

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS RELATIONS IN CYPRUS

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Öz: Kıbrıs sorununun, doğru anlaşılması ve sağlıklı bir çözüme kavuşturulması, geçmişte olduğu gibi günümüzde de, İslamiyet ve Hristiyanlık ilişkilerinin doğru anlaşılması ve yorumlanması ile bağlantılıdır. Çünkü Kıbrıs Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin geçmişte olduğu gibi günümüzde de Ada üzerindeki, siyasi ve kültürel etkisi devam etmektedir. Aynı şekilde Türk halkının Müslüman kimliğinin de hem siyasi hem de kültürel etkisi devam etmektedir. Bu etkiler sebebiyle Kıbrıs Cumhuriyeti Anayasası'nda kurucu unsurlar olarak Ortodoksluk ve Müslümanlığa özel vurgu yapılmıştır. Kıbrıs Adası belli bir dönemde Hristiyanlık içindeki mezhep kavgalarından etkilenmiş ve bu etkinin bir sonucu olarak Kıbrıs Ortodoks Kilisesi ile Osmanlılar arasında Katolik baskılara karşı bir dayanışma zemini oluşmuştu. Osmanlı'nın son dönemlerinde ise Yunanistan'da başlayan bağımsızlık hareketlerine, Kıbrıs Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin de destek vermesi sonucu, Küçük Mehmet döneminde Baş Papaz ile yardımcısının idamı, üç pazın öldürülmesi ve diğer ileri gelenlerin ise sürgülüne gönderilmesi ile tarihi dayanışma bozulmuş ve karşılıklı güvensizliğe dayalı yeni bir süreç başladı. Bu süreç doğal olarak Kıbrıs siyasi ve kültürel tarihini inanç ilişkileri açısından çok yönlü bir incelemeyi gerekli kılmıştır. Bu çalışma Adanın Hristiyanlıkla tanışmasından günümüze kadar inançlar bağlamında oluşmuş olan ilişkileri kısa bir şekilde özetlemeyi ve günümüz meselelerine tarihin gözüyle bakabilmeyi kolaylaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Abstract: To understand Cyprus problem and founding out a sustainable solution we need to analyze and understand the role of religion on Cyprus issues in past and today. As it is known both Christian and Muslim cultures left their signs on island and have a strong impact on today's relationships. As a result of this different effects in The Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, referred to the Orthodox Christianity and Islam as constituent elements.

After division of Christianity, the conflicts between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Ottomans and Cyprus Orthodox Church became allies. The Ottomans, while trying to reduce Latin's influence, treated the Orthodox Cypriots with the consideration and gained their good will. In 1821 with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence, the Greeks of Cyprus attempted to follow in the footsteps of those of Greece; such was the accusation, which Kuchuk Mehmed brought against the bishops and the leading Greek laymen of Cyprus. As a result of this the Archbishop and his archdeacon were hanged, the three Bishops beheaded and the notables dispatched by the Janissaries. This was the break point and beginning of political separation between Ottoman administration and Cyprus Orthodox Church. In this article, I have tried

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to analyze the developments of relationships between Muslims and Christians under lights of history and give a right perspective to the future relationships.

Key words: Cyprus conflict, Religion, Muslims, Christians, Orthodox and Catholics

The Church of Cyprus represents the spiritual and political leadership of Greek Cypriots and traces its origins to the apostles Paul and Barnabas, who brought Christianity to the island in the 1st century¹ and whose story is mentioned in Bible². Cyprus converted to Christianity by works of Barnabas and Saint Paul. We can find many verses in New Testament deal with works of Barnabas and Paul³. We can find the story of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus conversion to Christianity⁴. After conversion Sergius Paulus to Christianity, Church of Cyprus became an important power on Cyprus in very short time and started to play a significant role on Cyprus history⁵.

