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Accounting for refugee segregation through "misfit" Islam

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at investigating discourse about religion of refugees in interviews with Greek citizens. Specifically, the analytic material was derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 residents in Athens, Lesvos, and Thessaloniki. The analysis was based on the principles of critical discursive social psychology. As a result, four main lines of argumentation emerged from the interviews, discussing elements of the refugees' religion. First, religion is equated with Islam and it is described as a religion that defines all aspects of its adherents' lives. Furthermore, it is described as a religion that fosters fanaticism. In addition, it is constructed as a religion that devalues women and it is hostile to alternative religions. All these argumentative lines construct refugee religion as dangerous and, by extension, its adherents (the refugees) as dangerous and, coexistence with them as inevitable. Nonetheless, the possibility of peaceful coexistence is also presented in another argumentative line, provided that refugees assimilate into Greek culture.

Introduction

Greece has been both a transit and a host country for moving populations, due to its strategic location at the borders of the European Union (Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2018).In2015, a vast number of refugees began crossing from Greece into Central and North European states without facing any legal obstacles. This refugee movement was hindered by the EU-Turkey joint agreement in March 2016. According to this agreement, all people coming from Turkey into Greece as from 20 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey (European Council, 2016). Whereas, for every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian was to be resettled from Turkey to the European Union territory/ ground (Council of EU, 2016). As a result, this decision "sealed" the Balkan route and Greek authorities were faced with refugee's urgent humanitarian needs and the responsibility for managing integration processes (Tsitselikis, 2018).

Scientific research on refugee integration in recent years highlights how refugees, are often perceived as culturally distinct from Europeans (Abbas, 2020;Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016;Narkowicz, 2018).In surveys conducted across Europe, refugees are frequently depicted as holders of values that are presented as incompatible with Western values, and threatening for European lifestyle (Eghdamian, 2019; Wike et al., 2016). These negative images of refugees get even worse when Muslim religion is usually attributed to them. For example, research in Poland found that Muslim refugees are often viewed as an invasive force that seeks to change the country and must be excluded (Narkowicz, 2018). Research in Spain highlighted that even when Muslim refugees are presented as more susceptible to religious radicalization(Antunez, 2019).Similarly, in Portugal, Islam is presented as monolithic and violent, fueling fears that Muslim refugees could instigate extremist movements (PintoArena, 2017).

Since terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001negative portrayals of Muslims became pervasive in both everyday discourse and media representations across Europe (Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005; Zunes, 2017)and Islam associating them with "bad Islamists" who pose a threat to Western civilization (Pinto Arena, 2017; Issaev

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et al., 2020). Terrorist attacks in London (2005), Paris (2015), and Brussels (2016) reinforced these fears even further (Rexhepi, 2018; Zunes, 2017).Especially in the media Muslim are presented as a potential 'threat' to society, but also to the security and values of Europe (Abbas, 2020; Eghdamian, 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Qasmiyeh, 2010; Mavelli & Wilson, 2016; Rexhepi, 2018; Zunes, 2017;). They are portrayed as dangerous, ruthless, immoral and capable of any kind of evil (Moore et al., 2008).

Research on the integration of migrants in Greece shows that cultural differences are central to the way refugees are positioned within Greek society. For example, Greek citizens engage with refugee integration, viewing refugees through the lens of national and cultural difference (Figgou et al., 2018). Moreover, the adaptation of refugee children in Greece is shaped by supranational cultural norms that frame refugees as 'other,' highlighting the role of cultural expectations (Sapountzis & Zarmakoupi, 2024). Research on the discourse of the mass media in Greece, showed arguments in favor of the cross- cultural coexistence sometimes support the possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing cultural elements (de-essentialization) and sometimes support the equivalence of autonomous and concrete cultures (essentialism) (Doumou et al.,2024)

Moreover, previous studies within the Greek context have shown how national identity has historically been constructed in opposition to various 'significant Others', including both immigrants and, paradoxically, Europeans. These categorizations have always been mediated by the cultural and political particularities of Greece, but also by broader ideological assumptions surrounding intergroup relations and deeply rooted patterns of prejudice (Sapountzis et al., 2006). Importantly, even discourses that appear to embrace multiculturalism may function within implicit nationalistic frameworks. As Figgou mentioned (2018), Condor (2011), has expressed skepticism regarding the supposedly inclusionary role of (multi)cultural citizenship representations, arguing that such constructions of society and identity are often embedded in a taken-for-granted, 'banal nationalist' frame of reference (Billig, 1995). In this light, the figure of the Muslim refugee emerges not only as culturally incompatible but as a civilizational threat—an Other that reinforces the boundaries of the national self precisely through discourses that may seem, on the surface, progressive or inclusive (Archakis et al., 2018).

