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DRAFT PAPER

Religion and Immigration in Cyprus: A Comparative Study

Abstract

Cyprus is well known for its border, being a divided island - state after the Turkish invasion in 1974, which followed the wide-spread intercommunal violence that plagued the island since the early 60s. Cyprus itself is an EU border since it is the South-easternmost EU member-state, EU's border with the Arab countries of the Middle East. In the past few years, Cyprus became a host country for thousands of immigrants, mostly from South-East Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Also a remarkable number of immigrants from the Russian Federation reside these days in Cyprus. Cyprus' and Europe's religious landscape has changed, in part, because of immigration, but the religious practices of immigrant religious groups have not been thoroughly studied yet. The main research questions I will address in this paper are: Is religion a barrier or bridge for immigrant integration? Does religion obstruct or promote social integration? How is religion related with social identity, cultural identity, and public opinion?

I will attempt to answer these questions by focusing on immigrants' religion and its role in integration, religious assimilation and adaptation. The paper is based on data gathered in the course of a mixed methods research project, co-funded by the Solidarity Funds and the Ministry of Interior. Particularly, we focused comparatively on Syrian, Russian, Philippino and Sri-Lankan nationals residing in Cyprus. This choice was dictated by the religion of the majority of the population in the Republic of Cyprus, which are Orthodox Christians and also by the significance of religion as a vital part of the Greek-Cypriot national identity. Therefore we chose an Orthodox immigrant community, a Catholic one, which is a common denomination in many European countries, a Buddhist one, since Buddhism is a religion that did not historically exist in Cyprus and Europe in general and a Muslim one, which represents, in a way, Greek Cypriots' 'constitutive Others', Turkish Cypriots. Moreover, Philippinos and Sri-Lankans generally stay in Cyprus for a shorter period of time than Syrians and Russians.

In terms of methodology, qualitative interviews, observation and quantitative research were conducted in order to shed light in as many aspects of the role of religion in immigrant integration as possible.

Introduction

In the recent years many debates took place in European countries in which religious pluralism was being praised, criticized or even condemned. These days, in the eve of the European Parliament Elections there are many disputes in various European countries that accentuate the issue of immigration in Europe. In France, UK, Italy and other countries, parties that promote anti-immigration policies are on the rise, while immigrants mainly from islamic countries are considered to be the most 'unwanted' in these countries, or the least integrated in their receiving societies. At this point, the concept of integration calls for further explanation:

According to Stolz (2011: 85), it seems clear that various religious communities “may be more or less well ‘integrated’ into society”. Some religious groups appear hostile, others appear exotic and peaceful, while others become almost invisible, because of their strong identification with the society they live in. On the other hand, when a religious group is not integrated at all, there are concerns about violation of norms, inter-group conflicts or disrespect of fundamental rights for its members. In addition disregard of fundamental rights of the group itself by the wider society can occur. According to the National Partnership for the New Americans, “immigrant Integration is a dynamic, two-way process in which immigrants and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities. As an intentional effort, integration engages and transforms all community members, reaping shared benefits and creating a new whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (http://www.partnershipfornewamericans.org/storage/NPNA_Immigrant_Integration_Principles.pdf). However, it is argued that there is no scientifically justified way to say if a religious group is well integrated or not but we can instead measure certain dimensions of integration that are important and then explain the differences between religious groups (Stolz 2011: 87).

In this paper, I will present some preliminary results from a research project that is still in progress, co-funded by the Solidarity Funds and the Ministry of Interior. We focus comparatively on immigrants from Syria, Russia, the Philippines and Sri-Lanka. The choice of these particular migrant communities was dictated by the religion of the majority of the population in the Republic of Cyprus, which are Orthodox Christians and also by the significance of religion as a vital part of the Greek-Cypriot national identity. Therefore we chose an Orthodox immigrant community (Russians), a Catholic one (Philippinos), which is a common denomination in many European countries, a Buddhist one (Sri Lankans), since Buddhism is a religion that did not historically exist in Cyprus and Europe in general and a Muslim one (Syrians), which represents, in a way, Greek Cypriots’ ‘constitutive Others’, Turkish Cypriots. More specifically, in the Philippines the dominant religious group are Roman Catholics, with a percentage of over 85% (Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, 2001: 1779). In Sri Lanka Buddhism is dominant (69%) (ibid: 2096). In Syria, Islamic religions are the most common (74%) (ibid: 2156) while in Russia the dominant religious group are Orthodox Christians (ibid: 1866).