After division of Christianity the conflicts among Catholic and Orthodox Churches took place in Cyprus history. With coming of Latin control on Island, the Orthodox Church was largely dispossessed of its property and subordinated, gradually but firmly, to a Latin Church. Finally, in 1260, Pope Alexander IV made the Latin Archbishop the supreme ecclesiastical chief of Latins and Orthodox alike. The Orthodox bishops were reduced to the position of dependents of the corresponding Latin bishops, and at their installation were obliged to take an oath of obedience to them. After time the Latin Church insisted on the supremacy of the Latin Church and the property formerly belonging to the Greek clergy was to be possessed by the Latin clergy⁶. The aim of Catholic hierarchy was to complete the subjection of Orthodox Church and conversion of Orthodox to Catholic. In 1231 thirteen Orthodox monks who rejected the heterodox doctrine of the Latin Archbishop were burnt alive by Frankish rulers and their Catholic co-religionists⁷. During the Venetian period the persecution continued as well

1 "Orthodox Church." Microsoft® Student 2007 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2006. Microsoft © Encarta ® 2007.

2 Act 4:36, Act 9:27, Act 11:22, Act 11:25...

3 Act 13:7-13

4 Act 13: 12; Ioannides, Keitos, *The Church of Cyprus*, Published by the Holy Monastery of Kykkos, Nicosia, Cyprus 1999, p. 21, 22.

5 Suiçmez, Yusuf, "Kıbrıs'ta Din", (Türk Dünyası Dini Meseleleri Sempozyumu, Ankara, 1998), Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, Ankara, 1998, s. ?

6 Sir George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, Cambridge at The University Press, London, 1949, II, 1044.

7 Ioannides, Keitos, *The Church of Cyprus*, p. 99-101; Cyprus Society and Culture 1191-1374, Edited by Angel Nicolaou-Konnari and Chris Schabel, Chris Schabel, 'Religion', Brill Keiden-Boston, 2005, p. 195, 197.

the looting and restriction on religious freedom⁸. This position was maintained until the arrival of the Ottomans⁹.

The Turkish conquest was welcomed by Greek Cypriots, who had groaned under the harsh tyranny of Venice, the serfdom of the feudal age disappeared; a certain measure of autonomy was granted to the Christian population¹⁰. Under Turkish rule the position of the Greek Church was greatly enhanced through the application of the “millet” system, whereby the head of each religious community was answerable to the Governor for its behavior. As Theodoulou acknowledged, for the Cyprus Orthodox Church, the defeat of Venice was not just a change from one conqueror to the other, but a change for the better¹¹. The Turks, while trying to reduce Latins influence, treated the Orthodox Cypriots with the consideration and gained their good will. The Ottomans assured them free enjoyment of their religion, with the undisturbed possession of their churches; gave them permission to acquire houses and land¹², with the power of transmission to their heirs; recognized the supremacy of the Orthodox community over all other Christian denominations in the island¹³. An uncompromising hater of the Turks, Kyprianos acknowledged that, “the Greeks, who to a certain extent preferred to be subject to the Ottoman rather than to the Latin power, were even glad in their wretchedness because, so far as concerned their rites and customs, they escaped the tyranny of the Latins¹⁴”.

In later times the Church developed so great an influence on temporal affairs that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Archbishop was in fact ruling Cyprus through his control of its finances¹⁵.

8 Ioannides, Keitos. *The Church of Cyprus*, p. 102, 103.

9 Gunnis, Rupert, *Historic Cyprus*, K Rustem and BRO, Nicosia, 1973, p. 17; Sir Hamilton Goold Adams, Çev. Ali Çakıroğlu, *Kıbrıs'ın El Kitabı*, Galeri Kültür Yayınları, Lefkoşa, 2007, s. 50, 51.

10 Theodaulou, Georghios, The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era, Kailas Printers and Lithographers Ltd, Nicosia, 2005, p. 25, 26; Gunnis, Rupert, *Historic Cyprus*, p.20, 21; Sir Hamilton Goold Adams, *Kıbrıs'ın El Kitabı*, Galeri Kültür Yayınları. 29; Hakeri, B. Hakkı, Başlangıçtan 1878'e Kadar Kıbrıs Tarihi, KKTC ME ve Kültür Bakanlığı Yayını, Ankara, 1993, s. 254, 255; The Cyprus Issue, Edited by Hüseyin Gökçekuş, Gazioglu, C. Ahmet, “Cyprus During the Turkish Period (1571-1878)”, Near East University press, 2001, Nicosia, p. 17, 18.

