by institutional actors representing the dominant majority—Christian Orthodox Greeks. It is important to stress that the minority whose religious needs *were* to be addressed (Muslim immigrants) was represented in the public debate in a very restricted manner. Both in the press and in parliament, we argue that the debate was essentially seen as an issue that had to be addressed and discussed among Greek stakeholders and institutions. Immigrants belonging to the Muslim faith were, of course, referred to extensively but were not invited to take part in the debate. In the mainstream press, there are quotes by and references to the Pakistani community—which took a very active and vocal lead in the public sphere in lobbying for the construction of a mosque—basically referring to their criticism of and frustration with the current situation. In addition, there are numerous personalised stories, interviews and quotes of individual migrants published (see, *inter alia*, *Eleftherotypia*, 21 and 22 March 2004, 04 April 2006, and *Ta Nea*, 31 July 2004)⁸ that provide personal accounts of migrants' difficulty in practicing their religion. Giving the human, individualised dimension of the story

appears to have been the preferred reporting approach, rather than more formal reference to collective rights.

The press coverage focuses on the national political and religious elites, with extensive coverage of the personalised disagreements taking place not only *between* political parties but also *within* them. In other words, the left-wing/right-wing dimension is largely irrelevant in organising the opinions of Greek politicians in favour of or against the construction of a mosque in Athens. Similarly, much attention is paid to the opinions expressed by Archbishop Christodoulos of Greece, whose official statements are always in full support of the establishment of this mosque, but which tend to be intertwined with comments by the press suggesting that this support is hypocritical, and covering up the fact that the Church is discreetly obstructing the mosque's establishment. It is also interesting to note that there exists a distance between positions expressed at the local and at the national levels. Local authorities and representatives of the local church—as reported extensively in the press—took on the role of 'defending' the native population from the 'imposition' of a religious establishment that constitutes a symbol of past oppression and a threat to Greek national identity and unity. The opposite position is taken mainly by the Holy Synod or by official government and left-wing representatives. Their support for the mosque's construction is expressed on the basis of democratic freedoms and duties, respect and tolerance towards religious and other differences.

The opinions and position of the Muslim immigrants directly concerned with the issue are relatively marginal to the overall debate. *Eleftherotypia* and, to a lesser extent, *Ta Nea* only report on them, with immigrants and immigrant representatives expressing their opinion and the need to have a formal place in which to pray and a cemetery in which to bury their dead. Their opposition to the establishment of the mosque in the suburbs of Athens (as opposed to the centre) is emphasised.

The Main Political and Value Issues at Stake

The establishment of the mosque is accepted, in principle, by all sides (with the exception of the Bishop of Thessaloniki, who takes a more critical approach overall). It is considered a necessary venue for the needs of those of the population practicing the Muslim faith, and a reasonable religious freedom. However, questions and issues raised in the debates illustrate that there is a significant underlying unease. Where should the mosque be built? What would the symbolic implications be regarding each possible location? How would the local majority population react to its construction? What would be the 'dangers' of this construction? Thus, while addressing the topics presented in Table 1, our analysis of the coverage is organised along two main lines. The first concerns geopolitics and identity, or the role of the 'foreign factor' in the establishment and functioning of the mosque. The second asks what the value basis is upon which the building of the mosque should be decided and implemented. Both dimensions provide interesting perspectives through which to consider the position of cultural and religious difference in Greek society.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of press coverage on the Athens mosque construction

Theme	Newspaper	No. of relevant articles	Total
Establishment of an Islamic centre of study	<i>Eleftherotypia</i>	2	6
	<i>Kathimerini-English edition</i>	1	
	<i>Ta Nea</i>	1	
	<i>To Vima</i>	2	
Informal prayer rooms in Athens	<i>Eleftherotypia</i>	5	7
	<i>Ta Nea</i>	1	
	<i>To Vima</i>	1	
Opinions on the establishment and location of the mosque	<i>Eleftherotypia</i>	14	37
	<i>Kathimerini-English edition</i>	4	
	<i>Kathimerini</i>	3	
	<i>Rizospastis</i>	2	
	<i>To Vima</i>	4	
	<i>Ta Nea</i>	10	
Funding and procedural aspects relating to the building functioning of the mosque	<i>Eleftherotypia</i>	4	11
	<i>Kathimerini-English edition</i>	2	
	<i>Rizospastis</i>	1	
	<i>To Vima</i>	1	
	<i>Ta Nea</i>	3	
History of the establishment of the mosque in Athens	<i>Kathimerini</i>	1	3
	<i>Eleftherotypia</i>	1	
	<i>To Vima</i>	1	
Lack of a Muslim cemetery	<i>Ta Nea</i>	2	2
TOTAL			66

Note: For a full list of articles analysed, see Gropas and Triandafyllidou (2007).

