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Some Observations on Greek Popular Worship and the Traditional Religiosity of the Greek People

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Abstract

Man's relationship to the beyond and the supernatural as well as the systematisation of humanity's corresponding pursuit of it in religions and the elaboration of organised rituals for expressing these convictions and worshipping the divine are realities lost in the beginnings of human presence on earth. Indeed, the specialisation of these perceptions and rituals and the concomitant appearance and shaping of the particular order of the priesthood led to a delineation between official and folk worship, the first being studied by the discipline of theology and the second by folklore studies, specifically the branch of "religious folklore". For these reasons, the relevant literature is constantly expanding and corresponding folklore studies are presently flourishing. This will continue as people never stop creating culturally and adopting new viewpoints and holding events where these forms correspond to relevant psychological needs. Because of this, "religious folklore" constitutes a constantly developing branch of folklore studies with great prospects for the future and space for many young academics to carry out research. Some aspects of the main forms of Greek popular religiosity will be examined in this paper.

Keywords

Religious folklore, popular religiosity, cult of saints, Greek folk culture

Folk religiosity constitutes a widespread reality, with an enduring power. During each period of time there also exists, close to the “official” one, a religion practised by the people in parallel to the former. The “official” and “folk” religions are cohabiting and parallel situations, which, however, frequently overlap and adjoin each other. The existing bibliography often points to this fact. For instance, in 1996, when examining the relation between legend and folk worshipping practice in Anglo-Irish literature, Wolfgang Davis¹ noted that this uninterrupted successiveness, which can even reach the limits of overlapping, is so frequent as to have acquired the dimensions of a commonplace event in its corresponding literary expressions. Similar observations are made by Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner,² who studied extensively the contact between these different traditions in the context of the same religion, on the basis of examples offered by the multifaceted German folk tradition.

On the other hand, when treating the question of the duration and historical boundaries of popular culture, the discipline of folklore studies has reached the conclusion that these are not linked to temporal but, rather, to cultural parameters. In other terms, according to the prevailing historical conjuncture, forms of popular customs, but also forms of popular culture more broadly speaking, these will exist for as long as organised human societies exist. Each epoch, with its own particular conditions and circumstances, brings changes and modifications to the content, forms and externalisations of each region’s popular culture. For this reason, folklore phenomena can be determined historically and interpreted socially, but continue to exist for as long as they serve the common person’s psychological needs.

What is ascertained about folklore phenomena more generally is also valid in particular for the forms of folk religiosity, i.e. for the customarily determined relation of mankind to the divine and the world of the supernatural, whatever the content that might be given to these entities by each people or person. The common person, whether a city dweller or a villager, has a direct need of his/her religious customs, through which to appropriate the holy and feel safe and protected by the divinities he/she believes in.

At this point, however, certain observations need to be formulated, so as to better comprehend what follows, according to both fieldwork and secondary literature, as it is noted at any case particularly. Firstly, our approach here is that of traditional religious behaviour and religious folklore and not of folk

1 Davis (1996: 121–122).

2 Kittsteiner (1995: 327).

worship, to which earlier academic folklore limited itself.³ In other words, we are interested in all of man's relations to religion, including their economic and social parameters, and not in the forms of customs that could be traced to the past, to pre-Christian legacies, within the framework of what could be termed a "folklore of continuity".⁴ In turn, this does not mean that we are distancing ourselves from the framework of folklore as a discipline, but that we are following the historico-social method as defined by Modern Greek folklore studies, respecting discipline's past and its tradition.

This is a method based at the work of M. G. Meraklis, who brought at Greek folklore Moser's and Bausinger's concept of folklorism with his books and papers,⁵ from the early '70s. And this is the theoretical base of this study.⁶ As a matter of fact, previous scholarship focuses on the pre-Christian customs and rituals, while Meraklis showed that a synchronic approach was necessary. So what follows is about the relation of rituals to the time and place, and of course refers mainly to modern customs, in what can be determined as 'popular culture' of the Greek people.