Images of Islam and Islamophobia

Islam is often presented as a religion that defines aspects of secular life and is more restrictive compared to other religions. In this context Islam is often seen as oppressive towards women, and hijab, is frequently treated as a proof of women's oppression (Barlas, 2013; Bishin& Cherif, 2017), with Muslim women depicted as passive victims or as symbols of the subjugation inherent in Islam (Bishin & Cherif, 2017). Islamophobia was initially defined as the fear of Muslims who have committed violence in the name of Islam; however, it ended up meaning the fear of all Muslims, who are often profiled as "savages" and "potential terrorists" (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016; Helbling, 2012; Hüseyinoğlu, 2015). Islamophobic rhetoric is perpetuated through assertions that Islam is homogeneous, static, resistant to change, violent, and dangerous (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016; Imnoff & Recker, 2012; Taras, 2012). It is also claimed that Muslims cannot coexist peacefully with Westerners, portraying them as potentially dangerous and advocating for their rejection (Garcia Nardiz, 2019; Duman & Unur, 2020; Olmos-Alcaraz, 2023; Rexhepi, 2018).

Islam is also presented as opposed to democracy and is constructed as its "enemy", ignoring the fact that such images compare two dissimilar elements, a religion (Islam) with apolitical regime (democracy). The West is presented in terms of atheism, as if it has no religion. The Western "civilization" is projected against the Islamic faith, raising hostility towards Islam, and complicating Muslim-non-Muslim relations (Khan, 2015). This renders the relationship between them in a perpetual cycle of tension and disputes (Khan, 2015). Religion acts as a barrier to the integration of refugees in Europe but also undermines the possibility of being granted asylum (Goodman &Speer, 2007).This article aims to analyze the ways in which refugee religion is used in discourse to legitimize exclusion.

All the above representations of Islam are often attributed to Islamophobia meaning biased attitudes and prejudices towards Muslims and their religion (Taras, 2013). It includes views of Islam as inherently violent, monolithic, and hostile to Western values, while also justifying the marginalization of Muslims (Imnoff & Recker, 2012; Massoumi et al., 2017; Taras, 2012; Zunes, 2017). Such views often contribute to the exclusion of Muslim from social, economic, and political opportunities (Massoumi et al., 2017; Zunes, 2017). Islamophobia also leads to aggressive and intolerant acts against Muslims. Numerous incidents of both verbal and physical violence (Taras, 2012; Zunes, 2017) target Muslims, and hate speech against Muslims is widespread. The police often face accusations of Islamophobia, as several cases have come to light involving the deliberate surveillance of Muslims who were not engaged in any unlawful activities (Sayyid, 2014). Islamophobia is widespread also in Greece especially among members of the far-right leading to attacks against Muslims (Sakellariou, 2016).

Orientalism and the Clash of Civilizations

Negative images of Islam as well as Islamophobia can be traced into Orientalism. This term as defined by Edward Said (1978) refers to the western images of the "East" (Said, 1978)as primitive, rigid, and as a source of instability (Berger, 2006; Blaut, 1993). Based on unhistorical representations, images, and stereotypes, the East is frequently characterized as the land of "fanatical Arabs", the "mysterious East", "mystical religiosity", etc. On the contrary, in this framework, the West is portrayed as enlightened, superior, and the benchmark for civilization. This way the West constructs its identity in contrast to the ‘inferior’ East (Tsibiridou & Stamatopoulos, 2008). This "us-them" mentality perpetuates racial and cultural discriminations that justify the marginalization of people from the East such as Muslim-majority countries (Said, 1978; 2004) and reinforces racism, prejudice, and exploitation of the East (Facos, 2011).Such construction of the West and the East can be seen as a part of a broader ideological argumentative frame of reference described by other scholars as 'banal Occidentalism' (Bozatzis, 2014).

Orientalism has been found to be important also in the discourse of Greek identity. Research by Bozatzis (2009, 2016; Bozatzis et al., 2022) showed how Greek discourse constructs cultural and religious difference through intersecting logics of banal occidentalism and orientalism. His analysis of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace (2009) shows how Western values serve as implicit benchmarks for evaluating “Others,” positioning Islam as culturally incompatible. In later work, Greece itself is portrayed as semi-Western and culturally deficient (2016), while migrants are framed as backward and misaligned with “modern” European values (Bozatzis et al., 2022). These studies highlight how cultural hierarchies and modernity gaps shape exclusionary representations of Islam within the Greek context.

Even though Said treats images of the East as orientalistic, for Huntington (1996) these images and differences among the West and the East are “real”. According to him, the end of the Cold War (1991) marked the beginning of a conflict that keeps on escalating between Western 'civilization' and Islam. The Islamic religion and its followers are portrayed as being opposed to Western 'civilization' and its ideas, leading to their characterization as enemies of the West, which is perceived to be under threat. Huntington argued that all ideological and political conflicts would eventually be overshadowed by cultural and, more specifically, religious divisions. He believed as well that these religious differences would become the battlegrounds of the future as 'cultures' inherently serve as sources of conflict among nations and peoples. Furthermore, Huntington asserted that countries are defined by their culture and their cultural values like religion, language, and customs (Huntington, 1996). According to his perspective, the countries of Western Christianity are the northern countries, which are economically, spiritually, and politically advanced, whereas Islamic countries, outside Europe, are economically underdeveloped and are not embrace democratic ideal (Huntington, 1996).

