

## Article

# Young People and the Process of Secularisation in Contemporary Greek Society

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**Abstract:** During the last twenty years, a significant shift has taken place in Greek society. On the one hand, the religious context has been altered due to the arrival of immigrants and refugees with different religious backgrounds. On the other hand, young people seem to distance themselves from religion and the Orthodox Church in various ways. With the above in mind, this article will try to answer a number of questions: Are young people in contemporary Greek society religious? What do they think about the role of the Orthodox Church? How do they value the Church's public discourse on issues such as immigration, gender equality, and homosexuality? Where do they stand on state–Church relations? How close are they to the Orthodox Church? Based on theoretical discussions about secularisation, secularism, and the post-secular, this article builds upon quantitative and qualitative research on young people from 17 to 35 years of age. The main argument is that young people seem to gradually move away from religion and the Orthodox Church, while in some cases, religion becomes a private matter; this indicates that there seems to be a process of secularisation underway, although further research is needed.

**Keywords:** Greek society; secularisation; young people; social change; Orthodox Church



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## 1. Introduction

In her seminal study for the United Kingdom, Grace Davie (1994) argued that while young people tend to believe in God and practice several religious rituals, they are no longer members of organised religious groups; she described this as “believing without belonging”. Other studies responded to Davie’s thesis, arguing that people neither belong to a religious group anymore nor do they believe in God (Voas and Crockett 2005), or that while they belong, they do not believe (Hayes and McKinnon 2018). This is what has been termed cultural or nominal Christianity. Within this framework, during the last two decades, academics have begun to study young people’s relationship to religion and spirituality (Possamai 2009; Giordan 2010; Lippman and McIntosh 2010; Collins-Mayo 2010; Cusack 2011; Vincett et al. 2014). According to the findings of some surveys and opinion polls, young people tend to be less religious compared to the previous generation, especially in the West (Ziebertz and Kay 2006; Ziebertz et al. 2009; Bengtson 2013; Pew Research Center 2018).<sup>1</sup>

It is only recently that debates on young people, religiosity, and their stance against the Orthodox Church started to appear in the Greek public sphere and academia. For decades, Greek society has been considered religiously homogenous, with the Orthodox religion playing a significant role in people’s lives and the Orthodox Church maintaining close relations with politics and the state. Moreover, the Orthodox Church was—if not the most—among the first most respected and trusted institutions, especially in the 1990s and the 2000s. During the last twenty years, however, a significant shift has seemingly begun to take place. On the one hand, the religious context has changed due to the arrival of immigrants and refugees from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East with different religions, namely Islam. On the other hand, younger people seem to move away from religion and the

Orthodox Church in various ways (e.g., atheism, agnosticism, believing without belonging, or belonging without believing).

This article will try to answer a number of questions related to youth and religion based on the findings of quantitative and qualitative research on young people and religion in contemporary Greek society: Are young people religious? If they are, how do they practice their religious duties? What do young people think about the Orthodox Church? How do they value the Church's public discourse on several issues, such as gender relations, homosexuality, and immigration? How do they understand state–Church relations? How close to or far from the Orthodox Church are they? The analysis is framed with the theoretical discussions on secularisation, secularism, and the post-secular in order to understand where young people stand concerning religion and the Orthodox Church. This research shows that Greek society faces significant social changes when it comes to secularisation, with young people playing a key role in these developments.

## 2. Religion in Greek Society

Religion still plays a central role in Greek people's lives and is a fundamental component of their identity even when considered only from a cultural perspective. Despite Greece being a relatively homogenous society in terms of religion in the past, it should be noted that different religious communities (Muslims, Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and others) lived in Greek society for many years, even centuries ([Clogg 2002](#)), but they were not visible and not treated equally by the state ([Christopoulos 1999](#)).

In the last thirty years, three developments gradually changed the above-described homogeneity. First, some individuals and religious and non-religious groups (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses and The Atheist Union of Greece) won their legal battles on the European level to protect their religious freedom and rights ([Focas 2017](#)). Second, there was a significant increase in the number of Muslim immigrants and refugees. Although official data regarding people's religious affiliations are not collected in censuses, it is estimated that the Muslim population is approximately 600,000 ([Pew Research Centre 2017](#)), while unofficial estimates have put this number at around 1 million. Third, Greek society has faced an increase in the number of people who distance themselves from the Orthodox religion and become atheists, agnostics, and religiously indifferent, leading to the establishment of the Atheist Union of Greece in 2012. This change has become evident in surveys conducted recently. In one opinion poll conducted in 2008 ([Public Issue 2008](#)), 7% stated that religion is "not at all important" in their lives, while 14% said that religion is "not that important". More recently ([Kapa Research 2015](#)) 81.4% self-identified as Orthodox Christians, while 14.7% said that they are atheists, a number much higher than the 1.8% reported in the same company's opinion poll in 2006. Regarding religiosity, there also appears to be a significant change between 2006 and 2015. The number of those who attend church weekly decreased from 22.7% in 2006 to 6.7% in 2015; those who go one to three times per month decreased from 24.6% to 10%; and those who never go (apart from weddings, funerals, and baptisms) increased from 6.9% to 36.7%. Furthermore, the number of people who are in favour of the separation of the Orthodox Church from the state increased from 59.2%, in 2006, to 74.5%, in 2015 ([Kapa Research 2015](#)).

