Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

*Instilling Religion in Greek and Turkish Nationalism: A Sacred Synthesis*


Turkish and Greek nationalisms are two interesting subjects for comparison. This is because one of the most important ‘others’ of Turkish national identity is the Greek, and vice versa. The Greek War of Independence in the 1820s left a strong trace in the Ottoman memory. For instance, the Ottomans’ first encounter with the concepts of modern nationalism, such as patrie and nation, happened during the Greek War of Independence. The New Turkish Republic, moreover, emerged after a war against Greek armies in Anatolia. Greek national identity, on the other hand, places itself against both Muslim Ottomans and the Greek elites of Istanbul Ecumenical Patriarchate, who belonged to the Ottoman millet system. For these reasons, Ioannis Grigoriadis’ comparison of Turkish and Greek nationalisms in terms of the role religion played in their formation is highly instructive and insightful.

Grigoriadis is an expert academic on Turkish and Greek politics, who teaches at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He has conducted numerous studies on nationalism, identity, religion, and democratization in Turkey and Greece. In this study, Grigoriadis analyzes the role of religion in shaping national identity in both Turkey and Greece. He looks at both cases in depth by using examples from the history of the two countries. He also develops a theoretical framework that makes his comparison easily understandable.

In both Greece and Turkey, nationalist movements started as secular ideologies influenced by the European Enlightenment. In Greece, the founding fathers of nationalism tried to create a Greek identity that was based on classical Hellenistic culture. By doing so, they ignored the Byzantine and Ottoman orthodox past, and instead emphasized the so-called ties between Ancient Greek antiquity and the modern Greek nation. However, this
Project of creating a secular national identity with Hellenistic motives did not take root in the newly established Greek nation-state. Irredentist understanding of the ‘Megali Idea,’ newly emerging rival nationalist movements in the Balkans, and the existence of an Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul who sceptically approached secular Greek nationalism did not allow for a secularist Greek national identity. Greek nationalists then realized the potential of religion in consolidating a national identity that included other Greek-Orthodox people, regardless of their ethnicity. Thus, some nationalist authors constructed a Greek identity in which Hellenistic and medieval Orthodox heritages were reconciled. This is referred to as the ‘Hellenic-Christian Synthesis,’ and it sets the framework for the nationalization of religion. The formation of Greek national churches helped to strengthen the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis.

The author chooses two examples of invented traditions to show the instillation of religion into Greek nationalism: Greece’s Independence Day (March 25) and the Myth of Clandestine School. Greece Independence Day deliberately coincides with the day of the Annunciation of Virgin Mary, although this is not historically accurate. Hence, the birth of the Greek nation-state gained a religious color. The example of the Clandestine Schools narrative, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, tells the story of the Church’s heroic struggle to teach Greek language from the Bible in secret schools to prevent the Ottoman’s restrictions on the Greek language. In this case, the Orthodox Church was depicted as the protector of Greek identity against the Ottomans, although again this information is not historically valid.

As for the Turkish case, the secularist project was originally much stronger. The Kemalist founding fathers implemented a comprehensive secularist project in the early years of the new Turkish Republic and rejected the Ottoman Islamic legacy. However, the multi-party system and the rise of Kurdish nationalism and communist movements compelled Turkish nationalists to reconcile religion and nationalism and create a Turkish Sunni identity. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis gained power especially after the 1980 military coup. Two examples reflect the Turkish-Islamic synthesis: Mandatory Religious Education and Popularizing New Foreign Policy. The military regime in the beginning of the 1980s introduced mandatory religious courses in primary and secondary education, and since then mandatory religious education has continued in Turkey. Furthermore, after the 1980s, Turkey’s Ottoman Islamic heritage has been encouraged in its foreign policy vision. Following in the footsteps of Turgut Özal and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current Prime Minister,