

Historein

Vol 16, No 1-2 (2017)

Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



Review of Trine Stauning Willert's, *New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought: Untying the Bond between Nation and Religion*

Margarita Markoviti

doi: [10.12681/historein.9959](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9959)

Copyright © 2017, Margarita Markoviti



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Markoviti, M. (2017). Review of Trine Stauning Willert's, *New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought: Untying the Bond between Nation and Religion*. *Historein*, 16(1-2), 189–192. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9959>

NOTES

- 1 This is a review of the Greek translation, published in 2013, in juxtaposition with the original English edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). The page references are from the Greek translation.
- 2 This participation took the form of conscription as soldiers of the EES, members of the state-organised village guard system, suppliers of the DSE or members of its small Turkophone "Ottoman Brigade", led by legendary Turkish communist Mihri Belli.

Trine Stauning Willert

New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought: Untying the Bond between Nation and Religion

**Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.
viii + 197 pp.**

Margarita Markoviti

Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (Eliamep)

What should be the nature of church–state relations? And how can we conceptualise the current links between national and religious identity in Greece? How does the Greek Orthodox church, moreover, deal with the presence of “the other” in an increasingly pluralistic society? These very questions have been forcefully brought to the fore due to the unfolding of a chain of events and developments: the growing waves of migration of people of different religions (and origins), the implementation of austerity measures and the increasing levels of poverty in Greek society, and, lastly, the rise to power of the radical-left Syriza party, which purportedly bears a modernist agenda that is targeting some of the policy domains and institutions that have long defined church–state relations in Greece. Even though the largest part of her research was conducted in 2008–9, that is, before the advent of the economic crisis in Greece, Trine Stauning Willert, a modern Greek studies professor at the University of Copenhagen, critically unpacks these key questions in this book.

Willert’s book addresses the crucial issue of “religious innovation”, specifically within Greek Orthodox thought. It sheds light on a thus far unexamined and little known dimension of Orthodox theology in Greece: the theo-

logians and intellectuals who, since the end of the previous century, have been advocating a renewal of the religion, to embrace both Greek Orthodox Christian tradition *and* western European Christian culture. The “denationalisation of religion” inherent in this emerging group of thought seeks to precisely untie the established bonds between nation and religion, as depicted in the choice of book title. As the author herself explains, her objective was “not to provide an exhaustive presentation of contemporary theological issues in Greece, but to illustrate how theological arguments and general arguments, based on a religious worldview, are put forward in the Greek public space as an alternative agenda to both secular and other religious worldviews” (17).

The book is based on interviews with those Greek theologians who seek to promote the modernisation of Greek Orthodoxy, in milieus such as the Volos Academy for Theological Studies or within the Pedagogical Institute (since renamed the Institute of Educational Policy) of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. It also digs into the literature (magazines, periodicals and books), internet texts and blogs on religious or theological issues, including fiction literature, and is attentive to the crucial role of specialised publishing houses. Willert’s rich selection of texts and careful reading of their discourse powerfully reflects the wider spectrum of contemporary Orthodox theological views, with a special focus on the recent antinationalistic and prodiversity discourses.

Willert uses argumentation analysis and adopts a historical approach to closely examine the thoughts and the construction of arguments of those theologians who position themselves as progressive in an ongoing discussion on the constituent features of Greek culture, attacking the traditionalist and funda-

mentalist voices in the country. Drawing on the work of French sociologist Hervieu-Léger, Willert juxtaposes the “amnesia” of western European societies – a result of secularisation – with the significance of commemorative (religious) practices (or *anamneses*) in Greece that serve to preserve both religion and the idea of the nation. The book further offers a thorough historical analysis of the evolving bonds between Orthodoxy and national identity at different critical stages of the country’s history: the establishment of the Greek state in 1832 and the proclamation of the autocephalous Church of Greece in 1833; the attempts to reconstruct a national identity following the collapse of the irredentist *Megali Idea* (“Great Idea”) from the 1920s onwards; the neo-Orthodox movement of the 1980s and 1990s; the leadership of Archbishop Christodoulos and his idea of the Orthodox church as guardian of the Greek nation both vis-à-vis the country’s Balkan neighbours and the European Union. The main focus of the book, namely the emergence of these progressive theologians and intellectuals in the second half of the 1990s, comes precisely as a reaction to Christodoulos’ nationalistic rhetoric and to the concept of Greekness as rooted in the Orthodox tradition, promoted by neo-Orthodox intellectuals such as theologian Christos Yannaras.