The 'Foreign Factor'

An important theme in the debates is the 'foreign factor' and the perceived potential threats related to the construction of the mosque. The press links the religious aspects of Islam (the building and functioning of a mosque in Athens) with the question of national security and the relationship between Turkey and Greece, thus short-circuiting the debate. The construction of the mosque becomes part of the larger security debate related to Islamic fundamentalism—terrorism in general and the Turkish Other in particular. These threats are sometimes explicitly expressed, while on other occasions they are alluded to through rhetorical questions:

Who will provide guidance to the conscience of Muslims living in Greece? Which country will take charge of this education, a neighbouring one [Turkey] or one from further afield? (*Kathimerini*, 30 April 2006).

Similarly, another article underlines that the mosque will be financed by the Greek state and not by 'other Islamic organisations' while 'particular attention will be paid to the selection of the imams' (*Ta Nea*, 26 July 2006).⁹

The question of the mosque becomes intertwined with Greece's most significant Other—Turkey—and the West's most significant threat—violent Islamic fundamentalism—rather than being treated as part of internal arrangements within

Greek society. Cultural and religious differences are thus defined as coming from outside and/or necessarily related to a sense of threat—both military and symbolic—to the nation and its well-being.

Although the press makes no direct link between the building of a mosque for the needs of the Muslim residents of Athens—economic immigrants in their vast majority—and the religious rights or freedoms of the native Muslim minority of Western Thrace, there are several questions raised by journalists and academics in the press that point to the implicit intertwining of the two issues. For instance, questions were raised regarding the language in which prayer meetings would be held, the way in which the *imam* would be elected (pointing to the internal differentiations among Sunni and Shiite Muslim immigrants), and whether or not the Greek state should pay for the *imam's* salary and the management expenses of the mosque under the principle of equality between all creeds. The way these issues are regulated for the Muslim minority of Western Thrace, and the tensions that have arisen in the past or still exist about the election of the *mufti* by the local community, or his appointment by the Greek state, are all referred to (Anagnostou and Triandafyllidou 2007; Tsitselikis 2003). More security-related questions on how to prevent the mosque from coming under the influence of Muslim religious leaders from other regions, or where the *imams* will be trained and educated (pointing to the need for a religious school in the context of Greek public higher education) are also raised. The implicit fear is here again of the 'foreign factor' if the *imams* are to be educated in neighbouring Turkey.

One proposal put forward is the creation of a Greek–Muslim Institute that would represent the Muslim communities in Greece and manage the Athens mosque. Yet questions have been raised about how to prevent it being financed (in part or totally) by 'foreign' actors who would thus have a . . .

. . . strong and dangerous weapon at their disposal. Because we agree with the establishment of a mosque in Athens, but we do not intend to allow the creation of an international centre for educating terrorists (or at the very least fanatic enemies of our Western world) (*Kathimerini*, 30 April 2006).¹⁰

Thus, initiatives that lead to the institutionalisation of a wider Muslim presence are impregnated with a 'foreign threat' and (in)security discourse.

Religious Difference and Political Values

The mosque debate included an important value dimension: the value basis on which to decide in favour of or against the building of the mosque. A telling example of this perspective is offered by an article published in *Ta Nea* based on an interview with the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs.¹¹ Minister Bakoyannis expressed support for the timely establishment of the mosque in central Athens because she considered this as being part of the wider dialogue between Europe and the US on the one hand and the Muslim world on the other. Similarly, another article, in *Eleftherotypia*, emphasised that Orthodoxy and Islam had lived side-by-side for centuries, rejected the automatic

clash between these faiths and saw current socio-economic exclusion and underdevelopment as the roots of fundamentalism.¹² These articles call for a dialogue between religions and cultures and express a willingness to recognise and accommodate religious and cultural diversity in Greece. However, they do not reflect on the fact that many European citizens and residents are Muslims, nor do they engage in a discussion on how and whether Greek national identity is also in the course of being re-defined in view of an increasing migrant population that has settled in the country.

