

## **Women of Orthodox Faith in Cyprus amid Historical Transitions**

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### **Abstract:**

A fully effective participation of women of faith in political life could contribute significantly to the prevention of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, making for a more humane global society. The focus of this article is the contribution of Orthodox Christian women to the life and culture of Cyprus, a country with a history of conflict and division across ethnic and religious lines, something not rare in the Middle East. The northern section of Cyprus has been under Turkish rule since 1974. This has a majority Muslim population; albeit with an existing Christian presence composed of Christians, Maronite inhabitants as well as foreign workers. A survey conducted in the summer of 2019 sheds light on the image of women of faith in daily life and society. Central to my analysis is women's struggle for reconciliation between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots amid the United Nations' continuing efforts for a settlement to the Cyprus conflict. The role of women is examined along with a brief historical outline of each period, which is important in order to understand their effort and achievements.

**Keywords:** Cyprus, gender, Orthodox Church, Christian women, Muslim women, financial crisis, reconstruction, reconciliation, Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots.

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## History of Cyprus, the Orthodox Church, and Changes affecting Women's Status

The word 'ἐκκλησία' ecclesia is comprised of two Greek words: *ek*, which means "out from and to", and *kaléō*, which means "to call." In antiquity 'Εκκλησία του Δήμου' was the Church of the Municipality, a main democratic assembly in ancient Athens, and was held on the hill of Pnyx, the Market or the Theatre of Dionysos. The assembly was open exclusively to all male citizens, over the age of 20, who had political rights. The assembly was established by Solon in 594 B.C. In contrast to the Church of the Municipality, the Orthodox Church allowed women to come to services. Moreover, women have a religious duty to participate in the Holy Sacraments as well as educate their children in this direction. However, segregation was practised within the Church with a designated area *Gynaikonitis*<sup>1</sup> for women to pray. In the Byzantine Church of Ayia Sophia in Constantinople, the throne of the Queen was placed at the front of the Gynaikonitis. The end of the Ottoman Empire in Cyprus marked an end to women's segregation in the Churches. Nevertheless there remains to this day the unwritten rule that women stand on the left side of the inner Church building while men stand on the right. However, it is now common practice for younger couples to stand together with their children as a family without any censure by more traditional members of the congregation.

There have been several times when the doctrine of the first Church in our region has been accused of a kind of misogyny. These criticisms however need to be viewed in light of their historical context. It would be unfair to omit referring to what was happening in Corinth at the time the Apostle Paul wrote the two Letters to the Corinthians. In his first letter Paul admonishes women who do not cover their head in worship. «Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head; it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head" (*I Corinthians, 11:5-6*). From the time of classical antiquity until the Byzantine Era, Corinth had been the centre of

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<sup>1</sup> In Ancient Greece the part of the house reserved for women was called "gynaecium" (γυναικείον) or gynaeconitis (γυναικωνίτις, *gynaikōnitis*). These women's quarters are similar to the Indian and Muslim Zenana. The *gynaecium* is the counterpart to the *andron*, or male quarters.

organized prostitution as well as the so-called sacred prostitution. There, in the temple of Aphrodite a significant number of female servants, called *hetairai* were employed. These women wore their hair short and did not cover their head. According to apostle Paul, a failure to cover the hair would readily identify a woman as a prostitute. In the *Letter to Galatians* (3:28) the same Apostle, emphasizes sexual equality in the matter of salvation: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." All who are in Christ have same salvation status before God. However they do not have the same function (Brown, 1976, 570). Although there is evidence that sacred prostitution did exist, it was not the main form of prostitution in ancient Greece (Stephanie Budin, 2009).

In 45 A.D. the Apostles Paul and Barnabas (both of Jewish descent) visited the island and stopped in Paphos, then the capital of Cyprus, where they preached Christianity. Jews and adherents of idolatry were displeased by this and asked them to leave the island. According to tradition, Paul was tied and beaten receiving forty but one (i.e. 39) lashes by friends of a sorcerer, called Elymas. During this period male and female inhabitants of Cyprus, converted to Christianity. At that time the religions that existed on the island were Judaism, the religion of the Twelve Olympians, idolatry, as well as the practice of sorcery (Papadopoulos, 2011). As Christians they learnt the new message of this religion, which espoused love, humility and the elevated status of women. This had a positive impact on family relations and social life on the island. It is worth noting here, that the legal and social status of women was considerably lower than that of men. Judith Wegner (1988) describes the status of women at that time as resting somewhere between the level of a chattel and of a person, which kept women nearly as *res* (objects).<sup>2</sup>

During the reign of Emperor Zeno the autocephaly (*juridical independency*) of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus was granted (478 A.D.).<sup>3</sup> Through the Byzantine Era women were confined to the home

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<sup>2</sup> An entity possessing no powers, rights, or duties is no person at all but merely an object or chattel. In the advent of the Religion of Islam in Arabia, women were treated like *res*. Sharia, the Muslim Law, lifted the status of women at that time, from *res* to personhood with limited rights and many duties. See Said Ramadan, *Islamisches Recht. Theorie und Praxis*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980), 50-51.

<sup>3</sup> See John Hackett, *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1972<sup>2</sup>), 23ff.

and could go out only with the permission of their husband or guardian. Parents arranged the marriage of their daughters usually between the ages of 13-15. Women's education was generally limited to reading and writing. Very few women acquired a wider learning. The Codex Justinianus decreed that a married woman sitting at a table with other men and without her husband was grounds for divorce (Book V, The Civil Law, XIII). These Laws were in force in Byzantine Cyprus as well. *Scenicae* (in Greek 'θεατρικές') used to perform in the theatre and earn their living from prostitution for the upper class; they were deprived of the right to become public officers or work in the judicial system. Byzantine Law was more inclusive regarding women's social status than their British and American counterparts, which until the nineteenth century deprived women of the right to make contracts and wills. According to Codex Justinianus if a husband predeceased the wife, she took control of his property as well as her own and became the head of the household and the legal guardian of any underage children (Harris, 2015). Flourishing monasticism was the central feature of cultural life during this period (Kyrris, 1996). This together with the existence of widespread poverty at the time was the impetus for many women entering the Monastic life. Famous monasteries in Cyprus for women were the following: Monastery of Agios Herakleidios situated in the centre of the ancient city-kingdom Tamassos. Quite impressive was Timios Stavros (Holy Cross) Monastery in the middle of Omodos village in the epicentre of the wine-growing district of the island. Also important in this period was Ayia Napa Monastery in the eastern part of the island. The Monastery of Panagia Apsinthiotissa in Kerynia was known in western medieval sources as the Abbey of Abscithi and was most probably a women's convent (Hackett, 1972).<sup>4</sup>

During the Lusignan Period (1191-1489) Cypriots struggled for cultural and religious survival against their politically and militarily

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the patriarchal structure of this period, most monasteries were male: Kykkos Monastery in Troodos where one of the three holy icons of the Virgin Mary made by Apostle Luke is to be found, Machairas also dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Stavrovouni Monastery in the Larnaca district, famous for the piece of the Cross of Jesus Christ left there by Queen Helen (Mother of the Emperor Constantine) after returning from her mission to Jerusalem in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Panayia tou Sinti Monastery in Paphos district, an UNESCO World Heritage Site. Apostolos Andreas Monastery is situated just south of Cape Apostolos Andreas, the north-easternmost point of the island in the Karpass Peninsula. See Nicholas Coureas, *The Foundation rules of Medieval Cypriot Monasteries: Makhairas and St. Neophytos* (Nicosia: The Cyprus Research Centre, 2003), 124-125.

powerful new masters. The then newly established Latin hierarchy subjugated the Orthodox Church and deprived the Greek Community of its traditional leadership. During the Crusades Cyprus was used a point of departure for operations and contacts, a place of refuge and the only remaining corridor for pilgrims. There were persecutions against Orthodox Christians, with some of them converting to the Latin denomination in order to pay less tax and be granted more privileges by the ruling class. The Venetian occupation (1489 - 1571) was worse than the Lusignan rule; the island was treated like a neglected province: hygiene and public health deteriorated, resulting in a steady decline of the native population (Hill, 2010). Women, mothers and grandmothers experienced so much poverty and hardship in their daily lives that many preferred to have the Ottomans as rulers, who had been promising gifts and security should Cyprus come under their rule.