For its part, the area in which these forms develop and exist is, mainly, the city, even though the exportation of the urban way of life to rural regions means that similar forms may also be encountered in the Greek provinces. Thus, a new tradition is formed, of urban origin, with globalised forms, but which nonetheless are adapted to the national and local cultural facts and models of each region. Besides, this constitutes a reality that will greatly influence the content and the method of the folklore discipline over the years to come. Whatever the case, a new tradition is taking shape, which is a characteristic example of the times of transition and periods of cultural transformations that we are living in.⁷

A prevalent tendency in these forms of contemporary folk religiosity is the transposition of the customs of the place of origin, of the "personal homeland" or birthplace, to the new urban location of settlement and life. As we saw in a field work in the island of Samos, held at 1999, on the level of traditional religious behaviour, this essentially means that those originating from a specific place transport their habits and their customs to the city on a family, or a broader social, level. In the first case, these concern the habits of home worship, i.e. domestic customs that continue to be performed even in the hostile

3 Danforth (1984: 55).

4 Varvounis (1998: 161-163).

5 Meraklis (1973: 6-7).

6 Meraklis (2004: 4-5).

7 Varvounis (1994: 8-23); Dubisch (1990: 115-117).

environment of apartment blocks, or in the all-inclusive environment of large cities. In the second case, though, the customs' performance entails collective participation and social acceptance, ensured through the activities of ethno-local associations.⁸ In Samos, the transposition of the religious festivals of one's birthplace, the dedications of relevant icons-reproductions of the main miraculous icon of each place, and even holding special church services and *artoklasía* ('blessing of the loaves') by the members of these ethno-local associations, constitute the main manifestations of the contemporary forms of folk religiosity.

The Greek people has always honoured the saints, the *Panaghía* ('Virgin Mary') and the great feasts of the annual ecclesiastical celebration cycle with *panegyria*, religious festivals that combined the feast's spiritual aspect, devotional life and liturgical honour with facets of social life, such as entertainment, the strengthening of social ties, even financial transactions or economic agreements. The people believe that, by their grace, the saints bless all these traditional activities, which is why, despite initially being against any event that disrupted or disturbed the spirituality of each feast, the Church later began to condone and tolerate these events (obviously to the extent that these remained within certain boundaries) as examples of possibly particular, but in all cases genuine and sincere, piety.⁹

As of the mid-20th century, approximately, the mass population moves to urban centres, either to Athens and Thessaloniki, or to large provincial towns and the capitals of prefectures, created new conditions for the manifestations of Greek traditional culture and, by extension, for its religious festivals. Disciplines such as folklore studies and sociology are called upon to record and study these conditions, while the Church has to deal with them and manage them in the context of its broader pastoral care and concern.¹⁰ And this because the epicentre and cause of these events are the celebrating church and the specific religious feast, itself the determining factor for the people's participation as it would not flock to that place if not for the religious festival.

In the 1960s, Dimitrios S. Loukatos was the first to study the religious festivals of Athens, noting that traditional habits and practices still subsisted in them, but that they also incorporated elements that the various domestic immigrants had brought with them to the city. Over the years, a single folk rite was elaborated for urban religious festivals, but traces of local customs can still be detected, especially in regions where almost compact populations from a particular

8 Varvounis (1995a: 45-47); Varvounis (1992: 135).

9 Varvounis (2015: 234-235).

10 Meraklis (1973: 35).

region of Greece have established themselves, as is the case, for instance, in the Athenian suburbs of Galatsi with the Naxiotes or Maroussi with the Sifniotes.

