



NEW CUSTOMS IN GREEK ORTHODOX PARISHES AS EXPRESIONS OF GREEK URBAN RELIGIOSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines some of the most characteristic forms of the newly-established customs, which relate to urban parishes' religious festivals and excursions. Over and above their cultural aspects, the identification and study of these customs presents pastoral dimensions, as they constitute characteristic cases of observances and rituals that priests are confronted with on a daily basis and to which, on occasion, they contribute decisively in terms of their formation and establishment. Because of this, their study presents a broader social and cultural interest, as they constitute contemporary expressions of existing human feelings and aspirations, but enriched with forms of modernist daily life.

Keywords: urban religiosity, newly-established customs, religious festivals, observances, rituals, cultural interest, human aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

In our ever-changing times, the interactions of the various ecclesiastical and social facts and events are daily and frequent. In the urban parishes of our times a series of modernist religious customs see the light, which also define contemporary urban religiosity. As is known, in the urban parishes of our times a series of modernist religious customs see the light, which also define contemporary urban religiosity. In what follows, we examine some of the most characteristic forms of these newly-established customs, which relate to urban parishes' religious festivals and excursions.

Over and above their cultural aspects, the identification and study of these customs presents pastoral dimensions, as they constitute characteristic cases of observances and rituals that priests are confronted with on a daily basis and to which, on occasion, they contribute decisively in terms of their formation and establishment. Because of this, their study presents a broader social and cultural interest, as they constitute contemporary expressions of existing human feelings and aspirations, but enriched with forms of modernist daily life.

It is also known that folk religiosity isn't a phenomenon encountered solely in rural farming communities, but also occurs -with certain permutations, adaptations and differentiations- in towns and cities, too. In recent years, the phenomena and manifestations of so-called "urban folklore" constitute some of the most beloved subjects of modern folklore studies. Within this

framework, aspects of religious folk tradition are also frequently studied with respect to how it takes form and manifests itself in urban milieus.

A common finding of the relevant bibliography is the fact that the modernist folkloric forms are characterised by the prevalence of sociability over rituality. It is the requirements and conditions of the contemporary modernist society that exaggerates social ties over the ritual bonds and bridges of the here with the hereafter. This basic reality is reflected in the forms of contemporary customs, which are created in the modernist urban context, and which evolve and are shaped within its confines.

On the other hand, the creation of new customary forms is continuous and keeps pace with the evolution and existence of organised human society. The new ritual forms coexist with, or succeed, older ones, but in all cases form part of the customary core of social life, an attempt to inscribe the supernatural within natural frameworks and boundaries. For this reason, they will continue to exist and appear for as long as organised human societies exist, societies that will both support and repeat them assertively. Besides, customary apprehension or fear, that is to say the impression that in all probability some negative development or intervention will occur should a ritual commitment, command or stricture not be observed, even in the case where everyone believes that in essence this is illogical, constitutes one of the most basic driving forces behind the creation of new customary forms.

The ecclesiastical dimension of Greek folk religiosity constitutes a necessary condition and prerequisite for understanding the manifestations of religious folklore, both in its older and more recent forms. It is a proviso for correctly understanding the manifestations of folk religiosity, but also for discerning and interpreting whatever analogous forms come about in our times. Indeed, because of being contemporary to us and part of our lives, these new forms often pass unnoticed, as the folklorist needs to be particularly practiced in order to isolate, record and study the forms of folk culture that see the light and are carried out in his time, in parallel to his own life and existence.

More particularly, in the folk religiosity of the Greek common people, a close connection is observed with the Orthodox Church, even in our times when, from a cultural, ethnic and religious viewpoint, Greek society has ceased to be homogeneous. Even in multicultural environments, their relation with the supernatural is directly associated to their relation with religious acts and life, as indeed also occurs in Greek communities abroad throughout the world, where customary life always exists and is structured in reference to religious life. Indeed, the assimilation and adaptation of any chance outsider or foreign-inspired customary elements, which are nonetheless incorporated into our devotional and ritual life renewing the content of contemporary folk religiosity, belong to this general framework.