The Ottoman Empire (1571-1878) began with changes in the religious groups. The rule of the island was in the hands of a military aristocracy appointed by the Sultan and headed by the *Beğlerbeğ*, whose responsibilities were both administration and defence. On the social level Muslim Law became the driving power of all activities. According to this Law, Christian people who were not believers like the Muslims were deprived of certain privileges the latter enjoyed. The same rules also applied for Jews. As noted by Jacob Marcus (1938) on page 16: "It is forbidden to the tolerated peoples living on Moslem territory to clothe themselves in the same manner as the chiefs, the scholars and the nobles. They should not be allowed to clothe themselves in costly fabrics which have been cut in the fashions which are forbidden to them, in order that they may not offend the sensibilities of the poor Moslems and in order that their faith in their religion should not be shaken by this (poor Moslems may regret their faith when they see how well-dressed the Christians and Jews are)". They were also forbidden to make much noise on their Sunday or Shabbat celebrations. They had to be quiet when celebrating their own festivals. As personal testimony, my great grandmother, Chatzimaria,<sup>5</sup> who was born in 1863, used to tell my mother stories regarding these prohibitions. When her daughter Loutsia, my grandmother, was growing up, her mother always wanted to dress her in red clothes, a

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<sup>5</sup> She was called Haji-Maria. Haji is a prefix denoting those who made the pilgrimage to the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. It derives from the Arabic *Hajji*, denoting one who has successfully completed a pilgrimage to Mecca. My great grandmother came from a rich family where women were allowed to go abroad and visit Palestine.

colour she was forbidden to wear during her own childhood under Ottoman rule because this was forbidden to the non-Muslim.

The role of the Orthodox Church as the leader of the nation (Ethnarchy) was strengthened through the *Khatti Sheriff of Güllhane* (or Khatti Khumayun) reforms promulgated by Sultan Abdul Mejid (19<sup>th</sup> century). The acquired privileges of the communities were confirmed by *the Law of Tanzimat*, a decisive legislation, as it granted administrative autonomy of communal affairs to all Christians and other non-Muslim communities living in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup> Although during this period most women were illiterate, their adherence to the liturgical life and customs of the Church not only kept the faith alive but provided an impulse for many Muslims to come to the Church as well as attend Christian ceremonies. The traveller Pietro della Valle recounts his experience of a celebration at the Monastery of Agia Napa on Sept. 9th 1625, describing how Christians with several Muslims danced, sang, and ate together.<sup>7</sup> The company of Muslim Cypriots at the festival of Agia Napa was not at all unusual. Other such shared festivities were those of Panagia tou Kykkou Monastery, that of Panagia Troothidissa Monastery, etc. One holy site that is officially recognised by Turks to this date, despite the partition, is the Monastery of Apostle Andreas in the north east of the island.<sup>8</sup> That the Orthodox Church has been a shelter for Turkish Cypriots is evidenced by the toponymes,<sup>9</sup> of many purely Turkish villages and villages with a Turkish majority with names of Christian Saints. For instance the villages: "Agios<sup>10</sup> Ioannis", "Agios Nikolaos", "Agios Isidoros", "Agios Georgios" et al.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See George Serghides, *Internal and External Conflict of Laws in regard to Family Relations in Cyprus* (Studia Juris Cyprii, Vol. 1, Nicosia, 1988), 32.

<sup>7</sup> See Excerpta Cypria, *Materials for a History of Cyprus*, transl. by C. D. Cobham (Cambridge, 1908), 213. Also see Halil Inalcik, "*Ottoman Policy and Administration in Cyprus after the Conquest*", *The Ottoman Empire: Conquest, Organisation and Economy, Collected Studies* (London, 1978), 5-23.

<sup>8</sup> Official Turkish travel guides acknowledge this Monastery to be a sacred place for all Cypriots. See *Historical and Archaeological Places of Famagusta Area*, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Youth, Department of Antiquities and Museums, (Kıbrıs Türk Federe Devleti, 1982), 15: "The Monastery of Apostolos Andreas is a holy place both for Turks and Greeks."

<sup>9</sup> *Toponymes* are names of places.

<sup>10</sup> *Agios* means Saint.

<sup>11</sup> See Costas Kyrris, *Peaceful Coexistence in Cyprus under the British Rule (1878-1959) and after Independence* (Nicosia: Public Information Office, 1977), 29f. Idem, "*Symbiotic*

Food preparation, traditionally women's domain, meant that women were mostly responsible for the adherence of the fasts in the Orthodox Church calendar. It is important to note here that up to one third of the days of a year Orthodox Christians fast from animal products including fish. This rule was established in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D. in order to protect people's health, even though at that time the link between the consumption of animal products and cancer had yet to be made. However, people followed this rule (Kypri & Protopapa, 2003). From a theological point fasting is regarded as the only kind of sacrifice Christian Orthodox believers may make for God.

British Rule (1878-1960) in Cyprus offered wider opportunities for political activity of the Church, despite the serious encroachments on its civil jurisdiction and privileges. In 1895 the first Law regarding education was passed; it provided for separate Educational Councils for the Turkish and Greek community respectively. According to Pantelides (1982, 7) during British Rule the education, through its orientations and objectives and through constitutional provisions, had become "one of the main agencies in widening the gap between the two communities". A defining characteristic of this period is the changes in women's dress. Women had the freedom to choose their own clothing, whether it be colourful or not and removed the veil, which was a practise showing respect and submission. Although early Christian teaching ordered women to cover their head and Islam to this day obliges especially married women to wear the veil, it is important to note that this practice has its roots before the social establishment of the monotheistic religions. In the prehistoric period, well before people lived in settlements, men worshipped woman as the mother of life. In ancient Crete there was the worship of the Goddess Mother (*Θεά-Μητέρα*). In ancient Greece Amazon-women (*Αμαζόνες*) would hunt accompanied by their guards. This changed when the male realized his crucial role in procreation. Consequently, the female was obliged to show submission to the male by covering her head.<sup>12</sup>

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*Elements in the History of the two Communities of Cyprus*", Proceedings of the International Symposium on Political Geography (Nicosia, 1976), 243ff.

<sup>12</sup> To this day matriarchal societies exist in various parts of the world such as in Indonesian Sumatra and Africa e.g. the Tuareg tribe in the Sahara. See Georg Stathia, *Divorce according to the Civil Code* (in Greek, Athens 1985), 7f. John Mayne, *A Treatise on Hindu Law and Usages* (Madras: Higginbotham, 1906), 78f. Julius Jolly, *Hindu Law and*

The London-Zurich Treaty established the Republic of Cyprus. Archbishop Makarios III, in his role as the *Ethnarch* (leader of the nation) of the people of Cyprus, became the First Head of State. Art. 87 of the Constitution provided two Communal Chambers, the Turkish and the Greek, each having jurisdiction in matters of religion, education, cultural affairs and personal status of their respective community.<sup>13</sup> In the twenty-nine years following the war of 1974 there had been no communication at all between Turks and Greeks until the first checkpoint opened in 2003. During this time the educational system had been exposed to propaganda. No common language was practiced. Coexistence had been hidden even by historiography. However recently and due to economic interests, communication between the two communities has been improved. For example, the year 2018, on first of October, on the day the establishment of Cyprus Republic is celebrated, 21 thousand Greek Cypriots from Cyprus Republic passed checkpoints and visited the Turkish side mostly for shopping because the Turkish lira was low and commodities were cheaper there. Many women went to the other side and bought Turkish sewing and knitting wool. Besides, on that day 14 thousand Turkish Cypriots visited the south.<sup>14</sup> Cyprus is evolving into an intercultural society interacting among its citizens belonging to different cultural groups.<sup>15</sup>

The island of Aphrodite once again faced another threat to its existence with an acute financial crisis in 2013. A €10 billion international bailout by the Euro-group, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund was announced, in return for Cyprus agreeing to close the country's second-largest bank, the Cyprus Popular Bank (also known as Laiki Bank), imposing a one-time bank deposit levy on all uninsured

