Somewhere Between Paris and Tehran

Exploring Greece's Media-mediated Sociopolitics of Religion and their Implicit Class Connotations

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There is a seeming paradox lying at the heart of the Greek Orthodox Church and her presence in the public realm. Mediated by the media and thus reflected in the public sphere, Greece's Church is seen as *simultaneously* a top-down pillar of state power, Greek history and splendour *and* a bottom-up subversion of the nation's prospects by the "uneducated plebs". In a kaleidoscopic way, and depending on timing, context, speaker, and so on, the sociopolitical aspects of Greece's Church are at times approached as a Trojan horse of the Greek state proper ("deep" and "shallow" alike) and the bourgeoisie, assisting in the subjugation of the working class, and at times as a popular, working-class insurgency halting Greece's march towards a brighter, "European" future prepared by a forward-looking, Western-oriented, Enlightened, reformist avant-garde bourgeoisie.

Of course, this paradoxical picture is indeed a contradiction in terms; it cannot possibly be that *both* descriptions and media-mediated portrayals reflect reality, lest we are examining "Schrödinger's Church". Yet it is precisely in this M.C. Escher-like kaleidoscopic reflection of the Church in public discourse, fusing oppositional politics, class connotations, identity politics and their opposites, that the Church retains her spectral nature as a "spectre that haunts Greece". This paradoxical Church as portrayed in the media does not exist, *it cannot possibly exist*, in the same way that the refugees'

"Norway" cannot exist (Žižek 2015). And if the Church as it is imaged in the public discourse "does not exist", then "everything is permitted".

This chapter[1] does *not* deal with what the Church is and what the Church does, or with Church-State relations *per se*: it focuses on the *representations* of the Greek Orthodox Church in public discourse, and particularly in the media-mediated public discourse. To achieve this, I employ a multi-method approach, integrating media research, discourse analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork in Athens. My methodological choices for gathering empirical material include (a) media research, systematically analysing newspaper articles, television news programs, and online platforms to identify patterns and trends in the representation of the Greek Orthodox Church, (b) archival data, contextualising my findings and tracing the evolution of the Church's representations over time, and (c) ethnographic fieldwork, based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations with various stakeholders, including clergy, laypeople, and journalists, in Athens. Regarding my method of analysis, I deploy a combination of discourse analysis (thus identifying underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural assumptions) and, to a lesser extent, content analysis. The chapter explores its titular subject at times with concrete examples and at times by commenting on, and analysing, ubiquitous tropes in Greece's public discourse — such as "we are Tehran now" or "this is the Middle Ages", tropes so ubiquitous and quotidian that pinpointing that or the other example would constitute a vain exercise. Two case studies are presented in detail: the late January 2023 "Tatsopoulos affair" and the class connotations projected onto religion during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter's aim is to excavate past the "known knowns" —to quote Donald H. Rumsfeld (US Department of Defense 2002)—, i.e. that Greece's right-wing voices generally tend to approach Orthodoxy as a pillar of Hellenic identity, of values, of societal cohesion and of the state's *gravitas*, whereas Greece's left-wing voices tend to see the Church as an enabler and facilitator of right-wing and upper-class oppression with deep historical roots in the Greek Civil War and the Left-Right divide (see e.g. Antonakos et al. 2021). Analysing that much would be carrying coals to Newcastle (or, more fittingly, bringing owls to Athens). Assessing the situation,

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including its class connotations, requires going beyond a Left-Right divide — and taking a detour via Paris and Tehran.

Between Paris and Tehran: Greek Neo-Orientalism Redux

Greece regularly appears in surveys —from the Pew Research Center (2018) to Greece's DiaNEOsis (World Values Survey 2018)— as having one of the highest EU scores in "believing in God", "trusting the Church as an institution", "deeming religion as important" and so on. Yet religion is also a point of contention in a larger context with ample class culture connotations. I have argued (Mitralexis 2017) that Greek public discourse is saturated by the "cultural dualism' narrative, whose prevalence and pre-eminence implicitly dominates Greek politics. The "cultural dualism" ("underdog culture") reading of Modern Greece divides Greek society and political life into an "underdog" Orthodox conservative culture and a "reformist" Western secular culture, thus forming a Neo-Orientalist schematization in Greek academia, journalism and political discourse. This "underdog culture" narrative is identified as the implicit hermeneutic approach almost universally employed when studying non-standard political and cultural thought in Greece: other forms thereof comprise the dichotomies of "normal/non-biased" versus "anti-Western", "European' versus "national-populist", "secular" versus "religious/ Byzantine/ Orthodox" etc. (e.g. Tsoukalis 1999; Couloumbis 2001; Pagoulatos 2003; Mandravelis 2011; Diamandouros 2013; Triandafyllidou et al. 2013; Ntampoudi 2014a; Ntampoudi 2014b; Liakos and Kouki 2015). By "Greek Neo-Orientalism" we are referring to a phenomenon characterised by Greeks' internalization and appropriation of Orientalist or Balkanist stereotypes to describe or criticize their own country. It shares similarities with Balkanism but is distinct in that its narratives originate from Greece or Greeks abroad. The main traits of Greek Neo-Orientalism are: (a) being voiced by Greeks, (b) employing typical Orientalist/Balkanist stereotypes adapted for Greece's historical context, and (c) advocating for further alignment with the West. This phenomenon is a response to the stereotypes of Balkanism, as Greek intellectuals attempt to "become Western/European" by elevating these stereotypes to a new level of original intellectual

production, making Greek Neo-Orientalism a distinct phenomenon (Mitralexis 2017, 128–129).

