

'Religion is the Opium of the People': An FDA Analysis on the Construction of Religion by Young Greek Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discourses constructed around religion in Greek society, focusing on the transition from conservative religious beliefs prevailing in micro societies to a more accepting discourse at the macro societal level. The research employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) on 7 interviews of young Greek adults, to explore the evolving landscape in Greece and the power dynamics of religion influenced by education, social interaction, and relevant discourses, resulting in a diminished influence of religion over time. The findings reveal the presence of tolerance towards religious diversity, challenging the traditional conservative discourse, which is characterized by strict adherence to Orthodox religious practices and resistance to religious pluralism, while also highlighting the declining power of religion. The study demonstrates how individuals aligning with the acceptive discourse value their own religious beliefs while fostering co-existence with individuals of different religious groups, without being heavily influenced by the church. Notably, younger generations, shaped by an era emphasizing social interaction, exhibit a stronger alignment with this discourse. By illuminating the shaping of identities and orienting actions within these discourses, this research contributes to the understanding of religion in Greek society. It underscores the significance of religion as a

subject warranting ongoing scholarly attention and highlights the need for future research to explore the complexities of religious beliefs and discourses across the country using varied methodological approaches.

Keywords: Greek society, Greek Orthodox church, discourse analysis, conservative beliefs, religious tolerance, social interaction, power dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Religion is considered a core part of human nature and can be traced back to the earliest recorded human history, coinciding with the development of writing [1]. Individuals and societies construct religion in diverse and complex ways in an attempt to answer philosophical questions regarding the existence and the purpose of humanity [2]. Religion has always been an integral part of human society, and its impact on individuals and communities has been the subject of much scholarly attention. From its role in shaping individual and collective identities to its influence on social, political, and economic systems, religion has been a constant presence in the lives of people across time and space [3].

Even though the purpose of religion is to satisfy the need of an answer to humanity's existential mysteries, it has been shown to

hold an influential role on human actions and identities. Throughout history, many wars have been fought in the name of religion, like the crusades [4] and the French wars of religion [5], while heavily impacting social and political issues [6]. Today, religion is not as relevant as it used to be those centuries ago [7] which caused a cultural transformation, emerging secular ideologies with the purpose of mobilizing political action without reference to supernatural values or beings [8].

Despite the profound impact of religion on human behavior, psychology has yet to provide a comprehensive understanding of religion, and the quality of research is often insufficient. To further highlight its importance, religion consistently shares a negative correlation with infidelity [9, 10, 11], illegal drug usage [12, 13, 14] and criminal behaviours [15, 16, 17]. Therefore, a psychological analysis of an individual cannot be considered complete, unless it includes information on their religious beliefs and how it affects their behavior.

Quantitative studies on religion, especially those in psychology, are usually inadequately performed. Method is often neglected on these studies and rarely discussed, failing to follow their corresponding methodology protocols [18]. According to Ruble [19], older textbooks that introduce the psychology of religion usually overlook the presence of religion itself. Quantitative approaches usually keep a distant relationship with their study objects [20] and at the same time, religion is characterized by its fluid nature across cultures [21], which therefore suggests that generalization of the findings that emerged from such studies is seemingly impossible and unreliable.

Qualitative studies approach religion in a different manner. They tend to have closer relationships with their subjects, while they also allow for more flexibility and wider exploration [22], making them more suitable for studying certain aspects of religion. Qualitative data only have significance within the context in which they are

situated, and their meaning can only be fully comprehended in relation to that context [23]. Similarly, social facts cannot be isolated from the social structures and systems within which they exist and must be understood in the broader context of their social environment [24]. Therefore, data produced by such studies should be considered for generalization only inside their cultural domain.

In the context of Greece, religion has a long and complex history, with roots in ancient Greek mythology and the adoption of Christianity in the early Byzantine period [25]. The Greek Orthodox Church has played a central role in shaping Greek society and culture, influencing not only religious practices but also social norms and political ideology [26, 27, 28]. Since over 80% of the Greek population identifies as Orthodox [29], religion is a fundamental topic of study for understanding the Greek culture.

Bibliography regarding religion in Greece is scarce and limited, lacking wider points of view and discussion. A study by Stavrakakis in 2003 [27] explores a discourse in which the Greek Orthodox church is often used as an effective tool for social and political control, with its language and symbols commonly used to reinforce targeted ideologies. Another study by Zambeta in 2000 [30] proposes religion as a crucial factor in the construction of identities and argues that religious instruction in Greece exceeds the scope of the religious education curriculum, which has implications for the secular nature of education, the formation of dominant identities, and practices that lead to social exclusion. More specifically, Karamouzis & Athanassiades in 2011 [31] argue in their study that Greek education in religion, in accordance with most of the corresponding teachers of the modules, does not encourage critical thinking, labelling it as a threat to the authority and the traditional teaching way of the teachers. Triandafyllidou & Kokkali in 2010 [32], through analysis and data emerged from surveys, found evidence of tolerance

towards religious diversity in Greece from a small proportion of the Greek population who were willing to coexist with disparate religious groups. Overall, these studies demonstrate the complex and multifaceted role that religion plays in Greek society, from its use as a tool for social and political control to its impact on education and identity formation, highlighting the need for further research and discussion on this important topic.