In the context of this debate, especially during 2006, the press emphasised that the mosque should be built and that a refusal to build it would constitute a violation of basic rights and freedoms as stated in the Greek Constitution. The conservative quality daily *Kathimerini* argued that even the issuance of an 'opinion' on the part of the OCG was unconstitutional and a violation of religious rights and freedoms. In the same article, the absolute association between Greece and Orthodoxy was rejected (*Kathimerini*, 30 April 2006).

Some articles (*Eleftherotypia*, 15 April and 23 May 2006; *Ta Nea*, 22 July 2004) stressed the need to disassociate religious and national identity, since citizenship is a legal public matter, whereas religion belongs to the realm of private life. It was also argued that the mosque should be built for the religious needs of Muslims, regardless of nationality. This line of reasoning adopts a Republican viewpoint of the type of important political principle traditionally supported by French elites and state institutions: religious freedom and the respect of religious diversity. However, diversity was to be recognised and accommodated only as an *individual private matter* and not as an issue associated with the *recognition of collective rights*. In this context, the establishment of a temple of worship for persons belonging to other religions was considered necessary in a 'European' and democratic country like Greece in the twenty-first century. In numerous statements, the terms 'tolerance' and 'democracy' were repeated, providing for a clear political framing of the issue. Nevertheless, the question of how Greek citizenship could and should be pluralised in response to the changing character of Greek society was not discussed by any of the newspapers.

Although the positive views constitute a step forward for dissociating religion and the state, and emancipating state authorities from the OCG, the underlying themes of the debate reproduce stereotypical perceptions of Islam and Muslim difference. The increasing presence of Islam is *de facto* connected to threats of indirect means through which Turkish influence, intervention and national interests will be promoted within Greece. It is equally connected to threats of fundamentalism and international terrorism. It thus raises an aspect of national security, which complements other dimensions of insecurity (identity, social unrest and the polarisation of society, etc.).

Debates in Parliament

A debate held in the Hellenic parliament on 7 November 2007 focused on the bill for the establishment of a mosque in Athens which was voted on the same day.¹² We do

not aim here to summarise all the issues discussed during the parliamentary session but rather to highlight some of the rationales presented by the main political parties in support of the mosque's construction or relevant concerns that were raised.

The government framed its bill in reference to respect for human rights, tolerance towards difference and a continuous and multi-level dialogue between civilisations and religions (880). This was seen to be in agreement with national historical experiences of the Greek nation that emphasised the role of religion and the importance of protecting religious identity and rights. Thus, the bill was supported in full patriotic ethos, as this quote from the Parliamentary Proceedings demonstrates:

The best example is the Greek citizen who deserves to be proud because, historically, he has deeply experienced restriction of his rights, persecution, the limitation of his religious identity and an attempt to annihilate Greekness and Orthodoxy. Consequently, our historic identity fully understands the importance of religious tolerance. (...) This is why we have understood the mutual and inter-related relation between the principles of human dignity and humanity (...) this is our civilisation, this is our historic legacy (880).

The need to respond to the immigrants' religious needs was presented as a historic duty and a responsibility to demonstrate the democratic credentials of Greek state and society. The refusal to proceed with the construction of the mosque was presented as a cultural retreat, a 'victory of xenophobia' and an 'unnecessary confirmation' of Huntington's clash of civilisations (881). Moreover, the Minister of National Education and Religious Affairs, who has the responsibility for all matters relating to the mosque, underlined that this mosque is a constitutional responsibility of Greece and a response to the needs of the Muslim residents of Athens. She clarified that she in no way considered the matter to be associated with any dimension of Greek foreign policy, nor similar to or connected with the Muslims of Thrace and the Treaty of Lausanne arrangements (896). The argument of the Conservative Party reinforced the representation of Greece as a democratic European country—this issue was also emphasised in the press discourse—and distinguished between the Greek–Turkish entanglement within which the Muslims of Thrace are caught and religious diversity related to immigration.