Although this schematisation derives from the late 20th century, its pedigree runs deeper into Greece's history: for example, in Adamantios Korais' "Metakenosis" doctrine in the early 19th century (Papaderos 1970), according to which Greece *becomes* Greek (again) by imitating Western European norms in order to be de-Ottomanised and de-Mediaevalised. So far as religion is concerned, a 1916 "Memorandum on Religious Matters" by Andreas Michalakopoulos (1875-1938, PM 1924-1925), Minister of Public Lands and Internal Settlement in Eleftherios Venizelos' government of "National Defence" in Thessaloniki at the apex of Greece's National Schism, is quite telling: therein Michalakopoulos advises the PM to enforce a "modernisation of religion", so that Orthodoxy becomes more "Western" in nature and better suited to serve the aims of the state and of the state ideology to come (Michalakopoulos 2000).

Returning to today's predicament, quite paradoxically the Greek Orthodox Church is seen by state and media as simultaneously a pillar of state power and an underdog, an impediment to progress. *On the one hand*, Orthodoxy is seen as an irreplaceable staple of collective identity and society. When SYRIZA, spearheaded by the self-styled atheist Alexis Tsipras, was marching during 2012–2015 towards forming what proved to be an ill-fated government (2015–2019), the fact that "the future PM is an atheist!" was presented as a grave threat with unforeseen implications. This was a recurring theme during the 2018/19 attempt to reform Church-State relations and the 2019 revision of Greece's constitution — which failed to insert a clause to the effect that "the Greek state is religiously neutral" while Orthodoxy would remain "Greece's prevailing religion" according to §3. In view of that constitutional revision, MP (and, at the time of writing this, Minister of the Interior) Makis Voridis of the conservative "Nea Dimokratia" party and of noted rhetorical acumen warned, somewhat comically, that SYRIZA's Alexis Tsipras strived to "cancel/abolish Christmas" and "remove the Christian cross from Greece's flag" (TVXS.gr 2018).[2] The invocation of Orthodoxy by Greece's right wing has been thoroughly documented, particularly as far as Greece's recent years of crisis are concerned (Antonakos et al. 2021); but what could perhaps

[2] The present author's very Greek penchant for irony finds it most poignant that the then-governing party did not retort, in a similarly theatrical way, by invoking the *Berliner Fernsehturm* debate during the *Rache des Papstes* affair and by claiming, Hermann Henselmann-style, that 'it's not a cross on Greece's flag; it's a plus for socialism'.

prove to be more interesting is that, *on the other hand*, Orthodoxy itself is —at times implicitly and at times implicitly— seen as a threat by Greek political discourse *across party lines,* including *within* the right-wing. In classic Greek Neo-Orientalist style (Mitralexis 2017, 128–129), and unless kept under control, Orthodox "impulses" are seen across the political spectrum as an impediment to Greece's proper "modernisation", "Westernisation", 'Europeanisation'; an impediment to Greece reaching "the Enlightenment", which in this context is not a two-centuries-old historical development, but a future event of a messianic, secularised political eschatology (apart from Mitralexis 2017, see also Herzfeld 2002; Herzfeld 2016; Safieddine 2020). Across party- and ideological lines, Greece is thus seen as oscillating between "Paris" and "Tehran': "Paris" as representing the messianic, eschatological attainment of "Europe" and "Westernisation',[3] since the exception of France's *laïcité* is seen as the European norm, while "Tehran", short for Iran's system of the Islamic Republic, as representing "theocracy", Greece's *failure* to be *properly European and Western* (and thus being doomed to the "East'), a *failure* in achieving Korais' *Metakenosis* — a lamentable victory for the hordes of working-class underdogs*,* not for the Enlightened upper-middle-class reformers.

It is not challenging to divine that these narratives attain a modicum of coherence only when meticulously mediated by Greece's media. This paper will proceed with an examination of two case studies to that end: the early 2023 "Tatsopoulos affair" and 2020–21's COVID-19 realities.

