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RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN CYPRUS UNDER THE OTTOMAN RULE

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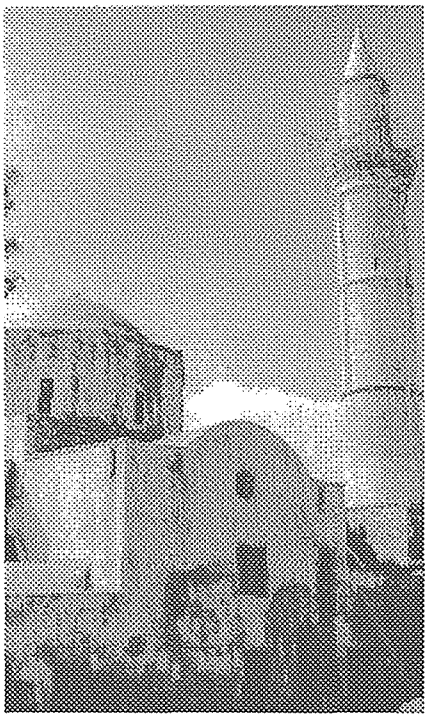

Ilust.1 **An old Byzantine church known as Ayia Sophia, in Paphos, turned into a mosque.**

The relationship among the various communities in Cyprus established on arrival by the Ottomans, were concurrent with the rest of the Empire. In February 1570 the Sultan, in a *firman*[1] directed to the *sanjak* bey regarding the situation on the island, ordered him "to do his utmost to win the hearts of the masses" . Inspired by this policy of *istimâlet* , he demanded that the population should in no way be molested and further that the people should be informed of this solemn promise.[2]

[1] NB. Published by Safvet in *Tarih-i Osmani Encümeni Mecmuasi,* IV, 1181-82.

[2] İnalcık, Halil *The Ottoman Empire:Conquest, Organization and Economy.*Chap.VII Ottoman policy and administration in Cyprus after the conquest.5.

We must consider the advent of the Ottomans in Cyprus in the pre-industrial context of a society composed of two major ethnic groups (Greeks and Turks) following two monotheistic faiths (Christianity and Islam). In these agro-literate societies two things are of particular interest: firstly the role played by religious institutions, and secondly the regulation of relations between groups through intermarriage and property transmission systems.[3]

In principle, four political and economic effects can be discerned from the Ottoman occupation of Cyprus: the transformation of the demographic composition by the introduction of a relatively small Turkish ruling group; the political emergence of the Greek Cypriot Orthodox Church as an essential part of the Imperial *millet* administration; the growth of large monastic estates and *chiftliks* (latifundia-type farms producing staple foods for European markets), and finally an ethnic division of labour between Greeks and Turks.

The Ottoman *millet* system administered subject peoples according to their religious beliefs rather than their ethnicity. Consequently, the two most populous religious groups were fixed in a relationship according to an immutable law which specified their respective rights, duties and privileges.

Soon after the Ottoman conquest the Orthodox Church was restored its properties which it had lost to the Latin Church during the Lusignan and Venetian periods. The former prebendal system of *zeâmet* was abandoned and tax-farming was established. The Dragoman or Greek interpreter in the government palace assumed the task of tax evaluation, and was usually chosen by the Bishops. These formed a scribal group whose principal ability was to maintain its monopoly of local knowledge, fundamental to composing the *tahrir,* that is the detailed register of all the taxable inhabitants. Thus, the Church assessed each village's tax levy which it then collected through its *grammatikoi* and monks.

Regarding the sphere of education, since all the schools in the island were church-foundations, their activities before the middle of the eighteenth century were insignificant and the cultural level in the island sank to its nadir[4]. The aristocratic élite with a taste for learning had to resort to Italy.

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[3] Sant Cassia, P. Religion, politics and ethnicity in Cyprus during the Turkocratia (1571-1878), *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, v.XXVII, 1986. *3-28.*

[4] Hill, Sir George, *A History of Cyprus*. Vol.IV. Cambridge University Press, 1952. p.311.

