

## Interview

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### With Charles Stewart<sup>1</sup>

### Dafne Accoroni<sup>2</sup>

**Dafne ACCORONI:** Dear Charles

Stewart, I thank you on behalf of *Insaniyat* for accepting this interview for our current issue on “Religion and Religiosity in the Mediterranean”. To begin, I would like you to introduce yourself and particularly how you became interested in religion/religious practices in Greece, your area of expertise, among others.

**Charles STEWART:** Thank you very much for this opportunity. One thing you need to know is that I studied Classics (Ancient Greek and Latin) for my undergraduate degree. A fascination for language and its history, have remained a feature of my work ever since. For my undergraduate dissertation, I had the opportunity to go to South Italy and study the Greek dialects spoken in Puglia and Calabria. Interviewing people to collect samples of the language persuaded me that my true vocation was as an anthropologist. I could not envisage a career chained to a library. I needed to get out and see the world. What could be better than field research in Greece, where I eventually spent two years on the island of Naxos in the Cyclades. Many people had argued that elements of ancient Greek religion had been transformed and continued within Orthodox

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Christianity. As a critical anthropologist, I rejected that romantic continuity thesis. I designed a project that would look at various of these supposed holdovers from antiquity such as spirits called gorgones, neraides and the figure of death, Charon – the names for all of which reveal ancient roots. I studied them, however, not as continuities but synchronically, as part of local cosmology. My research explored the boundary between the great tradition (textual and dogmatic Orthodoxy) and the little tradition of Christianity practiced in a village. That is how I came to be an anthropologist of religion.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *How would you describe Religion/Religiosity in Greece?*

**Charles STEWART:** As the Greek revolutionaries proclaimed at the outset of their war for independence from the Ottomans, and as enshrined in the 1832 Constitution of their new state, Greek Orthodox Christianity is the ‘predominant’ (*epikratousa*) religion of Greece. The constitution also stated that “All natives who believe in Christ are Greeks”, thus enfranchising Catholics and Protestants. Over time it became clear, however, that Greekness really rested on being a Greek-speaker and a member of the Orthodox Church. Protestants and Catholics may be Greek citizens (like Muslims and Jews) but not co-ethnic Greeks. In Greek terms, they are members of the *ethnos* (nation, political body); they have the same *ethnotita* (nationality), but not necessarily the same *ethnikotita* (ethnicity). The problem arose pointedly in the 1990s because this word for ethnicity was not in regular circulation in Greek prior to that decade. This caused misunderstandings between anthropologists, and the Greek public.

But I am getting ahead of myself. At the time of my research into the practice of Greek Orthodoxy and its ‘superstitions’ (so labelled by the Church) it appeared to me that the Greek nation had managed to subsume everyone (save for Muslims, who mainly lived faraway in Thrace, or Jews, of whom only about 5,000 remained after the Holocaust) into the Greek *ethnos*. On the island of Naxos where I did fieldwork, there was a small Catholic community with their own church and priest. I thought they

were much more Greek than anything else. In Athens in 1983 it was virtually impossible to find restaurants serving any cuisine other than Greek. When my friend Roger Just, who had also written his PhD under the supervision of John Campbell at Oxford, published an article entitled “Triumph of the Ethnos” in 1989, I thought he described exactly what I saw: a society that had, in the 150 years of its existence to that point, absorbed all of the diverse communities living in the country at the time of independence and in the territories it subsequently annexed as it expanded to its present size. These included notably: Albanítes (Albanian-speakers); Vlachs (speakers of a Romanian dialect) and Slavic-speakers.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *Which prevailed between ethnotita (nationality) and ethnikotita (ethnicity)?*

