

Sharia in Thrace (northern part of Greece): origins, possibilities and the future

*Speech of the General Secretary of Religious Affairs George Kalantzis
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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to particularly thank the organizers for their invitation. The choice of the speakers is interesting, however I believe that our discussion would be more complete if the Most Virtuous the Mufti of Komotini Metzo Tzemali were among the speakers as he is the most suitable to give us the theological and canonical aspect of the issue according to Islam.

The **first section** of my speech concerns a simple question: Why has Greece, only in the entire Europe, granted a so impressive privilege to its Muslim minority which is against the basic characteristics of a modern state of the western type? Why did it maintain this privilege even when Kemal Ataturk introduced the Swiss Civil Code in Turkey?

The maintenance of Sharia in Thrace about the personal status of Muslims is neither necessarily connected with the Treaty of Lausanne nor a subject of the principle of reciprocity with the concession of respective rights to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople while Turkey not only deprived every right that could be considered as equivalent, but recognizes not even the religious marriage while it prohibits even the participation of Clergymen in the administration of the churches.

The answer lies in the year 1913 when the Greek state found itself with a Muslim minority that reached the 10% of its population and in particular in a lot of liberated regions the Muslims were the local majority. The core of the problem that Venizelos was called to face was how a State whose Leader is a Christian, will handle an indigenous Muslim community.

The question for Venizelos was how he would inspire confidence and faith to the Muslims in the new state, whose the idea of establishment and legislation were influenced and determined by the Christian worldview while its King should obligatorily be Christian Orthodox. Think indeed that this problem became more complicated because at that period the Ottoman Sultan was simultaneously the Caliph, that is to say the Leader of all Muslims beyond states and borders. Today there is not a caliphate; therefore the question has an easier answer.

Eleftherios Venizelos who was well aware of the situation and as a former Ottoman citizen, knew very well the weaknesses and the errors of the Empire (but also its advantages), sought to find the answer in the name of the vision of Rigas Velestinlis who had spoken about a state "with no religious discrimination, because all the people are creatures of God and offspring of Adam and Eve". He knew therefore what his objective was but, unlike Kemal Ataturk who succeeded in modernizing and improving his country, he wanted to achieve it as the leader of a democratic state and not as a dictator that implements policies of genocide against

the minorities. He wanted to prove that a country and a population can change, can become a modern European state not against its people but with the people, for the people and by the people.

In 1897 when someone stole the calf of a Cretan Muslim, Eleftherios Venizelos dealt personally with the affair in order to find the guilty. When the astonished Christians and Muslims asked him why he showed personal interest for a calf he answered: "... because the holy aim of our fight depends on the safety that we offer to our Muslim fellow-citizens"¹. In the Second Constitutional Assembly of the Cretans (28/10/1906), Eleftherios Venizelos declared: "... how can you claim that the concept of Hellenism is identical to the Orthodoxy? How isn't it meant that a fundamental interest of Hellenism is to declare that the significance of the Hellenism is so wide and so irrelevant to the religions, so that in this significance it is able to embrace not only the Christians regardless of their denomination but also the believers of any other known or unknown religion? ". And all that was said by a man, who suffered, almost lost his life because he was and wanted to remain a Christian Orthodox.

In this decisive choice the Christian Orthodox Church was by his side. On November 4, 1912 Meletios, the Metropolitan of Kition at that time and later Archbishop of Athens and Ecumenical Patriarch, during a festive speech in the Holy Church of Saint Minas of Thessaloniki, in front of Queen Olga and all the local authorities said inter alia: "All the citizens of New Greece are brothers to each other, all of them are invited to live equal in rights and duties as free citizens of a free state no matter what the race or religion".

Eleftherios Venizelos is the one who upgraded the position of the Mufti granting him jurisdictional competence as well. The article 4 of the Law 147 of 1914 granted the Muslim and Jewish people the right to keep in force their "religious law" on matters of marriage, divorces and personal status in general.

The solution of Eleftherios Venizelos was wise and has worked well for 100 years. His most brilliant movement had two characteristics:

Firstly, he proceeded in a voluntary compromise by keeping Sharia only for the personal status of Muslims. Thus he proved his deepest and sincere respect towards Islam, kept the familial serenity of the Muslims and made clear that the transition to a western-type state would be gradual and not violent.