According to Huntington, Islam represents the primary source of global threat and destabilization contributing to violence, terrorism and undesirable migration of people. He argued that Islamic beliefs will provoke numerous violent conflicts between Islamic and Christian states. He also expresses his opposition to the

formation of multicultural societies, advocating instead for the urgent need to protect the West and preserve its boundaries from other 'civilizations', particularly Islamic ones (Huntington,1996). His' clash of civilizations' theory gained widespread support, especially following the 9/11terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center in New York. Many viewed these events as validation of Huntington's predictions, reinforcing the perception of Islamists as" dangerous" and "terrorist" threat to the West (English & Thibaud, 2001). Additionally, his theory was seen as endorsing liberal democracy, societal progress, and the defense of human rights against opposition from Islamic forces (Kung, 2010),while also highlighting the potentially negative consequences of multicultural societies (English & Thibaud, 2001).

However, this theory has faced substantial criticism. Some researchers argue that it oversimplifies complex dynamics by treating cultures and religions as fixed, static entities that are fundamentally incompatible. This perspective frames religious and cultural differences as unchanging and inherently irreconcilable, partially justifying violence against those who do not share the same beliefs. Religions and cultures are perceived as homogeneous and immutable and are essentialized while playing an ideological role and legitimizing all forms of interests (Maurozacharakis, 2017). Huntington himself dismissed the idea that different cultures could coexist peacefully, insisting at conflict between them was inevitable. However, this view is contradicted by the reality of many multicultural societies, where coexistence is often a reality.

The aim of the study was to explore how Greek people discuss the religion of refugees in the context of culture, and to explore the implications of these discussions for their social inclusion. The interviews concerned culture, but here we focus on religion as one of its components. By examining the interplay between these factors, the study seeks to shed light on the barriers to refugee integration and the role that people attribute to religion within this process.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted during the period August 2020-February 2021. A snowballing technique was used for sampling. The participants were Greek residents from Athens, Thessaloniki, and Lesvos, comprising 15 women; 15 men, aged between 19-64 years old, with an age of 41 years on average. None of the participants had professional or voluntary experience working with refugees. In the time frame of the interviews, 16 of the participants were employed full-time or part-time employment in public or private sectors, 11 were self-employed and 3 of them were unemployed. The regions were selected based on UNHCR (2015; 2021) reports about areas that had received significant numbers of refugees. Originally, the present research had been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation, with the researcher sharing the survey's Consent Form in each communication and being available to address any queries.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through the online application – Skype platform and were all individual and with each session focusing on three thematic axes: 1) the refugee cultures 2) the living conditions of refugees, 3) integration - consequences. The interviews lasted from approximately 36 to 114 minutes with an average of 45 minutes. Afterwards, they were recorded and fully transcribed. For this paper, original Greek excerpts have been translated into English. The extracts below have been selected for their clarity and density and are indicative of the arguments that appear in the majority of the interviews. After reading and re-reading the original corpus, we selected from the original transcripts all extracts talking about refugee religion and placed them in a separate file. At this stage, the data selection criteria were comprehensive. We selected passages in which the religion of Islam appears explicitly.

Analytic Method

Transcription focused mainly on the content. The analysis was based on the principles of critical discursive social psychology (Michos & Figgou, 2017;Wetherell, 1998).Critical discursive social psychology /emphasizes power and ideology as it is interested in relating actual discourse to historically constituted social representations and aims to explore the possible macro-social implications of discourse 'in action' (Wetherell, 1998). The first stage of the analysis involved coding the interview transcripts for recurring themes and patterns. The data was categorized according to these themes, with particular attention to the argumentative lines used by participants. This helped map out the different ways participants talked about refugees' religion and how they justified their positions. The analysis proceeded with a micro-level focus, examining how specific terms, phrases, and rhetorical strategies were used to construct meaning about refugees' religion. This micro-level analysis captures the interactional aspects of discourse, such as how participants justify, question, or contest these ideas. Especially, this analysis pays attention to the issue of accountability, identifying that participants' discourse reflects not only personal perspectives but broader social responsibilities. In considering how participants justify their views on refugee religion, the study examines the extent to which such positions are formed and contribute to societal norms and power dynamics. Simultaneously, we expanded to a macro-level analysis, contextualizing the discourse within broader social and ideological issues, such as nationalism, Islamophobia, and the politics of immigration. This macro-level perspective allowed us to see how the specific discourses around refugees' religion are reflective of larger societal concerns. Moreover, the study emphasizes the analysis of accounts—the justifications, explanations, or excuses participants provide to explain their views on refugees' religion. By focusing on the accounts participants offer, we explore how they manage complex social tensions, such as prejudice and religious differences, in relation to the refugee crisis.