More recent data on young people and religion ([Dianeosis 2022](#)) show that 34.2% of young people between 17 and 24 years of age and 21% of those 25 to 39 years of age respond that they do not believe in God. Furthermore, on a scale from 1 to 10—with 1 being the lowest—when asked how close to religion they feel, 22.1% of young people from 17 to 24 years of age replied "1", and 13.6% replied "2" and "3". In the 2020 opinion poll by the same institution ([Dianeosis 2020](#)), 27.1% of young people aged 17 to 24 replied that they do not believe in God, and in the 2016 survey ([Dianeosis 2016](#)) this number was 35.6%. That means that in recent years, around one out of three young people has openly stated that he/she does not believe in God. Apart from the above, the more recent data (wave 7, 2017) from the World Values Survey have shown that young people are less religious compared to older people. For example, 83.5% of young people 18–29 years of age replied

that they believe in God, and 14% replied that they do not, compared to the 96.3% of the +60 category who replied that they believe in God and the mere 2.5% who replied that they do not. Furthermore, 69.5% of young people were self-described as religious, less than any other age category, and 15.9% as non-religious, more than any other age category ([Sakellariou 2021a](#), pp. 162–70).

Despite the aforementioned evidence showing that a rising number of Greek people, especially the younger generations, distance themselves from religion, the Orthodox Church of Greece has preserved its strong place and influential role in politics and large segments of society. It was in 1833 that the Orthodox Church was self-declared as independent from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and became a national Church, which was then officially recognised as independent in 1850. On the one hand, the state has been protecting the Church, considering it as the nation's protector during the Ottoman Empire (the "mother of the nation"). On the other hand, the Church has been supporting the state on ideological and political issues. Furthermore, the church has contributed to the reproduction of a public discourse, which consists of primarily critical views and negative perceptions of the West and anything considered Western (e.g., the Enlightenment, modernity, individualism, and globalisation). At the same time, it uses this public discourse to continuously praise the East and its culture, i.e., the Byzantine Empire and Orthodox Christianity ([Makrides 2016](#)).

On the institutional level, it could be argued that the Orthodox Church is a state Church (*de facto*, not *de jure*) and this is proven by the current legislation, which defines the relations between Church and state and the legal status of the Church ([Sakellariou 2014](#)).

According to the third article of the Greek Constitution, the prevailing religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. The Constitution also includes the following preamble: "In the name of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity". Moreover, in the second article of the first chapter of the law describing the operational and administrative framework of the Orthodox Church and its relationship with the state (590/1977, Government Gazette A' 146), it is emphatically stated that:

"The Church of Greece cooperates with the state on issues of common interest, for example, the Christian education of the youth; religious service in the army; the support of the institution of marriage and family; [...] the protection of the holy relics and Ecclesiastical and Christian monuments; the establishment of new religious holidays; and asks for the protection of the state whenever our religion is insulted".

A legal provision like the above epitomises the very close and privileged relations between the state and the Orthodox Church compared to all other religious groups, since these legal provisions privilege the Orthodox Church alone.

Overall, it could be argued that the Orthodox Church still plays a central role in politics in a variety of ways. In some cases, the Church has reacted strongly against any political decision considered as a threat to religion in Greek society. For example, in 2000, after pressure from the European Union and the decision of the Hellenic Data Protection Authority, the government decided to remove religious affiliation from identity cards ([Dimitopoulos 2001](#), pp. 151–58). The Orthodox Church reacted against this decision, considering it as an offensive act against the Orthodox religion and culture, and organised massive demonstrations ([Stavrakakis 2002](#); [Molokotos-Liederman 2007](#)).

Another exemplary case was the rise and entrance into mainstream politics of the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn and the support it received from some Orthodox Metropolitans and lower rank priests, from 2010, until the party's conviction as a criminal organisation by the court in 2020 ([Zoumpoulakis 2013](#); [Papastathis 2015](#)). Furthermore, the agreement between the left-wing government of SYRIZA (Radical Left Coalition) and Archbishop Ieronymos in 2018, whose main goal was to resolve a number of issues between the state and the Church led to strong reactions, both at the high and lower clergy levels, resulting in the agreement's withdrawal. The main reason was that from large parts of the Church, it was considered as another effort to marginalise religion. The coronavirus pandemic was the latest issue that caused huge debates in the public sphere and reactions from

the part of the Church in relation to the restrictive measures decided by the government ([Sakellariou 2021b](#)). As a consequence, it is interesting to examine how young people perceive the role of the Church and how critical—if at all—they are towards the Church's involvement in politics.

### 3. Secularisation: Concepts and Theoretical Approaches

Secularisation, secularism, and secularity are concepts that have caused huge debates in academia, especially in sociology, already from the classical period (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim), but also in philosophy, law, politics, and anthropology ([Casanova 2009](#), pp. 1049–51). During the 20th century, several scholars elaborated on secularisation ([Wilson 1966](#); [Martin 1978](#); [Dobbelaere 1981](#)) and tried to explain its development and place in Western societies. What has been described as the return of religion in the late 1970s gave rise to heated debates among sociologists of religion arguing against ([Stark 1999](#); [Berger 1999](#)) or in support ([Wilson 1998](#); [Bruce 2002, 2011](#)) of the secularisation theory. An outcome of these debates was the concept of the post-secular, describing those societies where other forms of spirituality emerge or where religion comes back after a secular phase ([Habermas 2008](#); [Gorski et al. 2012](#); [Mapril et al. 2017](#); [Hashemi 2017](#)). There is, however, strong criticism of this argument ([Bruce 2011](#)), and it could be noted that in many parts of the world, societies have only very recently experienced a secular phase, with Greece certainly being one example.