Secondly, he abolished the institution of the Kadi and transferred to the Mufti only the judicial competences about the personal status of the Muslims. Thus he made clear that the offering of the privilege is inextricably linked to religion. That is to say, he said to the Muslims that "concerning the public sphere you are equal citizens of the State like everyone else with no distinction of religion, concerning your private

¹ *The incident occurred during the Cretan Revolution of 1897 aimed at liberation of Crete from the Turkish yoke and its union with Greece. In January 1897 the Turkish army along with local Muslims attacked to the Cretan Christians in Chania (the hometown of Eleftherios Venizelos) slaughtering hundreds of Christians and burning down all the Christian Quarter of Chania. In this context, it is astonishing that Eleftherios Venizelos chose to support a policy of egalitarianism and respect of all rights of the local Muslims.*

sphere however, the Greek State offers you a privilege because it respects your religion”.

Islam is a religion that gives great emphasis to the need of acting according to the Holy Quran; this is why the decision of Eleftherios Venizelos had a logic that could have theological documentation. Who would be more suitable to express and better comprehend the Holy Quran in order to advise the believers how to act according with the will of God, than the Mufti himself? Therefore there was no one better to decide on the way of implementation of the proper act in accordance to faith than the one who could understand and determine it better than anyone.

This most brilliant movement of Eleftherios Venizelos constitutes a founding stone, non negotiable for the Greek State then, now and in the future. **For the Greek State there is no matter of unilateral abolition of the jurisdictional competences of the Mufti.**

Of course, as it always happens in life, things are developing and changing through their development. We can, therefore, speak for development and changes in the way of acting of the Mufti under the right of the Judge but not for decisive break with the fundamental choices of Eleftherios Venizelos. We are always ready to discuss such changes if there are any definite and serious proposals.

The **second section** of my speech concerns the question “who wants the abolition of Sharia”. Let me classify them in three main groups, necessarily doing an injustice to some people. Neither do these three groups have the same origins nor do they follow the same routes. It happens that they coincide in a final aim but we should not make the mistake to make them coincide.

In the first group belong those, Christians and Muslims, outstanding for their progressive ideas or for the defense of human rights. They have gentle motives, high ideals, principles, morality and value. We must listen to what they say with attention, support and take it into consideration so that we try to find the best solutions. The rights and the position of the woman, especially concern them and they are absolutely right, because, if I remember well, a series of discriminations against women, regardless their religion, were abolished in Greece by the Socialists (PASOK) only in 1982. Let me remind you that up to then a woman could not travel abroad without the permission of her husband.

These fellow-citizens, independently from their religious identity, have in general, because of certain experiences of the past but also of the present, the justified fear that the religious leaders many times play a negative, conservative or even an unprogressive role. Sometimes their role can be absolutely devastating indeed for the cohesion of a society, when they ask their believers neither to talk nor to have any relation with the believers of other religions. This is why they are under the opinion that the religion should be strictly limited inside the Church, the Mosque or the Synagogue. Therefore the Sharia is a clue of regression for them, an unacceptable situation for a modern European state.

Another group of those who ask the abolition of the Sharia belongs to the extreme right. They fear Islam and, in the Greek case, they identify it with Turkey

because of ignorance or on purpose. They are our same fellow-citizens that wish to live in a country where there are no Muslims left, no Jewish, no communists, no homosexuals, no Christians unless they are Orthodox and, finally, no Orthodox unless they belong to the extreme right. The question, however, is not what an extreme minority, that has every right to have its opinions, believes, but if the majority will allow them to impose their own ideas for the society and the nation. The existence of the extreme right is not a Greek phenomenon. Europe is already facing the rise of the extreme right forces that have as their final aim its dissolution. It is however interesting that a common point of the extreme right in whole Europe is no longer the demonization of the Jews but also the demonization of Islam and, of course, the existence of the Sharia in their eyes is as if the devil enters the Church.