This study seeks to address the scarce amount of bibliography on the study of religion. In examining the role of religion in Greece through the lens of discourse analysis, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how religion is discursively constructed, the way that Greeks position towards those constructs, how it shapes identities and actions, as well as the possible power relations between these discourses and subject positioning. The findings will be compared with the existing literature on the topic and critically discussed.

METHODOLOGY

Analytic Approach

The present study was analysed under the epistemology of social constructionism. The four key assumptions that this epistemology underpins, according to Gergen [33] are: 1) There should be a critical stance towards any labels and taken-for-granted knowledge. 2) Knowledge is time-space bound and differs across cultures. 3) The way that an individual constructs reality occurs through social interaction, meaning that there is no final truth, but a constant production and reproduction of knowledge. 4) The constructed understanding of the individual's reality leads to their actions inside the society.

Data was analysed using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). As proposed by Michel Foucault, the main principles of FDA regard the exploration of discourses, subject positioning, and power [34]. Discourses are established truths that are accepted by society and consider which

action can be labelled as normal, while also ruling in and out acceptable and unacceptable forms of knowledge, ultimately constraining what can be said by whom, where and when [34]. Subject positioning is the construction of social identities based on whether people place themselves in favour or against a discourse, leading to how people make sense of the individuals in society [34]. Power is a concept that creates boundaries between those who can control and those who can be controlled [34]. Depending on their time-space context, discourses and subject positions can vary in power [34]. Religion is often portrayed as a fluid concept inside cultures with significant influence towards people [35], therefore FDA is best suited for this research.

This study uses Willig's [36] six stage approach for FDA. First, the discursive objects and main themes were identified. Second, the discourses were examined and further analysed. Third, the action orientation was examined, the function that the discourses serve. Fourth, the positioning of the subjects and the variants of the identities that are constructed was analysed. Fifth, the practical applications of discourses and positioning were examined to identify how actions are justified inside a discourse. Finally, the power relations and how an individual's construction of reality guides their behavior was further analysed.

Participants

Seven people participated, four men and three women, with their ages ranging between 19-27, mean: 24.57 and StD: 2.63. The inclusion criteria consisted of young adults (18-30 years old) who were not under medication, grew up in Greece and use Greek as their main language, in order to ensure that the data would closely reflect the current discourses of Greece from the average standpoint. The religious beliefs of the participants were not considered for their selection.

Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was used and the participants were selected through an open-invitation in social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, which follow a structure related to the topic, but also allow for possible topical trajectories and further exploration, through the use of open-ended questions [37]. These kinds of interviews are ideal for this study, since they allow for an in-depth investigation of a person's constructed knowledge which otherwise, to the most part, is not available for observation [38]. The interviews were conducted in Greek in contemplation of the importance of language, through which the social world of the individual can be comprehended [39].

Materials

The interview agenda consisted of seven core questions and further explanatory follow-up questions, which aimed to extract information in regard to the FDA principles. Questions like 'What does religion mean to you?' and 'Do you believe that religion influences people?' were used to explore how the individual constructs religion, what discourses are created from it, how they position themselves towards them and explore possible power relations. For the full interview agenda, see Appendix 1.

For the purposes of this study, a recording app was used from the researcher's mobile phone to record the interviews. A computer was used to save the recording and transcribe them through Microsoft's Word Online application. Interviews were translated and back-translated as it is suggested for cultural studies for the sake of keeping the meaning of each word as intact as possible [40].

Procedure and Ethics

People who volunteered to participate in this study found it through social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). The first seven people who were confirmed to fulfil the inclusion criteria were chosen.

All interviews took place inside a private lab room. During the meet-up, a small introduction was conducted in order to build rapport, as well as a reminder of the study's topic. The participants chose pseudonyms that were used for this study in order to ensure their anonymity. Before the interview, they were provided with a Participant Information Sheet which explained the procedure in detail, followed by a Consent Form. Interviews lasted from 15 to 45 minutes. When the researcher felt that there was no need for any further questions, the participants were asked if they wanted to include or say something around the subject. After the interview was over, they were presented with a Debrief Sheet and a reminder of their ethical rights. All ethical considerations were taken as proposed by the British Psychological Society's guidelines.

ANALYSIS

After conducting the analysis, three overarching themes and seven sub-themes were identified that emerged from the data. The first theme that emerged from the data is 'The decline of religious influence in Greece', divided into two sub-themes: 'The relationship between education, social interaction and religious beliefs' and 'The corruption and inefficiency of the Greek Orthodox church'. The second theme 'Actions, identity and agency: Religious practices in Greece', divided into three main sub-themes: 'The discursive construction of acceptance of religious diversity', 'The discursive construction of conservatism in religious practices and beliefs' and 'The discursive construction of fanaticism in religious practices and beliefs'. The final theme of this analysis is 'The positive impact of religious beliefs and practices', divided into two sub-themes: 'Mental strength and hope' and 'Family bonding and personal growth'. These themes and sub-themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the discourses, the identities and the power relationships that are shaped around religion, as portrayed in

the selected texts. In this analysis, the first theme, including its two sub-themes, as well the second theme and its first two sub-themes will be thoroughly explored, examining the discursive strategies used to construct and reinforce certain truths on the concept of religion.

