Islam in Cyprus—Introductory Remarks

Béatrice Hendrich and Martin Strohmeier

The study of Islam in Cyprus is a relatively new and still rather unexamined field of research. For several decades Islam has mainly been studied in the context of the development of the Turkish-Cypriot community since the British takeover, with a strong focus on either historical or political aspects. Beyond that, the analysis and retrospective interpretation of the Cyprus conflict is a strong motivation for a considerable amount of academic writing on Cyprus. This narrow approach to cultural, social and religious affairs added to the neglect of more up-to-date research areas in Islamic Studies proper: Islamic institutions and their activities, relations and frictions between different Islamic schools (madhhab) and marginalized Islamic communities, transnational Islam and its networks, (neo-)Sufi movements etc. More recent quantitative studies on religious identity employ normative approaches posing debatable questions (“Do you feel European or Muslim?”) (Güven-Lisaniler 2002; Yeşilada 2009).

It is only in recent years that the old and rather habitual association of Islam in Cyprus with “Turkish-Cypriot Muslims in the north of the island” has given way to a more differentiated view (Dayıoğlu and Hatay 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). Research into a variety of religious groups and their beliefs and practices within the wider spectrum of Islam is being carried out. One of the themes which has attracted considerable attention (and is perhaps one of the better researched aspects of Islam in Cyprus) is the person of Shaykh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Haqqani al-Qubrusi and the Naqshibandi community based in Morphou/Lefke. However, even this community has, despite its international popularity, attracted astonishingly little attention. While Tayfun Atay examined the British branch of the community in the 1990s (Atay 1996; English transl. Atay 2012), its international network (Böttcher 2011) as well as its center in Cyprus (Stjernholm 2011) were comprehensively studied only in 2011. In recent years another variant of Islam has been evolving in the “southern” part of the island, namely a diaspora Islam (Strohmeier 2015, in this issue).

Yet, even the notion of “Turkish Islam in Cyprus” is not without ambiguity. It means, on the one hand, the religion as practised by Turkish-Cypriots. On the other hand, it can also refer to the way Islam is observed by Turks in Cyprus, i.e. Turks from Turkey who started to immigrate to the island almost 40 years ago.
and are defined as settlers by the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus; these Turks are now in their third generation. What they have in common and where they differ in terms of religious attitudes and identities from Turkish-Cypriots is a particularly interesting topic. Both the settlers’ assimilation to the allegedly lax approach to Islam by Turkish-Cypriots and the fear articulated by Turkish-Cypriots that the settlers are islamizing Cyprus in a manner incompatible with Cypriot culture are still awaiting comprehensive research.

Islam in Cyprus looks back at a history of almost 1400 years, i.e. since the religion was founded. The incursions of the early Arab Muslims into the island in the 7th century left an imprint in legends which evolved around the supposed stay of venerated Muslim figures on the island. Hala Sultan/Umm Haram, the shrine associated with a female follower of the Prophet, and Hazret-i Ömer, the burial place of the “Seven Martyrs” (Harmansah 2014), are prominent examples. However, a significant Muslim population element began to develop only nine centuries later when, after the Ottoman conquest in 1571, garrisons were stationed here and the tried and tested settlement policies (sürgün) of the Sultans were applied to Cyprus as well.

The island became a province of an Islamic state where the Shari’a prevailed. In the framework of the millet-system a peculiar distribution of powers emerged, leading to a strong involvement of the Orthodox Church in administration. Collective and individual conversions, mostly voluntary, of Christians increased the Muslim element (villages with a large Muslim population named after Greek saints are evidence of collective conversions of entire village communities) (Cicek 1993; Jennings 1993). This resulted in a partial blending of the Christian, particularly the Orthodox population, with the Muslim element (in the first half of the 19th century approximately one third of the villages were mixed). The largely peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians led to an exchange between faiths, phenomena of syncretism and contacts between religious customs. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of Islam in Cyprus is its relations to other religions in the island, predominantly the Orthodox Church. In the not too distant past there existed a group called Linovavvakoi (linen-cotton), i.e. Crypto-Christians (probably mainly Catholics) whose name alluded to their mixed identity; outwardly Muslims, they practised their Christian faith secretly (or even changed to and fro between the faiths). Several Greek-Orthodox customs can perhaps be traced to the proximity to Muslims. Holy shrines, especially in the northern part of the island, were visited and venerated by Muslims and Christians alike well into the 20th century. The most prominent of these shrines are the Apostolos Andreas monastery with its holy spring in the Karpasia region at the north-eastern tip of the island (Hendrich 2013), the subterranean shrine Kirklar (Ayii Saranda, “The holy fourty”) near