

Cyprus: Bridging the Divide Through Interreligious Dialogue

A Tumultuous History

The 1950s and 1960s marked a tumultuous period in the history of Cyprus, characterized by intercommunal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots that undermined the newly gained independence from British rule. The ethnic tensions reached a breaking point with the invasion of Turkey in 1974, putting to an end the island's short-lived unity.

The complexity of Cyprus' reconciliation is evident in the conflict famously getting labeled as intractable. Despite numerous attempts to reunite the island, division remains part of a daily reality, with Greek Cypriots residing mostly in the south of the island and the Turkish Cypriots in the north. Nevertheless, there remains a hope that through the

Annotations

- ***! Wow, woah***
- ***? Confusion***

- ***React to the text!***
- ***Highlight in GREEN if you***

feel a connection to the text

- ***Create a gist (20 words or less next to each paragraph)***

workings of non-governmental organizations, the island can move one step closer to reunification.

A Shift From Negative to Positive Peace

The Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung makes a distinction between negative peace, characterized by the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, involving the harmonious coexistence of human society. While Cyprus has achieved a state of negative peace with direct violence ceasing after 1974, it still falls short of positive peace, which envisions Greek and Turkish Cypriots coexisting and sharing space in a unified Cyprus. Galtung emphasizes that true reconciliation necessitates a transition from negative to positive peace.

In fact, Cyprus came closest to reunification in 2004 when a referendum was held for Greek and Turkish Cypriots to vote on the Annan Plan, a proposed resolution by the United Nations named after former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan. As Salpy Eskidjian, the founder of the peacebuilding initiative called

Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, said, it was precisely the absence of positive peace that resulted in only 24% of Greek Cypriots voting in favor, while Turkish Cypriots showed a higher rate of approval at 65%.

"Trust and peace ground should already exist for reconciliation. It is reconciliation that gives birth to a peace agreement! Not vice versa," Eskidjian said.

The Birth of the Religious Track Of The Cyprus Peace Process

Since 2011, the Religious Track of the Cyprus Process (RTCYPP) has served as an important for fostering interfaith dialogue among religious leaders from different communities in Cyprus.

The idea for establishing the RTCYPP came right after the failure of the Annan Plan. At that time, in 2004, Eskidjian worked at the World Council of Churches and was tasked with studying the Annan plan and proposing action steps. She soon uncovered a critical oversight by the UN—not every key stakeholder had been consulted when drafting the peace resolution.

"Religious leaders and faith based institutions were not given a seat at the table, Eskidjian said. "They were excluded from the discussions and were not invited to be part of the bi-communal civil society efforts."

“Peace agreement is like a glass tower, and anyone left out is like a small pebble capable of cracking it!” Eskidjian said. It was especially true for Greek Cypriots, where “religion is very much part of culture and identity even of those who say they are not religious—there are weddings, christenings, etc.,” Eskidjian said.

“There was no space where religious communities met for anything—not even to greet each other on special occasions like Christmas or Eid,” she added.

In light of these considerations, the proposal to establish the RTCYPP emerged, intending to promote interfaith dialogue to advance human rights and foster peace and reconciliation. It garnered overwhelming support from the religious leaders of Cyprus, encompassing not only the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, but also minority religions on the island, such as the Maronite, Armenian, and Latin churches.

"We approached the initiative by establishing a foundation rooted in human rights, rather than a religious framework," Eskidjian said. "We delved into questions surrounding universal human rights and international law, seeking ways to promote religious freedom collectively. Although reconciliation was an integral aspect, the primary emphasis of the religious leaders initially remained on advancing human rights, mainly freedom of religion or belief."

Religious Leaders' Work on Advancing Human Rights

To date, religious heads have made several joint statements such as the "Joint Statement on the Resumption of Peace Talks" (26 February 2014), the "Joint Statement of the Religious Leaders of Cyprus, against all forms of attacks, terrorism, and violence" (24 November 2015), the "Joint appeal for missing persons in Cyprus" (9 December 2016), and the "Joint Statement Condemning Violence Against Women and Girls" (8 March 2017).

In the context of seeking truth and reconciliation, Eskidjian particularly emphasized the importance of the joint appeal on missing persons in Cyprus. In the aftermath of the 1974 war, more than 2,000 Greek and Turkish Cypriots are still declared missing. The joint appeal marked a transformative shift, as it was no longer about handling information on missing persons just from one's own community.

<https://fb.watch/IWD3-n5Dgt/Video> produced by the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process. Cyprus, 2016.

In religious leaders' speeches, there was a shared acknowledgment of the humanity of Cypriots and recognition of the profound pain experienced by grieving families who are still unaware of the fate of lost loved ones, regardless of whether the person was a Greek or Turkish Cypriot.

"I do not think people yet realize how monumental it was," Eskidjian said.

Religious Heritage in Cyprus

The failure to involve religious communities in drafting the peace agreement meant the issues related to the sites of worship on the island remained unaddressed. In the Annan plan, “there was no special agreement with the religious leaders stating the fate of the monuments—it was unclear how and who would continue to care for and respect the places of worship as sacred spaces,” Eskidjian said.

As Greek Cypriot Christians were forcefully displaced to the south and Turkish Cypriot Muslims moved to the north, they left behind the intrinsic places of worship. Until the comprehensive agreement, the churches and Christian cemeteries would remain under the custodianship of the Islamic religious trust called the Cyprus Foundations Administration (EVKAF) and the Antiquities Department. This led to Christian sites and cemeteries being entrusted to local municipalities or administrations, often without clear agreements or expertise on how to properly administer and care for them. If the formerly Greek Cypriot

village had lacked a mosque, it was commonplace to turn a church into a mosque by taking down the cross, bell tower, looting, or throwing away all the icons. In other scenarios, churches were turned into storage places, stables, and entertainment halls, ignoring the pain it caused to Christian believers. The remaining sites have been abandoned and now are close to ruin with no one to care for them.

While Turkish Cypriots thought turning a church into a mosque signified a respectful gesture compared to total desecration, Christian Orthodox viewed these actions as disrespect.

“For orthodox ecclesiology, once a place of worship, always a place of worship. You can never transform it like we witness in a protestant or reformed Christian denomination. For the believers, every single stone is sacred and anointed with holy oils, every icon is not a mere picture but the image of the saint it represents. This is not just significant for faith but also deep in identity!” Eskidjian said.

Regarding the state of mosques in the Republic of Cyprus, the

government has identified 101 mosques that were left behind by the Turkish Cypriots. Currently, only eight of them are functioning. The rest of the mosques are restored but locked up and others have been left abandoned, requiring restoration to prevent further ruin.

With the facilitation of the RTCYPP, the leaders for the first time have acknowledged the importance of each other's struggles in preserving religious heritage together and advancing the right to freedom of religion as an intrinsic part of peacebuilding.

"If you are the one who has desecrated my place of worship, you have made it into a stable, or a café or a youth club without my consent. Now you start listening to me, you hear my pain, acknowledge, and recognize it. And then you stop and say you are sorry because you understand what you are doing hurts me. What we saw was former victim-aggressors starting to listen to one another, acknowledge each other's pain, move together, work hand in hand, and even start to advocate

for each other. It was an emotional, transformative, and very powerful journey,” Eskidjian said.	
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