About the Church, yet Without the Church: À propos the Tatsopoulos Affair

Case in point. One might cite the late January 2023 "Tatsopoulos affair", which took Greece's media by storm, as an example illustrating how Greece's public discourse is implicitly steeped in a cultural dualism narrative between agents of "the Enlightenment" and agents of "mediaeval obscurantism" — a narrative that puts the Greek Church at the centre of its analysis, even *in the absence* of the Church itself; a narrative *about* the Church, yet *without* the Church. The incident involved two media

[3] *And modernity*, as is worth noting; the idea that there are indeed "multiple modernities", à la Eisenstadt (2000), seems to elude the attention of the "reform camp'.

personalities involved in politics with varying degrees of success: Filippos Kampouris, a trash TV presenter and aspiring political candidate with the right-wing parliamentary party "Greek Solution" (Ελληνική Λύση) in Greece's upcoming 2023 national elections, and Petros Tatsopoulos, a writer, former Coalition of the Radical Left MP (SYRIZA, 2012–2014) and current *Nea Dimokratia* politician (News247.gr 2018) (2018–, including an unsuccessful candidacy in 2019's national elections on the ticket of the conservative party) who at times flirts with trash TV qualities as well.[4]

Tatsopoulos was arrested *in flagrante delicto* on 30 January outside an Athenian bookstore following, as reported, a libel/slander/defamation lawsuit (Kampouris 2023) and hence *in flagrante delicto* according to Greek law) by Filippos Kampouris (Kondaraki 2023).[5] According to Tatsopoulos himself, he was released "within two hours" following the review of the case by the prosecutor's office (Proto Thema 2023). The reason was a Facebook post by the former MP and conservative politician against the right-wing political candidate, in which he described Kampouris as a 'trash TV proconsul" («ανθύπατος της trash tv») who claims to have been saved by a miracle following a major stroke and now, claiming to be on the receiving end of a miracle, attempts to be elected to parliament on the right-wing "Greek Solution" ticket (MegaTV 2023). For those not well-versed in Greek politics, "Greek Solution" (Ελληνική Λύση) is a right-wing, nationalist political party founded in 2019 (receiving 3,7% of the popular vote in the 2019 national elections) by Kyriakos Velopoulos, a former member of the Greek Parliament and a controversial figure in Greek politics criticised for his extreme views and the promotion of conspiracy theories. Apart from religion, Kampouris claims Tatsopoulos defamed and ridiculed him on the basis of his health problems and those of his sister (cancer), while he concludes his message with an ALL-CAPS reminder that he is a candidate for parliament with "Greek solution" in Northern

[4] For example, Tatsopoulos is notorious for his 2012 public statement during his term as an MP with the Coalition of the Radical Left [SYRIZA]: "Although I have slept with half of Athens' population, [the neo-Nazi party] Golden Dawn calls me a faggot", presumably the female half of the capital's population, given the context (Demetis 2012; Doumanis 2012). Given that Athens has a population of about 4 million people, the researcher has been unable to assert the veracity of this claim during his fieldwork, also taking into account the sensitive nature of the question and the attention to the code of research ethics. Almost ten years later, and after an unsuccessful candidacy with the conservative *New Democracy* party in the 2019 elections, Tatsopoulos celebrated the notoriety of his phrase in an interview, noting that "This phrase was peeled off and travelled through outer space' [Η φράση αυτή αποφλοιώθηκε και ταξίδεψε στο διάστημα] (iEfimerida 2021).

[5] According to current Greek law, certain types of lawsuits allow for *in flagrante delicto* arrests by the police *before* the prosecutor's office reviews the case in order to release or retain the accused. That this is problematic is self-explanatory, as this incident among many demonstrates.

Athens' B1 constituency, in a move that could hardly be criticised as being overly discreet (Kampouris 2023). Court is pending; Tatsopoulos was not found guilty on anything *per se*, his short-lived arrest was purely on the basis of *in flagrante delicto*, and it is exceedingly difficult to imagine that Kampouris would win in court. As a result of the incident, however, both protagonists were thrust into the public eye while claiming to defend different public values, something which could have purchase in the political arena.

This incident is most germane to our subject, since public attention was transposed from what it actually was about to that which it *was not* about: the Church. While Kampouris publicly claimed that Tatsopoulos had offended his religious conscience (MegaTV 2023), it is important to note that a libel lawsuit invokes personal harm caused by statements, damage to the plaintiff's reputation, or emotional reactions; the legal dimension of the incident is exhausted to the purported damage to the plaintiff. The legal dimension of the incident, the lawsuit, was reported as neither involving blasphemy, which does not form part of Greece's current penal code, Law 4619/2019 (although it was included in the old penal code as article 198, yet was wholly removed in 2019 and thus may no longer be invoked) nor "discrimination on the basis of religion" on the basis of the relatively recent "anti-racist legislation" (Law 4285/2014), as it is colloquially called.[6] Being a libel lawsuit, and arguably an ill-fated one in the court to be, the lawsuit was about the plaintiff's *reputation* and/or *feelings* (apart from the incident *in toto* being about a thinly clad win-win PR stunt in view of the elections); what could conceivably be claimed to be of a libellous nature would be the "trash TV proconsul" honours and the insinuation that a purported miraculous healing is to be weaponised in a political campaign — in contrast, of course, to the question concerning the veracity, or lack thereof, of a miraculous healing, which rather falls beyond the scope of Greek courts and legal provisions per se.