**Charles STEWART:** This apparently tight social fabric began to fray dramatically in the decade after the collapse of the East Bloc, ignited not only by the ‘repatriation’ of Greeks from the former Soviet Union (and the question of whether they were really ethnic Greeks or just people trying to enter a European country) but also by the wave of Albanians who came across the northern border in search of jobs. Some of these Albanians were ethnic Greeks and possibly able to speak some Greek although they might have lost their Orthodoxy after decades of state atheism in communist Albania. Others might have been Muslims or Catholics whose religious faith had lapsed to varying degrees. The presence of the Albanians provoked general Greek public prejudice against foreigners, and even polarized the recognition of the long-resident Greek Albanítes. The Greekness of the very people the *ethnos* had so triumphed in absorbing possibly came into question. Added to this, international trends of multi-culturalism emanating from the USA encouraged people to celebrate their particular cultural roots, their ethnicity – that new concept for Greece. Around this same time, Greece also came increasingly under the legal authority of the European Court of Human Rights. Jehovah’s Witnesses appealed to this institution against the Greek state’s suppression of their right to evangelize, or to claim the right of conscientious

objection to military service without harsh punishment. On a visit back to Naxos around this time I saw anti-Catholic graffiti scrawled in black on the pristine whitewashed walls of the Catholic Church. The 1990s represented a perfect storm of forces that exposed pluralism and whipped up religious and ethnic chauvinism to the point where the ultra-right Golden Dawn party gained 7% of the vote in 2012.

I have surprised myself by going into this degree of detail on the friction between religions in Greece. My early research on religion took place before most of these developments occurred. My first book, *Demons and the Devil*, had nothing to do with this topic. It presented a cultural anthropological study of the spectrum of ambiguous evil beings spanning from the Orthodox Christian Devil to the nymphs, spirits and vampires of local popular religion. It delved into the cultural logic of religious imagery and the uncertain border between acceptable religion and illegitimate superstition. What seems important to study now is the articulation between religion, ethnic or communal identity, power, and state authority. Mediterranean countries tend, like Greece, to have a predominant religion and uncertain protections for the practice of other religions. The number of alternative religions in Greece is presently growing. Migrants have brought Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, while Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism have sprouted in new regions, brought by migrants from countries such as Poland, or conversion to Evangelical Christianity. Furthermore, New Age spiritualities such as yoga, tarot, reiki and crystals have gained followers, and there is even the revival of the Twelve Olympian Gods. Followers of this neo-pagan religion conduct rituals at the ancient temples found in Greece and assert that this religion, not Christianity, is the true religion of Greece.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *Your current research interests include the study of syncretism, creolization and dreaming. Could you elaborate on how they may shape contemporary Greek religious pluralism and/or religiouscape?*

**Charles STEWART:** From an objective viewpoint all religions, indeed most cultural forms, are syncretic in that they have synthesized forerunners. The Christian Easter, for example, has responded to and created a distinct variation on the Jewish Passover. The Last Supper was most probably a Seder. The Jewish rite of renewal got rolled into the Christian rite of annual renewal. Traffic does not go in one direction between religions. Chanukah may be older than Christmas, but in modern times it has certainly borrowed the gift-giving practices of Christmas. Picking apart the historical fusions between religions and rituals involves a cultural historical approach, but in order to become properly anthropological it requires capturing how the people involved perceive the matter. I could walk up to villagers on Naxos and tell them that their religion incorporated bits of ancient paganism and Judaism but they would shrug their shoulders in apathy, or possibly get annoyed that I might be impugning Orthodoxy.

On a daily basis most practitioners of the main religions of the Mediterranean - Christianity, Islam and Judaism - are likely to regard their body of faith and practice as integral and in some sense 'pure'. Yet, their religious leaders actively discourage unauthorized borrowings (syncretisms) and root them out if they can find them thereby indicating the indigenous perception that there is some present danger. Stricter versions of Islam (Salafism, Wahabism) inveigh against Mediterranean Muslim saints' shrines and the pilgrimages or other rituals that may take place at them. Periodic fundamentalisms may be viewed as anti-syncretic interventions that seek to remove accretions and restore the purity of the true religion.

