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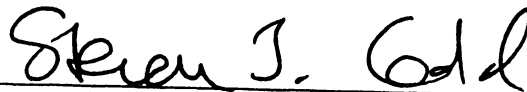
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THE HOLY COMMUNITY AND ITS CONVERTS

By

Evangelia Christodoulou

A THESIS

**Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

THE HOLY COMMUNITY AND ITS CONVERTS

By

Evangelia Christodoulou

This paper is an ethnography on an immigrant church in a town of Michigan, which took part from September through November in 2002. The main focus of this qualitative research is to study the reasons and the consequences of the entrance of the convert members in this immigrant church, which is a Greek Orthodox Church. The dynamics of the conversions and the relations that were formed amongst the converts and the old members are approached through the theoretical framework of Rational Choice Theory. For the purpose of proving that the Rational Choice Theory is a best applied in an American religious setting, this study is a comparison of the religious practices of the American converts, the Greek Americans and the Greek immigrants. The core qualitative method of this ethnography is participant observation and interviews.

To Kyriaki Kalaitzidou and W. E. M. who supported me during my research and the writing stage of this Master Thesis.

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Introduction

This study is a qualitative research project focusing on the community of a parish in a town in Michigan. This parish is not a church of a mainstream religion in the USA but a parish whose history is as long as the settling of Greek immigrants in the area, starting from 1946. It is a Greek Orthodox Church called Holy Community.

The general objective of this research project is the explanation of the non-Greek or previously non-Orthodox parishioners' choice to convert to an immigrant Greek Orthodox Church. The factors that will be taken into consideration are the American pluralistic religious nature and the ethnic solidarity that an ethnic church ensures. Specific questions that we will attempt to answer in this research project are: what do all the members of the Holy Community have in common? What is the linkage between people that come from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, with language and cultural barriers that are played out in almost every instance of the community's life? How were the converts able to overcome the difficulties of becoming members of an ethnic church?

The study will focus on the interactions between members of the parish through the scope of their aspirations that have been formed within the community as a consequence of their religious and national background and their own personal perspective and expectations from the community. The religious dimension is only one dimension of their expectations and aspirations. The social and familial aspects of the community will also be a part of this paper's findings.

An automatic categorization of the members is implied. And the criteria for such a categorization is whether or not the members were actually born and raised in the community, or whether they are new converts. This classification is not an absolute. It is supported that there are different ways to view the community's nature and to depict traits and themes that could also be contradictory to the ones that will be mentioned in this paper.

Theoretical concept

The reasons for converting to Greek Orthodoxy and for preserving this conversion over the years will be given based on Rational Choice Theory. According to this theoretical framework, people make choices in their lives after evaluating the gains and the costs of each option they have. It uses economic terms to justify people's decisions and each choice that is made is considered to be the most beneficial for the one who has made it. People seek rewards and that is manifested in every aspect of their life. Religion is also perceived as a choice that is made under a rational evaluation of all possibilities.

The motives behind converting to Greek Orthodoxy, the reasons maintaining their religious choices and the relationships formed within the body of the congregation will be viewed as a matter of utility and not solely of religious preference (Stark and Finke 2000). The goal of this paper is to prove that religion, for all members of the Holy Community, is a rational choice, "where people consume religious commodities in the same way that they weigh the costs and benefits of consuming secular commodities" (Stark and Finke 2000, p 42). The practice of weighing costs and benefits can also be called a reward system, according to which religious consumers seek rewards for their choices.

These religious rewards are applied to various aspects of life, as Stark and Finke assert that "people adjust their religious choices to coincide with what is going on around them" (p 138). One of the main propositions of Rational Choice Theory, on which the following ones will be based, is that religious choices, and in particular religious switching is a

product of socialization and all the parameters relevant to it. Conversion and maintaining ones religious affiliation is not about seeking and embracing an ideology, but about aligning one's behavior to the expectations of their social environment. Religious switching and religious conservation involves both interaction and introspection (Stark and Finke 2000, p 137). To use Sherkat, and Wilson's (1995) terminology, religious consumers "consume not only to maximize [their] own utility, but also to please those around [them] or avoid their wrath" (p 998). Those around the religious consumer can be family and friends or generally informants of the religious product. But what is meant by family is not the one the religious consumer was raised in necessarily. Family as a source of influence in religious switching and religious preservation is the one each person perceives and spends time with currently. For instance people with children are less likely to become apostates (Sherkat and Wilson 1995). In addition, spouses that are the ones that belong to a different religious affiliation will convert to the religion that is shared by the rest of their family members in order to harmonize the marriage (Loveland 2003). The reason why there is emphasis on what is currently perceived as a family is because Loveland argues: "preferences are not cemented during childhood religious socialization, but are vulnerable to influence later in life" (p 155). In addition to that, "preferences are formed and sustained by the social relationships people maintain or discard" (Loveland 2003, p 154).

A final assertion that will be argued is what Finke and Stark concluded about the circumstances under people convert or maintain their religious beliefs. What they say is that under normal circumstances people would not convert. In making religious choices,

people would attempt to maintain their religious choices (Starke and Finke, 2000). The religious consumer chooses to convert after weighing the gains and the costs and the decision to actually switch is encouraged by the conclusion that there is need to reconstruct their religious capital. Stark and Finke examine this notion from a social and emotional perspective whereas Sherkat and Wilson from the perspective of legitimizing consumers in society (Sherkat and Wilson 1995, p 995). So even though we are examining religious switching, Rational Choice Theory approaches it as though it was a stable preference as conversion is seen as a religious choice which helps the consumer avoid costs. The consumer has steady tastes adapting choices to the environment and his main consideration is maximizing benefits (Loveland 2003, p 149).