The historical role of the Greek Orthodox Church can be viewed in two ways, firstly in its purely spiritual capacity in shaping the culture of a number of peoples of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, and secondly as an institution invested with civil jurisdiction. Under the Ottoman regime the Sultans granted privileges,[5] conceived in the spirit of consolidating their authority, within the framework of religious law. As the political organization of the Byzantine Empire had been destroyed, the Church provided an ideal substitute for the political and fiscal administration of the Christian populations of the Empire. The Church offered a ready-made administrative machinery with a perfectly structured hierarchy[6] by which means the most remote communities were within the reach of its moral and jurisdictional control.

They could now examine cases of their own people relating to pecuniary matters, succession, dowry, matrimonial conventions etc, according to the law, canons, and ancient customs of the sacred Oriental Church. On many occasions the decisions reached by the ecclesiastical courts constituted precedents, although the basic principles applied in the exercise of civil jurisdiction were those of Graeco-Roman law; for purely ecclesiastical affairs the traditional canon law was that of the Orthodox Church.

From a social view, the *parici* and *perpiriarii*, who were slaves of the chiefs and upper classes, never ceased to help the Turks in providing the information for the *tahrir*, for they hoped to find freedom under their yoke: "They made known to the commission of enquiry and to the Pasha the revenues, estates, villages, and even in detail the families in each village and their houses."[7]

The Ottomans were initially welcomed because of the former antagonism towards the Latin Church, and the Orthodox Church benefited from its political responsibilities. Indeed it was commonly believed in the Greek world that the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantium came about by Divine Providence as a punishment for the Christian Empire's manifold sins and so that the Ottoman Empire might act as a shield for the Orthodox Church against the taint of the Latin heresy[8].

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[5] NB. These privileges were defined in an encyclical of the Patriach Gregorios V, dated April 1798.

[6] Papadopoulos, Th. H. *Studies and documents relating to the History of the Greek Church and people under Turkish domination*. Brussels 1952 (2nd edition) 201-8.

[7] *Firman* published by A.Refik: "Official Documents relating to the Cyprus and Tunis Campaigns", *Edebiyat Fakültesi Mecmuasi*, V, 1-2 (1926), doc.32.

[8] Clogg, R. (ed.) "The Greek millet in the Ottoman empire", in Braude&Lewis (eds.) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, Vol. I. London/New York, 1982. 187-207.

The people of Cyprus, in order to free themselves from the feudal charges of the Frankish period, accepted readily the Ottoman law. All agricultural land in the villages passed under the state's ownership as *mîrî* (public) land, while before the conquest the land was owned partly by the state and partly by the Frank nobility. The new government allowed a peasant to possess the land he tilled and to leave it to his male offspring as a heritage without indemnity if he paid the *hakk-ı karâr,* securing for the peasant the perpetual usufruct of the land.

Three main means of social mobility were available to ordinary Greeks, apart from joining the Church hierarchy or consular attachment. There were religious conversion, intermarriage and assimilation through customs, dress and the language of the ruling class. Conversion offered the greatest advantages for the poor because of lower taxes and greater protection in the courts. We can distinguish two types of conversion: the first type was the complete apostasy which was usually consolidated by marriage with a member of the ruling dominant groups. The second type of conversion was crypto-Christianity, the public adoption of Islamic practices whilst following Christian rites. Such converts were known as *Linovamvakoi,* and will be described in detail later.

Intermarriage provided great social mobility for Christian members. Indeed, Islam permitted men to take non-Muslim wives so long as the male progeny remained Muslim, whilst non-Muslim men could not take Muslim wives. Women were "free to return to the Christian community and re-marry at the end of the contractual period". In terms of religion, when one examines Islamic and Christian law in matters of intermarriage, it would seem that Islam was more elastic in both theory and praxis[9].

In Orthodox marriages the bride's father had to pay not only a dowry, but also the *trachoma* or an outright gift to the groom. But in giving his daughter to a Turk he was freed from paying these ruinous sums and received , in addition , a bride-price from the Turkish groom. What seems fairly certain is that within Turkish Cypriot marriages, the portion the wife brought to her husband was minimal, while the husband paid the bride-price.