However, Greece's mainstream public discourse had a different take on the subject: the incident was about *religion* and *miracles*; it was about Greece's fate between "the Enlightenment" and "the Middle Ages"; it was about "the West" and the rest. The incident was proof that "the Greek State is still in a quest for its

[6] It is worth mentioning that an arrest *in flagrante delicto*, i.e. within 24 hours from the lawsuit, is *also* foreseen for "anti-racist law" related offences — thus it is not the absence of such a provision that hindered their invocation by Kampouris.

Enlightenment" and engages in "mediaeval practices", with a host of public figures mentioning "theocracy", "the need for society's secularisation", "the struggle for attaining the Enlightenment" (indicatively, see Demetis 2023). Reflections were published in newspapers on how "making public claims about witnessing miracles is objectively a danger to society" or on "religious talibanism in the 21st century's digital world" (Brountzakis 2023).[7] Editorials underscored how the incident shows that Greece is not, properly and poignantly speaking, a true European country (TVXS.gr 2023). Phrases telling of cultural dualism's (Diamandouros 1994)[8] explicit Orientalism and implicit racism like "Greece is the Islamabad [or "Iran" (Kondaraki 2023)] of the Balkans' (*sic*), together with the ubiquitous references to "the Middle Ages" and the "Holy Inquisition", abounded in Greece's public discourse, both in written word and in oral discussions, private and public alike (e.g. C. Grammenos 2023). Journalists thought this was about "the Church" and its "hierarchy", as well as questions such as who is a "good Christian" and a "virtuous person" (like, indicatively, Krika 2023). Most of my Athenian interlocutors confirmed my suspicion that, in its media-mediated guise, the incident was primarily received by the public as one centring on *religion* in the public square. Reinforcing this, government spokesman Yannis Oikonomou noted that "pre-planned scenes of artificial tension and arrests of citizens for expressing their views are reprehensible. The Christian faith is love and never goes hand in hand with violence, of any form or kind, nor should it, through lawsuits and prosecutions, become a means of personal projection and political exploitation", while Greece's conservative PM called Petros Tatsopoulos from Japan to convey his solidarity (MegaTV 2023).

Meanwhile, Greece's institutional Church and most of the usually loquacious Church leaders were nowhere to be seen; the Church, its representative bodies, the clergy, etc. were not party to this conflict. As an organisation, a hierarchy, an institution, a sum of communities and so on, the Church *did not exist* in the "Tatsopoulos affair"

[7] The contradistinction of "[Greece's Orthodox] Talibans" with "the digital world of the 21st century" is interesting in its own terms: in the need for portraying a unidimensional obscurantist past versus luminous future narrative, the observation that actual combative religious fundamentalists are usually anything but "analog" and quite technology-savvy today seems to disappear.

[8] Diamandouros' "cultural dualism" thesis posits that Greek society and political culture are characterised by a fundamental tension between two conflicting cultural paradigms: the Western, modernising, and liberal tradition, and the indigenous, traditional, and conservative one. This dualism results in a constant struggle between the forces of modernization and those seeking to preserve traditional values and practices. According to Diamandouros, this cultural dualism significantly shapes Greece's political landscape, social dynamics, and the country's efforts to integrate and adapt to European and Western norms.

— neither explicitly, nor implicitly. To claim that Church figures would be at least implicitly, tacitly and silently in favour of Kampouris' lawsuit would be problematic, since to the extent that the institutional Church voices its preferences for a political party, these are consistently proven to lie with Petros Tatsopoulos' governing conservative political party rather than with Kampouris' minor right-wing party. This was an affair with two right-wing rival politicians as protagonists, one from the conservative "New Democracy" and one from the farther-right "Greek Solution", concerning what the one *said/wrote* about the other or *did* to the other, aided by arguably problematic *in flagrante delicto* provisions. Around them, and spearheaded by them, an arena of public value battles emerged — an arena of *identity politics*, with words and phrases such as "freedom of expression", "religious conscience", "faith", "secularisation", "Enlightenment", "the Middle Ages", "obscurantism", "progress", "Europe", "the West", "Iran", "Balkans", "rule of law", "Holy Inquisition", and so on, in lieu of ammunition.[9] (Too) much was said about religion; but the main institutional agent of religion in Greece, the "predominant" (επικρατούσα) Greek Orthodox Church, was wholly absent both as an institutional agent and as an aggregate of communities and their people. The *reality* of the Church is, in a number of ways, tangible; *values* are intangible. As an arena of values (and their translation into electoral behaviour) and an instance of identity politics warfare, this was about *in*tangible realities, the *meta*-physical notions mentioned above, rather than the *physical*, or social, or institutional, aspects of embodied religion — with the former maintaining an at best nominal and notional connection to the latter.