Results

Analysis focuses on discourse about Islam as the sole religion of refugees and as an integral part of their culture and how this enhances or limits their integration in Greece. Islam is presented as (a) defining all aspects of secular life, (b) fostering fanaticism, (c) devaluing women, (d) being hostile to alternative religions but also as a religion that can be(e) assimilated to allow for peaceful coexistence. Specifically, our analysis indicated two main recurrent patterns within which different lines of argument were mobilized. In the first pattern the religion of refugees is presented as dangerous, refugees are presented as dangerous adherents, and coexistence is perceived as inevitable. Nonetheless, in the second pattern, the case of possible peaceful coexistence is also presented, with refugees being constructed as "assimilable". Within each of these patterns/themes the participants unfolded different argumentative lines, employing diverse discursive strategies (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000).

The first extract followed the researcher's question on whether the participants think the different religion of refugees plays an important role in the relations between the refugees and the Greeks:

Extract 1: Religion defines all aspects of life

R: Turning to religion, there are people in Greece who believe that the refugees' different religion plays an important role in our relations, what do you say about that?

E: Well yeah... look... I am talking about me personally, I'm not speaking about the people in general... uh.... I mean yeah... .so I'll answer you... uh for me? about me or in general?

R: Yeah it's your opinion on that.

E: Look here... I do think that religion has an influence. Um, because... it is the nature of their religion. It's going to sound racist again (laughs). Just to make it a bit clearer. I'm not saying this from a racist point of view. I'm saying it because I believe that Muslimism is a religion... more defining, meaning it influences many elements of culture. It's not just a religion. It has to become a way of living.

(Eurydice, Lesvos)

The interviewer's question invites Eurydice to comment on an argument, that is presented as being endorsed by some Greeks, claiming that the refugee religion plays a significant role in their relations with the host country. By using the quantitative adjective "some," the interviewer avoids presenting this view as a majority one. Furthermore, by attributing it to others, she distances herself from the viewpoint, maintaining a neutral stance. In her response, Eurydice first seeks clarification as to whether she is being asked to comment on why some people hold this view or whether she should agree with it. Once the researcher confirms that Eurydice is being asked for her opinion, she promptly states that she agrees that refugee religion does impact relations with the host country, due to its inherent nature to define its followers' lives. However, Eurydice specifies that this does not apply to religions in general but only to "their" religion Islam. By attributing these qualities to the "nature" of Islam, she presents them as fixed and inherent, existing "somewhere out there" (Potter, 1996).

Nevertheless, this distinction between the religion of refugees and other religions, and the attribution of this difference to the specific "nature" of Muslim religion, places Eurydice at risk of being accused of discrimination and racism. To manage this potential accusation of racism, through laughter and humor, Eurydice recognizes the potentially racist nature of her statement to deflect racism accusation. Disclaimers such as the ones she uses ("Again, it will sound racist (laughter). Just a little bit to make it clear. I'm not saying it in a racist way") are often employed in racial discourse to protect speakers from being stigmatized as prejudiced, as stated in the relevant studies i.e. as inoculation against racism (Billig et al., 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and to (re)negotiate prevailing social perceptions of refugees (Archakis et al., 2018). Such racism assumptions commonly follow negative representations of minority groups (Augoustinos & Every, 2010).

Eurydice's recognition of "Muslimism" (as she calls Islam) as a religion that shapes the way of life and culture of its adherents seems to arise not from her personal racism but from her belief that Muslim is a religion that operates through authoritarianism and determines the lifestyle of its followers. By defining and limiting culture through religion, she implies that it is inferior and deficient, as reflected in the pejorative phrasing "it has to become." In this context, Eurydice could be seen as positioning herself as a liberal who believes that religion should not determine one's lifestyle. This argument also appears in the discussion of the minority position of refugees, whose religious identity is portrayed as a factor that hinders coexistence. Islam, as a religion, is presented as determining every aspect of a Muslim's life, thus complicating peaceful coexistence.

In the same interview, another participant also discusses the religion of refugees, but this time attributing elements of fanaticism to it.

Extract 2: Islam is a fanatic religion

R: ...Some people in Greece believe that the different religion of the refugees plays an important role in our relations, how do you feel about this argument?

Gr: Um... look... I think they shouldn't become Christians... no they shouldn't... now... okay... Muslims are very fanatical... I think there's a terrorist... terrorist religious organization... I'm not telling you they're all terrorists, but certainly there's been a lot of terrorists and definitely most of them are very fanatical.... I'm not in favor of it. Ok I don't think you should impose your religion on us, but not to accept... not to say that we are going to underestimate ourselves, so they can have ours... I mean if they are ok with us, ok we'll have no problem with each other, but they... they are fanatical I don't know how they can change.