The initial thesis of the secularisation theory was that religions will gradually lose their power and impact, becoming privatised or even disappearing in the face of modern developments in the fields of medicine, science, and technology. Secularisation, however, is not a one-way process, and this, as argued, was the error originally made by philosophers and sociologists who deterministically related modernisation with secularisation ([Davie 2008](#), p. 65). From this point of view, it could be argued that the secularisation thesis is not false unless it is defined as irreversible. Others ([Bruce 2011](#), pp. 54–56) have argued that although social scientists cannot foresee the future, secularisation seems to be irreversible based on the existing findings in Western societies, with Europe being at the centre of the debates ([Davie 2006, 2021](#); [Roy 2020](#)).

Despite different approaches, secularisation is defined as a process that leads to the loss of power and influence religion holds in a society, meaning a process towards the establishment of a condition of secularity ([Demerath 2007](#), pp. 65–66). That way, overarching and transcendent religious systems are confined in modern functionally differentiated societies to a subsystem alongside others, losing their overarching claims over these other subsystems ([Dobbelaere 2011](#), p. 600). This means that religious authorities cease to control fields such as politics, economy, family, education, law, etc. Secularisation can be found on three levels: the institutional, the societal, and the individual ([Dobbelaere 1981; 2002](#), pp. 165–95; [Casanova 2006](#)). Secularisation takes place differently in different societies and encompasses a multiplicity of factors not all of which move in the same direction ([Davie 2021](#), p. 269). On the other hand, secularity denotes a state of affairs that is described as secular and is usually considered a natural term, while secularism is an ideology and implies a commitment, to the process of secularisation, or to the affirmation of the secular in different spheres of society ([Davie 2021](#), p. 269).

[Bruce \(2011](#), pp. 2–3), based on [Wilson \(1982](#), p. 149), offers a more analytical definition, according to which secularisation consists of six elements: (1) the decay of religious institutions; (2) the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; (3) the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; (4) the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; (5) the shift from religious to secular control of a variety of social activities and functions; and (6) the decline in the proportion of the time, energy, and resources that people devote to supernatural concerns. Bruce also argues that the declining power of religion causes a decline in the number of religious people and the extent to which people are religious. As

religion loses social power, it becomes harder for each generation to socialise its children in the faith. It also becomes progressively harder for those who remain religious to preserve this cohesion (Bruce 2011, pp. 2–3). This brings to mind Hervieu-Léger’s approach to religion as a chain of memory (2006) and Maurice Halbwachs’s (1941, 1980, 1992) analyses of religious memory passing from generation to generation. The six elements presented by Bruce have been the basis for the analysis that will follow.

#### 4. The Research Method

This article is based on a study focused on young people and religion, the first one centred on this particular topic in Greek academia. The research consisted of two parts. The first one was a quantitative research among young people, from 17 to 34 years of age, who replied to an online structured questionnaire (CAWI) on issues related to religiosity, religious practices, the separation of Church and state and the Orthodox Church’s public discourse. The survey was carried out by a private opinion poll company, Prorata, in October 2021, with the collaboration of the author of this article, who was also the author of the findings’ final report. A total of 451 young people participated in this survey: 56% of them were men, and 43% were women; 43% were in the age category 17–24 years, and 57% were in the age category 25–34 years; 53% had a university degree, and 46% did not (although many of them were university students); 69% lived in cities and their suburbs, while 30% lived in smaller towns and villages. Since this was a survey on young people, the selection criterion was age, and at the same time, this was the only exclusion criterion. The questionnaire remained opened online from the 22nd to the 27th of October and was circulated by Prorata to the pool of young people who had participated in previous surveys. The main limitation of the quantitative part was that it was not based on a random sampling and that the selection of the sample was based on the company’s judgement and previous experience. However, the sample selection was representative in terms of gender, educational background and place of residence (region and city/countryside), and it was based on the data available from the national census and weighted based on the last national elections of 2019. Due to the limited space and the decision to include the findings of the qualitative part in the discussion, the survey results remain at a descriptive level without further in-depth-analysis, e.g., regressing age religiosity and values.

The second part was a qualitative study. The qualitative research was carried out from 19 January to 2 March 2022 through an electronic communication platform, and it included a total of nine semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, with the participation of 21 people in total. The sample was selected from those who had already participated in the quantitative research and had expressed their intention to take part in the next phase. Prorata undertook the identification and information of the participants, and the author of this article conducted and analysed the interviews and focus groups writing the final report. The average duration of the interviews was 30 min, while the two focus groups lasted a total of over 3 h and 45 min. All interviews and focus groups were recorded after the written or oral consent of the participants, and all the names that accompany the selected quotes are pseudonyms. The content analysis method was used in order to analyse the material that came out from the interviews and focus groups.

