

The Idiosyncrasy of Greek Islam and the Mosque of Votanikos as a Reconciliation Initiative

A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate how the mosque of Votanikos has emerged as a reconciliation initiative with a wider reconciling dynamic within Greek reality and history. It places the initiative of the construction of the mosque in its wider context, while also considering the idiosyncrasy of Greek Islam, historical conditions, tensions from within, and pressures from without. The mosque of Votanikos can and should be perceived as initiating the healing of wounded memories and as a high-impact symbolic reconciliation initiative reaching out to the grassroots level of society. The paper employs critical discourse analysis, examining the foreign and Greek media coverage of the issue.

Keywords

mosque of Votanikos, Greek Islam, Islamophobia, reconciliation, discourse analysis

The headline of an article published on 14 November 2020 in *The New York Times* stated, “It Took a Century to Open a Mosque in Athens.”¹ The idea of the construction of the first mosque in Athens in recent years sparked controversy between certain

¹ Niki Kitsantonis, “It Took a Century to Open a Mosque in Athens: Then Came the Pandemic,” *New York Times*, 14 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/14/world/europe/athens-mosque-coronavirus.html>.

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DOI: 10.1111/erev.12747

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extremist circles and received the attention of foreign and Greek media alike. The delay of the implementation of the plan for the first official mosque of the capital of Greece was scrutinized by international media with an implicit accusatory rhetoric. The mosque of Votanikos, denoting the idiosyncratic nature of Greek Islam within the European context, was caught in a whirlwind of heated political disputes between Greece and Turkey and pressures from the dictated European status quo. This occurred under the auspices of heavily burdened historical realities and a transgenerational trauma deeply embedded and still operating in the Greek collective memory. It is against this background that the building of the state-funded mosque of Votanikos should be understood as an initiative with symbolic significance, conveying various peacebuilding potentials that expand to the grassroots of Greek society.

This article attempts a critical discourse analysis of the media coverage of the issue. This approach provides insights into how the media language relates to the Greek socio-political and historical context while also examining the contextual meaning of the language. It also focuses on social aspects of communication to achieve specific effects. The analysis will be based solely on media reports and articles, outlining a chronological timeline of the headlines published online about the topic. The gradual development of the discourse sheds light on the complexity of the issue, which in most cases is neglected or insufficiently covered. Emphasis will be placed on articles that sketch the intricacy of the public discourse. The selection of the news broadcasters for the analysis is based on their popularity.

The Mosque in the Media Discourse

According to the *Greek Reporter* of 6 September 2012, “An estimated 500,000 Muslims live in Greece, with about 40% of them in Athens. Many of them [are] illegal immigrants, recent targets of racist attacks and a government purge to rid the city of them, moves which have intensified enmity toward Muslims. More than half of Greeks polled last year opposed an official mosque.”² “Athens: The EU Capital City without a Mosque” was the title of a BBC article published online on 28 December 2012, in which the journalist emphasized that the residence of “many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who enter Greece are Muslim, yet Athens remains the only EU capital without an official mosque.”³ Reuters was in “search

² Phaedon Boukas, “Without a Mosque, Greece’s Muslims Go Underground,” *Greek Reporter*, 6 September 2012, <https://greekreporter.com/2012/09/06/without-a-mosque-greeces-muslims-go-underground>.

³ Mark Lowen, “Athens: The EU Capital City without a Mosque,” *BBC News*, 28 December 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20820349>.

of a mosque in Athens,” citing the response of an interviewee that “soon there won’t be a single Muslim in Athens.”⁴ “Athens Muslims Worship Underground in Absence of Official Mosque,” the title of a media report published by the Australian ABC News on 10 June 2016, emphatically warned against the “fear [that] double-standard risks alienating Muslims.”⁵ Another title, from *The Economist*, “Where Islam Flourishes Despite Being Half-Underground,” pointed at “the strange social reality of Islam in Greece.” *The World*, on 29 April 2017, stated, “Athens doesn’t have a single mosque, so Muslims worship in makeshift prayer rooms.”⁶

Based on the above, the media seem to have a negative interpretation of the delay in the implementation of the plans for the construction of the mosque. At the same time, they seem to be implicitly accusatory regarding the overall situation of Islam in Greece, sketching an ambiguous religious tolerance reality within the country. While the Muslim immigrant population in Greece is rising, the media voice concerns for the potential marginalization of the Muslims in the capital.