Thus, while the "Tatsopoulos affair" does not tell us much (if anything at all) about the Orthodox Church in Greece, it *does* convey more information when it comes to the question of implicit and media-mediated class connotations, particularly if one takes Greek Neo-Orientalism into account as an analytical tool. Although it has been established that Greek Neo-Orientalism and "cultural dualism" form top-down narratives and, essentially, an overt hegemonic discourse (Mitralexis 2017), in which one may find a number of examples on the wide political use of these tools in public discourse), with all that this entails for its class connotation, further future research on

[9] In Laclau's sense, all these signifiers can be viewed as moments of a hegemonic discursive chain of equivalence, opposing an antagonistic other; I owe this pertinent remark to one of the reviewers of this chapter.

the class dimension of Greek Neo-Orientalism and "cultural dualism" would be a most auspicious undertaking.

Unpleasing to the senses as it might at times be, trash TV can hardly be described as a spectacle the bourgeoise indulges in; its class connotations are demonstrable, as is its function in the context of a lumpenisation process. The working class and, to a lesser extent, lower middle class form the main audience thereof (Psarras 2010). The right-wing, minor "Greek Solution' party shares a similar, although not identical, audience: as a matter of fact, its leader Kyriakos Velopoulos was involved in, owned, and partly still owns —both directly and otherwise— a number of minor trash TV stations. On the other hand, the ruling "Nea Dimokratia" boasts that its leader and current Prime Minister (at the time of writing this) Kyriakos Mitsotakis, scion of a wealthy political family and son of former PM Konstantinos Mitsotakis, is Harvard-*and* Stanford- educated; cosmopolitan; *elite*. "Nea Dimokratia", particularly under Mitsotakis' rule, paints itself as the party of the cosmopolitan technocrat, a party of the "excellent ones" (άριστοι), explicitly committed to the value of "excellence" (αριστεία), particularly vis-à-vis the "stinky leftists" (άπλυτοι αριστεροί), whose leader Alexis Tsipras "cannot even speak proper English", as "Nea Dimokratia" officials such as the party's vice-chair Adonis Georgiadis[10] like to regularly remind the electorate. The class connotations of this difference between the conservative "Nea Dimokratia" and right-wing parties such as "Greek Solution' as seen by the former were aptly put into words by one of my interlocutors during fieldwork, a male in his early thirties and active in the *Nea Dimokratia* ruling conservative party, by way of a Tolkienesque *Lord of the Rings* analogy and with a smirk on his face: "We are cultivated; cosmopolitan; libertarian; educated; they are primitive; coarse and vulgar; plebeian. *We are Elves; they are Orcs*.'[11]

Of course, these distinctions are performative and partly autohagiographical rather than descriptive; neither do most "Nea Dimokratia"voters belong to the middle

[10] Adonis Georgiadis, the vice-chair of "Nea Dimokratia" is a case in point: having started his career in the public eye as a telemarketing books salesman in trash TV for a number of years and as an MP in a minor far-right party, Yorgos Karatzaferis' LAOS, during the first decade of the new millennium, he has now refashioned his media image, styling himself as a "Nea Dimokratia" successful technocrat-cum-*fidei-defensor* as well as master of the art of European statecraft, while accusing the left-wing opposition of being uneducated, uncultivated, not cosmopolitan like Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and so on.
[11] Interestingly and perhaps tellingly, "Orcs" is also a Greek far-right slang referring to migrants and refugees.

and upper middle class, nor are all "Greek Solution" voters members of the working class, *lumpen* or otherwise. However, "Nea Dimokratia" and "Greek Solution" *styling* themselves as they do requires hefty amounts of media-mediated performativity, for which the identity politics arena of values offered by the Greek Neo-Orientalist gaze proves to be a potent assistant, particularly as far as religion is concerned. "Nea Dimokratia" is pious; *but "European'*. It resides in Paris — not Tehran. It cherishes the Orthodox Church *to the extent that its activity serves a Western-oriented Greek state*, as Andreas Michalakopoulos' memorandum to Eleftherios Venizelos (a distant relative, as it happens, of current "Nea Dimokratia" chair and Greece's PM Mitsotakis) would have it.

There is a telling detail here, connecting this particular example, the Tatsopoulos affair, to the wider cultural dualism trope. As discussed in the paper on Greek Neo-Orientalism, and although the cultural dualism narrative permeates Greece's political spectrum across party lines, the political party that perhaps uniquely encapsulates this way of looking at Greece was the short-lived "To Potami", *The River,* founded in 2014 and dissolved in 2019 (Mitralexis 2017, 140–141). However, "To Potami" was neither merely dissolved nor simply absorbed by the conservative "Nea Dimokratia". After 2019, it staffed "Nea Dimokratia" and the 2019-2023 government —cabinet and beyond— to an unprecedented degree, with former "To Potami" officials occupying four ministerial positions, some MP positions, positions at the PM's press office, advisory positions to ministers, secretary general positions at ministries, and so on (Lialiouti 2023). Between his exit from SYRIZA in 2014 and his entry to "Nea Dimokratia" in 2019, Petros Tatsopoulos had twice ran for parliament with "To Potami", in January 2015 and September 2015 (HuffPost Greece 2014; To Potami 2015), and sees himself as an elite reformer whose ideas pave the way to "Greece's belated Enlightenment", as witnessed from his interviews including those after his short-lived arrest and subsequent release. In the tug-of-war within Mitsotakis' "Nea Dimokratia" transforming it from Greece's premier conservative party into a "centrist technocratic" party "against populism',[12] the legal dispute between the self-styled cosmopolitan novelist Petros Tatsopoulos from "To Potami" (and now in "Nea