Theme 1: The Decline of Religious Influence in Greece

Throughout the data, multiple evidence emerged indicating that there is a constant erosion of religious power in Greece. Two distinct sub-themes were identified which explain this power shift, the first positioned on how education and social interaction are more accessible and at the same time negatively correlate with religious beliefs, and the second focusing on a discursive corruption and disfunction of the Greek Orthodox church.

Sub-theme A: The Relationship between Education, Social Interaction and Religious Beliefs

Despite being traditionally viewed as a powerful force in society, religion has experienced a decline in influence over the years, and one main explanation comes from education levels and social interaction. Through technological advancements, people seem to detach from religious beliefs.

'Yeah, surely most people don't believe anymore. Or they may want to believe in another religion, but there are many atheists in general.' (Kratos, Lines 111-112) Kratos claims with certainty that the number of believers has been reduced over time, when he uses the word 'anymore', which also indicates that this wasn't the case in the past. This decline is considered a globally accepted construct for every religion [41].

'In a few years, where we will have higher percentages of people without spiritual beliefs, we will be talking with different variables. I think that kids already have zero similarities with my age. (...) And as years pass, they will believe even less.' (Kostas, Lines 32-37)

Not only it seems that there is a decline in the number of people that believe, but Kostas also mentions that this situation will continue to occur in the future. He positions himself in religious terms different when he was a child in comparison to today's children, further indicating that this global phenomenon is certainly affecting Greece as well. This became significantly more evident in 2009, when the previous prime minister of Greece and self-proclaimed atheist, Alexis Tsipras, refused to take the religious oath for taking office after his election, a tradition which never in Greek history had been broken before [42].

'There are many who don't believe. ... they say it doesn't exist or I can't see it, it doesn't help me, it does nothing to me. The typical "Why are children in Africa starving? If God existed, they wouldn't starve".'

Researcher: The typical... Which means that you hear it often?

Darklight: Very, very often. "Why does this happen in the world and God is not helping? If he truly existed, he would have done something". You hear these things everywhere and from everyone.' (Darklight, Lines 46-55)

The discourse that questions the existence of God is gaining power and weakening religion, as evidenced by Darklight's characterization of such quotes as 'typical' and the prevalence of such statements in society, which is also supported by Ford's [43] findings.

'They don't believe mostly from what they see due to physics, biology, I don't know, they want to be away from the church.'

Researcher: So, you think education affects faith?

Kratos: Surely, and also... they research more, they have a wider view of their options on this subject, and they don't try to follow something that many might have learned exclusively from their parents.'

Researcher: You mentioned before that people believed more, what do you think has actually changed and causes this?

Kratos: That before they had for example only one church and few ways of learning about it or anything else. Now they are more acceptive to see, to learn more things, whether these are religions, via internet or other things, they hear a lot. I believe, that when you hear many things, every person has their own opinion to change something. Before they knew the church, they knew our religion with Christianity and that's where it ends, I don't know if it's anything else. In the end, they were heavily influenced by their small circle.' (Kratos, Lines 112-130)

Kratos suggests that education has a significant impact on faith, as it exposes people to new perspectives and knowledge, which allows them to construct different realities and beliefs. He argues that people's exposure to a wider range of options and opinions can lead them to question their existing beliefs and consider alternatives, which was not possible before due to limited access to information and exposure to a small circle of influence, such as family and local communities. With his mention of a small circle, there is evidence of macro and micro society differences, since the participant uses these words as if he blames this micro society for religious attachments. These findings are also supported by Bengtson [44], according to whom families are considered the main influence of the construction of religious beliefs, with religious transmission occurring most effectively through both intentional and unintentional family practices and rituals.

Surely, because for me, any connections that I had with religion comes from school. Even in Greece, where it is considered that there actually is education here, there is a school, there is a structure where you learn and practice and receive knowledge, I had never heard from any teacher or the priest himself that, you know what? Yeah, there are other religions, too. Obviously more religions exist... I've never heard anything good about another religion. Censorship shouldn't exist to everything that is different. And at villages or smaller cities, this is more intense, they didn't have many

options. For instance, when I was a child, I was fortunate enough to learn from five or six teachers, cool? Where each one had a different opinion up and down in the general framework of 'What is Christianity?', 'What is our religion?'. In villages for example, they might not have even had that. They might have had a teacher who, if he unfortunately was an inhibited asshole, he could have instilled in the children that 'Yeah, only Christianity' intensively and that anything different is also bad for example.' (Faker, Lines 242-249)

There is evidence of a discourse that Greece has comparatively high educational levels, due to the use of the phrase 'it is considered', which indicates that this is a common construct by many. Yet the participant mentions this in comparison to his own experiences during school, where he explains how his education was narrowed into learning and approving only about Christianity. There is more evidence of micro society differences, as the villages are even more limited to their education and are therefore taught to construct powerful religious beliefs. Faker positions himself completely against one-sided education, which is evident when he states that different things should not be censored, as well as when he describes a teacher who would teach children in villages without wider views with strong offensive words. Faker's experience of education in Greece highlights the limitations of a one-sided approach to teaching religion and the need for greater openness and tolerance towards different beliefs and perspectives. His call for the elimination of censorship and the promotion of diversity reflects a growing awareness of the importance of education in fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness. This was acknowledged by the former Greek minister of education, Nikos Filis, who attempted to reshape the religious modules taught in school from being blindly focused on Christianity by adding wider religious concepts for teaching [42].