There is no paradox to this. One need only recall that the Greek people has always been so attached to Orthodoxy that all of its social and cultural events are connected to instances of the Orthodox liturgical and devotional life, or to the Orthodox calendar. The city dweller who yearns for his birthplace has linked it inextricably with honouring that place's saints and miraculous icons, in exactly the same manner that the Greek immigrants abroad directly tie their social life and their contact with their compatriots to the Orthodox Church and its celebrations. And it is this psychological relationship and immediacy that constitutes the target of all those who contrive vainly to cut off people from its roots and its tradition.¹¹

Therefore, the nature of contemporary urban religious festivals is, in part, one of social contact, while the dimension of entertainment has been practically abolished. This has come about because, in the context of towns and cities, there exist numerous and daily opportunities for amusement and entertainment, from the most beneficial to the totally pernicious, meaning that the religious festivals no longer constitute, as before, unique ways or opportunities for song and dance. Only certain cases constitute the exception, namely when associations or municipalities organise performances with traditional dance groups or "traditional feasts", but these are few and are usually theatrical spectacles, without the character of participatory immediacy that existed in the entertainment of traditional local religious festivals. In the town, but also in contemporary folk culture, entertainment has, to a great extent, severed itself and become totally independent from the religious convention of the *panegyri*, without the latter losing anything of the psychological resonance and popular support it always enjoyed.

Today, new forms of urban customs emerge to fill this gap and comply with the common man's everlasting craving for ritual celebrations. The religious litanies in urban surroundings, the numerous ceremonies of *artoklasía*, the booths with various items for sale that are set up around the celebrating church, even new forms of financial contribution, such as self-adhesive labels supporting parish associations or the parish treasury directly, for example at the Church of St. Marina in Ilioupolis, Athens, lend their particular tone to these urban religious festivals. It is also worth pointing out that nowadays special posters are produced, which are put up to notify the inhabitants of a region of the religious festival, its observance, the times of the services, the bishops who will officiate

11 Miligkou-Markantoni (1978: 58); Miligkou-Markantoni (1984: 265).

or will take the Holy Communion service, and even the bus timetables for those who live at a distance and would like to worship. These posters, with their religious decorative motifs and their particular content, constitute an extremely interesting subject for contemporary folklore studies.

All of the above, as well as many other subjects not mentioned here or that will be elaborated upon at some future point in time, serve to prove one and only thing: the important, palpable and indissoluble relation of the Greek people with the Orthodox faith and folk religious tradition. A relation that, despite the sometimes adverse conditions, did not falter and which will not falter either in the future as, within the Church, man finds persuasive answers to the big and important questions concerning his philosophy of life and worldview. But the community of the faithful among themselves and with God, which parish life ensures and guarantees, constitutes a basic ingredient of the life of Greeks, who live in an ecclesiastical environment and receive spiritual and moral instruction within the framework of their parishes.¹²

It is a life relation, which the branch of “religious folklore” ascertains, records and studies. However, no academic discourse or ossified description can convey the interior joy and inner exultation of the simple man within the confines and in the context of a religious festival, in the city or in the village, in the urban or the rural residential and cultural space.¹³ It is this deeper and more spiritual satisfaction that impels the faithful to attend the religious festivals, and which leads people to the churches, to participate in the services, to be instructed spiritually, to be supported psychologically and to seek its salvation. It is the truth and splendour of our forefathers’ faith that makes us uphold older religious customary events and prompts us, while respecting traditional past, to create new forms of religious tradition, in the manner that these are manifested in contemporary urban *panegýria*.¹⁴ Thus, the religious festival is transposed from the place of origin to the urban place of residence, at the same time also acquiring a dimension of memory, of a respectful remembrance and nostalgic reminiscence of one’s birthplace, while serving to strengthen and recreate the relations among those sharing the same origin, who often lose their contact in the surrounding large and impersonal towns and cities.¹⁵

These cases introduce the important issue of the parish’s customary articulation in the context of the urban centre. In towns and cities, with their

12 Varvounis (2015: 342).

13 Meraklis (1973: 67).

14 Varvounis (2018: 158).

15 Meraklis (2004: 49–50).

heterogeneous population, the customary framework of each parish, the particular mores and customs that are possibly held in it, are the product of the choices made by the priests or churchwardens, by certain active associations or even individuals, who impose the particular traditions of their place of origin on the broader assembly, as happens in the Church of St. Anastasia Patrikia in Peristeri, Athens. For their part, the rest of the parishioners accept these customary forms, given the common man's love of ceremonies and rituals, which also rekindle his religious sentiment. Thus, each parish constitutes a particular case, which merits a separate study. It is indeed fortunate that the study of the individual cases of parishes has already begun, as it is yielding a rich thematology in terms of customs, which at a first glance might appear unexpected.¹⁶