11 Theodaulou, Georghios, The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era, p. 25, 26.

12 Hadjidemetriou, Katia, A History of Cyprus, I.G. Kassoulides& Son Ltd., Nicosia, 2007, p. 250, 251.

13 Sir Harry, Luke, *Cyprus*, Harrap London in association with K Rustem and BRO, Nicosia, 1965, p. 77; Theodaulou, Georghios, The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era, p. 25, 26.

14 Sir Harry, Luke, *Cyprus*, Harrap London in association with K Rustem and BRO, Nicosia, 1965, p. 77.

15 Sir Harry, Luke, *Cyprus*, p. 81.

The first rumble was heard in 1804, when the Turks of the capital and the adjoining villages faced a shortage of foodstuffs a violent demonstration against the Archbishop had been organized. This was because of the fortuitous presence of some Turkish troops in transit, and life seemed to resume its normal course. In 1821 with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence, the Greeks of Cyprus attempted to follow in the footsteps of those of Greece, such was the accusation which Kuchuk Mehmed brought against the bishops and the leading Greek laymen of the Island. As a result of this Archbishop Kyprianos, the three Bishops of Paphos, Kition and Kyrenia together with other leading ecclesiastics and citizens were arrested. Summarily the Archbishop and his archdeacon were hanged, the three Bishops beheaded and the notables dispatched by the Janissaries. The Orthodox Cyprus Church had paid a terrible penalty for its abuse of power¹⁶. This was the worst experience between Orthodox Church of Cyprus and Ottoman administration, and beginning of political separation.

After the annexation in November 1914 the combative Archbishop Cyril II had led the Greek Members of the Legislative Council to Government House to express to the High Commissioner, Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams their satisfaction at the annexation of the island to Great Britain. And he considers this event as a stage as an opportunity return to the arms of its Mother Greece. Exactly a year later, on the 8th November 1915, the same Archbishop led the same deputation to Goold-Adams's successor on the assumption that the stage had now been reached¹⁷.

For Cyprus, a significant event in her modern history occurred during the First World War, when the British Government offered Cyprus to Greece in October 1915 on the condition that Greece entered the war on the side of the Entente. But this offer was not accepted by the Greek Government. And Sir John Clauson, the High Commissioner of Cyprus, was authorized to inform the archbishop about the offer and to take advantage of this opportunity. Furthermore he asked the archbishop to go to Greece immediately and press the Cypriot demand on the King and Parliament¹⁸. Things, however, did not develop according to the wishes of the archbishop and British government. However the Greek Government rejected the offer and decided to maintain its neutrality. By the end of the First World War the Cypriots started an

16 Gunnis, Rupert, *Historic Cyprus*, p.20, 21; Sir Harry, Luke, *Cyprus*, p. 82.

17 Sir Harry, Luke, *Cyprus*, p. 89; Theodaulou, Georghios, The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era, p. 60.

18 Theodaulou, Georghios, The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era, p. 120.

ambitious political campaign for uniting the island with mother land (Greece) by demanding the right of self-determination¹⁹, disregarding Ottomans` control, and rights on Island.

In 1931 because of economic crises, the Greek nationalist movement gained more power and the riots of 1931 took place in Cyprus history. The Bishop of Kition Nikodhimos succeeded to organize a powerful nationalist movement, and on 21 October with support of other churches the most important church of Nicosia stepped forward and declared revolution. The demand for union with Greece (ENOSIS) was one of the main targets of this revolution²⁰. The result was tragic: Government house was set in fire and completely destroyed. The Government asked for reinforcement from Egypt, which were sent immediately and in a few days peace and order restored all over the island²¹.

When the Church failed to take control of all Island by diplomatic tactics with support of Greece an armed struggle was launched by Archbishop Makarios and Grivas in 1955. The Greek Cypriot leaders continued to pursue the aim of enosis, regarding independence as just a stage or stepping-stone towards the realization of that aim²². Makarios says: `We do not believe, as some traitors and friends of England do, that enosis will be realized within the framework of Anglo-Hellenic friendship, enosis is not granted, it can only be won by continuous struggle²³. For that aim Makarios became a member of EOKA (National Organization of Cypriote Fighters) and when he won the elections and became president of Cyprus in 1960 he appointed seven ministers all of them were young and most of them were EOKA members or fighters²⁴.