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*Custom* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1928), 103f. Also Alexander Wilken, *Das Matriarchat bei den Alten Arabern*, Vol. 8 (Leipzig: O. Schulze, 1884), 10ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Cyprus Constitution in:

[http://www.kypros.org/Constitution/English/appendix\\_d\\_part\\_v.html](http://www.kypros.org/Constitution/English/appendix_d_part_v.html) (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Published in *ikypros.com*. See <http://ikypros.com/?p=331817> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>15</sup> The 'campaign' for multiculturalism has mainly developed in Western democratic societies, where the central question has been: "How is it possible to respond to the demands by minority groups for equality and the preservation of their cultural uniqueness, while giving primacy to the national interest and national unity?" Al-Haj Majid, "Multiculturalism in deeply divided societies: the Israeli case", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26 (2002), 170.

deposits there, and possibly around 48% of uninsured deposits in the Bank of Cyprus, the island's largest commercial bank.<sup>16</sup> This disaster created real poverty: for the first time in my life I encountered women in a rich place like Cyprus has often been regarded, begging for small change in order to buy milk and bread for their children. Voluntary Church associations, run mostly by women, started organizing the 'Community Markets of Love and Offerings' (*Κοινωνικά Παντοπωλεία Αγάπης και Προσφοράς*). Stalls were set up outside every Church building where donations of food and clothing for those in need could be made. This system operated until the end of 2018. Now, there are only 'community markets' run by the Bishop of each town where provisions are given on presentation of an official card indicating economic disadvantage. Cypriot Orthodox women, internalising the principles of their faith, contributed actively through volunteer work with charitable associations, which aim to assist the unemployed and their families. Their participation in a variety of projects of reconstruction<sup>17</sup> was instrumental in the recovery of the economy.

### Cyprus Constitution and the Greek Orthodox Church

The rights of the Ethnarch are a dominant factor in the Church-State relations in Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> Even today, it is hard to have a State President elected without the approval of the Archbishop. In addition, the selection of the Minister of Education and Culture is a direct or indirect choice of the Archbishop. This may explain why there has only been one female Minister of Education since the formation of the Republic.<sup>19</sup> The Orthodox Church is 'protected' by State Law. Article 110, §1 of the Constitution provides that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus shall continue to have the exclusive right of regulating and administering its own internal affairs and property

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<sup>16</sup> "Distressed investing in Cyprus after the bail-in". *International Financing Review*, 19 June 2013. In: <https://www.ifre.com/story/1283303/guest-comment-distressed-investing-in-cyprus-after-the-bail-in-6fwcm3lnjv> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.sigmalive.com/archive/simerini/news/social/495036> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Victor Roudometof & Michalis N. Michael, "Church, State and Politics in 19th Century Cyprus», in: *Mannheimer Beiträge zur Klassischen Archäologie und Geschichte Griechenlands und Zyperns*, vol. 16/17 (2010): 97-104. Halil Alasya, "The Privileges granted to the Orthodox Church of Cyprus by the Ottoman Empire", in: *Praktika tou Protou Diethnous Kypriologikou Synedriou*, vol. 3, eds. Theodoros Papadopoulos & Menelaos Christodoulou (Nicosia: Kypriakai Spoudai, 1973): 24-38.

<sup>19</sup> Klairi Angelidou was Minister of Education and Culture from 1993 till 1997.

in accordance with the Holy Canons and its Charter in force for the time being and the Greek Communal Chamber shall not act inconsistently with such right. This is expressed in the curricula as one of the aims of education: *“To promote Greek and Christian values in order to support young students become virtuous citizens. To give multicultural orientation in a united Europe without any racism or prejudice.”* (Cyprus Government, Ministry of Education and Culture, Aims of the school year 2010-11, number of envelope 7.1.05.23).

Public school children have two hours a week of compulsory lessons in religious catechism; this is for all grades except in the last grade of Lyceum, where it is only one hour. The curriculum is based on the doctrine and practice of Orthodox Christianity. Pupils of other denominations or religions have permission to opt out of this lesson, if they wish. Some days before the main Feasts of Orthodoxy, all pupils attend a Church service accompanied by their teachers during class time. This practice was obligatory until 2014; school children may now choose if they want to go to Church or stay at school.

### **Women’s Every Day Religiosity**

Getting up in the morning, a devout Christian Orthodox woman completes her five minutes of Morning Prayer, called in Greek *πρωινή προσευχή*, burns incense and lights the oil lamp, which is usually kept in the home. The light of the oil lamp symbolizes the eternal existing Light of God. This goes back to the doctrine laid down in the Symbol of Faith that God in Christianity is Light.<sup>20</sup> The light of the lamp is a reminder of the existence of God. This is a widespread Orthodox ritual, which is practised predominantly by the woman of the household - due to her role as the homemaker - and it is a ritual known to offer comfort and assuage anxiety. I remember when my cousin’s daughter was a university student who stayed in an apartment alone and was afraid at night, followed the advice of her spiritual father, reverend Constantinos Stratigopoulos who suggested that she keep an oil lamp lit as a symbol of God’s protection. She found this truly helpful.

In Cyprus one in three marriages ends in divorce with every second marriage in a compromised position. It is easy to imagine how

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<sup>20</sup> Orthodox Christian Creed: *«And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God ... Light of light; true God of true God; begotten, not made ...»* See <https://oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/symbol-of-faith> (accessed 23 October 2019).

the financial crisis has compounded the many problems women are called to face: those of poverty, rejection, and unemployment. Pastoral instructions given, especially during the Sacrament of Confession, support women and provide them with hope and guidance. Prayer is another supporting pillar of help. Religious practices such as the nightly prayer of *Akathist Hymn*<sup>21</sup> of the Virgin Mary, is kept mostly by women. The recitation of this hymn has a meditative effect created by the frequent repetition of the word 'rejoice': «Rejoice, You through whom joy will shine forth!». The Akathist Hymn of Saint Marina, a much respected female Saint in Cyprus, ends in one chapter with the verse: "Rejoice, thou through His help you took out of your soul all fears» (*Χαίρε φόβον τον παράλογον εκβαλούσα σης ψυχής*). It is a matter of fact, that due to the help of the Christian faith very few suicides are committed in Cyprus; there are no official records of suicides committed by women.<sup>22</sup>

A number of studies have shown that faith and spirituality are important factors in overcoming substance abuse (Tsironis, 2012). The results confirm the importance of faith in society, if religion is practised on a personal level and not political, far from any radicalization. The significance of religiosity is apparent in many statistics such as that of the global Gallup Poll in 2009: 75% of those surveyed in Cyprus responded positively to the question: "Is religion important in your life?" In the last few decades we have also witnessed an increased interest in monasticism with a number of organised missions from Mount Athos in Greece visiting the laity in Cyprus. These were led by Metropolitan of Limassol Athanasios, and the Abbot of Vatopedi Monastery, Panosiologiotatos Ephraim.<sup>23</sup>

All Orthodox Christians are responsible for one another, especially in regions where conflicts and wars affect daily life. Women in Cyprus may hold diverse views but in the Church they remain a

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<sup>21</sup> An Akathist Hymn (*Ακάθιστος Ύμνος*, "unseated hymn") is a type of hymn usually recited by Eastern Orthodox or Eastern Catholic Christians, dedicated to a Saint, holy event, or one of the persons of the Holy Trinity. The name derives from the fact that during the chanting of the hymn, or sometimes the whole service, the congregation is expected to remain standing in reverence, without sitting down (*ἀ-, a-, "without, not"* and *κάθισις, káthisis*, "sitting"), except for the aged or infirm.