It is broadly accepted that the Christian life and ecclesiastical existence of a Greek Orthodox Christian is constructed on the basis of the parish, this elemental and breathing cell of spiritual presence and action. Throughout the centuries, the relation of the Greek Orthodox Christian with his/her parish has been vivacious and productive, whether in terms of spiritual shaping and the act of worshipping,¹⁷ or for the national, religious and cultural identity of the Greek people.

Let us not forget that, during the long and crucial years of Ottoman rule, it was within the parish confines that the live and active elements of the Greek Orthodox communities organised themselves and acted, creating the renowned communal system on whose basis the Nation moved forward, preserved its physiognomy and its own identity, and which led it, vigorous and dynamic, to the revolutionary assertion of its freedom and its independent national and political existence. It is within the parishes that the social, philanthropic and educational work of the Church was organised, and it is within the parish that the traditional customary events of people began: with the church as centre and epicentre, the subjugated people celebrated and remembered, worshiped and offered ideological, religious and national instruction to their children, who would responsibly prolong the thread of tradition during the succession of the generations, as for example we can see in the Church of St. Antonios in Peristeri, Athens.

The bibliography concerning parishes either focuses on the theological aspect of their work and significance, or makes historical reductions to the community, often with the publication and use of parish archives and codices, yet without pointing out the parish's multiple functionality and nationally and

16 Loukatos (1985: 62); Alexiadis (1987: 265).

17 Florakis (1982: 23); Kefalliniadis (1990-1995: 1, 24).

religiously important action during the Nation's historical course.¹⁸ The few existing exceptions confirm the rule. Therefore, the parishes offer bountiful material for a new interdisciplinary approach combining the historical, theological and folkloric, for a new interdisciplinary examination of their work and contribution, which certainly is among the objectives and desiderata of the branch of "religious folklore".¹⁹

The matter does not end there, though, as the parishes and the parochial system continue to constitute live units of faith and worship within the large framework of Orthodox Church, and have many and important things to offer the stressed and anxiety-ridden person of our troubled times. Naturally, the changes in conditions also imposed changes in the parishes' exterior events and actions, as the centre and the essence always remain the same: the parish constitutes a part of the body of the faithful, an essential and unique organisation manner of the devout.

However, relations of parish members among themselves, but also with the priests and the clergy serving there, risk being disrupted in the context of multitudinous and impersonal large cities. From various folklore accounts we know that, in the past, in some villages of Crete and Karpathos, for example, the priest refused to chant the *Christós Anésti* (*Christ is Risen*), if all the parish members not facing insurmountable problems were not present to hear it. Indeed, he would send the churchwardens to summon all those who were absent, so that they might all be together to hear the "good word". Naturally, something of this nature would be inconceivable today in the large parishes of urban centres, as the Churches in Athens and Thessaloniki, where, despite their good will and continuous laborious efforts, it is impossible for the priests to personally know all of their parishioners, and, in certain cases, to even cover the whole extent of their parish when blessing the houses during Epiphany. The sheer number of people and the sizes involved exclude or limit the substantive contact, psychological and spiritual, between all of the faithful and their pastors.²⁰

Faced with this situation, the parishes have readjusted their social and philanthropic actions, but also part of their pastoral diaconry, so as to respond to the new conditions. Here we can use the example of the Church of St. Anastasia Patrikia in Peristeri, Athens.²¹ Large feasts in cultural centres and church halls,

18 For example, see the archive of the Churches of St. Nikolaos in Samos and St. Achillios in Larissa. Varvounis (1995b).