Regarding the characteristics of the sample: the ages varied from 18 to 35 years of age; 10 were men and 11 were women; 16 lived in Athens and 5 lived in the province; but of those who were in Athens during the fieldwork, many had arrived during the last two or three years from the province for studies. Regarding education, they either continued their studies after secondary education or had completed their studies, and some of them were holding a master’s degree (three) or a PhD (one). Almost half (eight) of the participants, mainly the older ones who were no longer students, worked in either the private or public sector, and two of them were unemployed. The main purpose of the qualitative research was to focus on some of the key points/findings of the preceding quantitative study, in order to better understand and explain the practices, attitudes and perceptions of young people about religion and the Orthodox Church.

## 5. Young People and Religion: Practices and Beliefs

One part of the research was about young people's relationship to religion, beliefs, and religious practices. The findings confirm the trend observed in other Western societies, as presented at the beginning of this article, which is described as a departure from religion, mainly from religious practices (e.g., religious ceremonies, praying, fasting), but also the increase in the record of non-religion, or even the rise of atheism and agnosticism.

In terms of belonging to a religious group, the majority self-identified as Orthodox Christians (57%), a rather expected finding, although well below the general population, where according to the surveys mentioned above, the percentages range from 80 to 90%. The most interesting finding was that the second response of self-identification was the category 'atheist', with 24%. Voluntary inclusion in this category is of great importance because historically, the words atheist/atheism have been stigmatised. Consequently, this choice of the respondents also shows a tendency to 'break' the stigma of atheism. Another 15% answered that they consider themselves as 'irreligious/agnostic', raising, even more, the percentage of those who do not belong to any religion or possibly do not believe in any God. These numbers verify other surveys ([Dianeosis 2022](#)), i.e., that in Greek society, young people are gradually moving away from religion.

In the same context, the answers regarding their relationship with a religious doctrine were intriguing. The largest part (42%) answered that they are not related to any religious denomination. This raises additional research questions as there are a number of people who appear to declare themselves Orthodox Christians, but without considering themselves as members of the Orthodox Church. The explanation could be that many young people are nominal or cultural Christians and they state it in surveys, only because they have been baptized in their infancy, but they do not go to church anymore apart from major religious holidays. Therefore, it can be argued that there are also young people who may believe in God or some higher power without belonging to any religion (believing without belonging) ([Davie 1994](#)). Finally, 34% answered that they hold a loose relationship, and only 22% answered that they have a close relationship with a religious denomination, namely, Orthodox Christianity. The same applies to participation in religious practices, as 34% answered 'never' to the question, "apart from weddings, baptisms, Easter, and Christmas how often do you go to church?", a number confirming the findings of other surveys in these age groups ([Kapa Research 2015](#)).

The most notable of the findings about religious affiliation and the subsequent participation in religious practices is an observed change related to gender. The majority of current research has led to the conclusion that women are more religious compared to men ([Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012](#)). The findings of this research show an interesting trend. When asked about their relationship with a certain religion, 16% of women answered that they maintain a close relationship, compared to 26% of men. Women were higher than men, with 46% of women, as opposed to 39% of men, answering that they have no relation to any religion. Also, in terms of self-identification, men and women scored almost the same percentage, in terms of whether they belong to the Orthodox or another religion, as well as in terms of atheism, agnosticism, and non-religion. A total of 16% of young women self-identified as irreligious or agnostic (vs. 15% of men) and 22% as atheists (vs. 25% of men). Regarding church attendance, the findings were more impressive. The question of whether they attended church 'at least once a week' was answered by only 4% of women compared to 10% of men, while 'never' was answered by 42% of women compared to 29% of men.

From the quantitative research and analysis, it emerged that although the majority of young people self-identify as Orthodox Christians, on the one hand, there are a large number of young people who openly declare themselves atheists and, on the other hand, a number of young people who either declare themselves nominally or culturally Orthodox without believing in God (belonging without believing) or believing in some higher power/superior being, without considering that they belong to the Orthodox Church (believing without belonging). Observance of traditions and customs seems in some cases

to be more important from faith, while some traditions and customs are followed even by people who do not situate themselves among Orthodox Christians, as can be seen in the following excerpt.

"I grew up in an Orthodox environment. I like Christian customs as such, as customs, not religious [rituals]; [I like] the part of the tradition and how much it allows us to reflect, to get close to our family, the spirituality. I keep this part and not religion itself, so I cannot say that I am an Orthodox Christian". (Tassia 29)

When it comes to religious self-identification of the qualitative research, although the sample was not representative, similar findings to the quantitative part were recorded. From the total of 21 individuals: 12 were self-characterised as atheists, agnostics, or indifferent; 6 as faithful Christian Orthodox, belonging to the Orthodox Church with varying degrees of closeness; and 3 as believers, but having a personal relationship with the divine and without any particular relation or closeness to the Church. Nevertheless, they all grew up in family and social environments in which religious beliefs and especially religious practices were present, although not always with the same intensity. Sometimes these environments are characterised as 'relaxed' and 'neutral' in terms of religion and only in a couple of cases as very close to the Orthodox faith and the Church, e.g., having a priest father or participating in Sunday school. As one interviewee mentioned:

"I come from a deeply religious family; I am an Orthodox Christian; because I was born in Greece. If I was born in another country, I would clearly have another religion. [...]. I think that all religions say more or less the same things; I believe in the idea of prayer. Yes, I am an Orthodox Christian, but I have some misgivings". (Gianna 34)

This sense of inherited religion was also mentioned by another participant and combined with the fact that many young people go to church mainly or exclusively for cultural purposes strengthens an already formulated sociological argument, namely, that religion functions as a chain of memory passed down from generation to generation through the family and the wider society (e.g., education system) (Hervieu-Léger 2006; Halbwachs 1980, 1992). Sometimes, however, this chain of religious memory (transmission of faith from generation to generation) is broken, and members of the family or the community move away from the traditional religion (Bengtson 2013; Sakellariou 2022). As a consequence, the essence of religion is lost, and only a formal outer shell remains.