In recent years, a boost in immigration to Cyprus has taken place. In 2001 immigrants living in Cyprus, were 64.810 or a 9.4% of the total population (2001 Census, Volume IV, p 13).

In the same census, Russian nationals were 4.952, those from the Philippines 3245 , Sri Lankans 4939, while Syrians were 1436 (ibid.). According to the 2011 census , the total number of immigrants in Cyprus is 107.383, of which Russians amounted to 8.164 , Philipinos to 9.413 , nationals of Sri Lanka to 7.269, and Syrians to 3.054 (Source: <http://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf>, retrieved on 04.11.2013). It is obvious that a rapid increase in the total number of immigrants in Cyprus, and a remarkable increase in the population of the four groups that we focus on have taken place.

According to one of the most classic and broad definitions, culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871, see Cuche 2001: 33). Religion is indisputably an essential component of cultures and identities. Although it is extremely difficult to define religion, Geertz proposes a conception of religion as a “cultural system” (Geertz 1973: 87-125). Indeed, religions usually are sets of beliefs, cultural systems, and worldviews. As such, they become extremely important in understanding a culture in depth. Religion is also a part of collective identities. Moreover, it seems to be an important factor in conflicts and a vital part of many identities in an ethnic or even a national level. In addition to the above points , according to many scholars (see Connor 2008:243-257, Connor 2010, Cadge & Ecklund 2007:359 -379) religion is often a factor that either facilitates or hinders the assimilation of immigrants into receiving societies.

In the last decades there has been a steady increase in immigration to Western countries. Several aspects of this phenomenon have been thoroughly studied by social scientists. Immigrants’ religion though, was, until recently, a neglected aspect of immigration. Lately an ongoing debate has emerged, focusing on the role of immigrants’ religion in the integration process (see Foner and Alba 2008). Theories that deal with this issue could be categorized as follows, and the debate between the proponents of each approach could be called ‘the bridge or barrier debate’ (see Connor & Koenig 2013: 3-5):

- Theories that see immigrants’ religion as a bridge to integration, assimilation and upward mobility of immigrants.
- Theories that stress on the boundaries constituted by religious difference.

Interestingly enough, the ‘bridge approach’ flourishes in the US, while the ‘barrier approach’ is mostly adopted by European scholars. In addition, European scholars deal mainly with immigrants from Islamic countries (Zolberg and Woon, 1999; Casanova, 2007).

Methodological Remarks

The main research questions of the project were:

- Is religion a barrier or a bridge for immigrant integration in Cyprus?
- Does religion obstruct or promote social integration?
- How is religion related with social identity, cultural identity, and public opinion?

In order to answer those questions, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, commonly called “triangulation” (see Rothbauer, Paulette 2008:892-894). Triangulation aims at a deep examination and understanding of social phenomena. The different techniques that are being used result in conclusions about different aspects of the social phenomenon under study. Quantitative research techniques are ideal for highlighting attitudes, perceptions and trends. On the other hand, the use of qualitative sociological research contributes to a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon under study with its main advantage being the close examination of the ‘emic’ perspective, the ‘insider’s point of view’. However, qualitative research results cannot be generalized as much as quantitative ones, because of sample limitations. The quantitative part of the research involves a sample of 1000 people (250 for each religious group), while the qualitative part involves observation of religious activities and semi-structured interviews with 40 individuals (ten for each religious group). Geographically, the research covers all major cities in Cyprus (Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Famagusta, Paphos).

Regarding the sampling techniques, a combination of random sampling and snowballing was used. The sample was representative in terms of gender, in analogy with the total population of each group in Cyprus. There is a strong gendered dimension in immigration to Cyprus, since according to the census of 2011 (<http://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf>, 4/11/2013), of a total of 9.413 Filipino nationals in Cyprus, only 397 or 4.21% are men, while of the 7.269 Sri Lankans, 6.119 or 84.17% are women. Male immigrants from Syria are significantly more than Syrian women, which are 699 or 22.8% from a total population of 3.054. Finally, of the 8.164

Russian immigrants in Cyprus, 5.211 are women (63.82%) and 2.953 are men (36.17%). Thus, of the 250 questionnaires distributed to Filipinos, about 10 were distributed to men, and so on.