'I believe that the development... The economic, political, social, cultural development of every country affects religion. Villages, as I see it, are lagging behind any form of development or progress, so what is also lagging behind is... the behavior? Anyways, the faith in a religion. In a village you will see way more people proportional to their corresponding population in a church than Athens for example. And respectively, in a less developed country they believe way more, like Muslim countries for example which, above all, are economically inferior to the western world. They believe more than western countries. While in England and Belgium for example, that's not the case. There they have secularism and in churches you will mostly see foreigners who came from other countries and wanted to visit a church.' (Kostas, Lines 89-99)

While religious influence is generally declining, it appears to hold a greater sway in micro societies such as villages, where development arrives at a slower pace and faith remains strong. This seems to be the case across different religions and countries, as indicated by the participant's observation that less developed nations tend to have a stronger faith than their more developed counterparts.

'I believe that western societies, which have reached a level that leans towards atheism, Netherlands and United Kingdom for example, who have very mild faith, they don't have intensive faith towards Christianity and large proportions of atheism. It seems that religions like Islam, which is an intense religion and demands very active participation, very active religious duties and is not as mild and liberal as Christianity, they have large influence there.' (Scrooge, Lines 206-213).

According to Scrooge, there is a marked difference in the intensity of faith between Western societies that lean towards atheism and religions like Islam that demand active participation and strong religious duties. This sentiment is echoed by research indicating that Islamic religious education

has a powerful influence on shaping students' identities [45] and may contribute to extremist attitudes among Muslim students [46].

'Because people, after technologies, found the way to be able to investigate some things more. Humans didn't have this ability in the past, they were more leaning towards what is transferred from person to person, from mouth to mouth, without having the ability to search, to find, etc.' (Yuuki, Lines 14-18). Education and development brought forth technologies that help people question their current constructs. By having better access to information and diverse perspectives through socialization and technology, people are now able to interact with other humans and create knowledge that is not restricted from a 'small' circle, as it was aforementioned. This is therefore causing religion to drop in power as education and social interaction are further accessible.

Sub-theme B: The Corruption and Inefficiency of the Greek Orthodox Church

While education and social interaction are portrayed as important factors responsible for the decrease in religion's power, one other sub-theme that emerged as a cause of this issue is how people have constructed beliefs that the Greek Orthodox church has been deemed inefficient and corrupted.

'Maybe the fact that now less people have faith is due to... Maybe they are influenced by this rising topic regarding the priests, with the church, that they are not right, the fact that there are rapes. You occasionally hear such information. And the other issue, that they take the money from the church, and I don't even know what they do with it, you've surely heard about that.' (Darklight, Lines 111-115)

Truly, I don't think it's honest. The church used to influence everything, fortunately this is no longer the case. And actually, I believe that the church has the largest wealth in comparison to everyone in this country. If you look from charities and things they offer to the church... Of course, everyone does it

by heart and to offer help, right? But that doesn't mean that they are used that way, too. Personally, I have people inside the church, deep inside, we all have seen things different from what some others believe. For example, people gifting clothes, food, etc. Some of these may be given to people who need them, but some other things, they keep them for themselves, a large portion actually. Same with money. And I don't think it's honest for that reason, because many have used the church to their advantage.' (Yuuki, Lines 145-156)

There is evidence of a discourse that corruption resides inside the Greek Orthodox church. Darklight mentions rapes as an occasionally heard situation, and confidently says that the researcher must have heard about the priests stealing the money of the church, which indicates that this is a frequent topic of discussion inside the Greek society. Certainly, these are cases that have often been reported in local newspapers as well, like 'Kathimerini' and 'Ta Nea' [47, 48, 49]. These constructs are also shared by Yuuki, who also makes note of how religion used to be more influential, showing the decline in power by her words 'fortunately, this is no longer the case'. By using the word fortunately, Yuuki positions herself against the older discursive power of religion.

'I believe, but because I work inside religious domains, many times I feel like they force me to feel like I don't believe, if I could say it that way. Because I see a lot going on, either with stealing money, or using religion as a mean to make profit. Either priests, or people who collaborate with religious domains like me. Even when sometimes they try to present that they are doing a good deed, if you look from the inside, you can see that they try to trick people.' (Kratos, Lines 30-36).

Kratos, while positioning himself as a believer, shows his own disappointment from this discourse. He mentions how he feels like they 'force' him to stop believing, with the word force making his speech indicate that he actually doesn't want to stop

believing, but the discourse is powerful enough to at the very least firmly distance him from religious beliefs.