When it comes to religious practices (participation in religious services, ceremonies, praying, fasting, etc.), a variety of responses were recorded. For example, there was the case of a participant who, as the son of a priest, was in the church for services almost daily, and he was also a catechist at the Sunday school for primary school children. On the other hand, some participants self-identified as atheists and agnostics and answered that they go to the church either in cases of social events (weddings, baptisms, etc.) or to visit a historical temple or a monastery for cultural reasons. Most of the respondents stated that they visit the church during the Easter period and much less during Christmas and the 15th of August (Assumption of the Virgin Mary). Those who stated that they go to church more regularly, e.g., once a month or once a week, were even fewer. Some of the faithful said that they pray regularly, even daily, or make the sign of the cross when they pass outside of a church.

Particularly interesting were the responses of some young people who claimed that the sociability and crowding in the church combined with the proper conduct and dressing (e.g., going on Sunday in your good clothes) repels them and they prefer to be alone inside the church when they go. As one respondent characteristically argued,

"I go to church, but I do not go when they are held... when there is a service; I do not like everything that is going on; I go for personal reasons because I feel a calmness there when it is empty. [...] I think that God is inside you. Old people go [to church], because they clearly have had such experiences and have grown up like this; [...] and they compete over who is the best Christian. [...] I cannot

do this whole thing where everyone is comme il faut, i.e., that you have to be in your best clothes, and everyone looks at you, I go [to church] in workout pants when I go". (Tassos 35)

An interesting aspect of the research was the relationship between religion and young people's views on several social issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, whereby 76% agreed that homosexuality should be accepted, while 42% said they 'definitely agree' that same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt children, and 18% said they 'probably agree'. On these questions, women were overwhelmingly positive, with 88% accepting homosexuality compared to 71% of men, while about adoption, 71% responded with 'definitely' or 'somewhat agreed', compared to 53% of men. Although the percentages for men are not insignificant, the difference between men and women is notable. The most interesting finding comes from those who say they are closely associated with religion, who although they do not subscribe to the view of adoption by same-sex couples (75% disagree), nevertheless appear to be more open to homosexuality as they appear divided (44% should be accepted and 49% discouraged).

The findings are similar for abortion, where 53% said it should be legal in all cases and 16% in most cases, while only 7% said it should be illegal. It was to be expected that on this question, women would position themselves more positively than men (68% vs. 45% to be legal in all cases). Equally expected was that those with a close connection to a religion were more negative about abortion's full legalisation, although they accepted that in some cases it should be legal. Of course, a not insignificant 20% of them openly supported that it should be illegal. In addition to the more positive attitude on the part of women, there is also a higher level of acceptance recorded by those who stated a loose affiliation to a religion: 79% of them agreed that homosexuality should be accepted, and 60% of them agreed or partially agreed with the adoption of children by same-sex couples. Moreover, 52% agreed with the full legalisation of abortion. What comes out is that a close relationship to a religion, in this case Orthodox Christianity, is hardly compatible with views and ideas accepting sexual diversity and women's right to manage their bodies as they wish.

## 6. Church–State Relations: Towards a Separation?

Responding and discussing Church–state relations, the participants favoured their separation. Regarding the religious class, most of them (45%) answered that it should be optional, while 26% answered that it should be compulsory, but that all religions should be taught and not only the Orthodox one, as is currently the case. On the contrary, a significant percentage (28%) argued that it should not only be compulsory but that mainly the Orthodox doctrine should be taught. 51% of young women were in favour of an optional class compared to 42% of men, while only 16% of women asked for a compulsory class with an emphasis on Orthodoxy, compared to 34% of men. On the other hand, as expected, those who hold a close relationship with religion, namely, Orthodox Christianity, wanted a compulsory class with a focus on Orthodoxy, while those who have no relationship with a religion opted for optionality. The critical influence on the overall outcome came from those with a loose connection to a religious denomination: 35% of them said that they want the course to be optional, and 37% wanted it to be compulsory, but all religions are to be taught.

The findings are slightly different when it comes to the ceremony of sanctification at the beginning of every school year in September, with the presence of an Orthodox priest. In this case, the majority (52%) supported its continuation, while 41% asked to be terminated. In this question as well, however, women appear to be more open and progressive, with 47% wishing it to be stopped, compared to 38% of men; 55% of men wish to continue this practice, compared to 45% of women. Those who maintain a close relationship with a denomination wish to maintain it, while a difference is observed in terms of educational level, as those who have a university degree (47%) wish it to be stopped, compared to 33% of those without.