19 Varvounis (1992: 156–157).

20 Megas (1957: 25).

21 According to field work we have in progress there, from 2006 seqq. Varvounis (2014a).

cycles of interpretation of the gospel readings of holy worship or of the *New Testament*, gatherings and excursions of a worshipping or pilgrimage nature, the publication of calendars and printed material, are all ways of implementing parish work that were unknown to traditional societies, while in counterpart many of the parish activities under Ottoman rule have now passed to other entities, to local and regional self-government authorities, but also to services of the broader public sector.²² Thus, the Church's contribution, via the parishes, is continuous and constantly modernised, the aim always being abiding and fervent holy worship, offering solace to those in need, the moral elevation of the flock, love.²³

In this context, new forms exist that are transformations of earlier ones. A typical example is that of the manner of announcement and notification of the religious *panegýria*. The place of the old town crier, the *delális*, has now been taken by written and printed announcements of religious festivals. These are posters or smaller notices bearing the name of the church, the religious feast and the programme of the corresponding services. The older form of plainly typed announcements has been superseded by a more ornate and cared for look, with the icon of the saint or saints whose feast it is, decorative elements (usually from Byzantine hagiography or the ornamentation of handwritten codices), multicoloured inscriptions and a full programme listing all the liturgical details. Indeed, the use of such announcements has also spread to the Greek provinces, so that one encounters similar notices put up in various public locations in plain sight, but also outside each region's churches.²⁴ Certainly, the development of this manner of notifying the faithful of upcoming religious festivals, which also comprises certain advertising elements, is connected to the passage from orality to literacy, which characterises contemporary folk culture more generally. What used to be oral and fell under the normalities of oral speech has now been consolidated and finalised into text, with whatever consequences this might have in terms of standardisation for both its external form and its content. Indeed, this evolution is absolutely indicative of the prevailing tendencies in contemporary folk customary religious reality.

The parishes' work is now promoted in other, more contemporary manners, as we can see in the Churches of Peristeri in Athens.²⁵ Lotteries, one-day (or longer) worshipping/pilgrimage excursions, the publication of printed material

22 Aikaterinidis (1979: 57–59).

23 Varvounis (2018: 58).

24 Aikaterinidis (1993–1994: 61–80).

25 Varvounis (2014a); Varvounis (2014b).

and wall calendars, gatherings and similar events (tea, ouzo, etc.) define a new sociability, which increases the radius of the parish's work, renders it timely and modernises it. The participation of the faithful in all of the above is just as massive as for older folk religious customs. From a certain viewpoint, in fact, these are new customary manifestations of traditional religiosity, as the faithful feel that through them they communicate with the holy and strengthen the cohesive ties that join them to the rest of the members of the same body of the faithful, the same parish. For their part, the priests take care, by all means, to reinforce these ties, in order to create a stronger and more effective parish spirit.²⁶

It should be noted here that the practice of building the urban centres' large parish churches had its consequences on the popular religious act and practice of the faithful. Because of the edifices' volume, in order to serve the populous parish, but also the financial magnitude of the building's construction, an underground or semi-underground space is usually created first, sometimes also a ground floor one, which initially functions as a church until the main church building is constructed above it. However, after the main church's completion, the first makeshift church continues to be in use in certain cases and under specific conditions.²⁷ The opportunity is thus given for the establishment of more than one church to the memory of different saints, whose religious festivals are secondary festivals for the parish, thus imparting variety and diversity to the customary and devotional life of the faithful.²⁸ Furthermore, on other days and times, these same spaces have multiple functionalities when the templon and the Holy of Holies is covered by a portable partition, frequently in the form of a simple and practical curtain: they host catechism classes, gatherings and events, the cutting of the New Year's traditional cake, cycles of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, but it is also here that the coffee offered after memorial services held in the church is served. Through these events, the church, on all its levels, bonds with the faithful, so that this tie acquires the character of a customary phenomenon, which determines contemporary folk religious life decisively.²⁹