'If some things are improved in the church's structure, one of those being the archbishop... There is a need for an inside catharsis, including some big daring steps that have to do with the image of the church, like the luxury that archbishops and priests tend to show.' (...) *'It's a bit hard for a catharsis to be done in church because every single village in Greece needs, asks, wants for a priest to operate their church, right? We don't have that many priests. Thus, many people become priests with lessen requirements. It is not always the perfect, the very faithful, the very honest person, etc. Connections also help someone be chosen in these situations. Therefore, there are people inside the church, including priests, who don't great beliefs in accordance with the church I think. Or maybe they have some sins that they shouldn't have in the first place. A single cleric for example, who has just started his career, if I can phrase it that way, in church, inside a chapel, he is a monk first of all, maybe he couldn't be able to control his lust for women and have affairs, relationships which are not allowed for him to have. And of course, there are other things inside the church, which might not have started that way, but started spreading later by some priests. The church should chop the heads of some people, some clerics, who seem to, not only ruin the image of the church, that is the very least, but also scandalize the world! They steal and do the actual crime from one side but that's not the most important thing, at the same time they do a different kind of crime, they push people away from the church by scandalizing them. Those people later say that the village's priest stole from the money collection box, therefore this could possibly be done by every single archbishop, every single priest, etc. And today, when someone hears the word priest, immediately they think about how corrupted he could possibly be due to how often they hear such devious*

acts, instead of hearing something good. Therefore, the church truly needs a catharsis.' (Scrooge, Lines 323-326, 477-495)

Scrooge acknowledges the power and importance of this discourse, highlighting how it effectively reduces religion's power. He mentions how the church is not capable of always having the right people for the job, how others might pursue it as a 'career' and how they ultimately don't go in accordance with the expected actions of someone that represents the Orthodox, like their luxurious lifestyle and their religious sins. Those people are usually the ones that proceed with illegal acts, like stealing, as Scrooge asserts, and are completely responsible for why this discourse exists in the first place since, as the participant notes, they 'scandalize' people, who later view priests completely as corrupted. Scrooge portrays this issue as a stereotype that is currently inhabiting Greek people and mentions how they automatically think negatively about the priests due to how often they hear such cases. This behavior that he describes can be explained by the availability heuristic theory, a cognitive bias which refers to the human's tendency to judge the probability of an event based on the ease of retrieval from memory of other similar events [50]. Scrooge positions himself completely against this stereotype, which is evident by his sudden decisive description of how the church should 'chop the heads' of those who are causing this issue, which for Scrooge is the most important crime, how they 'push' people away from the church, which is similar to what Kratos mentioned before. Scrooge acknowledges this corruption and poetically uses the word 'catharsis' as a way to escape this stereotype, implicating how the corruption is evil and the church is actually pure but stained by certain people.

Even after those discourses, religion still seems to hold great power, according to the participants.

'First, let me say that Christianity, meaning our church, cannot possibly die. I mean as a

religion. Other religions have lived 500, 1000 years... But someday they ended. The religion of Christianity has lived, if we assume that it exists since the day of crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, for about 2000 years.' (Scrooge, Lines 265-269)

Scrooge defines the power of Christianity by comparing it to other religions and noting its longevity.

'I've talked with various people and I'm not gonna tell you that atheists are significantly more in numbers. There are many people who still tend to believe. But we are getting there' (Yuuki, Lines 68-69)

According to Yuuki, the numbers of people who position themselves against religious beliefs are not dominating over those who believe. According to the U.S. department of state demographics [29], in 2021, the estimated number of Orthodox believers in Greece ranges between 81-90% of the population. At first glance, these numbers certainly do not propose any threat on religious power. However, when comparing them to the demographics of 2000 [51], the range of the believers lies between 94-97%. Therefore, religion slowly declines in power, but is still a very powerful discourse.

Theme 2: Actions, Identity and Agency: Religious Practices in Greece

This theme delves into the action orientation of religion inside Greece, exploring the ways in which religion influences people's behaviours and shapes their identities. Specifically, two main discourses identified surrounding faith in religion will be analysed, each categorized into a sub-theme: the acceptive discourse and the conservative discourse. Each of these discourses represents a distinct way in which people position themselves in relation to religion and its influence on their lives. This examination of the characteristics and effects of each discourse provides a deeper understanding of how religion continues to impact Greek society today.

Sub-theme A: The Discursive Construction of Acceptance of Religious Diversity

Among the Greek Orthodox people, many seem to adopt an acceptive stance towards different beliefs and ideals. They apply the basic Orthodox principles in their lives, but do not let them interfere or overshadow their social interactions and lifestyle.

'In Greece, our faith is not that "mild". Most of us believe. Maybe there is a huge proportion of the people who won't visit the church that often, maybe they lack a lot of theological knowledge, but they still label themselves as Christians. And for some of them, oh, don't even try to insult their faith! They get seriously offended, even if they are not participating in most religious practices. So yeah, there is a deep religious feeling in Greece, not that extreme like eastern countries, Islam for example, neither that mild as the western countries.' (Scrooge, Lines 222-229)

Scrooge mentions how, while most of Greeks are Orthodox, they don't necessarily follow every typical expected behavior as proposed by the church. Yet, their feelings regarding religion remain intact, which is evident on the way he describes how these people would react when someone offended their faith. This could be explained by the fact that most Greeks consider being an Orthodox is a fundamental part of their nationality [52], supporting Scrooge's comments of a deep religious and not mild feeling inside Greece.