(Grigoris, Lesvos)

In response to the researcher's question, which mirrors the one in the first extract, Grigoris begins by rejecting the idea that refugees should adopt Christianity to improve relations with Greeks, emphatically repeating, "no, they should not." This statement helps him distance himself from the notion of refugee assimilation. However, he proceeds to explain that the problems with coexistence lay in an attribute of the Muslims—namely, fanaticism. To support his claim, he refers to the existence of terrorist religious organizations.

Once again, in an effort to avoid appearing prejudiced, he refrains from making blanket statements, asserting that not all Muslims are terrorists. Instead, through particularization (Billig, 1985), he categorizes them into terrorists and non-terrorists. This differentiation allows him to avoid generalizations that could be perceived as biased, claiming that he is not opposing all refugees but only those associated with terrorism. By doing so, he rhetorically aligns himself with anti-bias norms and begins to discuss the religion of refugees.

Nevertheless, later on an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) ("…but certainly there's been a lot of terrorists and definitely most of them are very fanatical"), he amplifies the potential danger posed by refugees. He concludes by reiterating that one cannot impose religion on others, nevertheless he stresses the importance of refugees accepting "our" religion. By this phrasing he presents himself as uncertain about whether refugees can change. His use of the second-person plural and possessive pronouns (e.g., "our religion") reflects an intergroup conflict between the in-group (Greeks) and the out-group (refugees, particularly fanatical Muslims).

In line with the clash of civilizations theory (Huntington, 1996) the speaker asserts that the Islam and its followers are fanatical and associated with terrorism. This identification raises concerns about the perceived dangers posed by refugees, framing them as extremists whose views are harmful to the West (Garcia Nardiz, 2019; Zunes, 2017). Consequently, refugees are constructed as dangerous and are directly associated with terrorism (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016; Mavelli & Wilson, 2016; Taras, 2012). This narrative further suggests that peaceful coexistence is limited and hindered, as refugees are seen as adherents of an unchangeable, fanatical religion.

In the same question another participant argues that relationships are significantly affected, notably with regards to the position of women.

Extract 3: An oppressive religion for women

> R: I will take you to religion that you have already mentioned. Some people in Greece argue that the different religion of refugees plays an important role in our relations, what do you think about that?
> N.: Where are the people who say so? Can we talk to each other? (laughs).Yes, I clearly agree with them. Of course it plays an important role in our relations. We are not obsessed with our religion, whereas they are extremely [obsessed] about theirs. I mean how can we have good relations and live harmoniously when they don't, how shall I say, can't get their minds off religion at all? So how can I as a teacher convince a family that if girls don't wear headscarves this is not a crime? It seems difficult. Impossible actually… You can't convince any of them that what they believe and are passionate about doesn't even apply here or in the whole world in general. They are stuck in religion and their cultural nonsense and they don't understand that it doesn't apply. Hence, how can we, free women living in a democracy, accept those women who devalue themselves? Other women in the world fought for our rights and feminism. Women who see themselves as so down and under can't cope. They're going to have a tough time.
>
> (Nelly, Athens)

In response to the researcher's request to comment on the argument that religion hinders relationships with refugees, Nelly begins her reply with laughter, wondering where the people who share this view are so that she can meet and discuss with them, indicating her agreement with the position expressed by the interviewer. This sentence, delivered with minimal delay, is clear and emphatic, reinforced by the phrase "of course," which strongly affirms her stance (Pomerantz, 1984). She then proceeds to explain her agreement by highlighting the differences between the religions of Muslims and Greeks. By using the first-person plural, she aligns herself with the Greeks and contrasts them with "those" who are "extremely" obsessed with religion. Here, "extremely" serves as an exaggerated expression.

Nelly further emphasizes her point through rhetorical questions: ("I mean how can we have good relations and live harmoniously when they don't, how shall I say, can't get their minds off religion at all? So how can I as a teacher convince a family that if girls don't wear headscarves this is not a crime?). These questions add dramatic

force to her argument, suggesting that it is impossible to change the mindset of fanatical people, making harmonious coexistence unfeasible. Specifically, she uses the metaphor of religion as something “stuck” in the minds of refugees, reinforcing the rigidity of their beliefs.

Later, adopting the role of a teacher, Nelly brings up the issue of headscarves, explaining that she is supposed to, but cannot, persuade a refugee family that it is not a crime for girls not to wear them. This evokes her position as a category entitlement, speaking from the authority of her teaching role. This rhetorical technique serves to bolster the objectivity of her perspective (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Focusing on gender differences, she attributes the lack of understanding between Muslims and Greeks to the rigidity of the former's worldview, which leads to what she perceives as nonsensical assumptions. Finally, Nelly places herself in the category of “free women” in a democracy, using the first-person plural, contrasting her with refugee women who, she believes, devalue themselves. She presents these two groups as incompatible and unable to coexist. She emphasizes that other women around the world have fought for rights and feminism, and that women who perceive themselves as beneath and subordinate cannot adapt and will have a difficult time (“They’re going to have it rough”), adapting to the new country because of their beliefs.