Finally, there is a small group of Muslims of Thrace struggling deceitfully and behind-the-scenes for the abolition of the Sharia because they believe that the abolition of the Sharia is an essential requirement in order to impose the selection of the Mufti through elections such as those made for Deputies or Mayors. That is to say they want to change the Mufti from a man of religion into a political leader.

I also feel that I have to notice that the existence of the Sharia in Thrace is a problem for Turkey because it always reminds the entire world that Greece, a country that in its Constitution recognizes Orthodoxy as its prevailing religion, grants its Muslims a right which a country like Turkey, that wants to be presented as the world protector of Islam, has abolished and denies even today.

In my opinion none of these three groups has serious chances to achieve the abolition of the Sharia, each one for different reasons. The most possible way to abolish it is the one of inaction and error. If the way and the procedure of implementation of the Sharia remain as they are today and are combined with a wrong decision with international consequences for the image of Greece, then the developments may be rapid and, finally, extremely problematic.

However, if there is to be any change, this will start from the Muslim men and the Muslim women of Thrace, it will be in the form of proposal or proposals by these Muslim men and Muslim women of Thrace and then it will be discussed with the Greek State. I would sincerely like to listen to proposals from the local Muslim lawyers in action who have studied in Greek, European or American universities because they fully understand the European perceptions while they are aware of Islam and have the experience of implementing Sharia at the same time.

Especially in the issue of abolishing the Sharia, it is necessary for us who want to change the society to remember that societies accept such major changes only when they are ready. **No Greek government is going to abolish the Sharia if the Muslim minority does not ask for it.**

The fundamental question in this issue, as in many others, is also if we can change something making one or more steps forward without cutting our roots, without losing our identity. I believe that we can.

But there is another fundamental question that fairly preoccupies a lot of our fellow-citizens from Thrace and other regions of the country as well. Considering that

Sharia is a medieval, old-fashioned juridical sphere, fundamentally opposite to human rights, they are sure that the maintenance of the Sharia in Thrace is a cause but also a way to keep the minority isolated, far from modern developments and, consequently, poor and marginalized.

I am not specialist in Sharia so that I cannot talk about these issues. However I am sure that, as in Christianity, the ways to comprehend the Holy Texts are many and different, providing thus the possibility of being compatible with the inalterable word of God without however presupposing that society will change at all. Therefore the way to implement the Sharia, that is already very different in Thrace than in other countries, can change, can keep up with life without betraying the inalterable word of God as written in the Holy Quran.

In any case, however, let's not coincide Islam with ignorance, poverty and fanaticism because such a thing is a lie and calumny. There was an era when the Islamic world under the leadership of the Arabs was more progressive, more open, and more civilized in everyday life than the Europeans.

The reason that the minority is not equally incorporated in the Greek society is neither the Sharia nor Islam. The main reason is the lack of knowledge of the Greek language. The linguistic barrier cannot be overcome and is the mother of all evils. Therefore let those who really care about the human rights of the Muslim minority and their potential of being equal citizens of this state, turn their look towards education. Many times I notice that various fellow-citizens who are sincere defenders of human rights do not understand neither the results of the existence of this linguistic barrier nor, of course, the cultural genocide of the Pomaks through the minority educational system, because Pomaks have neither voice nor organization.

Let those practicing the nice and good fight for the rights of those who have no voice, also deal with those who really have no voice.

Please let me **in the third and last section of my speech**, refer to the connection between the jurisdictional competences of the Mufti and the way of his appointment.

In western states there is a general principle, fundamental for the religious freedom, which does not allow the State to determine the way of selection of the religious leadership of a religious community. It can check whether it is kept, it can check whether it is consistent to the Constitution but it cannot determine it. This principle exists due to the European history which is full of religious wars between Christians. Catholics and Protestants slaughtered each other for centuries while the Catholics were those who first broke the Byzantine Empire into pieces massacring the Orthodox Christians. The only way, therefore, that they found in order to stop the religious wars was the absolute religious neutrality of the State which indeed was in accordance with the words of Jesus, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's.