Another question is one concerning the retention or elimination of article three of the Constitution on the prevailing religion in Greece. Regarding this, 52% of the respondents were in favour of retention, while 39% were in favour of abolition. Further, analyses show that women are again in favour of abolition at 44% (versus 45% calling for it to be retained), while men are more clearly in favour of retention with 56%, as opposed to 37% who are in favour of abolition. This question also reveals differences based on the educational background, as those with a university degree are in favour of abolition with 44%, while it is 34% for those without. The support for retention of 92% by those with a close connection to a religion is not surprising. On the contrary, it is interesting that even those who have a loose connection with religion are overwhelmingly (65%) in favour of retaining this article. At the same time, even 20% of those who have no connection with religion are in favour of retaining it.

Similar findings came out from the qualitative research, where young people framed their arguments. The majority was in favour of the separation between the two institutions. It was argued that “It is absurd to discuss this [issue] in 2022” (laughs) and that it should have already implemented. As it was mentioned, “the ideal society does not depend on such a degree on the Church, the ideal state and society [should] not have such a degree of dependence” (Athina 32). Nevertheless, it was stressed that Greece is a religiously tolerant country, not a theocracy, although one respondent argued that although this is constitutionally accurate, in reality, there are many issues that prove otherwise. Some, however, argued that even if the separation takes place, it does not mean that there will be an ideological distinction between the state and the Church, while others argued that if the separation had happened earlier, Greece today would be a culturally different country, meaning more progressive, tolerant and secular. The opinion of a participant who was quite faithful, though not close to the Church, was illuminating: “The separation would be to the benefit of the Church, they do not understand that. The Church itself should have pushed [things towards] separation, for its own sake, because it would attract future generations” (Tassos 35).

The overwhelming majority claimed that they did not want the Church to be involved in political affairs, even those who described themselves as faithful: “I think it [the Church] does not need to be so closely related to the state. Yes, [it can be close] to the nation [but] not to politics; why [should the Church be involved] in politics?” (Dimitra 29). Only two participants argued that the Church should express its opinion more often, because she represents a large part of the society, without this meaning that she will be listened to by the state. Most of those in favour of separation pointed out with frustration that the separation is very unlikely to happen, and that it “seems utopian” since all political parties are reluctant to take such a decision because of what is perceived a high political cost:

“There has to be a dividing line between Church and state; some limits have to be set, because it seems to me that some people have made a fool of things, we do not have for example ICUs, we do not have snowploughs, we do not have fire engines in the summer, we do not have food, we do not have work [...] but [...] 4000 priests have to be hired [...] Why is there no separation of Church and state? It is purely for electoral purposes; it is the political cost for any [political] party to openly declare it and especially to implement it”. (Lefteris 34)

Opinions were also expressed in favour of the removal of religious symbols from schools and public buildings, the change in the Constitution, the abolition of sanctification in schools and, above all, the necessity of changing the religious education curriculum, as was emphatically revealed by the quantitative study. The majority argued that the course cannot be taught in its current form because it is essentially catechism, and as was mentioned, “If I wanted catechism, I would go to Sunday school” (Michalis 22). The need to teach all religions was stressed as a matter of inclusivity. For those who do not believe it was suggested that the class can be optional or even atheism and agnosticism could be taught as social phenomena or philosophical worldviews: “I would be satisfied if I, [as] growing up in school, would learn about some other religions and general issues of faith [...]”

I should have learned about other religions" (Tatiana 27). The multicultural composition of Greek society was also considered a crucial point for the change in the way religion is taught at schools. "[...] We are now talking about multicultural schools, schools where there are students from all parts of the world, even many who come from Orthodox families, are not even Orthodox, for me, it [religious class] has no place [in schools]" (Kiki 23). Overall, it comes out that young people are in favour of a more secular state, but they do not give similar importance to all issues presented and discussed.

## 7. Criticising the Orthodox Church

The majority of the participants highly criticised the Church as an institution. For example, 60% of the respondents considered the Church's public discourse to be backward, while only 15% disagreed with this view. Also, 49% agreed with the view that the Church does not do well with human rights, and 29% disagreed, while 55% disagreed with the view that the Church considers women and men equal. More particularly, on the place of women in society, respondents rate the public discourse of Church representatives negatively (60%), while they consider equally negatively the Church's public discourse on migrants and refugees (58%), and more negatively about homosexuals (77%).

Women were much more critical of the Church than men, especially concerning questions that directly concern them (e.g., abortion). On the other hand, those who have a close relationship with religion disagreed both with the view that the Church's discourse is backward and with the view that it does not respect human rights. The Church's discourse about the place of women in society is positively evaluated (73%), and the majority of the participants agree that the Church treats women equally (64%).

The words and phrases used during the qualitative part confirmed the negative attitudes of young people towards the Church. The majority of respondents, even people who declared themselves believers and religious, were highly critical of the Church. Far fewer were those who either expressed a positive view or answered that they had neither a positive nor a negative view. However, how did this attitude crystallise verbally? Their most typical statements about the Church were as follows:

- "It is a corrupt institution";
- "It is an obsolete institution";
- "The Church is too backward";
- "The Church is a conservative, patriarchal institution that resists any progress";
- "It's reactionary, it's conservative";
- "It looks like a department store";
- "As an institution, is very outdated".