The discourse of the Socialist Party (in opposition) was similarly framed in terms of fundamental freedom protection. However, the party also emphasised the need to safeguard cultural pluralism, difference and multiculturalism (881) at a time when globalisation threatens to flatten differences. References to Greece's close ties with the Arab world were also referred to as further reasons for supporting the mosque (890). The Socialist Party did raise two critical points, however. First, it accused the government of failing to recognise and appropriately accommodate the religious, linguistic, national and ethnic diversity within the Muslim immigrant population. Second, it accused them of adopting a top-down approach without engaging in dialogue with the representatives of the immigrant population to allow them to express their needs and wishes on the matter. It is in this party-politics context that

there is more extensive reference to the Muslim immigrants as stakeholders on this issue and to the fact that they ought to have been more substantially engaged in the debate and the decision-making process.

The two far-left parties—the Greek communist party (KKE) and the Alliance of the Left (*Synaspismos*)—while supporting the creation of the mosque, focused their arguments on the fundamental need to proceed with a complete separation between the Greek state and the Church (883–5). In agreement with the Socialists, the Alliance of the Left denounced the statist character of the mosque’s management. However, they also adopted a more conservative discourse, pointing to the need to avoid situations where extremist ‘Bin Laden-type fundamentalists’ might control the mosque, as is the case in ‘all other European cities’ (885).

The Parliamentary Proceedings show a cross-party consensus on the need to establish a mosque in Athens. The debate is framed overall in terms of values and constitutional principles, emphasising that Greece is a modern, Western European country and, as such, should respect cultural and religious diversity. The parliamentary debate goes a step further in terms of acknowledging that Greek society has changed in the course of the past two decades: the important contribution of Greece’s immigrant population to the country’s economy and the need for the state to make the necessary accommodations for this population to be able to enjoy its fundamental rights and freedoms were emphasised by different MPs (893). Concerns about the role of the ‘foreign factor’ in the mosque’s establishment and functioning were much less pronounced in the parliamentary debates than in the press.

Concluding Remarks: Constructing Difference and Identity in Greece

Most Muslims in Athens are neither Turkish nor of Turkish origin, but are economic immigrants or asylum-seekers from the Middle East and South-East Asia. This demographic ‘detail’, however, does not appear to have been relevant for the development of the mosque debate. The construction of the mosque in Athens was associated with Greece’s Ottoman past, the Cyprus and Aegean disputes, and Turkey’s aggression towards Greece (in political and military terms). These issues were sown into the press and political debate even though they have no direct relevance to the issue. The location of the mosque in the centre of Athens was also framed by some journalists and religious leaders as symbolic of the ‘Turkish threat’ and/or the ‘Ottoman jug’ that Greece experienced for four centuries.

The Holy Synod, official government representatives, and in particular the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the main representatives of the left-wing political parties, framed their support for the mosque’s construction with reference to the value of democracy, respect for religious freedoms, constitutional rights and ‘the Greek state’s duty to ensure respect and tolerance towards difference’ (*Kathimerini*, 16 April 2006).

However, the argument was not limited to a rights–duties value dimension. The practical necessity of the mosque was framed in patriotic terms, as supporting Greek

national interests. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, for instance, argued that, for Greece to have the authority to pressure Turkey and other countries to respect human rights and European values, Greece cannot deprive the right to religious worship in an appropriate venue to hundreds of thousands of legal residents. She noted: 'We are asking for the re-establishment of the Halki Theological School in Istanbul and at the same time we do not even have a mosque in our capital' (*Ta Nea*, 28 March 2006). These inconsistencies and double standards are pointed out less as value questions and more as weak points preventing Greece from successfully promoting its national interests and need, therefore, to be remedied.

Alongside this patriotic framing of the mosque bill, there was extensive reference to the fact that religious freedom is a core value and a right that everyone should be able to exercise freely. There was, in principle, support for the rights of the 'other.' However, such declaratory statements were not followed up by concrete proposals to speed up the establishment of the mosque. Moreover, they were rarely disassociated from statements of 'but ... there are other issues that need to be taken into consideration (i.e. location, funding, ulterior motives, etc)' that in effect hampered the process and arguably demonstrate an implicit Islamophobia.