In Islam however the relation between political and religious power has a different starting point, a different theological foundation and different routes. For this reason and, independently from the jurisdictional competences of the Mufti, he is not

elected in any Islamic state, including Turkey. However a question is raised: is it possible for a not Muslim political leader to have the right to select the Mufti? I believe that there is the Islamic theological concept supporting that if the not Muslim political leader guarantees the protection of the Muslims, allows the operation of Mosques and, mainly, the Prayer of Friday, then he has the right to appoint the Mufti.

Beyond, however, the theological foundation on part of Islam, for us, as a modern European state that respects human rights, remains the question whether the political leaders –regardless religion- can select and appoint religious leaders – regardless religion. And our answer is clear. No. Religious freedom does not let us.

The religious community should indicate itself the way of the selection of its religious leaders, which must be specific, definite and consolidated in the dogma of this particular religious community but also respect the Constitution and the laws of the State.

A Mufti could also be elected if this is the will of the religious community, and only on condition of the abolition of the Sharia, if the European concept about religious freedom and human rights is implemented. This case leads to the following fundamental questions: a) what the electoral body is, b) which the procedure of the election is and c) if there is and what is the holding period of the position.

Let us look at these questions in relation to the experience of the procedures through which those claiming to be “elected” Muftis by the people emerged. It is of course obvious that the entire “idea” about elected Muftis aims mainly to the western audience of Europe and the USA for which it is completely unthinkable that the religious leaders of a community are named by no other than the religious community itself. So, they invented the supposedly “elected” muftis who are the chosen of the religious community, in their opinion, in order to juxtapose them to the “appointed” Muftis chosen by the State, so that the westerner – mainly Christian - audience rushes to condemn Greece.

Greece is a free country where the freedom of speech and the freedom of religious conscience are fundamental values. This is why our specific fellow-citizens who believe that are Muftis have the right to state whatever they want for themselves, as those wishing to follow them, have the right to do so. However they are not real Muftis because the real Muftis have the right to implement Sharia. The self called Muftis neither have this right, nor will they acquire it.

As they themselves know, even if Greece accepts that there is “a mufti problem”, as some people claim, any solution found will certainly include their return back home and back to their job. The reason is what our specific fellow-citizens have chosen to symbolize and the way they chose to move – as when they called their Christian neighbors with the Turkish word “giaour”²– does not allow them to be part of the solution because they have been and they will always be part of the problem.

² *Giaour or gavur means infidel and the use of this word is considered highly offensive by the Christians who were under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.*

In few words, the specific persons that wear the turban to hide the hat, as Mustafa Sabri³ would say, are not to be recognized ever by the Greek state in any other status than this of the Greek citizen which they possess since they were born. And the reason for this is absolutely their behavior. Those people crossed the river and burned all bridges behind them. And because they know well that they are the losers, they do what the fox that lost its tail did, according the Aesop's fable. They try to convince other foxes to cut their tails off by themselves because the beautiful fox is the one that, allegedly, has no tail.

Since they decided to play the game with the terms that the western Christian audiences understand, we plead them to let us explain to them what elections mean in the West, since we are Christians. When somebody speaks about election, the first and main thing is to determine the electoral body because this body will determine the breadth and the kind of its legalization. The second is to determine the procedure that defines the conditions of being elected and ensures the exercise of the right to vote and also the secrecy of vote. The third is to determine the duration of the service for which he is elected.

With the criteria that I mentioned before it is clear that the self called "elected" Muftis are not elected by the people because, very simply, the procedure that they followed has no relation with elections as all the western democracies conceive it. The electoral body, that is to say those who had the right of voting, was not determined beforehand as it happens in a western democracy but also it was never theologically founded in Islam, as it had to be if it were a religious procedure. Those who voted happened to find themselves in a particular place one particular day. There was no application procedure and, of course, the candidature was, as understood only one. The electors were called simply to say in public if they approve or not the unique candidature. No one ever said if there is any service and which this will be. All these match exactly with the procedures of invention of an a posteriori supposedly popular legalization of various dictators and political leaders of the third world or communist regimes such as this in North Korea. As you can all understand the procedure of election mainly characterizes the one that is elected, especially when he is the only candidate.