What seems to dominate the foreign media discourse is the European identity at stake, the European self-perception of being affirmative toward the Muslim communities, and the unnegotiable need to respect human dignity. Athens, counted among European capitals, should align with their example. The lack of a mosque becomes a European contradistinction, and Athens is juxtaposed to other European capitals that have fully operational mosques. The rhetoric of the headlines on the one hand disregards the complex situation of the historical encounter between Greece and Islam and on the other hand presents Greece intentionally, or unintentionally, as a scapegoat. In doing this, they neglect other European nations’ discriminatory restrictions and subtle Islamophobic behaviours and policies. In fact, the refugee-migration-Islam-terrorism nexus became the standard argument justifying a number of domestic and international measures within Europe, according to the European Islamophobia Report of 2015.⁷

⁴ Yorgos Karahalios, “The Search for a Mosque in Athens,” *Reuters*, 27 June 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUS331443891420130627>.

⁵ Briette Hague, “Athens Muslims Worship Underground in Absence of Official Mosque,” *ABC News*, 10 June 2016, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-11/muslims-forced-to-worship-in-underground-mosque-in-athens/7501488?fbclid=IwAR2m8jz4q5HZo35BZ5TXXJVYq0hh-3B4Q7RJ2DRzhhAQtbG79cHUVrB_n6Y.

⁶ D.I. and Erasmus, “Where Islam Flourishes Despite Being Half-Underground,” *The Economist*, 27 May 2018, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2018/05/27/where-islam-flourishes-despite-being-half-underground>.

⁷ Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, eds, *European Islamophobia Report* (SETA, 2015), http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015.pdf

Mosque Discourse in History

Despite the controversies and accusations, the actual history and discussion around a mosque in Athens predate recent developments. In 1890, the AONA/1851 law was introduced, according to which a plot of land was to be freely granted to the Ottoman government “for the construction of a Turkish mosque” – to no avail. During the same period, the Piraeus municipality granted the Ottoman government a plot of three acres in Palaia Kokkinia for a Muslim cemetery. The site still exists today; however, since 1954 it has been unilaterally designated as a military cemetery by Turkey, the country that manages it. In 1913, the third protocol of the Athens Peace Treaty stated explicitly, “The Greek Royal Government will build at its own expense, a Mosque in the capital.” After the exchange of populations following the Lausanne Treaty, the situation changed drastically, and the plans for the construction of the mosque were not realized. A new law followed in 1934, according to which the Greek government granted to Egypt three-and-a-half acres in Maroussi to build a mosque and an Egyptian institute. During the junta regime, the mosque discussions were forced to stop, and only after its overthrowing was the issue again raised – primarily by Arab ambassadors, especially from Saudi Arabia. This was the time of the lavish financing of the creation of Islamic cultural centres and mosques in European countries. The first decisive steps toward the establishment of a mosque were taken with the occasion of the Olympics of 2004, when the need for a special prayer area for the Muslim athletes was raised. That led to the passing of a law in 2000 for the creation of an “Islamic cultural center.” The whole plan was quickly abandoned due to direct opposition from nationalists and ultra-religious groups. After a few years, in 2006, the issue was revisited, with the decision to construct a mosque in the area of Votanikos in Athens.⁸

The mosque of Votanikos, Athen’s first mosque, is located at 144 Iera Odos in the Votanikos district. It opened on Monday, 3 November 2020, with these words of the general secretary of religious affairs, Giorgos Kalantzis: “A long effort by successive governments since 2006, when Law 3512 was passed, has been completed. Greece sends a clear message inside and outside the country, of democracy, religious freedom and respect.” The mosque’s first imam is the Moroccan-born Zaki Mohammed, a Greek citizen.⁹ The mosque has the capacity to host 300 people.