'I don't know if I consider myself an Orthodox... I mean, I think I believe... And let me tell you, after I grew up, I stopped fasting or going to church. Deep inside me I guess I still believe, I accept the existence of Jesus and Virgin Mary, etc.... And surely, there is a deep respect from my part to all of this. I am not the kind of guy who will run around and yell "Fuck Jesus" like some kids for no reason, or humiliate, or say something rude, because come on man, you got to respect that someone might have strong beliefs about something, why should that bother anyone? Anyways, maybe my

faith is not that strong anymore I guess because I don't feel like it affects my actions as much as when I was younger.' (Faker, Lines 70-77)

'The religious beliefs of others never bothered me. It just annoys me when someone tells me that "Since you believe, you should do this, or that...". I don't want to know, and I don't care of how I should act. It's my own personal beliefs, I don't tell judge others based on their beliefs and how they act, so I don't want them to judge mine as well.' (Kostas, Lines 180-183)

Faker still shows traces of faith in Orthodox, but weaker than when he was younger, which could be explained by the aforementioned diminished role of religion. He doesn't seem to construct what he actually believes important, since he shows uncertainty to whether he is actually a believer by using phrases like 'I don't know', 'I think' and 'maybe' when he tries to give an answer. He positions himself in an acceptive discourse, where he notes how wrong it is to insult someone's religion and that there should be shown respect to anyone's faith, since there is no reason for anyone to be bothered by that. His construction of how religion shouldn't be anything boresome is reflected in his own uncertainty of his specific beliefs. Kostas positions himself in the same discourse, noting how he doesn't show any interest in what others believe, while his words portray the same need of respect that Faker mentions people should show. Both of them seem to not have their actions heavily oriented by the expected religious practices of a Greek Orthodox.

'Well, if you ask me if our faith had similar demanding principles with Islam... For example, if the church suddenly headed out and said, "From now on, one will be considered a Christian only if he participates in Sunday's services, otherwise they will be removed from our list", the same way that a person is removed as a club member, I don't really feel that many people would accept that today. Because they would say that it's the church saying

that, the typical exaggeration that we know from it, probably the words of someone conservative, I am not following their way of thinking, I believe in my own way.' (Scrooge, Lines 390-396)

The weak influence of religion to people who position themselves inside the acceptive discourse is more evident in Scrooge's example of how only few would follow any extreme demands from the church. He mentions how such demands would be characterized as 'typical exaggerations', which implies that people often actually construct the church's principles as 'exaggerating', which could also be the reason that the acceptive discourse exists in the first place. With the example of 'I believe in my own way', Scrooge constructs this discourse as one where people orientate their actions, not from the church, but mostly on their own constructed ideals and ethics. He mentions how this scenario wouldn't be easily accepted today, possibly implying that in the past, where religion held higher power, things might have been different. This common belief of the young participants is further supported by a study from Gropas and Triandafyllidou [53], who also found evidence of an acceptive discourse in Greece that emphasizes on tolerance and acceptance of diverse beliefs, allowing for a more inclusive and open-minded society. According to them, this discourse is mostly prevalent among younger generations due to their higher exposure towards multiculturalism and globalization, a claim which supports the so far findings of this analysis.

Sub-theme B: The Discursive Construction of Conservatism in Religious Practices and Beliefs

In comparison to the acceptive discourse, another discourse which seems to have been dominant for Greek history is the conservative discourse. People who position themselves towards this discourse have their actions heavily oriented by the guidance of

the church and usually do not conform with outlying religious perspectives.

'With my induction inside religious domains, due to my theological studies I got rid of my old beliefs, those that we could call conservative. Now I think I am more open-minded and, if you ask me, I think that this is the true spirit of our faith and what describes me best.' (Scrooge, Lines 63-68)

Scrooge repositions himself from the conservative to the acceptive discourse due to his studies, which supports the preceding findings. He constructs this discourse as the real way of approaching religion and identifies himself inside this discourse's mentality.

'A conservative is a person who holds dearly the morals, the traditions... He is not really into progress. A good example of them on our church is what we call "the grannies of the church", who are very religious, they also make the sign of the cross with their fingers for everything, but they don't comprehend the true meaning of Jesus' teachings. Those are a good example of some very conservative people, who outlie from our religious society.' (Scrooge, Lines 85-92)

'With these grannies, our faith and religion is the same. The basic difference lies in their behavior, their actions, their way of thinking... I think this is due to a mentality that lives in Greece even today. A mentality which makes some people believe that, since they visit the church and participate in religious practices more often, they are more Christians than the rest. But being a Christian is many more things. Yeah, you should visit the church and participate in all of these, but it is also about being different than those conservatives. If someone with tattoos and piercings visits the church and they look at him like he is less of a Christian than them, then you realize that something went wrong with their mentalities.' (Scrooge, Lines 132-140)

Scrooge constructs a conservative discourse, which is bound by morals and traditions. He mentions the 'grannies of the church' as a known concept in Greece and uses them to

describe and generalize conservative thoughts and actions. By characterizing them as outliers, he constructs a distinction between the proportions of people positioning towards the acceptive discourse who appear to overshadow those of the conservative discourse. Furthermore, Scrooge seems to disapprove of the conservative actions, which is evident from how he criticizes their comparing beliefs as actions that have to do with wrong mentalities, as well as how he positions himself in the acceptive discourse by saying that this is the true spirit of their faith. Therefore, both these discourses regard the same religion and faith, but their actions are distinguished and, in this case, the conservative is constructed as inferior to the acceptive discourse.