EOKA was considered by the Colonial administration as a terrorist organization and its members as terrorists, but to the Greek Cypriots it was the organization fighting for their freedom. Makarios was deeply involved in the formation of this organization both in Greece and Cyprus. He himself chose General George Grivas as its military leader and he financed the purchase of arms and ammunition. It is

19 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, p. 62.

20 Sir George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, II, 549.

21 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, p. 70-73.

22 Reddaway, *John, Burdened with Cyprus*, Published by Rustem, Nicosia, 2001, p. 76.

23 Edited by Andrew Faulds MP, *Excerpta Cypria for Today*, Published by K. Rustem and Brother, Lefkosha-Istabul-London, 1988, p. 16.

24 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, Kailas Printers and Lithographers Ltd, Nicosia, 2005, p. 104, 105.

claimed that Makarios had not wished the armed struggle to develop into a guerilla war, but his aim was to make the Cyprus problem known worldwide, with a few explosions and some acts of sabotage. As a reaction to the EOKA with the support of Turkey a Turkish armed organization which is called TMT (Turkish Resistance Organization) established. Unfortunately, things did not develop as Makarios wished because in a guerilla war a lot of blood was shed by both sides²⁵.

When the Greek junta took over the leadership of this terrorist organization after death of general Grivas the leader of EOKA `B` in January 1974²⁶, with support of some bishops they demanded resignation of Makarios from presidency. As a respond to this demand he decided to deport all Greek officers and wrote a strong letter to the President of Greek regime, General Ghizikes, which resulted with coup of 1974²⁷. In July 1974, the military junta in Athens sponsored this coup and Turkey, citing the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, intervened militarily to protect Turkish Cypriots. In a two-stage operation, Turkish troops took control of 38% of the island. After an agreement among Turks and Greeks almost all Greek Cypriots were moved to south while almost all Turkish Cypriots were moved north. With that agreement the division of Island justified. After division of the Island the Church continued to involve in Cyprus politics. The Cyprus Church established good relationships with other Christian Orthodox Churches and got their support, like The Orthodox Church of Russia²⁸ and Greek Orthodox Church of United Nations²⁹. Probably for that reason head of the Religious Affairs Department of Turkish Republic of North Cyprus Ahmet Yonluer arranged a meeting with Mufti of Russia, Sheikh-ul Islam Talgat Safa Tacettin. According to the statement, during the meeting, the Russian Mufti said that he will exert efforts for the development of the relations between the Religious Affairs Department of the Turkish Cypriots and the Russian Moslems³⁰. In my opinion that was a balance policy.

Between 1997 and 2000, the Turkish and Greek Governments agreed to allow reciprocal visits to religious sites on certain religious holidays in which groups of Greek Cypriots visited Apostolos Andreas

25 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, p. 91

26 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, P. 104, 105.

27 Theodaulou, Georghios, *The origins and evolution of Church-State relations in Cyprus with special reference to the modern era*, p. 119, 120.

28 <http://www.usakgundem.com/haber.php?id=2590>

29 <http://www.tumgazeteler.com/?a=130018>

30 <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/2007/07-01-17.tcpr.html#07>

monastery in the north and groups of Turkish Cypriots visited Hala Sultan mosque in the south. The Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite priests have occasionally performed religious services in unused churches in the north and there was no fanatic adverse reaction from Turkish media or reaction from Turkish Cypriot authorities³¹. In a report prepared in 2004 the prohibition of Greek Cypriots and Maronites from visiting religious sites located in military zones in the Turkish site criticized without dealing with what happened for Turks in Greek site³².

On April 24, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots voted in separate referenda on a plan to reunite the island proposed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. In the weeks leading up to the referendum vote in the Greek Cypriot community, the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus came out against the Annan Plan and priests and bishops regularly made political statements about the Annan plan in their sermons. In a sermon six days before the referendum, the Bishop of Kyrenia (now resident in the Greek government-controlled area, although his traditional seat is located in Turkish Republic of North Cyprus) told Greek Cypriots that those who voted for the Annan plan would not go to heaven. In the Turkish Cypriot community, the Vakf and Religious Affairs of TRNC did not take a public stand on the Annan plan³³. The Greek Orthodox Church has gone so far as to designate the plan as "the work of Satan³⁴." Two Turkish Cypriot lawyers were going to apply the European Court of Human Rights for the racial position taken by the Church of Cyprus against Turkish Cypriots³⁵.