A phenomenon also connected to the parishes is that of the introduction of devotional and liturgical forms that relate to monastic life and the corresponding monastic rites. An ever-growing number of parishes, as the Churches of St. Paul and St. Anastasia Patrikia in Peristeri, Athens, of St. Photius in Thessaloniki and of The Dormition of Virgin Mary in Komotini, Thrace,³⁰ both

26 Friedman (1995: 102–103).

27 Aikaterinidis (1965: 163–170).

28 Varvounis (2018: 210).

29 Cf. Megas (1952: 3–27).

30 Varvounis (2014b: 134ff.).

in large urban centres and in the Greek provinces, are in the habit of organising all-night vigils (*agrypnía*) and night-long services (*olonyktía*), including the *óres* ('hours'), *óρθρος* ('matins'), *mesonyktikón* ('midnight office') and divine liturgy, on various occasions: the anniversary of the church's inauguration, on the eve of an important feast commemorating Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary, the anniversary of the church's religious festival, etc. Indeed, it is frequent that after the completion of the *agrypnía*, which ends in the early morning hours, the parish serves a treat or a repast of light victuals, in imitation of the corresponding monastic models and rites. These new events mould urban folk religiosity and, essentially, "are exported" from the towns and cities to the rural regions, as they have gradually started to be incorporated into the devotional life and the folk religious tradition of various localities.³¹ In fact, the same is valid for other devotional details or particularities, too, such as having the divine liturgy on the morning of Good Saturday in the centre of the church, on the *epitáphios*³² that was decorated and lifted in procession the previous day, a custom also received from the monastic rites of certain Orthodox monasteries.

In all of these cases, the most important factor for the introduction and establishment of these new forms is the common man's well-known love of ceremony, and particularly for the ecclesiastical liturgical and devotional ritual. This is, of course also the reason why people continue to create customs, and tend to renew or give new meaning to the older ones, so that their religious life is characterised by diversity and variety.³³ In the Greek provinces' urban centres, especially in the capitals of prefectures, there is a phenomenon of frequent Sunday church attendance not in parishes, but in monasteries of the region. The existence of spiritually active and vibrant brotherhoods, as well as the rapid development of the – anyway profoundly worshipful – Greek people's religious sentiment over the two last decades of the 20th century, often lead the faithful to monasteries, with which they develop numerous and close customary, liturgical and spiritual ties. In fact, under the monks' influence, religious mores and customs are introduced (or re-introduced) on an individual, family and social level, such as frequent confession and communion, which revive the folk religiosity and traditional religious behaviour of the Greek people.

31 Varvounis (2018: 168ff.).

32 The *epitáphios* is an icon or embroidered cloth depicting Jesus after being removed from the cross and, in Greek churches, is placed on a bier-like table with a canopy, decorated with flowers. During the evening service of Good Friday, this is lifted and taken in procession around the parish to the chanting of the *epitáphios thrênos*, i.e. the lamentation on the grave, before being returned to the church, where the faithful worship it.

33 Minas (1975: 17); Meraklis (2004: 38).

A basic factor in the development and structure of Greek folk religiosity is folklorism which, together with the associations' inherent action mentioned above, determines contemporary folk culture.³⁴ Folklorism, which started in the urban centres and has expanded to the whole of Greece, consists in the revival of older religious and devotional forms, which had fallen into disuse following the changes of the social and economic conditions that supported and sustained them. In the context of folklorist action, all kinds of associations revive religious customs and habits that, it should be observed, sometimes find a true popular base, precisely because of being connected to live beliefs and active rituals and not resembling a performance, instead becoming active parts of folk religiosity.