<sup>22</sup> Cyprus has lowest suicide rate in the European Union.  
<https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/07/16/cyprus-has-lowest-suicide-rate-in-the-eu/>  
 (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>23</sup> They have radio and TV channels as well as Journals. See *Πεμπτοσία*,  
<http://www.pemptousia.gr> (accessed 23 October 2019).

single extended family. Jesus established one Church, a point that Paul later echoed in the *Letter to Ephesians 4:4-6*: “There is one body and one Spirit... One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” The Christian Orthodox faith is a source of strength and sustenance through adversity. Women have demonstrated their ability to contribute to the workforce as well as be homemakers. In addition, they contribute greatly to voluntary work with the needy. Many are involved as volunteers with such associations as ‘*Hope for Children*’, an NGO that contributes decisively to the protection of the rights of the child,<sup>24</sup> where 71% of volunteers are women. The same applies to the Pancyprrian Association ‘*One Dream one Wish*’ (Ενὰ Όνειρο, Μία Εοχρή) which supports sick children and their parents,<sup>25</sup> as well as *PASYKAF* (the Cyprus Association of Cancer Patients and Friends).<sup>26</sup> Community service is an area in which women excel. This may be attributed to Helgesen’s *Female Advantage* (1995) but it is also due to the desire to follow the Christian command to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ “There is no commandment greater than this” (Mark 12: 31). Two years ago Father Nikodimos Voreas, a missionary monk from Athens visited Cyprus; I will not forget the impressive number of people, mainly women, who attended his talks which focused on the aforementioned verse from the New Testament and explaining that visiting the Sunday Church service does not ‘take us to Paradise’. One must actively seek out and help the needy. A combination of actions and faith is required.

Commemoration of the dead does not belong to every day religiosity, although it is common practice for women of an older generation to visit the cemetery at dusk in order to light the oil lamp on the grave of family members. Although Priests in large communities commemorate the dead on Saturday Liturgy, this is not practical for most people who reserve this day to run the family errands. For this reason, commemoration for the dead is performed at the end of the Sunday service. Orthodox women contribute actively to many of the commemorative rituals especially in the preparation of koliva, which are always served at the “*Mnymosina*”. Koliva is ritualistic food consisting of boiled wheat and seeds, which symbolise the rebirth of the soul after burial. Funeral customs such as the

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.uncrcpc.org> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.enaoniromiaefxi.com/enaoniromiaefxi/page.php?pageID=9> (accessed 23 October 2019).

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bestrong.org.gr/el/support/organizationscancersupport/?id=3874> (accessed 23 October 2019).

wailing, the dressing in black mourning, and the decoration with flowers is to this day a women's domain. Another duty of the Orthodox woman is the baking of the Prospora (*Πρόσφορον*). These are loaves of bread, which are offered in the Eucharist. Before the bread is baked a special seal is used to make an impression bearing the sign of the cross and symbolic letters for Jesus Christ Victorious. In addition, women are responsible for the continuation of traditional wedding customs, practiced mostly in village communities. These include the bride's female relatives dancing around her whilst holding woven baskets laden with the bride's heirlooms; sewing of small crosses with red thread on the bed the couple will sleep on; decorating the house of the new couple with flowers, delivering the invitations, etc. Konstantinos Giagkoulis in his *Cypriot Customs* stresses the role of women in preparation of all Sacraments of the Church, which is sine qua non for the happy celebration and successful integration of all the community.<sup>27</sup>

### Image of Women of Faith in Daily Life and Society

The Christian baptism, performed in early infancy, is only the beginning of the path to becoming a practising Christian in later life. Through their special role in the family as mothers, grandmothers and teachers, women have born the responsibility of transmitting the teachings and precepts of the Orthodox Christian faith. Results of a survey conducted by the Institute of Historical Research for Peace examined people's personal views relating to faith, education, ordination of women and other religious issues.<sup>28</sup> Around 93% of the total sample said that they believe in God. These are 1302 out of the 1400. Only 1% - a total of 14 persons said they do not believe; 6% they did not want to express whether they believe or not; this is 84 persons. Those who gave a positive answer (1302 persons) were asked to respond to further questions. To the question «*who taught you to believe in God?*» the responses suggest that the majority were taught by a

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<sup>27</sup> Konstantinos Giagkoulis, *Cypriot Customs* (in Greek, Nicosia: Vivliothiki Kypriou kai Laikon Poiiton, vol. 67, 2008), 22f.

<sup>28</sup> Those questioned were women and men aged 18-34 from both rural and urban areas of Cyprus. For the purposes of this article, this research was conducted by the Institute of Historical Research for Peace, in the summer of 2019. Out of the people who took part in the research, 800 live in towns and 600 come from villages. Their nationality is Greek-Cypriot. All identify as Christian. I would like to thank Eleni Pozotou, Polyxeni Paschalidou, Neophytos Vasiliou and Stelios Stavrinidis for operating this survey via personal interviews, telephone calls, and e-mails.

female relative with grandmothers and mothers taking the lead.<sup>29</sup> As one's home indicates one's identity (McDowell, 2003), one's mother often indicates one's religion. This happens in Orthodox Cyprus as our survey showed. However, in the world des Islam, the father gives the religious adherence. This is one of the reasons why the bride often goes and lives with her parents-in-law in the Turkish community.

To the question «*who is better at fulfilling his/her religious duties at home?*» women again scored higher than men.<sup>30</sup> 'The question on weekly Church attendance showed a clear difference along gender but also generational lines. That is, grandmothers were seen to be regular Church attendants scored higher by a wide margin in relation to mothers. This can be attributed to the fact that most grandmothers are retired or housewives and thus have fewer demands on their time; regular Church attendance not only includes the Sunday service but feast days and commemorative events as well. To the question «*which family member attends Sunday service twice a month?*» nearly half of the respondents declared their grandmothers.<sup>31</sup> Only 25% of respondents said that their Church attendance is limited to major Feasts like Christmas and Easter as well as weddings and christenings.<sup>32</sup> Many Cypriots are not regular Churchgoers,<sup>33</sup> but are in the habit of many Orthodox Cypriots think that by visiting a Church on a Saint's feast day, lighting a candle and venerating the icon have fulfilled their religious obligations.

To the question «*when you were a child, who used to take you to Church on Sunday?*» over half of the group surveyed said that their

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<sup>29</sup> By their mother 35%, by their grandmother 38%, by father 5%, by grandfather 5%, by a girlfriend 5%, by female teacher at school 3%, by male teacher 2%, none of the above 7%.

<sup>30</sup> My mother answered 25%, my father 10%, my grandmother scored the highest at 45%, my grandfather 10%, my sister 5%, my brother 2%, none of the above 3%.

<sup>31</sup> My mother said 20%, my father 15%, my grandmother 45%, my grandfather 10%, my sister 6%, my brother 2%, none of the above 2%.

<sup>32</sup> In answer to the question «*do you attend Church services only on Christmas and Easter Day and for funerals and weddings?*» 25% said 'yes', 65% said 'no', 10% said 'not sure/I do not want to say'.

<sup>33</sup> There is a famous joke, which refers to the Greek Orthodox people's attitude to Church attendance: There were mice hiding in the Church. For this reason the Protestant clergyman said: "I have read the whole Bible out loud but they won't leave the Church building!" The Roman Catholic priest said: "I have sprinkled holy water around the Church ten times but they are still here!" The Orthodox priest said: "I have given them the Sacrament of Orthodox Confirmation; they left successfully and they did not return until Easter!"

grandmother was the family member who took them to Church on Sundays.<sup>34</sup> Giving alms to the poor is a basic obligation in the Orthodox faith. Results of the questionnaire<sup>35</sup> reflect the patriarchal structure of Cypriot society where men remain the highest wage earners and consequently make up the highest percentage of alms givers. Sunday schools, which are mainly organized by female teachers, theologians, philologists, and/or the priest's wife, are considered valuable by half of those questioned (50%).<sup>36</sup> An impressive 85% of the respondents considered summer Church camps were successful in imparting the faith to young people.<sup>37</sup> Vasiliki Mitropoulou argues that the task of transmitting faith is a never-ending process which necessitates not only skills, but the integration of modern technologies in the classroom as well as extra curricular activities. The role of women Theologians is highly important in this regard.<sup>38</sup> Responses to the question «*who are the better teachers of religion at school, men or women?*» emphasized that women's natural aptitude as teachers places them in the lead over men.<sup>39</sup> Although John Chrysostom describes the father and mother as jointly responsible (*συνυπεύθυνος*) for the Christian education of their children, the main weight of responsibility is in fact borne by the mother (Bourneli, 2004, 150).<sup>40</sup>

The question «*do you approve of the Orthodox Church not ordaining women as priests?*» elicited responses that showed that the majority do

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<sup>34</sup> "When you were a child, who used to take you to Church on Sunday?" My mother 15%, my father 10%, my grandmother 55%, my grandfather 5%, my sister 3%, my brother 2%, none of the above 10%.