In this way, many Christians resorted to Muslim law courts to escape the more rigid stipulations of their own religious law in such matters as marriage,

[9] Vryonis, S. "Byzantine and Turkish societies and their sources of manpower", in V.J. Parry and M.E. Yapp (eds), *War Technology and Society in the Middle East.* Cambridge University Press . London 1975, p.142-3.

divorce and paternity. In the eighteenth century the Greek patriarchate had to take serious measures to prevent this practice. However, the infiltration of Islamic and customary law was apparent in such areas as marriage and dowry practices[10].

Regarding the mentioned *Linovamvakoi*, Dawkins[11] says: "In the period of Turkish domination these people, like other Crypto-Christians, were outwardly completely Muslim in religious observances and in dress; they also performed military service. (...) But they were never very numerous and even under the Turks were decreasing. At the time of the British occupation in 1878 they were estimated at 1200 only". The sect began at the Turkish conquest of Cyprus in 1571, and at least some of the *Linovamvakoi* were said to have been Christians of the Roman obedience rather than of the Orthodox Church.

So we can distinguish in some cases an "imperfect conversion", in the sense that people retained at least traces of their previous religion. Such people had a mixed religion, but there is no evidence that they did not believe equally in both the elements of which it was composed. A case in point, was the *Hanchoulis* community of Armenian Christians to the East of Trebizond, who went over to Islam but retained some of their Christian rites. In particular, they baptized their children with consecrated water, carefully preserved for this purpose. Following the thesis of Dawkins, "there was always an influence at work which tended to promote at least some degree of syncretism between the two religions. This was the work of the dervishes (...) and among them were the Bektashi dervishes..."

In Bektashism there was a system outwardly Muslim, but inwardly of so eclectic a nature as to make it possible for a primitive type of Christian in either Asia Minor or Albania to reconcile his old beliefs and practices with an external situation where outward acceptance of Islam may have seemed necessary. Christians from different origins and many of the descendants of the millions of Turks who at that time were Nestorian Christians may in this way have been absorbed into the Bektashi system.

There are several parallels between the seven sacraments in the Eastern Church and the practices of Bektashis: Baptism closely resembles the rite of *abdest* or ablution. Chrism with ointment, Holy Eucharist, penitence and excommunication practised in the Christian Church also find parallels in *baş*

[10] Inalcik, H. "Ottoman Archival Materials on Millets", p. 437 in Braude & Lewis, *op.cit.*
[11] Dawkins, R.M., "The Crypto-Christians of Turkey", *Byzantion* 8 (1933) pp.247-275.

Illust.2 **Two Bektashis of today (from Kingsley Birge, *op. cit.*).**

okutmak and *düşkünlük* in Bektashism. Haji Bektash himself was considered by many to be a reincarnation of St. Choralambos[12]; and support of at least some Christian connection might be found by showing parallels in Bektash's experience with Bible narrative[13].

It will be noted that dervishes are not only the natural successors to monks, but are undoubtedly in Turkey the element in Islam most conciliatory to Christianity. Furthermore the transfer of cults and holy places, especially rural sanctuaries was very often accomplished not by the representatives of the official religion, but by the dervish orders. This transfer seems generally to be effected by means of a rough identification of a Christian saint with his Muslim successor –favoured by the idea of the metempsychosis-, often a remote or ambiguous figure who tends in turn to be supplanted by an actual buried saint.

Near Nicosia, in Kırklar Tekke there seems to be an example of a Muslim encroachment. There is no dervish establishment on the spot. The sanctuary is frequented not only by Mohammedans but also by Christians, who recognize in the Muslim "*Kırklar*" their own "Forty Saints" in memory of the Sivas burial. Another ambiguous sanctuary is that of St. Arab at Larnaka, which in the present day is still frequented both by Turks and Greeks. The place is known as Turabi Tekke by the former and as St Therapon by the latter. Turabi is the name of a wandering dervish from Kastamonu in northern Anatolia, who lived in the reign of Mehmet II and was noted for his liberal views as to religions outside Islam. St. Therapon is a well-known saint and healer in Cyprus, where he has several churches. All these Christian holy places are frequented by Muslims primarily on account of the acknowledged power of the saints or relics as manifested by beneficent miracles. From one point of view Christian priests and

[12] "much revered all over Orthodox Christendom, especially as an averter of plague." Hasluck F.W.*Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*. Oxford 1929 . 84.
[13] Kingsley Birge, J. *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*. London 1965. 216.