Finally, as mentioned above, the public debate that resulted from the desirability of accommodating the needs of part of the population within Greece, did not involve any re-consideration of Greek identity. The Greek press and parliamentary debates analysed suggest that current cultural and religious differences characterising Greek social reality are observed with a degree of detachment, as they are not considered relevant for national culture or identity. Rather, Greece's social reality is perceived as one that has fallen upon Greek society and that has to be accommodated in line with the constitutional principles of Greece and with a view to furthering national interests. At best, this is 'tolerated' because Greece is a democratic country; at worst, it is approached as a potential 'foreign threat' to national independence and authenticity. There is as yet no debate on how to accommodate cultural and religious difference in inclusive and integrating ways, or how to make this diversity part of contemporary Greek society. In other words, dominant national self-understandings remain mono-cultural and mono-religious. The challenge of migration-related diversity is not yet fully addressed in institutional or normative terms and the integration of this population into the self-definition of the nation is, for the time being, not raised as a public issue. It remains to be seen whether and when this law on the construction of a mosque in Athens will eventually be implemented.

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Notes

- [1] Illustrative of this is the ‘Macedonian question’, which has occupied Greek foreign policy since the early 1990s: the recognition of the official name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (see also Roudometof 1996).
- [2] The support for Turkey joining the EU if it fulfils all the criteria is on average, in the EU25, 48 per cent against, with the highest opposition found in Austria (81 per cent), Germany and Luxembourg (69 per cent), Cyprus (68 per cent) and Greece (67 per cent). Data from Eurobarometer, No. 255: 65.2, July 2006, accessed 18 October 2006 at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_255_en.pdf.
- [3] Greek Constitution, First Part: General Provisions: Relations between Church and State, Article 3. Online at: <http://www.parliament.gr/politeuma/syntagmaDetails.asp?ArthroID=3>.
- [4] This Treaty guarantees the preservation of *sharia* (Islamic law) as a separate jurisdiction presided over by *muftis* (religious leaders) who provide spiritual leadership, supervise the management of the property of the Muslim community and the operation of religious schools. The use of *sharia* is voluntary and geographically restricted to the regions where this minority population lives. More importantly, however, it replaces the Greek Civil code. The *mufti* decisions acquire legal force after the judiciary confirms their compliance with civil and constitutional principles. Given the extraordinary nature of this freedom, the Greek government has persistently attempted to manage the selection process of *muftis*; over the past 15 years, there has been significant opposition between the Muslim community and the Greek state, given the latter’s insistence on having exclusive competence over their selection. The Greek government’s position is that the functions of the religious leaders include legal and administrative decisions and, therefore, responsibility for these functions must be held by individuals with state recognition.
- [5] Council of Europe (2002, 2006), online at <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=984125&BackColorInternet=99B5AD&BackColorIntranet=FABF45&BackColorLogged=FFC679>, accessed 10 March 2007.
- [6] Our study took place under the auspices of a larger research project entitled A European Approach to Multicultural Citizenship: Legal, Political and Educational Challenges (EMILIE), 2006–2009; for more information, see: <http://emilie.eliamep.gr/emilie-reports-on-multiculturalism-debates/#more-41>.
- [7] *Kathimerini* is a quality broadsheet of centre-right orientation (with an English language insert every Friday), *Eleftherotypia*, *Ta Nea* and *To Vima* are centre-left-wing. They are quality newspapers, although the language they use is more sensational than that used by *Kathimerini*. *Rizospastis* is the official newspaper of the Greek Communist Party.
- [8] Respectively, ‘A hideout for Allah in Athens’; ‘...and police controls outside the mosques’; ‘14 places of worship for Muslims in Athens’; ‘We are praying in garages and storage places’. All original quotes in Greek were translated into English by the authors.
- [9] Parliamentary proceedings, Session 3, Meeting 12, pp. 880–905, available at <http://www.parliament.gr/ergasies/praktika/pdf/es07112006.pdf>, accessed 17 September 2007. All page numbers in parentheses in this section of the paper refer to these proceedings.
- [10] Article entitled ‘Mosques and imams’.
- [11] ‘The mosque is going to...Monastiraki’, *Ta Nea*, 28 March 2006.
- [12] ‘A mosque of isolation or coexistence?’, *Eleftherotypia*, 8 April 2006.

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