Access to the research population was relatively difficult. The fact that most of the immigrants residing in Cyprus have no registered line phone or mobile connection, dictated that the interviews had to be conducted in person. Another question imposed by this fact concerned the place where the interviews were to be conducted; most Sri-Lankans and Philipinos work as domestic workers or housemaids and in most cases they stay in their employers' homes, so even interviewing them at home was out of the question, in order to avoid gathering biased data. During the qualitative part of the research, we discovered places that members of each group usually meet and we visited those places to recruit participants. Needless to say that the interviews were conducted in places the participants suggested.

Another important choice we had to make was whether we would use translated questionnaires or not. We decided to translate the questionnaires, because most of the immigrants, mainly Sri-Lankans could speak or read neither English nor Greek. Thus, we had the questionnaire translated in four languages: Arabic, Russian, Tagalog and Sinhala.

The qualitative part of the research included both observing religious rituals and practices, and semi-structured interviews with 40 participants. The main goal of observation was to discover the reasons for attending religious activities and if there were any politics of religious identity, namely negotiations of identity or even transformations of identity. In addition, the qualitative part took place prior to the quantitative and it contributed greatly in planning the latter on the one hand, and gave us valuable insights on the cultures we were to study on the other.

Measuring Religion and Integration

The main variables of the quantitative part of the research were nationality, religion, religiosity and the degree of integration in the Cypriot society. At this point I need to clarify how the concepts of religiosity and integration are measured. According to Billiet (2002:339-383), religion often becomes measurable through certain dimensions: the ideological dimension, the ritual dimension, the degree of knowledge of the religion's doctrine and its history and the community dimension, usually associated with the concept of social capital. Religiosity therefore, can be measured on the basis of participation in religious activities (ritual dimension) and by a direct

question about the respondents' subjective religiosity. We used or adapted questions from the ESS and ISSP databases to measure these dimensions in our questionnaire. The questions that measure the ritual dimension are:

- *Before you came to Cyprus, apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often did you participate in religious activities?*
- *Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often would you wish to participate in religious activities?*
- *Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you participate in religious activities?*

And the set of possible responses is

1. Never
2. Once or twice a year
3. Only on special holy days
4. At least once a month
5. Once a week
6. More than once a week
7. Every day

The ideological dimension is measured by this set of questions:

1. *Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are on a scale from zero to ten, with zero meaning not religious at all and ten very religious?*
2. *Do you believe in any kind of life after death?*
3. *Do you think of yourself as having a religion or faith?*

The third dimension could not be included in our research because we focus on four different religious groups, and it would require different sets of questions for each group, making the sample incomparable. The community dimension is measured by these questions:

4. *How many of your friends are members of the same nationality as yours?*
5. *How many of your friends are members of the same religious group as yours?*
6. *Are you a member of, or taken part in the activities of, any groups or organizations during your stay in Cyprus?*
7. *If yes, what kind of group or organization (You can choose more than one answers)?*

On the other hand, the degree of social integration of immigrants in a host society usually becomes measurable through four main indicators (see Waters, Mary C., Jiménez, Tomás R.,

2005: 105-125). These are socio-economic status, which is defined by the level of education, occupation and income, spatial concentration, which is defined by geography, and it examines if a particular group of immigrants tend to reside in common areas, language attainment, the ability to speak the language of the host country and the degree of fluency in speaking and/or writing and intermarriages, i.e. marriages between immigrants and locals. Stolz (2011:92-93), proposes “five different dimensions that are then measured with several indicators”. He defines these dimensions as follows:

- Cultural dimension: The cultural integration dimension involves cultural competences, basic values, norms, beliefs and practices.
- Structural dimension: education, professional status, income or quality of places of residence
- Legal dimension: individual and collective rights
- interactional dimension: “the frequency and type of interactions with the societal surrounding as the majority of other groups, and/or if they take part in public life as collective actors in a similar way” (Stolz 2011: 92)
- Identity dimension of integration: the extent to which the members of the religious group and respectively the community as a collective actor identify with the society, the state and the constitution.

In the questionnaire used, the cultural dimension was examined by the use of the following set of questions: “*Is your spouse of Cypriot origin?*”, “*What languages do you usually speak with your spouse at home?*”, “*What’s your spouse’s religion?*”, “*If currently single, how important is it for you to marry someone with the same religious views as yours, with zero meaning not important at all and ten very important?*”, “*How fluent are your children in Greek?*” etc. The structural dimension was measured by questions concerning income, level of education, occupation, area of residence etc., the legal dimension by questions dealing with discrimination, associations etc., the interaction dimension by questions about the respondent’s social life and friends, and finally, the identity dimension by questions about respondents’ trust in Cyprus’ public institutions, about future aspirations etc.