⁸ Αγγελος Συρίγος, “Και πάλι περί του Τεμένου,” *Η Καθημερινή*, 16 October 2016, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/879389/kai-pali-peri-toy-temenoys>.

⁹ Apostolos Lakasas, “Athens’ First Mosque Opens Its Doors after 14-Year Wait: Exclusive Footage,” *ekathimerini.com*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/258747/athens-first-mosque-opens-its-doors-after-14-year-wait-exclusive-footage>.

The Mosque and Controversial Historical-Political Discourse

The results of an online search using the phrase “mosque in Athens” show, along with stories that emphasize the delay, various related topics touching on certain dimensions of international politics. This is not incidental. The construction of the mosque has been caught up not only in the political conflicts of Greece and Turkey but also in historical transgenerational trauma, with Islam being “a concept inseparable from the dark days of the Ottoman Empire.”¹⁰

Pointing to the tense relations of Greece and Turkey, the *National Herald* wrote, “Ironically, it comes after Turkey changed the status of the ancient-revered church of Aghia Sophia in Constantinople into a mosque along with another church and as Turkey is demanding more rights for a Muslim minority in northern Greece.”¹¹ *Euronews*, on 24 July 2020, reported about the protests in Greece over the decision to turn Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque. Protesters gathered at the Athens’ Kolokotroni square carrying banners with the slogan “No to new Ottomanism,” condemning “the second capture of Constantinople.” A similar protest took place, with approximately 150 participants, in Thessaloniki, the second-largest city in Greece.¹² As an article in the *Greek Reporter* attests, “Hagia Sophia in Istanbul remains the symbolic center of the Greek Orthodox Faith even almost six centuries after its fall to the Ottomans and its conversion to a mosque” being the “eastern heart of Christianity.” After the fall of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia operated as a mosque until 1934, when Turkish President Kemal Atatürk converted it to a museum.¹³ News 18 reported, on 6 August 2020, “Greek Muslims Fear Hagia Sophia Retaliation May Delay Mosque in Athens Despite Decade-Long Wait.”¹⁴ A later article by Reuters on 10 July 2022 reproduced the response from the Greek prime minister’s office: “Greece condemns in the most intense manner the decision

¹⁰ “Athens No Longer Last European Capital without a Mosque, First One since Ottoman Days Set to Open,” *RT*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/456044-votnikos-mosque-athens-open>.

¹¹ “Delayed Years, Athens’ First Mosque Will Open Doors in October,” *The National Herald*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.thenationalherald.com/delayed-years-athens-first-mosque-will-open-doors-in-october>.

¹² Alessio Dellanna, “Watch Back: Athens’ Protest as Turkey’s Hagia Sophia Becomes a Mosque,” *Euronews*, 24 July 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/24/church-of-greece-mourning-as-istanbul-s-6th-century-hagia-sophia-is-reconverted-into-a-mos>.

¹³ Philip Chrysopoulos, “Hagia Sophia: The Center of Greek Orthodox Faith through the Ages,” 20 July 2022, <https://greekreporter.com/2022/07/20/hagia-sophia-the-center-of-greek-orthodox-faith-through-the-ages>.