In general lines, one can observe that contemporary folk religiosity in Greece is distinguished by the survival of older customary forms, the revival of others – not always according to the classic format of folklorism, as encountered in other cases – and the introduction of new customs and rituals, which are either copied or created *ad hoc*. As a whole, these forms are based on the solid bed of the Greek people's deep and fervent Orthodox Christian faith and manifest its traditional devoutness. In this context, old forms are given new meanings, new ones are enlisted, elements of different traditions (of other regions, monastic centres, etc.) are introduced, but all of these are integrated smoothly into each local customary repertoire, so as to co-form each region's customary wealth.³⁵ Lastly, it should be noted that, on the level of large Greek cities, the parish, whose customary action nonetheless calls for a more detailed discussion than what has been proposed here indicatively, plays the role of main coordinator of these developments. In any case, certain basic principles were noted here, as a small contribution to a large and important contemporary folklore research project, which is still under way and directly concerns the spiritual, customary and cultural physiognomy of the Greek people at the beginning of the third millennium.

Contemporary study of Greek folk religious behaviour moves away from the earlier Greek tradition of studying “folk worship”, inasmuch as it does not necessarily look for the ancient and age-old roots of the customs and customary forms it studies, but is also interested in contemporary or innovative forms, as well as in the totality of the relations that the believer can develop with his faith, basically within the parish framework referred to above.

Thus, the contemporary folkloric study of popular religiosity diverges from the established path, and indeed often also treats issues that are not recognised

34 Varvounis (1992: 159); Varvounis (1995a: 69–70).

35 Varvounis (2015: 259).

as folklore objects by older or more traditional folklorists, such as, for instance, the believer's economic ties to the parish, the social dimension and functionality of various customs, but also newer or contemporary forms of customs that may not have a historical base, but nonetheless determine contemporary traditional folk religious behaviour.³⁶

The systematic study of all these factors also leads to highlighting certain principles that govern the religious phenomenon's contemporary manifestation. Except for the ethno-local and cultural associations' action, there is also an intervention of various entities of each region's local or prefectural administration, which recognise borderline signs of the local cultural identity as perceived, understood and promoted by them in each locality's folk religious customs. The result of this important process is that new customary forms are constantly being created, which, as a rule, are governed by a tendency to desacralisation.

By this, we mean that, ever more frequently, there is a tendency for folk religious customs to be cut off from their devotional base and starting point and, autonomously henceforth, to be reproduced as forms of the cultural, and not the religious and devotional, life of each locality.³⁷ The various festivals organised throughout Greece during the summer holidays are a typical example of this. In essence, they are folk religious festivals, but which have, however, been severed from their devotional roots and have solely retained their entertaining, economic, social and cultural side. The various types of *antamómata* ('meetings', or 'encounters') of mainland Greece, as also the variously-named "festivals" (e.g. the cherry festival, the potato festival, the chestnut festival, etc.), belong to this category. They are organised in the context of local religious festivals and if, during the summer season – and especially during the Greek holiday month *par excellence*, August –, the village has no such religious festival, they are held autonomously, although retaining the basic functionalities of the traditional Greek folk religious festivals.

In their context, the participants, and especially those having left their birthplace, reconnect with the locality of their origins, renew social relations and ties of friendship, enjoy and redefine themselves culturally, in other words do exactly what they used to do in the past during the religious festivals, except that here the secular approach and physiognomy of things is the one that dominates.³⁸ This is precisely the tendency of desacralisation, which is also encountered in many European societies and which – basically in the form

36 Varvounis (2018: 21).

37 Cf. Defteraios (1981: 272–273); Spyridakis (1952: 126–130).

38 Cf. Koukoules (1931: 387–402); Marava-Chatzinikolaou (1953: 23–25).

of secularisation – seriously concerns the Christian Churches, primarily the Roman Catholic and incidentally the Orthodox Church.

This tendency is directly related to the phenomenon of the renewal and enrichment of a locality's customary and religious life with new elements. Much as the common man's well-known and noted love for ritual helps ensure that the customs do not disappear, much as the religious and devotional system itself is by definition characterised by its conservativeness, nevertheless in modernist religious folklore the tendencies and practices of renewal are visible and tangible.³⁹ To this reality, folklore studies respond with the culture of “urban folklore” and of the thematic and methodological renewal of “religious folklore”, so that the numerous and varied manifestations of folk religiosity might be studied suitably.

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