'I believe that everything is mostly determined during our childhood, how our parents raised us is the most notable thing. And not only that. When I was young for example, every morning in school we would group and pray. We would also visit the church once per month. Now, if I had a child for example and it told me that they do all these in school, I would say that there truly is no reason for that. Let's leave the kids to do what they want and decide for themselves what they want to believe, instead of constantly brainwashing them. (...) As a colleague of mine at work used to say, with which I completely agree, "Religion is the opium of the people". It defines and influences many things and definitely people's actions. You can see that everywhere. We saw it recently during covid and the vaccines, all this paranoid resistance, how they insisted on participating in the church's services and put a spoon in their mouth that had the saliva of hundreds of people. I believe in our God too, but let's put some boundaries, ok? There is a fine line between faith and common sense. So yeah, religion completely defines your actions if you also completely dedicate yourself to it. And the blinder your faith is, the more it controls you like a puppet.' (Kostas, Lines 62-84)

Kostas mentions that he also believes in Orthodoxy, since he mentions how he believes in 'our' God, implying the Greek religion. He positions himself towards the acceptive discourse, which is implied in his words that kids should decide for themselves what they want to believe, words that reflect the religious diversity of the acceptive discourse. Kostas constructs a negative view of the conservative discourse, calling people who show blind faith towards religion as puppets. Those people have their actions and identities shaped through their religious beliefs, which shows how powerful this discourse is towards the people that position towards it. According to Kostas, their faith and their conformity are positively correlated. Certainly, in many cultures and societies, religion has been a significant influence on people's actions and beliefs [54] and was a prevalent factor worldwide for people to act against the covid restrictions [55, 56], as he also mentions that happened in Greece as paranoid acts. There is evidence that micro societies play a crucial role in guiding people towards the conservative discourse. Kostas constructs the way that a child is raised by its parents as the dominant factor that would position it towards conservative values.

'When I was a child, I had my grandmother and my grandfather who were obviously Christians, as it is expected from people their age here in Greece. And of course, they pushed me towards Orthodox beliefs and practices. It is like being in a house where everyone supports a specific soccer team, you are bound to support the same team as well. In the same way, they would say "You are a Christian", "You will come with us to church today", "You will fast during easter", etc. After I started living alone, meeting new people, searching for things, I didn't really feel the need to go to the church anymore.' (Faker, Lines 59-68)

'Life in a village has certain protocols and influences. You don't really get to choose how you grow, you will grow in accordance with your father's beliefs, and his father's,

and your great grandfather's, etc. It's a small society where every family lives in a similar way and the beliefs of the old people prevail.' (Yuuki, Lines 172-176)

The familial influence is further evident in these extracts, where Faker describes how you are 'bound' to adopt the same beliefs as your family. Yuuki mentions how in Greek villages, the older individuals often have a significant influence on the dominant beliefs and values, since there are no external influences and families tend to be the only sources of knowledge. While people today were constructed as leaning towards the acceptive discourse, this doesn't seem to be the case for Greek villages. This is also due to the higher power that religion holds there, as aforementioned, while families are also mainly responsible for passing down to their children traditional morals and practices [57], which is how Scrooge described conservative people. Faker mentioned the religious beliefs of his grandparents as common, saying that such beliefs are to be expected from old Greek people, a discourse that goes in accordance with Yuuki's words that in villages, the beliefs of the old prevail. Therefore, while the acceptive discourse was viewed as more prevalent to younger Greeks, with light influence on their actions, the conservative discourse is adopted mostly by older people and has a high influence on their actions and how they shape their identities, which coherences with Makrides' study in 2018 [58], according to whom the conservative religious views are mostly adopted by older Greeks and are often linked to nationalism and the preservation of the Greek cultural identity.

DISCUSSION

This study utilized the methodology of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to conduct an extensive investigation into the subject matter at hand, exploring in-depth the ways in which discourses are constructed in regard to religious beliefs, how people's actions are determined inside these discourses, as well as their power relations inside the Greek society. Throughout the

analysis, evidence of discourses was identified that structure religion as a weakening construct, in addition to discursive variants of religious individuals which shape their identities and define their actions.

Discourses regarding the power erosion of religion in Greece were highlighted in this analysis. Constructs regarding the rising dynamics of education and social interaction are prevalent in this case, which contrast the findings of Karamouzis & Athanassiades in 2011 [31], according to whom, religious education in Greece was one-sided and not supportive towards critical thinking. It is probable that, in the 12 years since the previous study, religious education in Greece has undergone a shift towards a more critical and inclusive approach, as evidenced by the recent aforementioned political actions by the previous minister of education to address this issue which took place in 2015 [42]. Social interaction has also become easier over these years, due to the use of internet and social media. Precisely, it is estimated that, since 2010, the percentage of Greek population with access to the internet has risen upwards by 30%.