[12] Interestingly, the more "Nea Dimokratia" tries to style itself as a centrist party, the more extreme, populist and right-wing policies it implements, aided by party officials drawn from now defunct far-right fringe parties, such as ministers Spyridon-Adonis (Adonis) Georgiadis, Mavroudis (Makis) Voridis and Athanasios (Thanos) Plevris of former LAOS notoriety (see Vasilaki and Souvlis 2021).

Dimokratia') and the trash TV persona of the flamboyant Filippos Kampouris, a "Greek Solution" parliamentary candidate, with religion in the public square as the seeming arena of the dispute, forms a most archetypical intra-Right media-mediated performative opportunity for Greek Neo-Orientalist engineering: a striving to get "closer to Paris" and "farther away from Tehran". "Nea Dimokratia" is indeed a proud *defender of the Faith*: but of the faith of cosmopolitan, cultivated Elves, as my interlocutor had put it — not the faith of working class, backward-looking, underdog Orcs.

Examining how religion and the Church were presented by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic will add a further layer to what is being discussed here.[13]

"Higher Church" and "Lower Church" during the COVID-19 Pandemic — and their Media-mediated Class Connotations

We saw a different and implicit class division around religion during COVID-19. Instead of being a time of unity and solidarity, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a time of *dis*unity, a time for deepening Greece's divisions after a decade of crisis — on a spectrum ranging from politics to religion, and more importantly on the *public discourse* on religion. In spite of the impression one might get in perusing the Greek media landscape, in actuality one would be safe to say that, in spite of occasional bumps in the road, the Orthodox Church of Greece as an institution has been one of the government's strongest allies in securing an acceptance rate for the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and in rolling out the vaccination programme. For a detailed presentation of this, together with a timeline of Church-State relations and interactions during the 2020–21 pandemic, see the information provided in (Mitralexis 2023, 27–44). Many factors contribute to this, perhaps the main one being that, together with its influence on Greek society, Greece's Orthodox Church is also in a very close relationship with the state apparatus in the context of a Church-State separation that leaves much to be desired; in many primarily indirect rather than institutional ways, it

[13] There is an overlap between my 2021-2023 fieldwork and research for the present paper and for (Mitralexis 2023). An earlier version of the section on COVID-19 that follows was printed in the aforementioned paper, pp. 45–50.

can be seen as *part* of the state apparatus as things currently stand, and the enlistment of the Church in the battle against COVID-19 may be seen in this context. At the same time, it is often reported that the Orthodox Church in Greece forms an *impediment* to countering COVID-19 and completing the roll-out of the vaccines. How is this to be explained?

There are several factors at play here — and most of them are class-related. Some of them indeed describe a reality. Other factors do not. A distinction needs to be made here which often eludes the overview of observers. Greece has a minority of various and disparate Old-Calendarist groups or "Genuine Orthodox Christians" (Γ.Ο.Χ. — Γνήσιοι Ορθόδοξοι Χριστιανοί), usually at odds with one another and differing in pythonesque acronymical ways as far as their official titles are concerned. "Old-Calendarist" does not here entail the mere adherence to the "Old", Julian calendar (as this is either way the case with numerous canonical Orthodox churches: the churches of Russia, Jerusalem, Greece's Mount Athos monastic communities, etc.), but the separation, rupture and schism from the official Orthodox Church following its early 20th century adoption of the *revised* Julian calendar, in the context of Greece's division between royalists and republicans at the time. Old-Calendarists are a minority, but a decisively *working-class* minority; many of them are refugees, such as many Pontic Greeks from the former Soviet Union, for whom Old Calendarist communities are a crucial part of their identity and alterity vis-à-vis Greek society at large.

While suffering in numbers and impact, Old-Calendarist groups are particularly active in conservative and ultra-conservative public demonstrations in Greece's streets or over the internet — including, for example, the demonstrations against the Prespes Agreement on North Macedonia in recent years. The vast majority of media articles featuring photos of clergy demonstrating against coronavirus restrictions or against COVID-19 vaccines depict clerics not belonging to the official Orthodox Church of Greece and sporting stereotypically Old-Calendarist-groups attire (such as the one in LIFO (2021) among many others); editors are usually unaware of the distinction.