All the answers focus on the institution of the Orthodox Church of Greece. However, a twofold distinction is made on the part of several respondents. Their critical attitude concerns the Church and especially the higher clergy, either because of the power that dominates their circles or because the higher clergy often covers up problems that appear among the lower clergy. One example was the case of allegations of rape and harassment from a priest that was in the news at the time of the survey and was reflected strongly during the interviews and focus groups. However, it was quite often emphasised that there are also 'good priests', truly 'holy men', who carry out important work in the Church, although the majority argued that they mainly hold a negative picture of the clergy. It was also underlined that the Church and religion should not be identified, as the negative image of the Church is not the fault of religion per se, and therefore, one should not demonise religion. Despite his criticism of the institution, as one respondent noted, "it is good that the Church exists; no one said that the Church should be abolished, but it should change its attitude" (Dimos 23). Nevertheless, some argued that the problem is inherent in Christianity and its sacred texts and that this is where many clergy members find a basis for expressing their extreme or intolerant views.

One of the most characteristic responses came from a very religious participant, who expressed a strongly negative view of the Church, and on the occasion of the Church's stance during the COVID-19 pandemic, she described it as a 'deep state'.

"Especially at the beginning [of the pandemic] when there is a legislation, meaning it is for everyone, there should not exist a deep state that will decide if the churches will remain open or if [holy] communion will continue to be practiced; there is a regulation that is for everyone and when someone breaks this regulation, that is where the deep state is created, it means that someone is stronger than the law [...] [Deep state] means when I can secretly pass whatever I want because in reality, I am in charge; When I can ignore the laws because in reality, I am above the state". (Dimitra 31)

The discussion with young people focused also on whether the Church's discourse contains racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, or other discriminatory elements and whether it has an influence on young people and society as a whole. According to the majority of young people, the Church's public discourse on a range of human rights issues could be characterised as conservative, stagnant, racist, homophobic and misogynistic: "Certainly [is] not progressive, I do not know if I would say regressive, I would say stagnant, for long periods of time, I do not think the Church of 2021 has changed from the Church of 1990" (Kiki 23). In fact, one participant, who stated that she is a faithful Orthodox Christian, noted that the Church's attitude discourages her from participating: "The Church's attitude on all issues [immigrants, women, homosexuals] is racist; maybe if it was more positive I would be closer to the Church" (Gianna 34).

The most negative characterisations of the Church concerned the issue of its stance towards women and homosexuals, and it was noted that on these issues, it goes against the current social developments taking place in society. As it was stated, "on women and the emancipation of women, on bisexuals, homosexuals, it [the Church] is very negative it goes against the current of the times. Priests have expressed very extreme discourse, vulgar discourse about homosexuals" (Georgia 18). Adapting to modern conditions and to the changes taking place at the social level was stressed by several interviewees: "I think it is medieval, it has obscurantist views; I think that the Church does not keep up with our times; Its views are anachronistic, backward; they cultivate intolerance, racism" (Lefteris 34).

The female interviewees, in particular, argued emphatically, and in some cases with a loud voice during the discussions, that the Church has no authority to speak about and influence people on issues concerning women's empowerment: "Priests cannot speak on issues of women's rights, self-determination of the body" (Domna 24) or "who is the priest who will judge me, who I am, how I speak, what I do, while God embraces me?" (Dimitra 31). Overall, it was argued that the Church's discourse regarding women is extremely demeaning.

"I think that in general, in the area of human rights, the Orthodox Church is lagging far behind because it downgrades women, [...] and in the workplace and about its role [in society]; I think the Orthodox Church believes that women should be at home, should not have rights, be under [men], in general; this is also evident from the Church's [sacred] texts. For example, in the sacrament of marriage, the whole text is extremely derogatory for the female gender". (Georgia 22)

The above positions include issues such as morality or appropriate dress, which are seen as targeting women, leading some female participants to argue that under these circumstances they do not even wish to go to church. The following quotation, which was expressed with tension in her voice during the discussion, is particularly interesting and encapsulates the above.

"It is not acceptable when God says 'you are all equal' and you, the Church, cannot acknowledge everyone as equal [...]. Each priest should treat everyone

equally. That's why I do not go to church. It [religion/Christianity] has remained unchanged in the sense that the world has moved on, things have changed, the way of thinking has changed and the efforts that are made in Greece [...] I do not see any desire to modernise, to change the philosophy, meaning I feel like I'm talking to people who are stupid and do not want to do it. Of course, I understand that things are not that simple, but I feel like it plays [the Church] such a big role in the mind-set of the Greek people affecting them deeply. [...] I mean I cannot have my life depend on how a worker [a priest] in an enterprise [the Church] interprets a book [the Bible]; It devalues me [as a woman]. I do not mean when religion prescribes fasting, but about my behaviour [as a woman]. I've been scolded by a priest for entering [the church] in pants. I'm not going to stop wearing pants in church. [...] It is 2022. We have to be able to go as we want, otherwise, I won't go again; with whatever hair we want, with whatever make-up we want. I mean, I find it unacceptable for an inclusive religion to be so closed to certain social groups and certain visual stimuli. Moreover, my disagreement with the Christian religion has to do with the gender violence part, gender discrimination, the position of women and men [...] [the Church], is not adjusted to modern times, today is not 1950". (Tatiana 27)

About homosexuals, everyone agreed that the Church maintains the most hostile attitude, being backward and obscurantist. Although, in this case, it was argued that these kinds of perceptions are based on the Bible, other interviewees argued that "it is not Christ who does not want homosexuals. The Church does not want them" (Kiki 23). In the same context, one of the participants, very close to the Church, defended the Church's stance, stressing that homosexuality for the Church is not considered normal. This caused the apparent discomfort of a member of the LGBTQI+ community participating in the focus group, who argued that "the Church should not have any influence in matters of non-believers" (Aris 24).