Through the increased ways of exchanging information and interacting with society, a discourse regarding the inefficiency and the corruption inside the Greek Orthodox church has been born. Through word of mouth and local newspapers further supporting this claim, this corruption has been passed as common knowledge among Greek citizens. Throughout the analysis, data emerged indicating that this corruption grows its roots inside a few individuals who are not proper representatives of the church and harm its overall image. In contradiction between the funding and supporting needs for the proper functionality of the church, and the reluctance to further hold faith inside that system and continue to support it in both mental and practical ways, a heated debate has erupted in a global scale regarding Christianity on whether and on

what extent the Christian churches should be further supported [59].

Among the discourses that are constructed through religion inside Greece, the conservative discourse has been the dominant one for decades. As Stavrakakis study in 2003 [27] suggests, religion in Greece has been commonly used in order to exercise political action and ideologies with high success rates, a fact that has been dominant the most in Greece during the era of military junta, which ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. The junta sought to legitimize its authoritarian rule by portraying itself as a defender of traditional Greek values, morals and conservative religious beliefs, while also suppressing religious and political oppositions, especially advocates for secularism, as well as any form of critical education and any sort of gatherings that would enhance social interaction [60]. The junta's use of the conservative religious discourse was a fundamental tool in its broader strategy of maintaining power through propaganda, repression, and censorship [61]. This time period, marked by junta's motto 'Greece of Christian Greeks' [62], provides insight on the immense power that the conservative discourse holds in Greece, which extends to a great scale up to this date. According to Foucault, power dictates the terms of knowledge, filtering which beliefs and action can be considered acceptable and unacceptable inside a discourse [63], which is clear inside that time period. Inside the analysis, the conservative discourse appears mostly prevalent inside micro societies like the Greek villages, but still holding great power over those who position themselves towards it, heavily influencing their life choices. This is portrayed by the participants due to the poor critical education and social interaction that differentiates the Greek villages from the main cities, which limits the construction of new knowledge and alternative beliefs [64]. Given that education and social interaction are identified as the primary factors within Greece that diminish the impact of religion,

the continued prevalence of conservative religious discourse in Greek villages becomes all the more apparent, as religion holds a significant degree of power in these areas.

In the context of Greek society, there is a discernible shift from conservative religious beliefs exerting a stronger influence within micro societies to a more accepting discourse prevailing at the macro societal level. Although the governing conservative discourse traditionally frowned upon tolerance towards religious diversity, a study conducted by Triandafyllidou & Kokkali in 2011 [32] revealed the presence of such traces within Greek society. Over the course of 12 years, as education and social interaction have flourished, diminishing the influence of religion, these traces have evolved into a prevailing discourse within Greek macro societies. Individuals aligning with this discourse are not necessarily heavily influenced by the church nor strictly adhering to Orthodox religious practices. However, they place significant value on their own religious beliefs and demonstrate a willingness to coexist with those who hold different faiths, which aligns with the direction Greek politics have been moving towards in the past decade [65]. This discourse is particularly prominent among younger individuals, as they have come of age during an era that emphasizes on social interaction [66].

While the present study addresses a neglected research topic, it offers only a glimpse into the various discourses constructed around religion in Greece. It is important to note that there were more themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data which were not analyzed in this study. One such theme, along with the acceptive and the conservative discourse, is the existence of a fanaticism discourse, wherein individuals would exaggerate and put their religious beliefs and practices above everything in their lives, including their family and the law. This could suggest that religion in Greece could also adopt

characteristics of a cult, a common case when it comes to religion in general [67], which could lead the faithful into a loss of self-identity, conformity to the demands of the church, as well as vulnerability to social and political control [68]. Another emergent theme pertained to the beneficial attributes of religion. Throughout the interviews, the participants constructed religion as a source of mental strength, hope, and personal development within society. Certainly, quantitative studies constantly produce a significant effect of religion in a global scale against stressors, up to a level that just being religious makes an individual less vulnerable to depression [69, 70, 71]. Future studies could potentially further explore this concept of religion's beneficial attributes by using different methodological approaches, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to fully comprehend how an individual experiences and comprehends religion inside Greece. A similar study with a larger number of participants could also capture in a better degree the diversity, the complexity, and the dynamics of religious beliefs and discourses across the country. Consequently, religion remains a topic deserving of further scholarly attention. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the evolving discourses constructed from religion within Greek society. It highlights the transition from conservative beliefs dominating micro societies to a more accepting discourse prevailing at the macro societal level. The presence of tolerance towards religious diversity indicates a changing landscape influenced by education, social interaction, and shifting political dynamics. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of other discourses, such as fanaticism, and the beneficial attributes of religion that emerged from the data. The findings of this study contribute to the body of literature on religion inside the Greek society, underscoring the significance of religion as a subject for further research and exploration.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interview Agenda

Core questions:

- 1) What does religion mean to you?
- 2) (If they believe) Do you participate in religious activities like your religion demands?
Why / Why not?
- 3) Do you judge others based on their religious beliefs and activities?
(If yes) Why? Do you feel that others judge your religious beliefs?
- 4) Do you believe that religion influences people?
In what way? Is that good or bad?
- 5) Do you think that religion affects mental strength?
(If yes) How?
- 6) Do you feel that religion affects social status and power?
Further explain why / why not.
- 7) Do you think that all the above also apply on smaller societies of Greece?
Why / Why not?

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