From Morocco to Macedonia, Christians and Muslims have shared shrines and engaged in each other's practices such as stepping through a chain (like a large rosary) at the Christian monastery of Mar Elyas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, or crawling through a hole in the wall beneath the icons of Mary and Jesus at the monastery of Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista in Macedonia. These examples were brought to light by Glenn Bowman who edited a volume on the topic, *Sharing the Sacra*, and several other volumes on this theme have appeared in recent years (e.g. Couroucli's

*Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean*, and Barkan and Barkey's, *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites*). These studies do not always reveal syncretism, but they do indicate the juxtaposition and mutual positioning of the Abrahamic religions in particular locations. They illuminate the complex logics by which people compartmentalize their practices as cultural and not religious, or excuse them as minor appeals for healing rather than commitments to the god of another religion that would compromise one's own religious identity.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *What have been the effects of science and secularism on religion or on syncretism in Greece?*

**Charles STEWART:** Modern science has steadily cut into the authority of religion to explain the world thereby opening a space for agnosticism if not atheism. This relativizing of religion allows for new types of syncretism. Perhaps these can be labelled middle class syncretism in that they arise from higher education and the awareness of global trends in New Age religiosity. One highly cosmopolitan Greek anthropologist, Pola Bousiou, once sent me a syncretic thank-you note that consisted of a montage of Hindu and Greek Orthodox iconography. Her book, *Nomads of Mykonos*, showed that anthropologists play a role here beyond that of observers or chroniclers. They may themselves embrace these movements and thus be a sort of role model for the people they meet. As a comparative discipline we document practices such as shamanism and dreaming that may be latched upon and revitalized in New Age syncretic assemblages. Work like my own on marginal practices such as the evil eye, divining rites and dream visions describes rituals that may then be incorporated into new spiritualities which are both traditionally Greek and cosmopolitan. Think of all of those tourist shops throughout the Mediterranean selling blue evil eye charms. What was once a widespread and unselfconscious practice, later demonized and relegated to the category of superstition, is now re-validated as an appealing piece of Mediterranean spirituality and material culture. Tourists return to the USA or Japan with hand of Fatima key rings and evil eye

pendants. Within Greece, people experiment with different media that may contain and transmit positive ‘energy’. Icons, crystals and blue beads jostle for space, in pluralistic juxtapositions sometimes justified in scientific terms so that spirituality and science coexist.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *Although earlier anthropology of the Mediterranean aimed at comparing Mediterranean societies (Peristiany 1965; Davis 1977), contending for their relative homogeneity revolving around the values of honor and shame (Pitt-Rivers), by the 1990s, researchers had largely abandoned area studies approaches. What’s your take on this?*

**Charles STEWART:** As mentioned above, I studied at Oxford University, alma mater of Peristiany, Pitt-Rivers and Campbell, all of whom contributed chapters to the 1965 *Honour and Shame* volume. As a young person from North America I found the descriptions of machismo and vendettas fascinating, not to say exotic. Conditioned to look for that sort of material, my work made its own discoveries and observations adding to the honour and shame model. In reality, urban Greece did not look at all like this, and even in the mountains of Naxos the culture of honour and shame existed more in stories than in actuality. Herzfeld properly analysed it as a narrative genre; one had to be good at performing manhood and this might largely be rhetorical.

When I first came to University College London, I taught a course on the Anthropology of the Mediterranean which covered honour and shame, the position of women, pilgrimage, religion, and patronage among other standard topics in the comparative anthropology of the Mediterranean area. I very quickly grew tired of this. For one thing, I had personally done it to death. More than that, as your question indicates, the Mediterranean belonged to an area studies conception that was big in the 1960s and 70s. The work of Braudel had also created a basis for considering the interrelations and consistent ecology and comparable similar social forms of the Mediterranean – the three C’s as I used to teach my students (drawing, I think, on John Davis’s succinct formulation): commerce, conquest and connubium. What happened in the late 80’s was the rise of the writing

culture movement and a more critical attitude toward the concept of culture. The fascination with identifying shared cultural traits in order to characterize large groups and regions began to wane in favour of the interest in the multiple positionalities within a putative culture, and the ongoing dialectics of internal difference, rather than harmony and homogeneity.