<sup>35</sup> To the question «*which member of your family gives food/money to the poor?*» responses were: My mother 30%, my father 40%, my grandmother 20%, my grandfather 2%, my sister 1%, my brother 1%, none of the above 6%.

<sup>36</sup> The important question «*to which extent did Sunday school contribute to your Christian education?*» was answered as follows: Contributed greatly 50%, contributed significantly 30%, no contribution 20%.

<sup>37</sup> The question «*are the summer Church camps successful in transmitting the faith to teenagers?*» was answered as follows: Very successful 50%, somewhat successful 15%, partly successful 20%, and not at all 15%.

<sup>38</sup> Vasiliki Mitropoulou, *New Technologies and Religious Education* (in Greek, Thessaloniki: Baniias, 2007), 57ff.

<sup>39</sup> Men 22%, women 45%, neither 18%, I do not know 15%.

<sup>40</sup> John Chrysostom (349 A.D. – 407 A.D.), Archbishop of Constantinople, was an important Early Church Father. He is known for his preaching and public speaking, his denunciation of abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders, and his ascetic sensibilities. He is most famous for composing the Sundays Divine Liturgy which bears his name.

not hold strong opinions either way.<sup>41</sup> Orthodox Christian Women do not need sacramental ordination in order to devote their lives to the Church and the good of society (Koukoura, 2005, 34). The Orthodox Church is generally regarded as a benign patriarchy; this acceptance of the status quo is evident in the answers prompted by the question: «Do you understand the reasons why women cannot get ordained in the Orthodox Church?» 25% said Yes, 30% No, and 45% said it was not relevant.

«Who in your opinion dresses most respectfully when in Church?» is a controversial issue in contemporary Cyprus due to current fashions.<sup>42</sup> Secularization in Cyprus is manifested mainly through the way teenagers dress. Since there is no written dress code for attending Church some young women attend the Sunday service with totally inappropriate clothing: wearing skirts that are very short or that leave too much of their bodies exposed. Kykkos Holy Monastery which is frequented by large numbers of visitors, provides a service which hands out garments to wear in case they are dressed immodestly to enter the sacred site. It is not unknown for a parish priest to refuse Holy Communion to women who may be immodestly dressed or wearing lipstick.

Most people thought that the era in which people showed the strongest faith was during Ottoman rule.<sup>43</sup> The holy book of Islam on the one hand recognizes Christians as people of revelation book, which categorizes them as privileged non-Muslims and thus tolerated by Dar al-Islam and on the other hand as non-believers, which means they are obliged to pay taxes including the *jizya* (head tax) and enjoying a lower legal status (*status juris minoris*) than that of Muslims (Panayiotides, 1995, 71). The depiction of Christians in the Koran is presented in the following quotation: «And they say: None shall enter the garden (or paradise) except he who is a Jew or a Christian. These are their vain desires. Say: Bring your proof if you are truthful» (The Cow, 2:111). This status *juris minoris* according to Muslim Law served to galvanise the faith of Christians and strengthen their resolve to remain in the religion of their fathers. This spirit of keeping their religion against all odds exists in the historic memory of the elderly; evidence of this can be found in the results of the survey with anecdotes of grandparents

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<sup>41</sup> Answers as follows: Yes 35%, no 40%, I do not have an opinion 25%.

<sup>42</sup> Responses as follows: Men 60%, women 15%, I do not know 25%.

<sup>43</sup> «In which era do you think people believed and practiced their faith the most?» During Ottoman rule 45%, during British rule 40%, in Cyprus Republic 5%, I do not know 10%.

remembering the past and scolding their grandchildren: “You are free to believe in God and you do not do properly. Our parents were not free but they did!”

To the question “*Who works more efficiently in the voluntary sector?*” once again women took the lead with 65%.<sup>44</sup> An equal number of men and women were surveyed. It seems natural that some of them are not satisfied with neither’s work (10%). The clarifying question, “*Which one of the following reasons explains why women are more efficient?*” emphasized women’s natural strength in inter-social skills.<sup>45</sup> Participation in politics is relatively good in Cyprus. Out of the 56 parliamentary seats only 10 belong to women. The question is now whether these MPs are women of faith. Only 39% of the respondents believed that it is possible for women of faith to serve in Parliament. This result reflects the overwhelming public perception that a political career is irreconcilable with Orthodox Christian belief. In the last electoral campaign, the candidates’ stance on the issue of child adoption by LGBT couples was a determining factor for some voters.

Over half of those surveyed expressed their disapproval of Church interfering in state politics. These results reflect the attitudinal change of the populace towards the Church.<sup>46</sup> The Ethnarchy role of the Archbishop does not hold the same status as it used to. In addition, Cyprus is the only Orthodox country<sup>47</sup> where Bishops, Metropolitans, and the Archbishop are elected by all citizens including women in a system with representatives similar to the election system in the USA. This has the advantage of people voting for the candidate they regard as worthy of the role of their Bishop. Besides, Bishops are accountable to the public; as a matter of fact they give reason for their actions. The disadvantage of this system is that

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<sup>44</sup> 65% Women, 20% men, neither 10%, and I do not know 5%.

<sup>45</sup> Women create more inclusive world 29%. They have better inter-social skills than men 42%. Women have a humble attitude 8%. I do not know 21%.

<sup>46</sup> «*Do you like the Church leaders interfering in State politics?*» was the next question resulting in: Very much 28%. Yes, sometimes 15%. Not at all 57%.

<sup>47</sup> In Greece, Rumania, Russia, and alia the Holy Synod made up of the Bishops is responsible for voting the new Archbishop etc. *Magna Charta of the Church of Greece (Katastatikos Chartis)*, Law 590/1977, chapter 2, article 4, §VII.

[http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/katastatikos\\_xarths\\_ekklhsia\\_ths\\_ella\\_dos.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/history/katastatikos_xarths_ekklhsia_ths_ella_dos.htm) (accessed 23 October 2019). Regarding the Church of Cyprus, see *Magna Charta of the Church of Cyprus (Katastatikos Chartis)*, chapter 2, article 19-30.

[http://filokalia.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/katastatikos\\_xartis2.pdf](http://filokalia.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/katastatikos_xartis2.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2019).

for purposes of the election, candidates' campaigns are similar to political ones which sometimes cause people to get fanaticized: «Candidate X is no more than a businessman, Y is a holy person, etc.»

«*When you have a problem, whom do you trust more?*» 52% trust the priest, 21% the priest's wife, 20% a Christian female psychologist, and none of the above 7%. These figures indicate that a high percentage of people of both sexes trust women of faith for advice. It means that out of every 4 people who might have a problem, 2 trust a Christian woman with whom to discuss it. Over half of those surveyed stated that they would forbid their daughter from taking monastic vows. The increased secularization of Cypriot society can be seen through the general parental objection to their children electing monasticism as a way of life. There are even lawsuits in court against the Metropolitan of Limassol Athanasios by parents of monks accusing him of proselytizing their children to take monastic vows.<sup>48</sup> However, it seems that these accusations have no evidence of guilt, since the monks were adults and after having finished their PhD when they got to know their spiritual father, Metropolitan Athanasios.

The last questions of the survey dealt with the European Union and its possible effect on religious attitudes: «*Do you think with the accession to E.U. people became more secular?*» Yes 23%, no 35%, I do not know 42%. Furthermore, it became evident from the answers of the last question that a general dissatisfaction exists regarding European Union and the way it functions.<sup>49</sup>

### Expressions of Secularism and Atheism

It is interesting to note that the number of nuns in the Cypriot monasteries at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century was far greater than that of monks. The largest female Monastery, Ayios Georgios Alamanos, outside of Limassol, had 150 dedicated nuns (1965). Despite there being many Monasteries for men, the number of monks was relatively low: at a ratio of approximately ten to one. One can only conjecture as to the reasons why this was so: the patriarchal structure of Cypriot society where daughters were considered a liability as well as the

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.alphanews.live/cyprus/dikastirio-aperripse-ton-ishyrismo-oikogeneias-monahoy-gia-prosilytismo-binteo> (accessed 24 October 2019).