In the above extract, the main argument again is that the refugees' religion is fanatical, restrictive and authoritarian. Furthermore, this religion is seen as a fundamental aspect of their identity that limits women’s rights, in stark contrast to Greek culture. By including herself in the category of Greek women, Nelly positions herself against the refugees, portraying them as fanatical about religion and adhering to outdated rules regarding women. Coexistence, in her view, is therefore unfeasible. By focusing on religion as an oppressive force for refugee women, Nelly constructs them as inferior to Western women and as passive victims (Amores et al., 2020). These representations reinforce and perpetuate stereotypical images of a superior and moral West versus the 'other' (Bozatzis, 2014) and enact issues of Islamophobia (Mavelli & Wilson, 2016), while also introducing gender issues into the discourse surrounding refugees' religion.

Analysis of answers to the questions about how refugees perceive Greece and Greeks, as well as how Greeks perceive them, shows that refugees are presented as belonging to a violent religion, one that is not accepted by the host country. Specifically:

Extract 4: Islam asks for the defeat of rival religions

> R: How do you think they [refugees] see Greece and the Greeks?
> Chr.: ...influenced by Turkey, because they are coming from Turkey and Erdogan, let's say, he is sending them to the coasts so as to cross over the other side in boats. So, that means that they might be taught by the Turks to... these are the Greeks who are so... I can't think of anything else. But I believe that it may be a religious issue, because they according to their religion consider us to be infidels. The Koran, if you have an idea, treats us as infidels and says that if you kill an infidel and so on, you will go to paradise and have party with virgins and tons of rice and things like that, let's say. That's what their religion tells them, I don't.
>
> (Chrysanthos, Athens)

The researcher asks the participant how he thinks refugees perceive Greece and the Greeks. Chrysanthos begins by stating, unequivocally, that refugees’ perceptions of Greeks are influenced and likely taught by the Turks and Erdogan, who send them to Greece by boats. He frames the refugees' movement as organized and guided by the Turkish president, who is presented as manipulating them and shaping their views on Greece. Refugees’ relationship with Turkey, according to Chrysanthos, is facilitated also by the fact that they share the same religion. He continues his talk without differentiating the refugees from the Turks and profiles them as people who believe in a monolithic and violent religion with extreme views against the Greeks, who are treated as infidels. He argues that the Koran instructs believers to kill the infidels and promises them after life rewards, reproducing orientalist images of the Muslim religion.

Thus, the central argument is that, due to their shared religion, refugees cooperate with the Turks against Greeks, positioning themselves as adversaries and enemies of Greece. The phrase he uses at the end of the extract ("That's what their religion tells them, I don't") manages the dilemma of interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992) by presenting himself as having no personal interest to call the refugees extremists who want to kill the non-believing Greeks. In this way, he portrays the refugees as hostile toward Greeks. Additionally, his Orientalist reference to the 'reward' as a 'virgin party' suggests a view of women as mere objects—gifts for men—within a broader context of sexualization and the enslavement of women (Ali, 2020).

This is a particularly interesting extract, as it situates this discussion within a framework of intergroup relations where Greeks are portrayed as being under threat from the alliance of Turks with the refugees. Within this interpretative context, refugee management policies should aim to send them away from Greece.

In the last extract, religion is portrayed as less restrictive in terms of coexistence. Specifically, the participant was asked to comment on how the widely shared view that Islam places women in a low social position, could affect relations with refugees.

Extract 5: Coexistence can lead to improvement of Islam

> R: Similarly, I say that some people argue that Islam as a religion sets women in a different social position and this may affect our relations with refugees. What do you think about this?
> A:...I think that barely... with osmosis and generally over the years I think that these people... those who will stay here and will not try to go elsewhere or wherever they will go I think they determine uh after a few years... uh a lot of years, so let's put it that way... uh the position of women in Islam with this interaction will... will improve and they will improve accordingly. So it doesn't mean that it's a burden to us. We won't go backwards. They... will go forward.
>
> (Apostolos, Thessaloniki)

The researcher invites the interviewee to discuss the opinion that the position of women differs in Islam and how this affects the relations with refugees. Apostolos begins by expressing his opposition to this view, though only mildly. He then proceeds to elaborate on his argument, acknowledging that differences exist but suggesting that they will be eliminated through interaction between the two groups. He believes that, with time and interaction, whether the refugees stay in Greece or leave, the position of women in Islam will improve. According to him, this process will not harm the Greeks, as they will not change; instead, the refugees will change for the better, assimilating the values of Greece.