All that is ascertained above also constitutes the general context of what follows: it constitutes the components of a modernist folk religious tradition, alive and evolving, which is still in the making and which is of interest not only to folklore, but also to anthropology more generally, in parallel with pastoral psychology, sociology of religion and other germane branches of study of the religious phenomenon.

As the relevant bibliography ascertains, it is the ritual splendour and magnificence that constitute the ordinary person's basic motivation for a closer relation with religion¹. The ritual aspect is a necessary element of every religion's external manifestations, while in parallel

¹ Ziegler 1935, 674-675.

constituting a strong attraction for drawing the faithful to it². This is also, of course, the reason why the various religions have elaborated complex and splendid rituals, while in those cases of religions without ritual magnificence, the participation of their faithful in the acts of worship of neighbours of other faiths or different dogmas is usual, without this necessarily entailing their proselytisation³.

Because this need of the ordinary person is acknowledged, there are frequent efforts of various religious ministrants, even in religions with an elaborate ritual side, such as Christianity, and even more particularly Orthodoxy, to renew and enrich the ritual part of their liturgical acts, so that this might also become an allurements for the faithful to participate in organised religious life, which in turn has many and varied political and economic consequences. We therefore encounter frequent changes in liturgical acts, in ritual dress codes and acts, even in the religious music used during these, which contribute to their complexity, yet simultaneously also constitute a basis for the development of religious life among the common people.

In the Church of Greece, in particular, as of the 1990s one observes a tendency to liturgical renewal that is combined with ever-increasing ritual splendour, which in any case, due to its ancient Eastern roots, is a given in Orthodoxy. Of course, this tendency (expressed in the ornamentation of churches and vestments through to the order of services and the introduction of liturgical variations) often leads, of course, to artless excesses⁴. As a rule, though, it achieves its goals, bringing people close to the Church and to religious life.

The relevant research highlights the fact that similar cultural phenomena come about due to the combination of an era's needs and the work of important personalities, who often leave their mark on that era. In the case at hand, the conditions of desacralisation and secularisation⁵ prevailing in this field as of the 1970s led to this reaction, i.e. the effort regarding their reversal through the development of the ritual-spectacular side of liturgical life. As for the factor of personalities' influence, it was the blessed Archbishop of Athens Christodoulos I, who, through his personal example and the corresponding work of his close collaborators, was the first to lead to this ritual revival, which was also continued after his death.

These partially modernist and partially revived, but always splendid and spectacular, practices inaugurated in the context of this effort continue to shape the particular visage of Greek Orthodox Christian liturgical life up to the present, and to set the tone of its varied demonstrations. They concern ritual details, which are constantly expanded and completed, always with the aim of achieving ritual splendour, as Father John Terbovich⁶ aptly notes, in the context of all that has been ascertained previously. Details, however, that define and determine the impression retained by the faithful after participating in such liturgical moments and experiencing similar magnificent ceremonies.

Most assuredly, this question has many and different facets that are beyond the limits of the present study. Facets both material and intangible, artistic and practical, liturgical and of daily life. Here, we shall focus on one of the issues posed by this effort, which relates to the

² Cf. Yoder 1965, 36-52.

³ On this subject, see Varvounis 1993, 75-89, which includes examples and bibliography.

⁴ On this subject, see Varvounis 2012, 247-266.

⁵ Cf. Varvounis 2008a, 4; Varvounis 2010, 529-537, which includes the relevant bibliography and indicative examples.

⁶ Terbovich 1963, 79-88.

organisation and carrying out of concelebrations featuring a number of celebrant prelates, as well as of patriarchal visits to Metropolises of the Church of Greece, from the 1990s through to the present, realities that exist and are in constant use, while also in part still in the making.

The concelebrations with a particularly large number of priests, as a rule in the case of religious festivals, were a known but not particularly developed practice in the spiritual and ecclesiastical area of the Greek homelands of the East. The corresponding archierarchical concelebrations were less well-known, given that, as a rule and up to the mid-20th century approximately, prelates systematically avoided them, with the sole exception of the cases where the typikon (the liturgical book of instructions on the prescribed form of services) called for a synodical and patriarchal divine liturgy, for certain feasts and only in the ancient Patriarchates of the Orthodox East⁷, i.e. Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch.