One of the main aims of the overall research (quantitative and qualitative) was to investigate the influence of the Church's discourse on society and especially on youth. All respondents claimed that based on their social environment, they felt that the Church has little influence on young people, at least in the 20 to 35 years age range, and many noted that a large proportion of their peers do not even believe (i.e., they are atheists or agnostics). Higher levels of education, the ability of young people nowadays to travel a lot and thus come into contact with other religions and cultures, living in large urban centres, and the internet, which was identified as a very important factor, were seen as playing a crucial role for the lack of the Church's influence: "The vast majority of Greeks under 40 who live in urban centres and perhaps with higher education are not influenced [by the Church]" (Aris 24). It was also argued that in the future, young people will become more distant from the Church and even less affected, since, as mentioned, even by those who self-identified as faithful Christian Orthodox, Orthodoxy is in decline worldwide.

On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the Church exerts influence—often described as dramatic—on a large part of the population, which usually has certain characteristics, such as, it is older, lives mainly in the countryside, and is heterosexual: "male and female heterosexuals, white usually native, older, is generally the pattern", of those who are influenced (Dimitris 30). This influence is considered partly inevitable since a large percentage of the population still self-identifies as Christian Orthodox. One example regularly mentioned was related to the COVID-19 pandemic: "There are people who were not vaccinated because their priest told them not to vaccinate and there are many of them and I do not think it's a secret" (Dimitra 31).

Some of the young participants, especially those who believe, raised the issue that this development, i.e., young people moving away from religion, is negative for the Church, but the Church seems either unaware or indifferent to the consequences.

"They are slowly driving things forward; they do not understand it. This institution will be continuously weakened and will inevitably be completely discredited

in the public consciousness in 30 years. Why is it an obsolete institution? I do not know. Cannot they see that? Do not they care to change? Are there so many benefits that they are not interested in changing? At some point, all these people who are going [to church] will stop going. I would also [go], I am a man who believes and believes deeply, I would like the Church to be different [...]. (Tassos 35)

As it was mentioned, “if [Orthodoxy] does not adapt [to the social developments], at some point it will be lost or if not lost the only reason will be because of a strong systemic connection with the government” (Tatiana 27). According to many participants, as society moves into the 21st century, average people will increasingly think more critically and will not share the Church’s views. Others argued that “the Church’s discourse does not necessarily discourage people from believing” (Gianna 34), that is, it does not turn them away from the faith, but from the institution, at least according to what they observe in their social environment. However, they also argued that in the future, religion’s influence on people will probably fade away gradually.

## 8. Conclusions

The evidence from this research on young people and religion in Greek society could lead to two preliminary conclusions. First, concerning religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation and based on the secularisation theory, it could be argued that in contemporary Greek society religion is losing its importance and impact among younger generations, breaking the chain of religious memory, which was quite strong in previous decades. Second, the Orthodox Church as an institution has lost young people’s trust and is considered as backward and incompatible with modernity, being highly criticised, even from those who are self-identified as Orthodox Christians on several topics, especially about sexual relations and gender issues. Furthermore, politics and the state are still considered closely related to the Orthodox Church, which is another point of high criticism among young people.

However, religion and the Orthodox Church continue to play a crucial role, not only in politics but also in many young people’s lives, even as a cultural remnant of their national and religious identity (cultural Christianity or belonging without believing). Moreover, a relatively clear distinction is made between religion and the Church as an institution, implying the emergence of a more individualised form of faith (believing without belonging). Based on Wilson’s (1982) six elements of secularisation, as described by Bruce (2011), it could be argued that on the one hand, there seems to be a decay of the Orthodox Church in Greece and a displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria. Sometimes a replacement of a specifically religious consciousness by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation is observed among young people. Furthermore, a shift from religious to secular control of a variety of social activities and functions seems to be underway, and the main finding is the decline in the proportion of the time, energy, and resources that young people devote to supernatural concerns. On the other hand, the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies does not apply to the Greek context.

The above findings, although they seem to verify previous studies in the field, should be cautiously approached due to the limitations described at the beginning. In any case, they do not imply that religion or the Orthodox Church have been privatised or marginalised in Greek society. As a consequence, the current social context in terms of religious beliefs, practices, and impact could probably best be described as liquid secularity or secularity in process.

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but there is no need in Greece for an official ethical clearance when a research is taken place outside of a University or research institution.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** More data can be found in the following link: <https://simeio.org.gr/neia/neolaia-kai-thriskia-kinonikes-diergasies-kai-rixis/> (accessed on 21 March 2022).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Eurobarometer 48 (1997), where 77% argued that they trust the Church and 21% that they do not. More particularly, for young people, see the following survey of 2005, in which the Church was the first among the most trusted institutions <https://core.ac.uk/download/188024846.pdf> (accessed 28 August 2022). Similar findings have been found in another survey, where the Church took second place among the most trusted institutions after the Presidency of the Democracy (Demertzis and Stavrakakis 2008, p. 152). The literature on youth studies, both on the international level and in Greece, is very extensive, and there is no space for an analytical presentation. However, for a dense overview, one can see the work of Demertzis and Stavrakakis (2008, pp. 15–52).

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