So what does this “progressive agenda” of Orthodox thought entail? The author critically presents the gradual shift of a part of the Orthodox milieu in Greece from an anti-western and Eurosceptic stance towards a more “modernising” way of religious thinking. During the 1990s, these progressive circles sought to set a new agenda that “proposes (both) a rethinking of the relationship with the past and its traditional rejection of modernity” (2). Such voices challenge in many ways the identification of religion and national identity – which carries with it a strictly nationalist interpretation of Or-

thodoxy – and put forward instead a universal or ecumenical understanding of Christianity (6). In contrast to the antiwestern rhetoric of Christodoulos, these intellectuals understand Europeanisation and religious pluralism not as a threat, but rather as a unique opportunity for Orthodoxy to break down the barriers between “us” and “them” – adopting the principles of the “theology of otherness” or “theology of diversity” (78) – and to fulfil its mission of evangelisation. In the words of Pantelis Kalaitzidis, director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies and key proponent of this agenda: “The question for me personally is not Orthodoxy *or* the West, Orthodoxy *or* Europe, but Orthodoxy *and* the West, Orthodoxy *and* Europe. Europe is our path and our way, our present and future” (68).¹ Arguing against the homogeneity of the Christian Orthodox church in the country, Willert’s analysis thus highlights instead the polyphony found within Orthodox theology and the diverse nuances within the church itself.

Willert further expands her analysis to a key policy domain that directly touches on the links between national and religious identity, namely public education. In fact, the recurrent public debates on the national education system in Greece, and particularly religious education, reflect the contrasting views on the role and place of religion in Greek society as expressed within the Orthodox church, among theologians and politicians, and in civil society as a whole. As it is, above all, through public education that these new voices seek to put their theological ideas into practice, Willert’s work crucially studies the very first stages of the formation of a new association (Kairos) of religious teachers to represent the modernist camp in this debate.

This book constitutes the first scholarly attempt to soften the strict dividing lines that characterise the debate on religion, educa-

tion and national identity, which have thus far distinguished a religious nationalist, conservative camp, on the one hand, and a secularist, Europeanist position on the other. Indeed, at the time that this review was being written, these “new voices” that the author eloquently exposes have entered public discourse in Greece, gradually becoming permanent actors who have determined, to a great extent, the course of events. Willert’s book also convincingly places the Greek case in a wider context and explains how this change in Orthodox thought in fact exemplifies global trends in theology. Accordingly, one witnesses how religion and theology accommodate the cultural conditions of late modernity, challenging the particularistic paradigm of national religions and adopting the universal discourses of reflexivity, pluralism and fluid identities.

In spite of its focus on theology, this book targets a wide, interdisciplinary audience that is interested in the overarching questions of the relations between national and religious identity and the church and state in Greece. The book is important for both the international and the Greek reader, as it represents a significant break from the past in terms of how we think about and how we study religious thought in Greece and abroad. However, the book falls short from addressing other factors that affect the debate, including the currently influential secularist voices and their impact since 2010, as well as the sociopolitical factors that shape the context within which such debates flourish. Syriza’s rise to power, for instance, does indicate the significant role of the respective political and social developments in the course of events. At the same time, Willert’s assertion that Archbishop Ieronymos’ intervention in the debates on religious pluralism is moderate, especially compared to his predecessor’s, needs to be further nuanced and reconsidered in the light of his increasingly intransigent dis-

course. The book would have also benefited from a more balanced approach, as by undermining the “old voices” and their recurrence within the debate, it fails to contextualise this refreshing new case study within the *longue durée* history of religious ideas.

Overall, Willert’s book is a most valuable contribution to the current literature, as it offers a well-written and sober synopsis of both the historical and current developments in Greek Orthodox thought. The author’s analytical approach and careful consideration of these delicate topics provides original and much needed insight into the passionate debates and the changes (and the limits thereof) in terms of religion and national identity in Greece.

NOTE

- 1 Taken from a lecture by Kalaitzidis on “New trends in greek orthodox theology: challenges in the movement towards a genuine renewal of Christian unity” at the University of Vienna, 15 May 2012.

Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, eds

Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. xiii + 217 pp.

Molly Greene

Princeton University

This edited volume of ten essays, plus an introduction and an afterword, grew out of a series of workshops held in Nicosia and London, organised around the theme of diasporas and national consciousness. Often such endeavours, in their final published version, are somewhat lacking in cohesion but happily that is not the case here. As Tom Gallant explains in the very useful afterword, the authors want to write a transnational intellectual history of the Mediterranean through the device of biography, and every essay does that. Each author focuses on one or several individuals to explore a set of common questions.

As I understand it, the authors have the following goals, laid out nicely in the introduction written by Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou. They are certainly correct that the nineteenth century remains the orphan of Mediterranean historiography. Historians are not quite sure what to do with it in the age of the nation-state and thus they “give the impression that the Mediterranean ceases to exist as a category of historical analysis when we enter modern times” (3). The volume’s first aim, then, and it is an ambitious one, is to make the case that the Mediterranean continues to be a relevant framework after 1800. The editors of the volume deliberately set out to bring together historians who – in spite of the geographi-