Thus, while the activity of the various Old-Calendarist groups falls very well within the subject of "Greece and religion" or "COVID-19 and religion in Greece' as a religious minority, it would be erroneous to include them in the "Greece's Orthodox Church and the pandemic" bundle. And this activity is, indeed, excitingly convenient in the context of a particular narrative: who is it that could voice second thoughts to the

handling of the pandemic, given that this handling is allegedly apolitical and solely dictated by a singular Science? It cannot be respectable citizens in the context of a democratic process. And while "the sprayed ones" (a Greek idiomatic phrase for "conspiracy theorist" or "tin foil hat enthusiast') provide a handy starting point for media-managing this, it does not provide an explanation in the way that a proper scapegoat would. However, "religious fanatics" and "obscurantists" trying to take us "back into the Middle Ages" because they "deny Science" due to their "faith" in the context of a "perennial battle between Science and Religion': this would support said narrative in more potent ways. Thus, fringe Old-Calendarist supporters (presented by the media as priests of the Orthodox Church of Greece) do not merely form *part* of a dissenting crowd; they *characterise* the crowd and a *representative* thereof — better still, they are the crowd's *leaders*, according to the narrative.

It is in no way the fact, however, that there are no Orthodox Church of Greece clerics (or Greek citizens at large, for that matter) who publicly oppose either coronavirus restrictions and measures or COVID-19 vaccines or both, calling upon their flocks to act accordingly. And the situation in monasteries is by definition a lot more complicated, given the very nature of these establishments as promised places of *exit* from "the (secular) world", while a certain amount of friction with their local overarching ecclesiastical authorities is often to be observed. Again, however, the reader would be imprudent to draw a distinction between the "official Church line" versus "everything/everyone else" (from individual bishops to monasteries, parishes, grassroots clergy) in which the former supports public health measures and the vaccination programme whereas the latter reject or undermine it.

It is simply impossible to have reliable, quantifiable data on *who does/says what* on the ground, as far as percentages are concerned. If the present author's day-to-day observations hold any value as "empirical data", the overwhelming, vast even, majority of Athenian parishes surveyed adhered to the state-designated health measures to a tee, from social distances to face masks and disinfecting agents. However, in a country of about 10.000 active parishes, exceptions of COVID-denying or anti-vaccine priests and flocks cannot but be, by definition, numerous in absolute numbers, most probably in a way proportional to the same tendencies in the general population — even if bishops such as the Metropolitan Bishop of Dodoni go as far as to claim that "vaccine-denying and COVID-denying priests should be hanged" (VimaOrthodoxias.gr 2021), in a

somewhat unrestrained bout of enthusiasm live on conservative SKAI TV, since "by opposing COVID-19 vaccines they exclude themselves from the Church and become minions of Satan'.(SKAI.gr 2021d) In any case, however, these exceptions to the rule enforced by the institutional church (*sans* hanging, hopefully) appear augmented in Greece's conservative media,(Taylor 2021) finding an unexpected ally in voices of the Greek Left often keen to identify an obscurantist ecclesial counter-example to an Enlightened progressivist cause. Not to put too fine a point on it, for the whole duration of September 2021 I had struggled to single out three or four instances of SKAI TV's news[14] that would not include a story on "anti-vaccine priests spreading outrageous lies'(SKAI.gr 2021e) (3/12/21), on "COVID-denying priests in a battle against the vaccines'(SKAI.gr 2021b) (16/9/21), on Metropolitan bishops informing the audience that "COVID-denying/anti-vaccine priests are heretics'(SKAI.gr 2021c) (6/11/21), on a "priest attacking a schoolmaster for wearing face masks'(SKAI.gr 2021a) (14/09/2021), on "priests having been spotted without masks'(SKAI.gr 2020) and so on. By regularly watching the news, one would get the impression that the country was under an anti-vaccine mass insurgency spearheaded by hundreds of combative science-denying priests in COVID-infected cassocks. By visiting 50 random Athenian parishes, one would get a very different picture, according to which state-dictated measures are adhered to in the vast majority of cases, exceptions notwithstanding. Thus, perspective is everything: there *are* anti-vaccine priests in Greece; the question is whether these are *more* in number than anti-vaccine *Greeks*, proportionally to the population; an educated guess would highly doubt that. And, as far as exceptions are concerned, their politico-religious dimension might induce a certain hilarity at times: for example, the Metropolitan bishop of Zakynthos wrote a letter to the PM (Newsbreak.gr 2022) on 4 January 2022 complaining to him that one of the governing party's parliamentarians is politically courting the very anti-vaccine priests and monks that the bishop is trying to contain.