It is absolutely typical that, at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the synodical concelebrations are strictly specified, e.g. during the Patriarchate's thronal feast (30th November, in memory of its founder according to tradition, the apostle Andrew)⁸, or in the cases of official - called "eirenikes", i.e. peaceful - visits of the heads of other autocephalous Orthodox Churches who, as soon as they are elected, and once again according to tradition, start off their visits to other Churches from the Mother Church of Constantinople. The monasteries of Mount Athos, also, when celebrating a religious festival, avoid archierarchical concelebrations, as only one prelate is invited to preside over the ceremonies, with whom the abbots of the Athonic State's monasteries as a rule concelebrate.

Similar practices are defined in the typikon of the other ancient Patriarchates, that is to say the Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Thus, in the Church of Greece initially the cases of archierarchical concelebrations were specific, for instance on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, with its synodical divine liturgy (attended in the past by the King, and now by the President of the Hellenic Republic), but also during the meal following it offered by the Archbishop of Greece to the members of the Standing Holy Synod, which give the whole event the character of a state ritual. Also, a synodical divine liturgy is held on the feast of Photios the Great (6th February), protector of the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece⁹. Lastly, at the Patriarchate of Alexandria a synodical divine liturgy is held at the end of the annual synod of the throne's hierarchy, but also during its thronal feast (25th April, or by transposition on the Wednesday after Easter should this fall during the Lenten period, in memory of the apostle Mark, according to tradition first bishop of Alexandria).

Thus, the practice of holding archierarchical concelebrations, gradually applied and now close to being an established event, brought to light a series of formal and ritual problems relating to the order of appearance, precedence, elevation to the rank of prelate, commemoration of each prelate's presiding ecclesiastical authority, etc., which in fact frequently gave rise to intense and long-standing disputes and disagreements that also upset ecclesiastical life as a whole.

An archierarchical concelebration is held in the case of important religious feasts, for the ordination of new prelates - where the order of the Church dictates that a concelebration with at

⁷ On this rite and its basic principles, see Kamalakis 2011, 307-308.

⁸ Cf. Varvounis 2007a; Varvounis 2008b.

⁹ Abundant information about this celebration can be found in the references each year of the periodical *Εκκλησία* (*Ekklesia*), which includes the speeches delivered by the prelates and invited academics during the corresponding official celebrations.

least three bishops be held - and on the name-day feasts of Bishops and Metropolitans, always following an invitation from the area's Metropolitan or, in the case of name days, after the unprompted attendance of those bishops wishing to honour the prelate whose name day it is. In the case at hand, what interests us here is the ritual order as perceived by the common people, who always watch and participate in these ceremonies with pleasure and joy, certainly because of their faith and spiritual connection to the Orthodox Church, but also due to the majestic spectacle these offer.

According to the order that is followed, on the eve of the feast the prelates are received at the entrance of the celebrating or metropolitan church, and then a service of vespers follows, usually presided over by the youngest in terms of elevation to the prelacy - i.e. with regard to the date of his ordination - and the others as onlookers from special seats placed opposite the episcopal throne. On the following day, an archieratical concelebration of the divine liturgy is held, presided over by the eldest in terms of elevation to the prelacy, while the area Metropolitan, independently of when he was elevated to the prelacy, holds the position of the last of the concelebrants. The same order is also observed, indeed rigorously, in the way in which the prelates are seated in two opposite rows within the church at the beginning of the service, with the prelate presiding over the service at the head, as can be observed by the faithful following the service or by whoever wants to be informed of it through the related mentions in ecclesiastical news agencies, which also always include plentiful photographic material¹⁰.