I deeply believe that our Muslim fellow-citizens of Thrace do not want their religious leaders to be elected with such a way that underestimates, undermines and lifts the big value and respect that we all should have for a religious leader like the Mufti.

There is a most clear fact proving that the discussion about the election of the Mufti is simply a political fraud in the context of a nationalistic competition. Those who have supported it for so many years have not expressed a specific proposal about how they want the election to be. It is obvious that the procedure of the supposedly election that I described to you and suits to dictators, is not even to be discussed.

³ *Mustafa Sabri was the last Shaykh-ul-Islam of the Ottoman Empire and he found shelter to Greece after its persecution by the nationalist Turks.*

A possible election sets dozens of questions which, those speaking precisely about “election” do not want to answer, because then it will be clear that they have never thought seriously what the election of the Mufti really means. Will the Mufti be elected for life or for a specific service and which will this be? Which will be the relation of the elected Mufti with the Imams? Why not follow the same procedure that will be in effect for the Mufti and the Imams? Will the Muslim women vote? If not, in what right will the Muslim women, Theologians or teachers of the Holy Quran in the Quran schools, be excluded from the electoral procedure? If the life of a Muslim is not according to the principals of Islam will he have the right to vote for the Mufti? Is it possible for somebody who doesn't know to read the Holy Quran to have the right of vote for the Mufti? If all Muslim men and women who have the right of vote according to the general electoral law do vote, then which will be the difference between a Mufti and a Deputy? If not all vote, with what criteria will be excluded those that will be excluded and with what criteria will the right of voting be given to some others? Who will check the keeping of the procedure? Who will have the right to ask the Mufti to give up his position?

Nothing of all these has been answered because nothing has seriously preoccupied those who speak about “the election of the Mufti”. In order someone to seriously discuss the subject of the appointment of the Mufti, a concrete proposal needs to be submitted by the Muslim minority. As long as this is not submitted, no discussion can be made because there is no subject of discussion. The minority itself should also think if it wishes its religious leaders to have the same legalization as its Deputies have, that is to say to be elected by the same electoral body, a fact meaning that there will be identification of religious and political power.

As an orthodox Christian I can tell them out of our own experience that it is not a wise movement that the Mitre of the Bishop or the Turban of the Mufti be identical to the hat of a minister or a Deputy. If indeed they are identical in the same person the institution of the Deputy, the Mufti and the Judge, that is to say political, religious and juridical authority, then it is most clear that the whole situation is about a terrible concentration of power which will function against the minority and will squash the life of the Muslims. Of course, it is clear that such a concentration of power will never be accepted by the Greek state.

Ladies and gentlemen, either some people want it or not, the Evros River is not only the border between Greece and Turkey but also between Europe and Turkey. Europe begins at the Evros River. The Muslim minority of Thrace is the only indigenous Muslim minority in the entire Europe using euro and having European passport. For more than 100 years Greece has proved that both in our civilization and country there is place for Islam, a place that no other western country did dare to grant.

I can hear some people speaking about reciprocity based on the Treaty of Lausanne. The reciprocity, as Lord Curzon, representative of the Great Britain in the negotiations of Lausanne noticed, “cuts down on both sides”. Those who talk about reciprocity should feel very glad and lucky that Greece did not apply the principle of

reciprocity in 1955, in 1963, in 1964 and in 1974⁴. They should remember that we did not do it out of weakness but out of choice. They should also remember that the next morning Greece will have to abolish the Sharia in the principle of reciprocity. So, is this what they want finally?

It would be also useful, to read the Proceedings of the Treaty of Lausanne because the proceedings, in general, are very useful for the interpretation of the terms of the Treaties. The view of Turkey about the issue of reciprocity for the number of the two populations is clearly stated in these Proceedings. Turkey imposed the idea that the two populations excluded from the Exchange of populations, that is to say the Greeks of Constantinople and the Muslims of Thrace, should be numerically equivalent. This is why it illegally chased away a lot of Greeks of Constantinople in 1923, contrary to the provisions of the Treaty and it proceeded to thousands of illegal confiscations of real and personal estate of the Greeks of Constantinople. 2.000 Greeks have remained in Constantinople today. 120.000 Muslims live in Thrace. I remind you again what the English said in 1923: reciprocity cuts down on both sides.