After all is said and done, however, one has to somehow account for the reality that there are *some* priests that defy the decisions of the state-friendly Church's

[14] Usually presented by Sia Kosioni, SKAI TV's main anchorwoman who —to put this into Greece's media-political perspective— is also the spouse of the mayor of Athens, who in turn is the nephew of the prime minister, the son of the former minister of foreign affairs Dora Bakoyannis, the grandson of the late prime minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis and the cousin of the former prime minister's Chief of Staff.

governing body — and even a minority in a population of about 10.000 priests can prove to be quite a substantial number indeed. How is this to be explained, given that the Church of Greece is usually thought to be a tight and strict hierarchical structure with a top-down flow of decisions rather than an anarchist collective in which the governing body's decisions may not amount to much? The Orthodox Church is not "Schrödinger's cat': we cannot be content with the explanation that it is *at once* tightly top-down hierarchical *and* anything-goes, or to resort to conspiracy theories implying that the Church desires to appear as if it defends the state's policy vis-à-vis the pandemic while in actuality is intends to undermine it. One might have to look for the answer in this seeming discrepancy by taking into account certain class considerations. The pandemic brought with it a blitzkrieg of radical changes to social life and life in general, as well as a number of vaccines developed in hitherto unforeseen speed, with which the entire population has to be vaccinated — together with the government's claim that it is simply, and apolitically, following the science, a claim with which reality has not proven to be very kind, as the Tsiodras-Lytras scandal (To Vima 2021) so aptly demonstrated. To think that this violent situation would not engender dissenting voices in the population would be an apolitical folly: we become happily polarised in much less challenging settings, with the "halo effect" entailing a change in our opinions and perspective even when the issue is whether we find a politically-charged feline aesthetically pleasing (Cowley 2014).

In the case of the pandemic and its class consideration, dissenting citizens from, say, the upper middle class, or higher still, have a voice of their own in the public square in order to articulate their dissent, and require no collective, or communal, way to do so. However, claiming the same for the working class would not be factually correct. It would not be oversimplistic to state that there are only roughly two kinds of institutional communities (apart from political parties) where working-class people throughout Greece, and particularly in Greece's provinces beyond the all-consuming capital of Athens, may join their voices with the voices of others: the local church, when pious citizens are concerned, and football clubs usually belonging to Greece's most powerful businessmen, when sports fans are concerned. Football clubs can be political at times (Paskedi.gr 2021), but analysing coronavirus measures and the state of vaccines wasn't quite their primary calling; all of Greece's parliamentary parties support the COVID-19 vaccination programme (perhaps and only partly apart from "Greek Solution'); thus,

the only kinds of *local* communities where the minority of dissenting citizens could bundle up (from sceptics, to groups that suffer financially from COVID-19 restrictions, to proper conspiracy theories) would be *those* local churches and parishes where a priest would be willing to lead them and to take on the microphone; a minority of priests, in a country with a minority of dissenters, if we are to judge from Greece's full vaccination percentages being roughly equivalent to the EU/EEA average. To put it otherwise: the only community that's *already there* and *could*, under certain circumstances, give voice to dissenters without it needing to be set up *ad hoc* (as has been the case with various organisations calling for anti-COVID demonstrations etc.) would be a local church *in which there's a priest of similar opinions.* Perhaps this offers some kind of preliminary explanation as to why clerics are indeed visible in the anti-COVID and anti-vaccine crowd in spite of the fact that the official Church of Greece via its governing body so staunchly defends COVID-19 health measures and the vaccination programme: reality is not always as simple and as one-dimensional as we would like it to be.

A peculiar, class-related distinction between "high Church" and "low Church", albeit in a context different than the Anglican one, would perhaps be opportune here. While the "high(er class) Church" was, as an institution, almost fully aligned with the state and certainly more so in comparison to other European countries (for a detailed exposition, see (Mitralexis 2023, 27–44)), the "low(er class) Church" of actual communities, particularly rural ones away from the capital of Athens, could at times give voice to a dissent that was primarily working class as far as its class connotations were concerned. The "high(er) Church" faced the danger of becoming (once again) weaponized as a servant of political power, or *ancillae potestatis*, in the name of a common and noble cause: public health. The "low(er) Church" was not a loudspeaker for the working class *per se*, but for those among the working class who could either way speak *louder*. The media, on the other hand, would opt to present the Church *in toto* as a conspiracy-theorising menace to the state's order and its new normal, arming a certain imagined plebeian insurgency; in general, Greece's media have seen better times in the past.: (A. Grammenos 2021).

Coda

In lieu of concluding remarks, the shortest of summaries would look like the following: (i) taking two case studies as limited examples, we can see that the Orthodox Church in Greece and its media representations run in parallel courses; they seldom converge in actually-existing reality; (ii) "religion" as media-mediated in the public sphere is a prime venue for diverging class cultures, or more precisely for the performativity of a peculiar Greek Neo-Orientalism that seems to be at the heart of Greece's implicit statecraft; (iii) "Orthodoxy" as a media-mediated item of "identity politics" can be a trait of both middle- and upper-middle class cultures and of working class realities, in a seemingly paradoxical manner: this depends on whether media-mediated "Orthodoxies" are closer to "Paris" or closer to "Tehran" — to follow the Greek Neo-Orientalist vocabulary; (iv) since the very inception of the Greek state, this "double life" of public Orthodoxy is correlated with a peculiarly symbiotic relationship between Church and State: a hypothetical emancipation of the Church from the State, i.e. Church-State separation *as a liberation of the Church from the State* rather than as a Laïcité Redux, could conceivably engender, as a collateral damage/gain, a new and formidable adversary for Greek statecraft and state ideology.

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