Interestingly, he describes this cross-cultural contact as "osmosis." This term, borrowed from chemistry, refers to a passive transfer where a substance (usually water) moves from an area of lower concentration to one of higher concentration, ultimately balancing the two. In this way, refugees are portrayed as physical categories undergoing a natural transfer of elements through "osmosis" with the Greeks. By differentiating between those who stay and those who leave, the speaker avoids making broad generalizations that might suggest prejudice. He emphasizes that this interaction will take "many years," implying that cross-cultural coexistence is a long-term process. Apostolos believes that this interaction will have a positive influence on the refugees, improving the position of women in Islam, while the Greeks will remain unaffected. Thus, he argues that while Islam may have negative attributes, it can only change when it comes into contact with the West.

This describes an intergroup differentiation between the in-group represented by the Apostolos (first plural - "we") and the out-group (refugees). These intra-categorical differentiations, apart from being oriented towards defending the in-group, they also define refugees as flexible and capable of adopting the progressive Greek way of life. Additionally, such a narrative that wants Greece (here aligned with the West) with superior and progressive values compared to the inferior East in which it (East) will learn about the position of women, constitutes a representation within Said's Orientalist prism, as previously mentioned (Said, 1978).

Finally, it is noteworthy that, in this extract, the participant acknowledges the possibility of Greek-refugee relations and potential peaceful coexistence. However, this position suggests that Greeks, as the host country, will remain unaffected by the cross-cultural interaction due to their perceived superiority. In contrast, the "assimilable" refugees are seen as capable of being transformed through this coexistence. Thus, change in the context of cross-cultural interaction is regarded as having no impact on the superior Greeks, but as capable of improving the “transformable” refugees.

Discussion

This article has sought to explore Greek discourse surrounding refugees’ religion, specifically Islam, and its impact on the social integration of refugee populations in Greece. It is embedded in social psychological discourse studies that explore issues of migration, prejudice, refugees and culture. Over the last nine years, Greece has become a focal point for migration flows, prompting discourses on refugee integration that are often framed through the lens of religion. The semi-structured interviews conducted in this study allowed for a nuanced analysis of how participants talk about refugee integration focusing specifically on the religious aspect of refugees’ identities. By analyzing these discourses, this study identifies the contradictory and often exclusionary perspectives that underpin broader social and political views on refugees in Greece.

Similarly with previous (Andreouli et al., 2017; Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2017; Figgou et al., 2018), the primary finding of the analysis is the equation of refugees with Islam, where it is used to justify and legitimize their exclusion from Greek society. According to the participants, this religion defines all aspects of secular life, fosters fanaticism, devalues women, it is hostile to alternative religions and through assimilation it might be able to lead to peaceful coexistence. Particularly Islam is portrayed not only as a religion, but as a way of life that governs every aspect of refugees’ existence. This portrayal becomes particularly harmful when religion is described as the root of fanaticism (Eghdamian, 2019), and linked to terrorism (Mavelli & Wilson, 2016). Refugees are framed as embodying a dangerous religious identity, with their beliefs seen as inherently incompatible with Western values and culture, while Islam has demonstrated as a fundamental point of division (Bozatzis, 2016). Particularly refugee women are often depicted as passive victims of their religion and, therefore, inferior to Western women (Amores et al., 2020). Such representations contribute to a broader narrative of a clash between Western and Islamic cultures, positioning refugees as threats to Greek societal norms. Another key argument is that refugees, due to their 'dangerous' religion, are bearers of a distinct and dangerous cultural identity, which is perceived as a threat to the West (Eghdamian, 2019; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005; Zunes, 2017), and to Greece since it leads them to collaborate with the enemies of Greece (Doumou et al.,2024).

However, in one argumentative line coexistence is rendered possible provided refugees assimilate and adapt their beliefs and practices through their interaction with Greek society. This perspective portraits refugees as “transformable,” and while it makes peaceful coexistence possible, it still reflects a hierarchical view where Greeks are presented as the superior group, unaffected by such interactions. A recent study highlights that the role of religious difference in shaping Greek society’s perception of refugees as ‘others’ and in defining boundaries of inclusion (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023). Even though such argumentation seems to be more favorable for potential integration, it still fails to endorse genuine acceptance and inclusion, perpetuating an underlying logic of exclusion.

The findings of this study align with the theoretical framework of Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory (1996), that positions Islam as inherently inferior and dangerous compared to the "civilized" West. These discourses not only reinforce negative stereotypes about refugees but also support the argument that multicultural societies are fundamentally problematic. By framing Islam as a violent, fanatical, and restrictive religion, these discourses legitimize exclusionary practices and policies that undermine refugees' rights and social inclusion (English &Thibaud, 2001).