Some people speak about reciprocity by equating the Muftis with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Muftis are local religious leaders, corresponding to the Metropolitans. The limits of their jurisdiction end in the borders of their prefectures. The Ecumenical Patriarch is the religious and spiritual leader of the second bigger Christian Church in the world. 300 millions Orthodox Christians stare at the Ecumenical Patriarch. What Turkey does with the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not a Greek-Turkish problem anymore because thanks to the Turkish policies of national cleansing, almost there are no Greeks left in Turkey. It is yet a problem of Turkey with the Christian World because the Pope but also the Anglican Church and the Protestants see "a brother" in the eyes of the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Let me say something more. I wish they all remembered, before they make easy statements for internal political reasons, that 2,2 billions of Christians stare at Saint Sophia. The day that the Muezzin will call for prayer in the holy place where it was built as the biggest Church of the whole Christianity – because when Saint Sophia was constructed there were no orthodox, catholics and protestants since all Christians were members of the same Church-, Turkey will have made a fatal mistake by offending the Christians of the whole World.

I have to clarify that I am one of those who deeply believe that human rights are not an issue of reciprocity. Human rights are called human because they are built on the fact that somebody is human being. This quality, therefore, is enough.

As a Greek Christian Orthodox I am proud of the fact that Greece did not do to the citizens of Muslim religion what Turkey did to its citizens of Greek origin. This fact characterizes both countries while it has been and still is a proof that Greece

⁴ In 1955 the Turkish state applied a policy of destruction against the Greek community of Constantinople that had many similarities with the Nazi tactic against the Jews during the Kristallnacht. In 1963 and 1964 the Turkish state applied measures that led to the forced exile of thousands of Constantinopolitan Greeks. In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus and simultaneously threatened war with the Greece and adopted new measures of repression against the Greeks of Constantinople.

believes that the Muslims of Thrace are an integral part of the Greek nation and a real richness for the region and the country in general.

At the same time, however, I must admit that I am ashamed of the bars⁵, I am ashamed of every anti-constitutional measure of oppression taken against our Muslim brothers in Thrace⁶, I am ashamed of every action that hurt them. I particularly admire our Muslim brothers who, despite these negative experiences, remained faithful to our mutual homeland because they were nurtured with this idea. These Muslim brothers of us have had the power not to forget but to forgive. As a Christian Orthodox I was taught that forgiveness and repentance are the biggest virtues, they are the path that God wants for the people to follow. This is why I feel that we have a special duty towards our Muslim brothers; to do whatever we can so that we vindicate their faith to this country. To vindicate their faith that we can live together, like brothers, on these blessed grounds without discriminations. Different but equal.

I wish to end my speech with a last remark. Greece and Turkey are neighbors. We live together and shall live together. Let's admit that there is no greater blessing than a good neighbor. And since neither we nor Turkey can change our neighbor, let's change ourselves in order to become better so that we live better.

⁵ In 1936 the dictatorship of Metaxas decided the formation of a large "surveillance zone" across the northern borders of Greece from Epirus to Thrace because Metaxas feared that Italy and Bulgaria would invade Greece as eventually happened. The entry or the exit from this surveillance zone required special permission by the Police. The majority of the Pomaks' areas were included in this zone. During the period 1949-1990 the "surveillance zone" remained because of the Cold War since all the northern neighbors of Greece were communists. After the fall of the communist regimes the "surveillance zone" languished and, finally, was abolished in 1995.

⁶ Right after the Turkish invasion in Cyprus, the Greek government took some measures against the Muslims of Thrace fearing the creation of a "5th column" in the rear of the Greek Army who had to face a possible Turkish invasion in Thrace. This policy ended in 1991 with the official declaration by the then Prime Minister K.Mitsotakis, for the political equality and equality before the law of all the Greek citizens. It should be noted that just two years before, 1989, the Greek parliament had voted for the law to remedy the consequences of the Civil War (1944-1949), namely the Law on political equality and equality before the law among Greek citizens regardless of whether they were communists.