<sup>49</sup> *The reasons for the E.U. being responsible for the secularisation of society* are as follows: 18% because is a non-religious Association. 27% its priorities are economic and political. The E.U. is not what it should be 40%. I do not know 15%.

extremely limited options available to women during this time may have given young women the impetus to enter a monastery. The last two decades in contrast to earlier periods, have seen Cypriot monasticism face difficulties due to the older nuns dying and insufficient novices to replenish the dwindling numbers. Secularism and the influence of social media as well as the control parents exercise on their children's decisions regarding their religiosity, prevent faithful young women from entering a monastic life. This is quite a paradox given that we live in a time where it is quite common for young people to rebel against their parents and pay no heed to parental wishes; but when it comes to decisions like entering monastic life, the will of the parents prevails.

The famous Monastery of Stavrovouni (the mountain of the Holy Cross, *To Βουνό του Σταυρού*) founded by St. Helena, the mother of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine I, was banned to women or became "*avaton*" (ἀβάτον) in 1988. According to the spokesman for the Church of Cyprus, this change of status was necessary in order to provide an incentive for monks to stay in Cyprus and not leave for the exclusively male monastic communities of Mountain Athos in Greece. The then first lady Androulla Vassiliou (wife of President George Vassiliou 1988-1993), supported by womens' organizations belonging to the communist party, reacted against this decision with demonstrations. However, they did not start legal proceedings against the Monastery because women of faith could not sue against the Church.<sup>50</sup>

A step towards secularisation affecting women's life was the decriminalization of abortions by Cyprus Parliament March 2018. This controversial matter, "which had remained largely stagnant out of fear of reprisal from the Church" as *Cyprus Mail* put it,<sup>51</sup> was voted into law with 33 votes in favour, eight against and five abstentions. It allows termination of an unwanted pregnancy up to 12 weeks of gestation. In the case of rape, an abortion can take place up to 19 weeks. The number of abortions that took place unlawfully reached over 9,000 the previous year, and a large number of women and teenagers went to the north to private Turkish gynecologists for the

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<sup>50</sup> <http://city.sigmalive.com/article/19962/giati-i-moni-stavrovounioy-apagorevei-tin-eisodo-stis-gynaikes> (accessed 24 October 2019).

<sup>51</sup> <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/03/30/parliament-decriminalises-abortion/> (accessed 24 October 2019).

abortions. The Association of Priest's Wives has petitioned against this legislation as the number of abortions has exceeded the number of births on the island, a statistic confirmed by Dr Marios Liasides, President of Cyprus Gynecologists' Association during an interview by Sigma TV, on March 29, 2018.

The right of homosexuals to enter a cohabitation agreement or a civil marriage is viewed by the Orthodox Church as a product of the growing influence of atheism, as stated by Archbishop Chrysostomos the II. The House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus on the 26th of November 2015 passed the Law on Civil Partnerships conferring the possibility to "two heterosexual or homosexual persons" to conclude a "written agreement", known as the *Civil Partnership Agreement* (section 4 of Law 184(I)/2015).

Cypriot people want to belong to the Church, as the above survey has showed. This is also apparent from the number of marriages contracted in the Church with a religious ceremony. According to Article 111 of the Constitution, religious marriage is recognized by State. After the introduction of the Civil Partnership Agreement some expressed the fear that this would serve as a catalyst against religious marriages. This has not been the case as shown by the statistics as couples' preference for a Church wedding remains strong. Only those who have an obstacle, which prevents a religious marriage, go to the Registrar's Office. This constitutes only 15% of the whole number of marriages/partnerships contracted on the island yearly and it includes many foreign citizens who belong to other religions. As Cyprus is a bridge in the Mediterranean, every year around 2.500 civil marriages of Israelis take place in Cyprus Republic. These marriages cannot be celebrated in Israel in a rabbinic wedding due an existing obstacle according to Jewish Law; for this reason couples come to Cyprus, and celebrate their wedding here (most of them in Aradippou municipality by Larnaca). Then they return home where Israeli State recognizes them as valid weddings. There are also mixed marriages between Muslims and Christians in Cyprus (around 10% of the total civil marriages number)<sup>52</sup> and a few between Muslims and Jewish people albeit not without the traditional conflict of laws. According to Muslim Law when the father is Muslim, the child is Muslim. According to Jewish Law when the mother is Jewish, the

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<sup>52</sup> Democracy of Cyprus: *Demographic Report*, Department of Statistics and Research, Ministry of Finance, Population Statistics (Nicosia 2018).

child is Jewish. So this raises the question of identity for a child whose father is Muslim and the mother Jewish. The answer depends on the *ius domicilii* (Law of the domicile) of the new couple (Demosthenous, 1999). Mainly the Christian women experience the negative consequences of mixed marriages between Muslim men and Christian women in Cyprus. There have been cases where the Muslim man abandoned his Cypriot wife and returned to his country of origin taking their children with him.

### **Women's Initiatives for Peace and Reconciliation in Cyprus**

Reconciliation between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots in Cyprus is one of the most important tasks of faithful Greek Cypriots although this has proven to be a challenging task.<sup>53</sup> In Cyprus, women's efforts for reconciliation had met with disapproval, which made any active involvement in informal or formal peace activities difficult. This is a direct consequence of the military intervention of 1974 which created a climate that is not conducive to rapprochement; in fact many Cypriots consider this is tantamount to treason as my personal experience testifies: In 2009, during the radio program «*Culture and Peaceful Coexistence*» which I compiled and presented for the Cyprus State Broadcasting Corporation, a listener attacked me and my invited guest for presenting some poems written in Greek by Turkish Cypriots, something culturally significant.<sup>54</sup> The interest by women and girls in becoming involved in peace process in Cyprus stemmed from their experiences during the war, whether primarily as relatives of victims or refugees.<sup>55</sup> This was one of the main reasons that women and girls, especially after the war, became aware of the necessity to strengthen the potential for transformation and reform in spite of many difficulties. The participation of women and girls and the inclusion of gender perspectives in both formal and informal peace processes are crucial in the establishment of sustainable peace.

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<sup>53</sup> In *Timothy I* (5:8) we read: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever". Who does not come for his relatives and more specifically his intimates commits the sin of infidelity and becomes even worse than the infidels. Considering that the Turkish Cypriots lived as neighbours with us many years, Christians, have both, a cultural and religious duty to reconcile with them and join efforts for a united Cyprus free from any kind of intolerance and violation of Human Rights.

<sup>54</sup> According to the opinion of that listener "people who worked for reconciliation in Cyprus were 'traitors'!" On that day I realised that it is a duty and a deep necessity to work for reconciliation.

<sup>55</sup> Cypriot women were victims of rape and inhumane treatment as enclaves.

On a global level, women have long been active in peace issues. In groups and individually, women have lobbied for the goal of disarmament. During the First World War, nearly 1,200 women from warring and neutral countries came together to protest against the conflict, and formed the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)*. Since then, women around the world have continued to pursue the goal of disarmament. The cases presented below include activities by individuals or groups and non-governmental organizations women leaders who contributed decisively in creating a better understanding between the island's two main population groups with a history of conflict and enmity. These efforts and activities were welcomed by many other groups and have had a positive impact on Cyprus' civil society.

*KAYAD Toplum Merkezi* (KAYAD Community Centre) is a Turkish-Cypriot women's organisation working in the field of community development in the Cypriot community. It was established in 1997 and has growing membership since then.<sup>56</sup> Meral Akinci is the president and initiator of KAYAD. The objectives of KAYAD include: Working for human rights in general and women's rights specifically; raising the awareness of the special needs of the girl child; strengthening women's position in the society; working for international peace and understanding as well as for tolerance, acceptance, kindness, rights and responsibilities, communication skills and many more. The objectives include working to establish ethical and moral values in the society but mainly promoting the understanding of "*Unity in Diversity*". This means respecting and valuing all kinds of diversity: race, personality, economical and cultural background, ability and disability, belief, language, sex, appearance, health, age diversity. To this end, Meral Akinci collaborates with well-educated women which include Nehe Miralay, Serpil Cananoglu and Gülsen Simge.

The next case of women working for peace includes women journalists. Among them is Sevgul Uludag, an initiator for peace and a journalist for the Turkish Cypriot newspaper "*Yeniduzen*".<sup>57</sup> Sevgul

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<sup>56</sup> At the national and international level, KAYAD has been in collaboration with UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services).

