

Banal, benign or pernicious? The relationship between religion and national identity from the perspective of religious minorities in Greece

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'*Kokkinakis* is in the drawer'. With these words a representative of the Greek ombudsman offers important insight into religious freedoms as experienced by religious minorities in the Greek context. His reference is to the 1993 European Court of Human Rights case of Greek Jehovah's Witness Minos Kokkinakis, against the Greek state, after he was arrested over 60 times for violation of the Greek ban on proselytism.

The Greek Ombudsman's representative delivered this statement as a positive thing: police no longer send Jehovah's Witnesses to jail in Greece, he said, because they have the *Kokkinakis* case in their desk drawer, like a trick up their sleeve, in order to justify to complainants why the Jehovah's Witness in question could not be sent to jail (and of course to remind themselves of the same thing).

But from a different perspective, namely, from that of religious minorities, the *drawer* is not a particularly prominent or effective place for *Kokkinakis* to be; it should be on the *books*, in a change to the legislation. Instead, the 1938 law banning proselytism, which dates back to the Metaxas dictatorship, is still formally in effect.



Photo: UK Human Rights Blog

At the same time, in theory *Kokkinakis* could be on the books but *not* in the drawer, and with more adverse effects for religious minority groups. This example points to a recurrent theme in my research, which is that there is a significant *gray area* around the intersection between law and religion. The relationship between religion and national identity forms an important part of that gray area.

In this particular case, the Greek government did not want to face the wrath of a powerful majority church pursuing the protection of the majority faith against 'external threats' (whether these be from religious minorities or from the European Court of Human Rights). Meanwhile, the ECtHR also protected the religion-national identity link by not actually enforcing a change in the law: it chose instead to show deference to national cultural tradition in the state's handling of religious affairs.

A close relationship between religion and national identity is a critical aspect of many 'national cultural traditions' and is manifested in all kinds of symbols around us, including flags, anthems, depictions on currency, etc., much like Michael Billig's description of 'banal nationalism' (the title of his popular 1995 book).

The question is, where do banal manifestations of a majority religion (or of a majority *non*-religion, or secularism, as the case may be) *stop* being banal and actually impinge upon freedoms of a religious minority or non-religious groups? As Billig notes, banal does not imply *benign* (1995:1). A lot more than we may realize may fall somewhere between the benign and the pernicious.

Much scholarly debate centres on whether parliaments or courts are the most appropriate venues for distinguishing between the banal, benign and pernicious when it comes to manifestations of the relationship between religion and national identity which are experienced by minority religious groups as limitations on their religious freedoms. My research suggests something which, admittedly, is itself a banal point: that a national education-led change in formulations of national identity is also critical to the equation, allowing for a conception which is far more open and reflective of Greek contemporary society, and inclusive of its religious minority, its secular and secularist components.

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