¹⁴ “Greek Muslims Fear Hagia Sophia Retaliation May Delay Mosque in Athens Despite Decade-long Wait,” *News 18*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/greek-muslims-fear-hagia-sophia-retaliation-may-delay-mosque-in-athens-despite-decade-long-wait-2763105.html>.

of Turkey to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque. This is a choice which offends all those who also recognize the monument as a World Heritage Site. And of course, it does not only affect the relations between Turkey and Greece, but its relations with the EU.”¹⁵

The above-mentioned media reports capture the essence of a deep-rooted historical-political conflict and express the fear of retaliation as well as the potential instrumentalization of mosques and churches in the international affairs arena. The correlation between the Votanikos mosque and international affairs was the determining factor for the postponement of implementing the mosque initiative, as is easily discerned from the media. The persistent political tensions as well as military provocations and violations, disputes in the Aegean Sea, and the defiance of international law and treaties regulating the relations between Greece and Turkey influenced the Greek media. As stated at the European Islamophobia report of 2015,

When talking about Islamophobia in Greece, it is crucial to have in mind that debates on Islam are deeply rooted in and strongly intertwined with the experience of a long Ottoman occupation and its collective interpretations. The Ottoman rule was a serious trauma and crucial juncture in the creation of the collective identity of the Greek people and the Ottoman past is still present in the predominant memories of the national self and ‘Other’. This was moreover bolstered by ongoing conflicts between Greece and Turkey such as the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ of 1922 and the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974, as well as more recent crises during the 1980s and 1990s. As a consequence, despite all the contemporary developments that are related with the rise of ‘radical Islam’, this historical past should always be taken under consideration when it comes to the issue of Islamophobia in the country.¹⁶

The Islamophobic Discourse

On the other side of the spectrum is the rhetoric of hatred, articulated primarily by the most radical elements of Greek society, such as the Islamophobic neo-fascist Golden Dawn party. This party “pledged to organize mass protests against the construction of a mosque in central Athens after the tender for the project was awarded,” according to the English edition of *Kathimerini* on 11 November 2013.¹⁷

¹⁵ “UPDATE 1: Greece Condemns Turkey’s Decision to Convert Hagia Sophia into Mosque,” Reuters, 10 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-museum-verdict-greece-idINL8N2EH4WH>.

¹⁶ Bayrakli and Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report*, 204.

¹⁷ “Golden Dawn Threatens Anti-Mosque Rallies Following Construction Contract,” *ekathimerini.com*, 11 November 2013, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/155524/golden-dawn-threatens-anti-mosque-rallies-following-construction-contract>.

Similar bigotry is demonstrated in the following statement by the Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus on 1 January 2012: “The establishment of a mosque in the center of the city of Athens will not only harm the public order and morals of Greek society but will also be the starting point of a series of events that will mathematically lead to the deconstruction of the unity of the Greek nation, as Orthodox Christian people.”¹⁸ In a meeting with the general secretary of the Golden Dawn Party, Metropolitan Anthimos of Thessaloniki talked about the “Islamization of the homeland” as a consequence of the mosque of Votanikos.¹⁹

However, Islamophobic statements do not seem to resonate with the great majority of the Greek society or the official stance of the Greek Orthodox Church. In the *Financial Times*, we read that a “2017 survey conducted by the Dianeosis Research and Policy Institute revealed that only 36.3 per cent of the Greek population reacted positively to the word ‘Muslim.’” According to Iason Zarikos, “this is not evidence of widespread Islamophobia, but rather of a pervasive indifference.”²⁰ The director of the press office of the Holy Archdiocese of Athens communicated a mitigated position on the matter, stating that “religious freedom in our country, as reflected in article 13 of the constitution, is fully guaranteed, as it includes freedom of religious conscience and freedom of religious worship. Furthermore, this issue at this particular juncture also has a political dimension, so it is the state that is competent to resolve it, not us. We are simply expressing our reservations.”²¹

The EU-funded *GREASE*, published in November 2019, is a detailed assessment of the religious diversity and violent religious radicalization in Greece. According to the evaluation, religion is an identity-forming element to the extent that Greek ethnicity and religiosity are hard to differentiate. A “unique model of religious governance prevails in Greece where the Eastern Orthodoxy occupies a prominent place in the public sphere. The definition of citizenship is formulated on the basis of the *jus sanguinis*. The Greek state characterized by its ‘historical anxiety’ fueled by traditional

¹⁸ “Προσφυγή του Μητροπολίτη Σεραφείμ στο ΣτΕ για το τζαμί στον Βοτανικό,” *iefimerida*, 2 January 2012, <https://www.iefimerida.gr/news>.