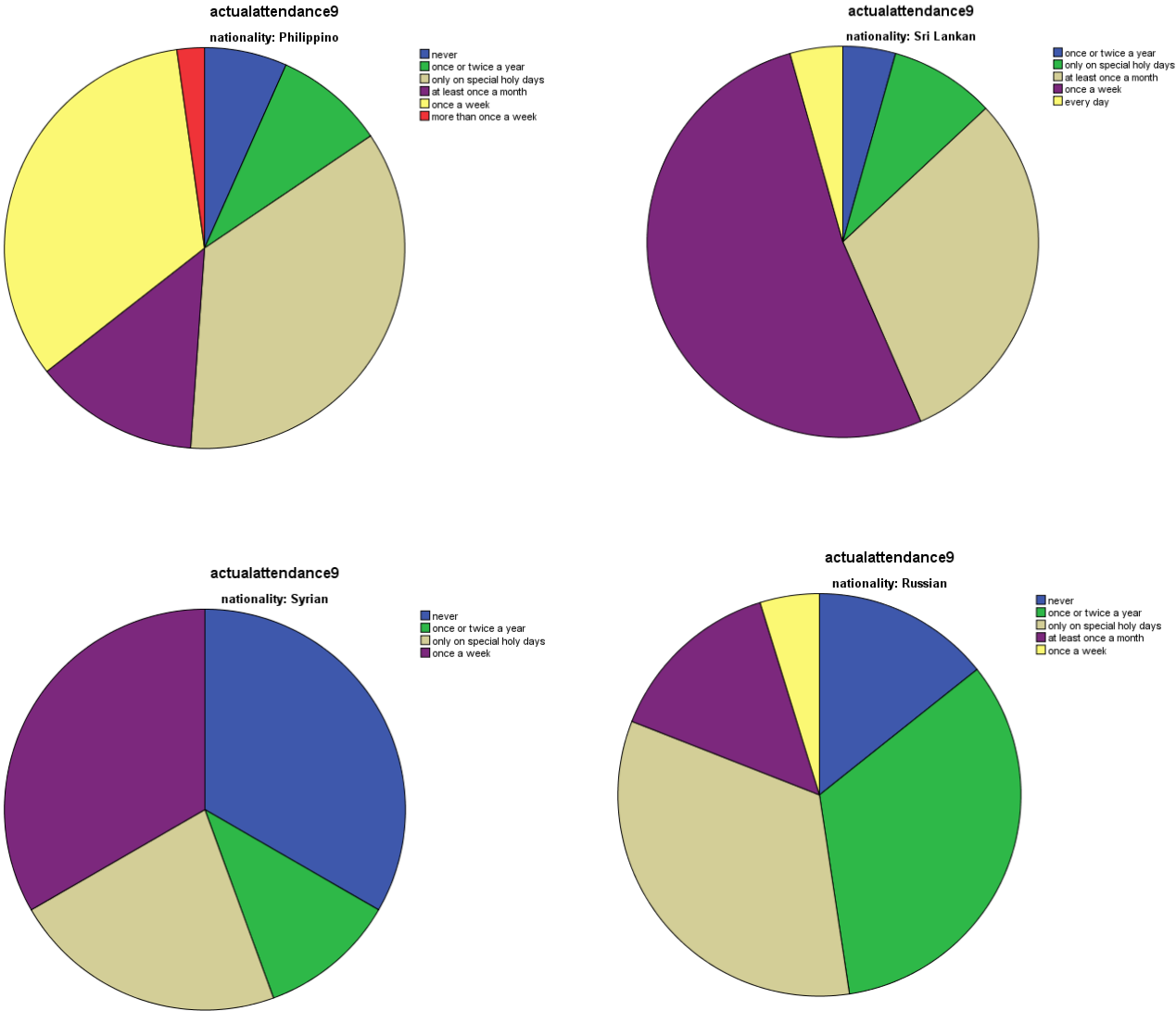
Research Results

As I already mentioned, I will examine certain indicators in order to eventually answer my research questions. First of all, an assessment should be made concerning the sample's religiosity or the ideological dimension of religion. Although the sample currently available in our database is still small (N=200, the research is in progress), we can conclude that generally that Philipinos and Sri-Lankans consider themselves to be more religious than the members of the other two groups, since on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning not religious at all and ten very religious, the 74% of Philipino participants and the 91% of Sri-Lankans answered that they consider themselves to be religious (answers ranging from 6 to 10), while the respective percentages for Syrians and Russians are 55% and 57%. In the question "*Do you consider yourself as having a religion or faith?*" 93,5% of the Philipino participants consider themselves as having a religion or faith. In the same question 98% of Sri-Lankan, 88,9% of Syrian and 90,5% of Russianparticipants gave a positive answer. According to the insecurity theory, (Norris &Inglehart 2004, Van Tubergen&Sindradottir 2011:274-275), insecurities caused by standards of living, emotional reasons or physical and societal vulnerability"shape and drive the demand for religion"(Van Tubergen&Sindradottir 2011:274). Van Tubergen andSindradottir hypothesize that "in those receiving countries where greater income inequalities exist, immigrants face more financial insecurity, which could in turn provoke increased feelings of religiosity" (ibid). As my results demonstrate, in terms of income, Philipinos and Sri-Lankans are insecure. There is a remarkable difference in the occupation types and income between Philipinos and Sri-Lankans on the one hand, and Syrians and Russians on the other. More specifically, the average income per month for Philipinos is422€, for Sri-Lankans 335€, while for Syrians and Russians 820€, and 846€ respectively.

The results that emerged from the examination of the ritual dimension of religion are far more interesting. Sri-Lankans and Philipinos seem to attend religious services more often than Syrians and Russians¹(see tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4). The interesting part of the ritual dimension has to do with the reasons for participating in religious services.During the qualitative part of the research, we observed that Philipinos and Sri-Lankans attend religious activities not only for

¹ The results analyzed here are based on answers to the question: "*Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you participate in religious activities?*"

religious reasons, and therefore we decided to add a variable in our questionnaire that would measure the reasons for attending religious services. The question was: “What are the main reasons you participate in religious activities? (you can choose more than one answers)”, and the possible answers were: Strictly for religious reasons (1), To meet with friends (2), To meet the ‘right kind of people’ (3), To meet with compatriots (4), To maintain a connection with my culture of origin (5), Other (Please Specify) (6).



Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4: Current attendance of religious services

In this question, only the 22,4% of the Philipinos answered “Strictly for religious reasons”. During the qualitative part of the research, we observed that Philipino community gatherings take place each week in Catholic churches in the major cities of Cyprus. These gatherings, apart from providing religious services, seem to play a crucial role in the reproduction and the cohesion of the community. Religion is considered by social scientists to be very important “to the development and maintenance of human societies” (Mellor & Shilling 1997: 2). Moreover, due to conditions of employment, Sri-Lankan and Philipino domestic workers and housemaids are able to meet with other members of their respective communities only on Sundays, when their religious gatherings also take place. In addition, during the qualitative research, most of the interviewees stated that religion and specifically places of worship were the only places they could socialize when they first came to Cyprus. F., a Syrian immigrant, said:

“Where else could I go besides the local mosque? I didn’t know anyone here in this country, and I knew I’d meet some people at the mosque”.

The community dimension of religion is thus partly examined as well, since attendance is interrelated to a great extent to community reproduction. Very few of the participants are members of religious associations. As far as the interactional dimension of integration and the community dimension of religion are concerned, most participants regardless of nationality answered that most or all of their friends are members of the same nationality (See table 2) and religious group as theirs.

In assessing integration in the society of Cyprus, I already stated the aspects that were measured: the structural dimension (socio-economic status, education etc.), language attainment, trust in public institutions, discrimination etc. In terms of income, as I examined above there is a remarkable difference between Philipinos and Sri-Lankans, and Syrians and Russians. The average income per month for Philipinos is 422€, for Sri-Lankans 335€, while for Syrians and Russians 820€, and 846€ respectively. As far as occupation is concerned, most Philipinos and Sri-Lankans work as housemaids or domestic workers, while Russians and Syrians have more diverse types of occupation (see table 3).

nationality		Valid Percent
Philippino	all of them	13,3
	most of them	53,3
	Afew of them	11,1
	none ofthem	15,6
Sri Lankan	all of them	8,3
	most of them	66,7
	Afew of them	12,5
	none of them	12,5
Syrian	most of them	55,6
	Afew of them	33,3
Russian	all of them	28,6
	most of them	61,9
	Afew of them	4,8
	none of them	4,8

Table 2: “How many of your friends are members of the same nationality as yours?”