As time went by, the Mediterranean gender arrangement began to seem more and more like a version of patriarchy worth comparing with Euroamerican versions rather than differentiating as entirely peculiar to the Mediterranean. Many anthropologists pointed out that ‘honour’, as Pitt-Rivers had formulated it, had more to do with northern European ideas of social precedence (e.g. the Queen’s honours list) than it did with Mediterranean vocabularies where equivalents of the word ‘honour’ were hard to find. The Italian equivalent, for example, *omertá*, means silence as in the English expression ‘honour among thieves,’ which is used to explain why criminal gang members rarely snitch on each other. The most vital instantiation of the word ‘honour’ currently found in European and North American societies is the expression ‘honour killings’. This refers to young women, usually belonging to Middle Eastern and South Asian migrant communities, who are killed by their male relatives for daring to date or marry without family approval. The main point is that the Mediterranean should not be compared exclusively with the Mediterranean but placed in the context of global ethnography. The idea of a Mediterranean culture area caused us to compare too narrowly between places that were thought to be comparable. As Marcel Detienne put it, we have to compare the incomparable.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *Certainly so. One could argue that Italian honour killings are not so different from any other gang-related killing where interests, codes of behaviour or even sentiments are felt to have been trespassed. Nonetheless, the ‘Mediterranean’ has come to the fore once again. How?*



**Charles STEWART:** I stopped teaching my course on the Mediterranean some time ago (changing to the Anthropology of Religion, by the way), but then things dramatically changed in the Mediterranean. The 2009 financial crisis affected the southern European countries of the EU disproportionately, grouping them together in new and negative ways. They came to be viewed as profligate, inefficient economies, possibly held back by their unreformed Christianity which, among other things, prevented them from understanding debt in the same way as northern European Protestants did.

Then there was the refugee crisis that placed Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece on the front lines, rescuing migrants out of the sea and caring for them. The EU forced its southern members into a common position as a buffer against the refugees, who had to have their asylum requests processed in the country where they first landed. These external and unforeseen events have made the Mediterranean an area of global interest. There is so much new work by anthropologists on these issues that I will revive my Mediterranean course next year. I plan on taking old topics such as hospitality and re-examining them in the context of accommodating hundreds of thousands of migrants. The Mediterranean is once again on the anthropological map, and it appeals to many students wanting to understand pressing topics such as forced migration, humanitarian assistance and economic crisis.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *What role, if any, does religion play in the “new” Mediterranean?*

**Charles STEWART:** The Mediterranean needs to be understood, at least for a moment, in historical perspective. For centuries, Muslim rulers such as the Ottomans or the Almoravids controlled large territories on the northern shore of the Mediterranean. In general, they allowed freedom of worship to Jews and Christians. Although members of those religions may not have enjoyed the same political rights as Muslims, these periods of co-existence now look relatively more successful than what came after. To be clear, the historical assessment of phenomena such as ‘*convivencia*’ in Spain is not settled; it fluctuates depending on the sensibility

of particular historians and the political needs of the present. On the one hand, kicking the Muslims out of Spain established Spain as a purely Christian country and that remains a touchstone for Spanish identity. On the other hand, some today argue that the Spanish experience of *convivencia* has established a unique ability to understand Islam, and that Spain should be a key mediator in European negotiations with the Muslim countries. On the eastern side of the Mediterranean, the violence between Christians and Muslims in Cyprus and Bosnia, has revived interest in how the Ottoman *millet* system worked and what lessons might be learned from it.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued (in his ‘Anthropology and the Savage Slot’), the expulsion of the Moors and Jews from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century opened a utopian vision of an exclusively Christian future for Europe. Muslims and Jews were not only chased off the land, but also cast outside the ‘law’ – both scriptural and civic. Some historians (e.g. Hannaford in his *Race: The History of an Idea*) have argued that this move, accompanied by obsessions over purity of blood, and clear genealogy, prepared the way to modern racism. In Greece, mosques, and especially minarets, were torn down as the Greek state took control. Today Athens is the only European capital without a major civic mosque. Building such a mosque has been discussed many times, most recently, in the run-up to the Olympic Games of 2004. This initiative ran into strong



*Statue of the Virgin, Cathedral of  
Strasbourg*

local opposition. On the land earmarked for the mosque a fanatical religious group, with the help of a priest, consecrated an Orthodox chapel. In Greek Orthodoxy, once a space is consecrated it may not easily be repurposed. In Spain, the Alhambra and Mezquita, built by the Moors, are now two of the most-visited tourist sites in Spain. The Islamic past is

marvelled at while migrants of North African descent are treated as second-class citizens.

