Chapter 9

Forms of Atheism in Contemporary Greek Society: Beliefs, Practices and the Formation of the Atheist Identity

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Introduction

Until very recently the dominant perception was that more than 95 per cent of the Greek population is Orthodox Christian. However, apart from some sporadic quantitative studies about religious beliefs and affiliation, no qualitative studies have been conducted in order to examine if all these people who in a survey reply that they are Orthodox Christians, are actually followers of the Orthodox faith or their answers are simply based on the fact that they have been baptized. As a consequence, it is not easy to determine the Orthodox population in contemporary Greek society and of course the population of atheists, agnostics and religiously indifferent.

As it has been argued, we know very little about atheists, but we are learning quickly, since for a long time atheists were, quite stunningly, almost completely ignored by sociologists (LeDrew 2013:1). However, contrary to what takes place on the international level during the last years, atheism in Greece has attracted no attention among social scientists. As a consequence, the purpose of this paper¹ is to make a first attempt to study this particular field and the main questions are: Who are the Greek atheists in contemporary Greek society? Into which family environment they were born and raised? How did they de-convert from the Greek Orthodox traditional and dominant religious paradigm and how did their families react to this rupture with their past? Which are their beliefs about religion, morality and life?

Status and Role of the Orthodox Church in Greek Society

The Orthodox Church of Greece was and still is a powerful institution, which historically has played a crucial role in Greek society in many aspects and

¹ This paper is part of a post-doctoral research about atheism in contemporary Greek Society conducted at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences of Athens since 2012.
acts as the country’s main cultural backdrop and reservoir (Makrides and Molokotos-Liederman 2004: 467). After the formation of the Greek state in 1830 the Orthodox Church became a national Church (1833) and was transformed into the state’s ideological apparatus reproducing the national ideology. This ideological function continued during the 20th century especially after the emergence of socialist and communist ideas within the Greek society. It was during that period that the Church became more important for the state as a mechanism against communism and helped in the formation and the propagation of the ideology of Helleno-Christianity (Gazi 2004). This ideology combines the history of ancient Greece, Byzantium and Modern Greece, arguing that the Greek nation is unique, blessed by God, characterized by historical and biological continuity and that a true Greek must be Orthodox, implying that religion and nation are inseparable and that the real Greek identity contains both these elements.

The Orthodox Church of Greece is a state Church and this is proved by the existing legal regime, which defines the relations between the two institutions and the legal status of the Church. According to the third article of the Greek Constitution, the dominant religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. Some insist that as long as there is such a statement in the constitution one cannot talk about religious freedom and a secular state (Manitakis 2000, Paparizos 2007), while others argue that this article is not substantial and is not actually in practice (Venizelos 2000). In addition, we should add that in the second article of the first chapter of the law (no 590/28.5.1977 Official Gazette A’ 146) regarding the function of the Orthodox Church of Greece and its relationship with the state, is stated that:

The Church of Greece cooperates with the state on subjects of common interest; for example, the Christian education of the youth, religious service in the army, the upholding 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.

To present and comment on every aspect and on all the historical and legal details of the relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church of Greece is not an easy task and there are many interesting studies examining this controversial relationship (Zaharopoulos 1985; Statopoulos 1993; Karagiannis 1997; Venizelos 2000; Manitakis 2000; Dimitropoulos 2001). The conclusion is that the Orthodox Church played and still plays a crucial role in Greek society and in the Greek political sphere functioning as a state apparatus. The