¹⁹ “Συνάντηση «σε θερμό κλίμα» μητροπολίτη Ανθίμου με Μιχαλολιάκο και Ζαρούλια,” *Athens Voice*, 3 March 2017, <https://www.athensvoice.gr/epikairota/politiki-oikonomia/346783/synantisi-se-thermo-klima-mitropolit-anthimoy-me/amp>.

²⁰ Madeleine Speed, “The Battle to Build a Mosque in Athens,” *Financial Times*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/ae4fa654-2416-11e9-8ce6-5db4543da632>.

²¹ Άγγελος Προβολισιάνος, “Τι λένε οι Μουσουλμάνοι και Αρχιεπισκοπή για το τέμενος στην Αθήνα,” 14 May 2015, <https://www.in.gr/2015/05/14/greece/ti-lene-moysoylmanoikai-archiepiskopi-gia-to-temenos-stin-athina/>.

tensions in Balkan Peninsula constructed the Greek national identity in opposition to a Muslim ‘Other.’”²²

The Idiosyncrasy of Greek Islam

The mosque discourse correlates also with the various rising issues of the Muslim minority in Thrace. In comparison to the Western European realities, Islam in Greece is not a new or recent phenomenon. The centuries-long Ottoman rule enabled various encounters between Greece and Islam. Due to these special historical conditions, Greek Islam could be divided roughly into “Old” and “New” Islam. Old Islam refers to the Greek indigenous Muslim minority of Western Thrace with Greek citizenship, whose settlement is regulated by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Old Islam has a continuous historical existence in the country and is differentiated from New Islam, where the latter refers to the relevant newer immigrant communities whose citizenship and national background vary. Despite the common religious Muslim identity, the two groups are quite distinct, something which applies to their legal status as well. Among the European Union member states, only in Greece do these two forms of Islam exist parallel to one another.²³ The Muslims falling into the category of New Islam range from less than 100,000 to 500,000.²⁴

For the Old Islam, there are and have been mosques in Greece. The oldest mosque in the wider Balkan region is the Mosque of Sultan Beyazit in Western Thrace, built between 1389 and 1402. The great majority of the mosques today are registered as cultural landmarks and operate as museums protected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. According to a 2010 article by Skoulariki, there are 300 mosques and *mescits* (prayer rooms) in Greece spread across the three regions of Xanthi, Rodopi, and Evros that are registered as *wakf*, namely, property belonging to the Muslim communities, with 270 imams and 3 muftis in Xanthi, in Komotini, and one in Didymoteicho. According to the Lausanne provisions, Islamic family law (*shari’ah*) is still implemented in Thrace.²⁵

The management of the religious diversity in Greece associated with New Islam, in addition to the historical backdrop pertaining to the regulation of Old Islam,

²² Eda Gemi, “Country Report: Greece,” *GREASE* (November 2019), 4, <http://grease.eu.eu/wp-content>.

²³ Konstantinos Tsitselikes, *Old and New Islam in Greece: From Historical Minorities to Immigrant Newcomers*. Studies in International Minority and Group Rights 5 (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2012), 19–20.

²⁴ “Athens No Longer Last European Capital without a Mosque,” <https://www.rt.com/news/456044-votnikos-mosque-athens-open>.