<sup>57</sup> Sevgul Uludag together with Sener Levent were honoured by his excellency the Minister of Culture of Greece and also his reverence the Bishop of Kykkos Nikiforos during the second International Meeting of the *World Forum for Religions and Cultures* in

Uludag with a group of journalists writes and publishes her views helping people to understand what democracy means and how this can be achieved. The Centre for World Dialogue is another effective initiative for promoting peace in Cyprus. Its co-founder Jila Faramarzi, often says that there could be no peace among nations without peace among religions. The *Centre for World Dialogue* is a non-governmental organization established in 1995 in order to promote greater understanding between the peoples of the world, especially those in the Middle East. According to Jila Faramarzi "people talking face to face are no longer enemies but other human beings with problems to solve". Jila Faramarzi whose country of origin is Iran, has been a Cypriot citizen for decades. She lives with her family in Nicosia and as a Muslim woman decided to help the promotion of mutual understanding between Turkish Cypriot Muslims and Greek Cypriot Christians through multicultural meetings and seminars, something of great importance. The Centre has a famous library with books on Islam and other World Religions, Judaism, Buddhism etc. dealing with multicultural issues and helping students and other visitors to view things in a global direction. The Centre has achieved a great deal in a very short time, hosting a series of highly successful conferences, arranging meetings and seminars that addressed a variety of issues, as well as publishing a quarterly journal, the "*Global Dialogue*".

Neshe Yasin is a Turkish Cypriot poet, peace activist and journalist. She is well-known for her pioneering contribution to conflict resolution through her poetry and other peace-promoting activities. Her poems and articles are regularly translated into the Greek language from the Turkish and both communities in Cyprus, as well as Turkey and Greece are familiar with her work. She has been a columnist for newspapers published on both sides of the island as well as in Turkey and Greece. The lines of her poem "my country has been divided in two; which of the two halves should I love?" succinctly expresses the feelings shared by many Cypriots towards their divided country. The words were set to music composed by a Greek Cypriot musician and is a very popular song performed by many singers in Cyprus.

The first political party of the island was AKEL, established in 1926. Its youth wing, the United Democratic Youth Organisation

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Nicosia (May 2003) for their contribution to the civil society and the freedom of press in Cyprus.

(EDON)<sup>58</sup> is a communist political organisation in Cyprus (founded in 1959). Members are Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots from both parts of the island. Since the forties many Turkish Cypriots have been active in this party. The organization supports a federal solution to the Cyprus dispute. Although it responded negatively to the Annan Plan, EDON supports strongly rapprochement with the Turkish Cypriots. In recent European Parliamentary elections (held in May 2019) a Turkish Cypriot, Professor Niyazi Kızılyürek, was elected with AKEL Party. It was the first time, Greek and Turkish Cypriots voted for a Turkish candidate and this is an achievement mostly of women voters who were tired with the division hoping that by voting for a Turkish Cypriot to be in the European Parliament as representative of Cyprus Republic, it will enable a better understanding of both Cypriot Communities and facilitate access to European Union for Turkish Cypriots.

The Bureau of Bi-communal Reconciliation and Strengthening of Civil Society in Cyprus was established on the initiative of Katie Clerides, the daughter of a former President of Cyprus. Although initially established under the auspices of the Democratic Rally<sup>59</sup>, its members are people from different political parties and from all cultural groups and communities of the island: Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Maronites, Armenians and Latins. The Bureau's main objectives are as follows: to underline the support of organised groups for bi-communal contacts between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots; to develop a political language which will take into account the multicultural character and traditions of Cypriot society and promote the idea and the necessity for reconciliation by organising activities (lectures, panel discussions and other programmes). This initiative initially faced difficulties because it was established after the war, a time when many members of the Democratic Rally were not particularly in favour of contacts with the Turkish Cypriot community.

Another important initiative promoting dialogue between the two communities in Cyprus is the establishment of *Hands Across the Divide (HAD)*, a bi-communal Association which came into being as a result of a conference organised by the British Council entitled

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<sup>58</sup> In Greek, “Ενιαία Δημοκρατική Οργάνωση Νεολαίας” (ΕΔΟΝ), Eniaia Dimokratiki Organosi Neolaias.

<sup>59</sup> Democratic Rally is the right wing party in Cyprus.

*"Communication in Divided Societies: What women can do."* This conference brought together women from conflict areas around the world such as Northern Ireland, Israel, and Palestine. The need for a strong bi-communal women's voice was the main conclusion of the conference. After a London workshop in February 2002, HAD became the first internationally recognised Cypriot bi-communal Association. It was responsible for the promotion of various group activities such as press releases and letters to the respective leaders on the eve of their direct talks as well as the collection of messages of peace from the public in *Eleftheria Square* sent to the north. These were used to form a "mountain of peace" installation in the park adjacent to Rauf Denktash's residence. Numerous TV, radio and newspaper articles have been written about HAD and projects are already lined up.<sup>60</sup>

Kyproula Makri is a Greek Cypriot Inspector of Special Education, Ministry of Education and Culture, TV presenter of the news in Sign Language and Sign Language Interpreter. She participates in various bi-communal projects involving the deaf community and the disabled. She often organises bi-communal seminars for deaf children (both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots) at the Buffer Zone in Nicosia. Greek and Turkish deaf children came together, participated in common activities, made drawings and created a big poster for Peace. Moreover, she was group leader of a bi-communal delegation to Washington D.C. comprised of an equal number of Greek and Turkish Cypriot teachers of the Deaf. The programme entitled "*Deaf Education Teacher Training*" took place at the Centre of Global Education at Gallaudet University, the World University for the Deaf. Under her initiative individual contacts and meetings with people and organisations of the Turkish-Cypriot community were made regarding the education and rehabilitation of the deaf and the disabled people there. This level of collaboration between the two main communities in this field was a precedent for Cyprus.

The work of the Institute of Historical Research for Peace in Nicosia forms a pioneering step towards peace building. The Institute of Historical Research for Peace (INISME) is a not-for-profit NGO dedicated to the resolution of conflicts, to the promotion of research,

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<sup>60</sup> Women founding members are the following: Tina Adamidou, Maria Hadjipavlou, Derya Beyatli, Neshe Yashin, Sevgul Uludag, Magda Zenonos and Fatma Azgin.

to education for Peace, and to international exchange programmes.<sup>61</sup> According to its profile, Historical thinking is the process of understanding history in depth and it can serve as a tool for predicting future possibilities and probabilities. Peace is hidden by historiography, which places greater emphasis on learning about wars and victories whilst neglecting the treaty making process or the national victories of neighbouring countries. The Institute has the following objectives: to examine the potential for peaceful coexistence among the Cypriot communities; to become acquainted with the unknown Turkish Cypriot neighbour and his/her language which can contribute to the Peace process; to establish close contacts aiming at cooperating with scientists in our field from the Turkish Cypriot community; to publically promote the importance of looking back in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past; to use the particular strength, wisdom and capability that women have shown across the centuries to promote peace and partnership; to study via research the archaeological, theological and historical development of Muslim places of Worship; to try to find a creative new form of coexistence in countries with heterogeneous populations espousing different values. The Institute of Historical Research for Peace has organised many interesting activities taking the form of projects, workshops as well as summer schools. These include research studies on interreligious relations between Muslims and Christians in Cyprus (16th-21st cent.), and a weekly radio programme broadcast by the Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation titled "*Our Neighbours and Us*", had as its aim the peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. This programme ran for nine whole years. Women who work voluntarily for our projects are, amongst others, Eliana Maltezou, Marianna Pozotou, Maria Skoufari, and Koulla Stavriniidou.

*Education in a Multicultural Cyprus* (2017) is the book edited by Iacovos Psaltis, Nicos Anastasiou, Hubert Faustmann, Maria Hadjipavlou, Hakan Karahasan and Marilena Zackheos; it is dedicated to all teachers with a pro-active vision for peace. It is the result of a project aiming at collaboration between Turkish and Greek teachers. All are members of the Cyprus Academic Forum, a meeting platform for Turkish and Greek women academics too.