In 21.09.06 UN Secretary-Generals Special Representative for Cyprus Chief of Mission Michael Moller visited the head of the Religious Affairs Department of TRNC Ahmet Yonluer. During the meeting they underlined the important role religion can play in establishing dialogue between the two sides and building peace in Cyprus. Mr Moller stated that the UN is searching for ways of promoting dialogue and peace on the island, underlined the importance of co-operation between the two religions on the island, and noted that dialogue is es-

31 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35449.htm>

32 International Religious Freedom Report 2004, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35449.htm>

33 International Religious Freedom Report 2004, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35449.htm>

34 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/apr2004/cypr-a24.shtml>

35 <http://www.trncinfo.com/TANITMADAIRESI/ARSIV2004/TURKCEarsiv/NISAN/290404.htm>

essential for a peaceful future. Mr Moller wished the sides to meet after the elections for Archbishop and make a new step forward³⁶.

After Moller the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Rene Van der Linden has invited religious leaders from both parts of Cyprus to meet, and this meeting took place at Ledra Palace Hotel for what was the first meeting of the communities' religious leaders in 33 years³⁷. This meeting created a better climate on Island and a new meeting scheduled between Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) religious affairs Chairman Ahmet Yonluer and Greek Orthodox Church Archbishop Chrysostomos II, but that meeting was cancelled due to statements of Greek Cypriot clergyman. The meeting was envisaged to focus on interfaith dialogue with the aim of making contributions to efforts to create a peaceful atmosphere on the island. However, Chrysostomos II said in an interview with the Greek Cypriot Mahi newspaper that they would request return of their 'looted places' of worship and graveyards, to undertake their restoration. Ahmed Yonluer pointed out that the Muslim religious sites in South Cyprus are also in urgent need of cleaning and restoration and from that time the grounds of dialogue interrupted and negative repercussions on the efforts for establishing cooperation and dialogue between the Turkish Cypriot and the Greek Cypriot peoples occurred. After becoming of Dr. Yusuf Suicmez as Mufti of Cyprus and Head of Religious Affairs of TRNC a new dialogue started between Chrysostomos II and Suicmez. During their meeting at the office of Chrysostomos they agreed on continuation of dialogue and promoting mutual understanding and cooperation. Because of good relationships, Archbishop Chrysostomos II paid a visit to the Turkish site on Monday for the first time since 1974 in a mission to restore the ancient Apostolos Andreas monastery in Turkish Cyprus. After a short time The Pope Benedict visited Cyprus and it was the first papal visit to Cyprus. Later Dr. Yusuf Suicmez dismissed from Religious Affairs but the meetings continued between Church Leaders and new appointed Mufti Dr. Talip Atalay.

As the largest owner of real estate in the south and the operator of several large business enterprises, the Greek Orthodox Church is a significant economic and political factor. Similarly, the Vakf is the largest landowner in the north³⁸. For keeping the doors of dialogue opened the Ambassador and other Embassy officers meet periodically

36 <http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/tcpr/2006/06-09-22.tcpr.html#03>

37 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90170.htm>

38 But the Religion Affairs has not got its control.

with Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot religious authorities regarding specific religious freedom concerns³⁹. While the preeminent position of the Church has been somewhat reduced in recent years, it remains an important power center in Cypriot politics. Present day influence of the Church can be seen in the political messages bishops and priests regularly include in their Sunday sermons.

In conclusion if we are to dispel our phobias, our objective must be the study of Islam and its relationship with historic Christianity of not only of the East but also the West and other religions in historical and contemporary perspectives. I think it most essential for spiritual leaderships of both communities to enter in to dialogue, just as the political leaderships have done, most understandably not an easy task. But a task that must be undertaken, if we are to live if not together, side by side on this Island of love that God has granted us.

39 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35449.htm>

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