²⁵ Athena Skoulariki, “Old and New Mosques in Greece: A New Debate Haunted by History,” in *Mosques in Europe: Why a Solution Has Become a Problem*, ed. Stefano Allievi (London: Publishing Trust/NEF, 2010), 300–17.

remains one of the most significant challenges facing Greek society and politics. New Islam as a diverse and multifarious expression of Islam in Greece, on the one hand, and the long-standing tensions between Greece and Turkey regarding Old Islam appear to have shaped public opinion. Security concerns are intertwined with the national geopolitical agenda and notions of identity. However, it should be mentioned that the legal framework for religious minorities in Greece has been significantly improved, encompassing liberal principles and human rights standards, recognizing individuals' equality before the law regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation.²⁶

Understanding the difference between the two Islams is crucial in clarifying the peacemaking potentials of the Votanikos mosque in the heart of Athens. The mosque of Votanikos is a mosque for New Islam, and as an initiative it aims at exploring and encountering this versatile form of Islam, which is still to a great extent unknown to the wider public. The existence of New Islam was further intensified with the migration of the last decade, when Greece was confronted with the infamous financial crisis.

Beyond Media Reception: The Mosque as a Key Reconciliation Initiative

Giorgos Kalantzis, general secretary of religious affairs, pointed out,

One of the strongest messages of the mosque is the firm and clear condemnation of Islamophobia. Our country has absolutely nothing to fear from Islam. The Muslims of Greece have proven by their actions that they are a peaceful, peace-loving, hard-working community and contribute to the overall progress of the country. Islamophobia is a serious problem. Because, behind Islamophobia, what is really in question are the great values that characterize our culture, our constitution, and the European Convention on Human Rights. Islamophobia is a serious threat to these values, and we should not under any circumstances either directly or indirectly contribute to its development.²⁷

In the words of Zaki Mohamed, the mosque's imam, in June 2019, "I would like to start by thanking Allah that we finally have a mosque where we can pray, we can gather, we can talk about our matters." Ashir Haidar, a representative of the Shia Muslim community of Greece, described the opening of the mosque as "a dream

²⁶ Gemi, "Country Report: Greece," 20–21.

²⁷ Μελομένη Μαραγκίδου, και Θεοδωρή Νικολάου, "Ακολουθήσαμε μία Ελληνίδα μουσουλμάνα στην Πρώτη της Προσευχή στο Τέμενος του Βοτανικού," *VICE*, 5 November 2020, <https://www.vice.com/el/article/akdd58/akoloy8hsame-mia-ellhnida-moysoylmana-sthn-prwth-ths-proseyxh-sto-temenos-toy-botanikoy>.

come true”: “It is a great gift from the Greek state to the Muslim community of Athens and it is a symbolic work that shows respect of the Greek state to the religion of Islam.”²⁸ “We’re a democracy and there has to be freedom of religion,” says Aggeliki Anagnostopoulou, a retiree living near the site of the upcoming mosque. “Why should I be worried, anyway? Being a Muslim doesn’t mean you’re an extremist.”²⁹

Considering the above, one could argue in favour of a positive evaluation of the mosque of Votanikos and an evolving awareness and recognition of New Islam, despite the delays of the actual construction of the mosque. It is of great importance to contextualize the idiosyncratic nature of Greek Islam, which constitutes a far different case than other expressions of European Islam.

First, despite the pompous headlines and common misconceptions, before the mosque of Votanikos, Athens was not the last European capital without a mosque. The lack of an official mosque is to be observed also in the capitals of Ljubljana and Bucharest. The chosen site of Votanikos, centrally located, is easily accessible through public transportation, with a certain distance from residential areas. This location prevents the ghettoization of the mosque that is seen in other European cities.³⁰ The architectural design of the mosque does not include a minaret, in accordance with similar regulations applying in Switzerland.³¹ Another dimension that has not received the proper attention in Greek media discourse about the mosque is the fact that the mosque of Votanikos is the only completely state-funded mosque in Europe, with a total budget of almost 900,000 euros.³² What also speaks in favour of the positively evolving Muslim existence in Greece is the fact that there is zero evidence of Islamic radicalization being a threat to the country. Despite the presentation of Greece as almost religiously intolerant, Greece has never been a target of extremist Islamism and has never been confronted with Islamist radicalization.³³

²⁸ “Delayed Years.”

²⁹ Nikolia Apostolou, “Muslims in Athens Prepare for the City’s First Mosque,” *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/11/25/muslims-in-athens-prepare-for-the-citys-first-mosque>.