Today we see a flow of migrants, many of them Muslim (although not necessarily from circum-Mediterranean countries) coming from south to north. Above the fortress of Europe flies the blue flag with the circle of twelve yellow stars. An obscure Alsatian draughtsman named Arsène Heitz designed it in 1955, inspired (as he later recounted) by a passage in the Book of Revelation (12:1), which described a woman: ‘clothed with the sun.... and a crown of twelve stars on her head.’ Heitz’s account has been denied, and other interpretations of the stars offered, but there is no denying that the design does resemble the crown adorning a statue of the Virgin in the Cathedral of Strasbourg, where Heitz lived and worked. Furthermore, the EU emblem calls up the figure of the Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, a figure of the Virgin embraced strongly by fishermen for whom she is a guiding light and a protector. These are the very fishermen who now rescue unfortunate migrants from the sea. One of the greatest protectors of these migrants in Italy is the Catholic Church. The Pope has repeatedly called for hospitality and charity as Christian duties, and been attacked by right wing politicians for doing so.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** *In your edited book *Ethnographies of Austerity, novel forms of consciousness, time and ritual in times of crisis are hinted at. Could we assume them as contemporary/secular forms of religiosity?**

**Charles STEWART:** I have been influenced by the work of the Italian historian of religions, and anthropologist, Ernesto de Martino. He offered the idea of the ‘crisis of presence’ (*crisi della presenza*) to conceptualize those moments where, under socioeconomic duress, perhaps in illness or in mental breakdown, people lose the present in the sense of not being able to synthesize what is happening. They lose their continuous becoming from past through present into the future. In short, they fall out of history; they suffer de-historification (de Martino’s neologism). In order to regain the present, they may resort to religious rituals which guide interaction with the timeless saints and spirits in what resembles the liminal phase in Victor Turner’s rites of

passage, or Mircea Eliade's idea of the ritual appeal to archetypal time (*in illo tempore*). Spells for curing illness in southern Italy and Greece involve folk narrative exorcisms, little stories of Christ or the saints expelling the illness (known to specialists as *historiolae*). These give courage to the sufferer who may envisage him/herself in the story alongside Christ commanding the evil eye or migraine headache to flee to the wilderness away from the community. Funeral laments which draw the mourner into slow circular dance, and into songs of the laments of the Virgin for Christ, 're-start' people who have stalled. A journey beyond this world, into metahistory, is made in the company of a strong communal escort that restores sociality.

My recent study of dreaming on Naxos (*Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece*) looked at two moments when the community of Kóronos underwent such a crisis of presence. These villagers earned their livelihood as emery miners and in the face of the nationalization of their resource in the 1830s, and the Great Depression of 1930 they were forced to countenance the idea that they might cease to exist. This situation propelled dreams that they would find an icon of the Panagia (as the Virgin Mary is known in Greece) if they dug for it in the mountainside. Numerous people began to see dreams where they encountered the saints and travelled with them, and they spoke with the still-buried icons. The saints told them that they would grow rich from the discovery of 'treasures' and the institution of a major pilgrimage when the icons were found. Some, but not all of this, came to pass. I would say that the dreams offered a sort of solution to their crisis by giving them meaning, hope and work (digging for icons) at moments when digging for emery looked like a dead end.

Such dramatic forms of prophecy and religiosity have not apparently arisen in the wake of the current financial crisis, which has been going on now for ten years. The most evident forms of expression have been political demonstrations against the state and the EU. Perhaps dreams and prophecies have begun to circulate in local communities awaiting ethnographic discovery. One of the most impressive cultural developments in Greece has been the explosion in street art, and my sense is that the creative art

scene has also been energised. Perhaps art is the new secular medium that offers therapeutic journeys to the beyond of the imagination in the face of the risks posed to existence.

**Dafne ACCORONI:** De Martino has been the focus of my thesis for my Degree in Philosophy, back in Italy. I believe he might have agreed with you that ritual changes and takes on new forms, but how would you think art can be ritualised? Maybe we can think about it for another issue of *Insaniyat*. In the meantime, I thank you once again for having answered our questions and thus contributed with your expert insights to our reflection on this topic.