Nationality			Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Philippino	Valid	housekeeper	50,0	50,0
		worker	13,3	63,3
		clerc	26,7	90,0
		self employed	10,0	100,0
		Total	100,0	
Sri Lankan	Valid	housekeeper	95,0	95,0
		worker	5,0	100,0
		Total	100,0	
Syrian	Valid	worker	60,0	60,0
		self employed	40,0	100,0
		Total	100,0	
Russian	Valid	worker	45,5	45,5
		clerc	36,4	81,8
		executive	18,2	100,0
		Total	100,0	

Table 3: What is your occupation?

Most of the respondents are not fluent in Greek: on a scale from 0 to ten with zero meaning “I don’t speak Greek at all” and 10 “I am fluent in spoken and written Greek” the average fluency for Philipinos was 2,8/10, for Sri-Lankans 3,3/10, for Syrians 3,9/10 and 6,2/10 for Russians. 68% of the respondents have experienced discrimination. Religious discrimination though seems to be more common for Syrians than other nationalities. During the qualitative part of the research, we came across an important issue concerning immigrants from Syria. There are certain stereotypes for Arab speaking people that seem to be reproduced by many Greek Cypriots. First of all, the most common word, used to refer to immigrants from Arab countries is ‘Arapies’, which literally means Arabs but in the way it’s used in everyday discourse has a derogative meaning.

Many Greek Cypriots seem to stress not only on ethnic but on religious boundaries as well to construct their ‘constitutive Other’ Turkish-Cypriots. According to A., a 56 year-old artist, for many Greek Cypriots Muslims and Turks were somehow similar, at least in the past:

“It was hard back in 1987 when I first came here because the Church had a very strong influence. When I got married with my wife who is a GC, the church wanted me to be baptized, to change my name etc. There was a lot of discrimination back then, people considered that being a Syrian or a Turk is basically the same thing. They even used to call me ‘Turk’ at the time”

This argument is further substantiated by more informants’ accounts. According to M., a 40 year-old, merchant:

“They [ELAM²] come to attack our mosque every year in July [the anniversary of the Turkish invasion]. They think we are Turks. Once they even tried to throw a molotov cocktail at the mosque, and we were shouting ‘we are not Turks’.”

Under these circumstances, many cases where religious identity is negotiated and instrumentalized in various ways by Syrian immigrants were recorded. S., a 19 year-old Syrian immigrant says:

² Greek Liberating Front, an ultra-nationalist organization.

“I know it’s a sin but I drink alcohol. I will stop someday, but I like it [...] If I didn’t, people would ask: ‘why don’t you drink? [...] Some of my friends don’t know I’m a Muslim, it’s not that I keep it secret, it just didn’t come up”.

To conclude, many of our Syrian informants believe that there is a religious boundary between them and Greek Cypriots. This is not the case for Philipinos and Sri-Lankans though, the majority of which believe that they are being discriminated because of their ethnicity and race.

Conclusions

Even though the project is in progress and we are not able to produce concrete conclusions yet, there are certain points that are interesting. First, to answer partly our main research questions, we could say that the question: “Is immigrant religion a bridge or a barrier in immigrant integration?” cannot be answered in the same way for all religious groups in any receiving society. Even in Cyprus, a very small country, there are huge differences between each religious group that we focus on. Nevertheless, we observed that for certain religious groups, under certain circumstances, religion can be a bridge, while for others a barrier. For example, religion and religious institutions support and generate social capital to newcomers to Cyprus, as I mentioned earlier. Many of our informants socialize in places of worship. Moreover, some of the Philippino participants are members of a religious association that supports other members of their community that are in need. In addition, there is a Buddhist religious festival that takes place each year in Nicosia, in which members of the community come together to celebrate and socialize. The festival also supports the feeling of common identity. The Russian church in Cyprus organizes Russian language classes for 2nd generation Russian immigrants and cultural events. It is very interesting that the two most common answers in the question about the reasons for attending religious services are “to maintain a connection with my culture of origin” and “to meet with friends”. Thus, participating in religious activities can also be seen as a form of networking and as a way to achieve community cohesion and reproduction. This was a common observation for all 4 religious groups.

On the other hand, religion seems to obstruct –to an extent- social integration in some cases. For Syrians for example, religion is often viewed as a disadvantage, resulting sometimes in

religious identity negotiation or marginalization. The interview extracts presented earlier are indicative. And the reasons for this have to do with Cypriots' national identity, which is not only based on ethnicity but also on the bipolar construct Muslim-Christian.

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