³⁰ Συρίγος, “Και πάλι περί του Τεμένους,” https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/879389/kai-pali-peri-toy-temen-oy/?fbclid=IwAR1Mq9jcZN9PuThrEIL6whHwzh7_ZOE-RHo85luK7c0SFc1MoY9q-l0NeKM.

³¹ See an analysis of the ban of minarets in Todd H. Green, “The Resistance to Minarets in Europe,” *Journal of Church and State* 52:4 (2010), 619–43.

³² “Athens No Longer Last European Capital without a Mosque.”

³³ Dimitris Skleparis, “Explaining the Absence of Islamist Terrorist Attack and Radicalisation in Greece,” ELIAMEP Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, <https://www.eliamep.gr/en>.

Although there are still many measures to be taken to reinforce and further foster religious diversity in Greece, the mosque was a daring first step in that direction, establishing and introducing “New Islam” to the Greek reality. Greek society’s familiarization with New Islam is a process in the making, strengthened by the mosque of Votanikos. The mosque of Votanikos is a mosque for New Islam, a first decisive step of including and integrating it into the Greek religious landscape with the Orthodox Church. The mosque was not stipulated or dictated based on bilateral treaties or international law, as the 300 mosques of Old Islam were. New Islam is thus being recognized, gaining its own space and status in the public sphere and discourse as an official practising community protected by the state.

The mosque’s New Islam is a paradigm shift and symbolizes the changes that Greek society must go through. It calls for reflection on the definition of national identity, which is reoriented, not directly defined in juxtaposition with the religious Muslim “other” to rationalize the otherness.³⁴ The mosque of Votanikos gives the impetus for the disassociation of Islam from the traumatic four centuries of Ottoman rule, necessitating new coping mechanisms for the historical transgenerational collective trauma. The Turkish connotations that the term “Islam” conveys are still prevalent and are expressed through the Greek reservations toward Islam in Greece in general. “100 years later, the trauma that Greek survivors experienced during the final years of the Ottoman Empire has been passed on to their descendants.”³⁵ The trauma on the individual and collective level of Greek society, especially following the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the ethnic cleansing of the Greeks by the Turks in 1922, continues to be fuelled by the ongoing tense political situation with Turkey, extending it onto the younger generations. The Votanikos mosque is the beginning of a healing process not only for a Greek collective transgenerational trauma but also for the uprooted migrant Muslims who were exposed to all sorts of hardships and who are seeking security and a better future outside their homelands. The mutual recognition of trauma will result in reconciliation and intensify interreligious and intercultural exchanges in everyday life “for peace to prevail throughout the whole world.”³⁶

³⁴ Christina Verousi and Chris Allen, “Problematising the Official Athens Mosque: Between Mere Place of Worship and 21st Century ‘Trojan Horse,’” *Religions* 12:485 (2021), 17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070485>.

³⁵ Themistocles Kritikakos, “100 Years since the Catastrophe of Smyrna: Trauma and Memory in Contemporary Australia,” *The National Herald*, 2 September 2022, <https://greekherald.com.au/culture/history/100-years-since-the-catastrophe-of-smyrna-trauma-and-memory-in-contemporary-australia>. On the Greek transgenerational and collective trauma, see Erik Sjöberg, *The Making of the Greek Genocide: Contested Memories of the Ottoman Greek Catastrophe*, War and Genocide Vol. 23 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

³⁶ Ειρήνη Χάτζογλου, “Τζαμί Βοτανικού -Ο ιμάμης στο iefimerida: Οι Έλληνες θα καταλάβουν τη θέση μου και με τη βοήθεια του Αλλάχ θα ζήσουμε ειρηνικά,” *iefimerida*, 4 November 2020, <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/tzami-botanikoy-o-imamis-zaki-sto-iefimerida-oi-ellines-tha-katalaboyn-ti-thesi-moy-kai-me>.