The presiding prelate, or another specially solicited to this end by the area Metropolitan, is also responsible for the sermon, both during Vespers on the eve of the feast and on the feast day itself. The oratory of these sermons, which is also sometimes available on the Internet, is also very interesting: beyond the specific celebratory circumstance and the life and deeds or life example of the saint whose feast it is, most frequently the preacher refers to the host Metropolitan, or to the abbot of the celebrating monastery, to his work, his personality and in general to the local Church, with terms that are always laudatory, and most frequently with expressive and verbal stereotypes specific to this particular kind of ecclesiastical rhetoric¹¹.

In the case of religious festivals, the archieratical concelebration is followed by a litany, also with numerous prelates¹², and a festive official meal with an exchange of gifts, from the invited prelates, but also - and essentially - from the hosting prelate to his guests and their retinue¹³. And this because each prelate is accompanied by his deacon, or by some other of his priests, during the whole of this ritual journey. Indeed, it should be stressed here that the archieratical festival concelebrations constitute opportunities for social contacts and relations, but also for discussions, consultations and contacts regarding serious issues occupying the Church, and naturally in relation to upcoming episcopal elections should a metropolitan see have fallen vacant and now be due to be occupied. For the bishops' escorts, too, they are an opportunity to cement relations and alliances, which is the reason why celibate clergymen are usually chosen

¹⁰ Concerning the influence of digital sources of information on the shaping of ritual life *cf.* Taylor 2003, 383-401; See also Sudhakar 2001, 293-313, which includes useful observations.

¹¹ These are modernist forms that were incorporated smoothly into the corpus of Greek ecclesiastical worship tradition. On these procedures, *cf.* Stewart 1994, 127-144.

¹² *Cf.* Varvounis 2011b, 67-75.

¹³ On corresponding examples of foreign peoples, which often serve as models also for the festival forms studied here, *cf.* Piper 1933, 169-172; White 1998; See also Abel 2006, 161-178; Roos - Quandt - DeWalt 1993, 295-298.

as escorts, as in future they will be candidates for the prelacy and as such will need the others' vote in order to ensure their election.

This is, then, a ritual innovation, a liturgical novelty, which combines the ritual splendour with the exercise of ecclesiastical politics, given that, if one observes the occurrence of these concelebrations throughout Greece, it is easy to discern the prelates steadfastly appearing as participants, and who are always candidates for the Archbishop's throne, or would like to be moved to a see more of their liking. A quite modernist form, which renews local liturgical life and brightens the saints' religious festivals.

For the common people, though, this is yet another opportunity and expression of ritual splendour, which is always welcome, based on all that is mentioned above regarding the common people's love of spectacular rituals, and which, of course, is valid not only for ecclesiastical but also for popular ceremonies¹⁴. An opportunity to experience ritual magnificence, which convinces the people of the supernatural ascendance of the divine – on which it symbolically reflects – and simultaneously constitutes a pole of attraction for drawing people to the corresponding ecclesiastical worship assemblies, as Darren Sherkat¹⁵ aptly observes,.

The forms studied above, about the archieratical concelebrations, basically don't belong to folk worship. However, they touch upon, and up to a certain degree co-shape, folk religiosity, given that they constitute popular spectacles for the people that invigorate their spiritual quest and ecclesiastical spirit, thus constituting a pole of attraction for their more frequent presence in churches. It is, besides, in this sense that they are examined here, as contemporary ritual forms whose exercise is directly related to religious folklore.

In our ever-changing times, the interactions of the various ecclesiastical and social facts and events are daily and frequent¹⁶. The search for new factors that influence the shaping of modernist folk religiosity constitutes a means of recording the new developments in this important sector of human life, with a past that dates back to the roots of human collective life and presence¹⁷, and with a future that stretches out to the farthest existence of organised human societies in the immense depths of the future of humanity itself.

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¹⁴ Cf. Stambolis 2001, 240-273.

¹⁵ On this point, cf. Sherkat 2001, 1459-1493. See also Sherkat - Wilson 1995, 993-1026, with bibliography.

¹⁶ Cf. Plongerón – Pannet 1976, 128 *et seq.*

¹⁷ On similar developments in other people's folk religiosity, see Panchenko 2004, 111-128.

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