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<sup>61</sup> The Institute was registered in the year 2000 and before checkpoints were opened (2003). At that time any project between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots could only be carried out by non-governmental organizations.

<http://www.ellines.de/inisme/>

Women's initiatives for peace and reconciliation in Cyprus are quite important and one could say that they resemble the pieces of art on the island, which although they cannot work for peace, are a silent witness to the peaceful coexistence, which had been a noble tradition for centuries.<sup>62</sup> A British observer in 1881 wrote: "Nicosia... is unique in one respect as being perhaps the only city in the East where Mahomedan and Christian religions are tolerated side by side. The old Cathedral of Santa Sophia is now a mosque and above the walls of the town Greek Church spires rise up side by side with Moslem minarets and in the busy and picturesque bazaars Greeks and Turks are freely mixed". When we get together for a new project we chant the following song: "We, women, deserve better! Sunset, and the masses are grieving. Sunset, blood red gives way to evening. We deserve better! Sunrise, and our children will play together. Sunrise to find nations in peace forever. Sunrise for the future is brighter. Because... We deserve better!"

### **Faith Shapes Women's Life towards Non-violent Actions**

At the Police Academy of Cyprus<sup>63</sup> police training is founded on the principle that non-violent behaviour requires two kinds of faith: faith in God and faith in human beings. These are not mutually exclusive. To this end, the religiosity of Orthodox women believers plays a crucial role, particularly their participation in the Holy Sacraments. Cypriot women in their majority have faith in God, and know that this should be demonstrated through love and respect for their fellow human beings. For a Christian, the issue at stake is not the combat against war and violence, but the elimination of the things that provoke violence and war (Tsetsis, 2007, 61). Cyprus is the only country where the house for the young couple is gifted by the bride's parents and not the bridegroom's, as happens in Greece, in Turkey and neighbouring countries. The girl owns the house and takes her future husband to live with her with the acceptance of his parents. This means that a new couple is more likely to live in close proximity to the woman's parents who subsequently help with the upbringing of their grandchildren. As a matter of fact, many disagreements with the mother-in-laws do not take place. Women have a better quality life

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<sup>62</sup> Kyrris, op. cit. 1977, 29f. Idem, 1976, 243ff. Areti Demosthenous, "The Potential of Peaceful Coexistence Among the Cypriot Communities in the New Millennium", *Études et Documents Balkaniques et Méditerranéens* 24 (Paris, 2001), 8ff.

<sup>63</sup> Where I have the honour to be external lecturer. Director of the Police Academy is also an academic woman, Dr Kyriaki Lambrianidou.

here compared to that in Greece. All these factors combined, help to create an environment conducive to the raising of children. In the New Testament Apostle Mark emphasizes: "But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh" (10:6-8). In Cyprus this order finds fulfilment literally. Traditionally, when a couple's first-born is a boy he is given the name of the paternal grandparent. The first daughter is given the name of the maternal grandparent. This tradition is more egalitarian than in Greece, where the expectation still exists that the first two children should bear the names of the paternal grandparents.

The Sacrament of Confession is another aspect of Orthodox religiosity which, albeit indirectly, contributes to peace and non-violence. Women practice this regularly, men usually once a year. Absolution is granted on condition the faithful forgive others: this has helped to reduce domestic violence. A priest in Limassol, Father Michalis Christofi, who is also a medical doctor, told me that he has observed people with this disordered habit making a considerable recovery after visiting him regularly for Confession. In the past this Sacrament empowered many Orthodox Cypriots to start a new life after the adversities of the war and the financial crisis. Thus, participation in Confession is more than a religious observance. The priest's role encompasses that of a counsellor and a mediator, which edifies believers at all stages of life.

From my perspective as an Orthodox Christian woman living in Cyprus, I remember that as a child at primary school I was often the recipient of negative criticism on account of my parents' liberal attitude to other religions.<sup>64</sup> My father was the village Orthodox priest and although this was forbidden by the basic Church teaching, he used to give holy water (*Ayazma*) to Muslims and Jews coming to him

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<sup>64</sup> As a result of my family upbringing, there were times when as a schoolgirl I would express my belief that not all Turks are the enemy, arguing that there were very kind Turks as well; this view was considered provocative, even heretical, by my teacher and fellow students. Given the war of 1974, it was quite understandable that at school my views could not be freely expressed. The year of the war, I was in the fourth grade. Moreover, there was an implicit expectation that I uphold the perceived values supporting the country's national interests and not the opposite.

for advice.<sup>65</sup> My mother, Electra, raised me with recounts about Turkish Cypriots and their kindness, hospitality and friendship.<sup>66</sup> "Today I have cooked *sarma* (Turkish word for Greek dolmadakia, meaning stuffed grape leaves), exactly how Sherifa's mother used to make them", she used to tell us. "Today, we have *bulgur* (a grain dish made from crushed wheat) my Turkish friend's best dish!"

### Christian Maronite Women

Maronite Christians form a special group of Christians who belong to the Latin Church. The Maronites get their name from Saint Maron (350-410 A.D.) who lived near Mount Taurus in "Syria Secunda", an administrative division of the Byzantine Empire. Between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries Maronites moved to Cyprus from the ancient territories of Syria, the Holy Land and Lebanon in four principal migrations.<sup>67</sup> After the war in 1974 and with the intervention of the Pope Paul VI, Maronites were permitted by the Turkish forces to remain in their villages of Kormakitis and Karpasha respectively. Ayia Marina and Asomatos are used for military purposes and no people are allowed to live there. Women in Kormakitis and Karpasha live there with restrictions. Most of their families earn their living through agricultural work. Greek Orthodox populations exist in the villages of Ayia Triada and Rizokarpaso. The Cyprus Government in collaboration with the Turkish Cypriot Authority established a Committee in charge of the reconstruction of Churches and Monasteries. Women live in a traditional way, sewing

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<sup>65</sup> My father, reverend Emilianos Demosthenous. He believed that as we bless baptized people with Ayiasma in order to stay healthy, we also bless non-baptized people in order to be enlightened and protected by God.

<sup>66</sup> During British rule in Cyprus, British authorities appointed a Turk to each Greek village to supervise the payment of taxes as part of their 'divide and rule' strategy. This was not conducive to friendly relations between the ethnic groups. My maternal grandfather, as a member of the community board was obliged to maintain good relations with the supervisor's family. As a result of this, their children and my mother (born in 1928) grew up together and was best friends with their daughter Sherifa. After the intercommunal violence of 1955-1959 Turkish Cypriots were taken to ghettos designated for Turkish Cypriots, so my mother and her Turkish girlfriend were separated. Sherifa's family was taken to Koutrafas camp near Vizatzia in Nicosia district. I will never forget the happy expression on my mother's face when she received a letter by post from Sherifa in the seventies.

<sup>67</sup> Guita Hourani, "A Reading in the History of the Maronites of Cyprus from the Eighth Century to the Beginning of British Rule", *Journal of Maronite Studies*, Vol. II (2010), No 3, 2f. Also see Nicholas Coureas, *The Latin Church in Cyprus 1313-1378, Texts and Studies in the History of Cyprus*, Volume LXV (Cyprus Research Centre, Nicosia, 2010), 19f.

their own clothes, baking their own bread, and teaching religion at home to their children. Reconciliation needs positive experiences. In history wars have not been about facts but understanding; there is no room for multiple interpretations (Fuchs, 2010).

### **Conclusions**

Women in Cyprus in their absolute majority (99%) do not identify themselves as atheist. Their religiosity sustains them through the adversities that have plagued the island such as internal conflicts, war, and financial crisis. The fact that there is no record of suicides by women in Cyprus, unlike other countries, is a testament to Cypriot Orthodox women's resilience. Secularisation's growing influence is mainly evident in the changes in the marriage contract, in social life, and recreation. Cypriot Orthodox women's efforts towards reconciliation have acted as a catalyst for the creation of an optimistic outlook regarding a settlement of the political problem. Based on the 2019 survey by the Institute of Historical Research for Peace, the majority of the respondents were taught religion by a female relative with grandmothers and mothers taking the lead. In addition, 41% of citizens consider an Orthodox Christian woman as trustworthy and 40% believe that there should be more accountability and transparency in the E.U.

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