This study contributes to the literature on refugee integration by highlighting how religion is used as a tool for the stigmatization and marginalization of refugees. By essentializing refugees' religion as static and homogenous, these argumentative lines justify their exclusion from society, even in cases where assimilation and coexistence are deemed possible. By critically examining these arguments, this study underscores the need to challenge the framing of Islam and refugees as inherently incompatible with the West. The categorization of refugees as part of a "mobile population" further complicates their integration, reconfiguring their identities in ways that reinforce boundaries between "us" and "them"(Andreouli et al., 2017; Papataxiarchis, 2017). The absence of inclusion, combined with systemic exclusion, significantly shapes how refugees are represented in public and lay discourses (Haw et al., 2019).

These findings resonate with existing analyses of Greek public, media, and institutional discourse, which have demonstrated that refugees are constructed as a political and cultural challenge (Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2017; Doumou et al., 2024). Research has shown that the portrayal of immigrants in Greek society is closely intertwined with notions of national identity and cultural purity (Sapountzis et al., 2006). This aligns with the present findings, where religion (specifically Islam) plays a central role in positioning refugees as the "other" and as fundamentally incompatible with dominant social values. This aligns with the present findings, where religion (specifically Islam) plays a central role in positioning refugees as the "other" and as fundamentally incompatible with dominant social values. Furthermore, research on Greek discourse reveals that religious identity, particularly Islam, becomes a symbolic marker of broader anxieties surrounding cultural misfit (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023).

Moreover, in line with Bozatzis (2016), who explored how Greek public discourse constructs refugees through cultural and religious dichotomies, this study also highlights the portrayal of Islam as a central marker of cultural misfit. In another research, refugees are often depicted as a threat or burden, consistent with the findings of the current study regarding the cultural and religious misfit narrative, which highlights constructions of danger and criminality that threaten national security (Figgou, 2015). Similarly, Sapountzis and Zarmakoupi (2024) examine the role of cultural norms in shaping perceptions of refugee children in Greece, showing how supranational cultural expectations frame them as 'other'. However, the construction of refugees in Greece extends beyond their religion and cultural identity, encompassing their social identity as well.

Methodologically, this study adopts a critical social-psychological perspective, emphasizing the role of discourse in shaping social realities and intergroup relations. By analyzing how participants talk about refugees' religious identities, this study highlights how refugees are categorized, stereotyped and their identities essentialized. The findings also contribute to the understanding of how these discourses reflect broader societal tensions and how these tensions are managed through the construction of a dangerous "other." In this way, the study provides valuable insights into the intersection of religion, immigration, and social integration, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges refugees face in Greece and similar contexts. Furthermore, such representations are intertwined with the participants' 'concern' to deny racism, highlighting the contradictory 'nature' of their discourses.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of recognizing and deconstructing the stereotypes and prejudices that underpin discourse about refugees. It is crucial to challenge the essentializing and exclusionary narratives that dominate public debates on refugee integration and to explore alternative discourses that promote inclusion and mutual understanding. Further research across different European contexts could provide additional insights into the broader dynamics of refugee integration in multicultural societies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

Η εξήγηση του διαχωρισμού των προσφύγων/-ισσών μέσω του «ασύμβατου» Ισλάμ

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η παρούσα μελέτη αποσκοπεί στη διερεύνηση του λόγου για τη θρησκεία των προσφύγων/-ισσών σε συνεντεύξεις με Έλληνες/-ίδες πολίτες. Συγκεκριμένα, το αναλυτικό υλικό αντλήθηκε από ημι-δομημένες συνεντεύξεις που πραγματοποιήθηκαν με 30 κατοίκους από την Αθήνα, τη Λέσβο και τη Θεσσαλονίκη. Η ανάλυση βασίστηκε στις αρχές της κριτικής κοινωνικής λογοψυχολογίας. Ως αποτέλεσμα από τις συνεντεύξεις προέκυψαν τέσσερις βασικές γραμμές επιχειρηματολογίας, οι οποίες συζητούν στοιχεία της θρησκείας των προσφύγων/-ισσών. Αρχικά, η θρησκεία εξομοιώνεται με το Ισλάμ και περιγράφεται ως μια θρησκεία που καθορίζει όλες τις πτυχές της ζωής των πιστών της. Επιπλέον, περιγράφεται ως μια θρησκεία που ενισχύει τον φανατισμό. Κατασκευάζεται, επίσης, ως μια θρησκεία που υποτιμά τις γυναίκες και είναι εχθρική προς τις εναλλακτικές θρησκείες. Όλες αυτές οι επιχειρηματολογικές γραμμές κατασκευάζουν τη θρησκεία των προσφύγων/-ισσών ως επικίνδυνη και κατ΄ επέκταση τους οπαδούς της (τους/τις πρόσφυγες/-ισσες) ως επικίνδυνους και τη συνύπαρξη μαζί τους ως αναπόφευκτη. Παρ' όλα αυτά, παρουσιάζεται σε μια άλλη επιχειρηματολογική γραμμή και η δυνατότητα της ειρηνικής συνύπαρξης, αν οι πρόσφυγες/-ες αφομοιώσουν τον ελληνικό πολιτισμό.

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