Mohamedan *khojas* were medicine-men differentiated by their respective sects. Besides certain laymen practised magic, black or white, for all, indiscriminately.[14]

The procedure at a Muslim healing-shrine was familiar to Christians through "folk-lore" usages common to the whole population (even if not shared by their own religion), as were contact with relics, propitiatory sacrifice (*kurban*), and the offering of votive candles. Even ritual practices such as "walking over" ailing children by the Rifai dervishes are paralleled in the Orthodox Church.

The other non-Orthodox members, representatives of various Christian communities arrived on the island at the time of the first Latin settlement. During the Lusignan period, they enjoyed great liberty and tolerance, settling principally in urban areas. Hacket[15] cites the *Syrians* and the *Georgians*, who identified themselves with the Orthodox faith to the point of adopting their language and frequenting their churches. In ecclesiastical terms they were under the control of Orthodox prelates.

The great Monophysite heresy was represented by the Abyssinians and Nestorians, the Armenians, presided by a bishop of their own nationality and the Jacobites and Copts who inhabited a particular quarter of Nicosia. All these various denominations were under the immediate jurisdiction of the Latin Archbishop.

The *Maronites*, the most numerous religious community in Cyprus after the native Orthodox Christians, had come since ancient times through progressive migrations from Lebanon via the coast of Asia Minor until the time of Guy de Lusignan and settled in the mountainous region north of Nicosia.

In 1596 Pope Clement VIII sent Jerome Dandini to Cyprus as nuncio to the Maronites of the Lebanon. He found them occupying nineteen villages. Their church in Nicosia was very poor, however in some of the villages they had two or three churches with as many priests. The Franciscan observant, John Baptist of Todi, who first went to Cyprus in 1636 found that many Maronites had embraced Islam and that others had fallen back into their "ancient errors".

Influenced by the hostility of the Orthodox Church, Maronite Bishops and Archbishops of Cyprus became non-resident and moved to their Lebanese

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[14] Hasluck, op.cit.76-89.
[15] Hacket, J. *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus*, New York 1972 [1901].

homes leaving their flocks to their own devices. Some of their villages were administered by Latin priests from 1690 to 1759, when the Maronites lacked priests of the own rite. At this time, the number of Maronites had decreased to 4000, from the 7000 to 8000 souls existent in the Lusignan period, and the most optimistic research put their number at 1200-1300 in 1861.

According to Kyprianos (p. 395) the Maronites were brought under the Orthodox Bishops until 1840, when, thanks to the efforts of the French Consul in obtaining a *firman* from the Porte, they returned to the rule of the Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon. Their Bishop, dependent on the Archbishop of Lebanon, who inhabited the monastery of St. George in the Karpas district and observed the festivals according to the calendar of the Orthodox Church.

The change over from the Latin to the Orthodox obedience must have taken place about the middle of the eighteenth century, when the western interest in the island had almost disappeared and the Cypriot Orthodox Bishops had entered on the period of their greatest influence[16].

This complex reality was reassumed in the articles of the *Hatt-ı Hümâyûn,* which was made public in the form of a *firman* sent to every city and rural population. The Tanzimat reforms meant the beginning of advantageous measures for the inhabitants of all the Empire, reducing the great authority of the provincial governors and aiming at popular participation in the councils. Thirteen members formed the upper councils: six officials, the *muhassil* with his two clerks, the *kadı*, the mufti and the security chief. The rest was composed of local Muslim notables, and in the case of a non-Muslim population, the metropolitan and two of the village elders (*kocabaşı*s).

The democratisation of the social structures resulted in a fluidity in ethnic, religious and administrative concepts and institutions and sometimes in an oscillation between Christianity and Islam.

[16] Hill, op.cit. p.382.