The context in which the Holy Community belongs will also be viewed through the lens of Rational Choice Theory. A study held by Stark and Finke in 1992 about the creation of the denominations in the United States and the meaning that churches have within that society will be very helpful in order to understand the pluralistic nature of American religious reality. In this paper the fact that “the fate of these firms (churches) depend upon (1) aspects of their organizational structure (2) their sales representatives (3) their products and (4) their marketing techniques” (Stark and Finke 1992, p 17) will be examined as an American characteristic. A characteristic formed due to its open religious market. Greece on the other hand, which has a religious monopoly, cannot view members of a congregation as religious consumers. The reason for regarding Greece’s religious reality as a monopoly is because, officially and in statistic figures, people belonging to religions other than Greek Orthodoxy are considered to be members of minorities.

Methodology

Participating and Observing

The initial technique used while operationalizing the research's objective was participant observation. There were a total of ten visits in the field starting from September 1st and ending on November 3rd. One of these was at another Orthodox parish in town for reasons of a comparative case study. The things that were always attempted to be answered were frequencies in the church's attendance. The number of the female parishioners in church as opposed to the male parishioners and the rate of families that attended compared to the single people in the parish. A part of the Sunday's aggregations that is vital to this research is the coffee hour, during which the points that were noted down were the gatherings and the in-groupings that take place.

Interviews:

The types of interviews taken were both semi-standardized and unstandardized (Berg 2001, p 69-70). There were cases where there was no set of questions at all and that the conversation went on with no defined structure and the parts that were recorded were the ones that seemed most important for the findings of the project (unstandardized interviews). There were also cases that there was a set of questions predefined but that was used as a general guideline and as a start for more topics that came up during the interview (semi-standardized interviews). Fourteen subjects were interviewed coming from different religious or ethnic backgrounds.

Element Selection:

The selection was based either on a convenience or a snowball sample used for the purposes of this research (Berg 2001, p 32-33). By convenience sample we mean the subjects that were selected because of their accessibility; Berg also calls this sample *accidental* or *available* (p32). From the accessible sample the snowball sample emerged. The people recommended had specific attributes. The most common members that were recommended were the new members of the Holy Community: the converts.

The table that follows is an outline of the coding of the subjects that contributed to the research by participating in the interviews.

Table1: Element Selection

Name	Sex	Nationality	Duration of Membership
Mary	F	American	Convert
Kostas	M	Cypriot	Student
Kiki	F	Greek	Immigrant member
The priest	M	American	Convert
Mr. Smith	M	American	Convert
Mrs. Papas	F	Gr.-Am.	Old member
Mrs. Nikou	F	Gr.-Am.	Old member
Mrs. Julie	F	Gr.-Am.	Old member
Tracy	F	American	Convert
Sam	M	American	Convert
Amy	F	American	Convert
Carmen	F	American	Convert
Petros	M	Cypriot	Student
Kelly	F	American	Convert

Archives:

The final technique was going through the parish's archives. The material that was studied were the books that FM most helpfully offered and they were the following: baptism book, a note book (rough notes) with all chrismations (conversions for those already baptized), official book of marriages, book of deaths, weddings and divorces. The most useful books were the first two. In the first there was an official reporting of the baptism of the member. That was the primary source to see the number of baptisms or chrismation (if the member had already been baptized by a different church). One could make out that a certain baptism or chrismation meant a conversion by the age of the member. The second source were the notes both priests took in the follow up procedure of conversion during the period of December 1994 to April 2002.

Another item from the parish's archive that was vital for the research was a questionnaire that was distributed to the members of the community in March 1999. The survey's purpose was to create a genealogy tree of the members of the community. The response rate was estimated around 50%. Even though it is relatively low the answers of some converts for the last questions of the instrument helped to orientate the interviews that followed. These questions were the following:

1. Memories: Write a favorite story about growing up Greek Orthodox, or the experience of joining the church later (use extra sheet as needed). Consider early efforts by AHEPA, meeting in halls.

2. Looking Ahead: What things need to be included in planning for the millennium so this church is relevant to your needs?
3. Family history: Please write a brief history of yourself and family you would like to be part of Holy parish's history. Encourage children to participate in this project. Develop as you wish but consider early years (1900-1959) and or later (1960 to present).

Based on all the information given about the methodology and the theoretical approach applied, an answer to the core question of reward amongst the members will be attempted in the pages that follow.

Findings

Some historical facts:

The Holy Community is an aggregate of people joined together because of their membership to a parish. This parish is a Greek Orthodox Church which was founded in 1946 to accommodate the religious needs of the Greek immigrants that had just settled down in the area. Since then the parish has been moved to two different buildings and the ethnic nature of the members has been changing. According to Mr. Smith, in mid 1980s a relatively large number of parishioners joined the Holy Community after leaving another parish in the same town that was an Orthodox Church, but not Greek. The reason these people decided to leave their parish and to affiliate to the Holy Community was their dissatisfaction with the way the priest was managing the parish's finances. So within an open religious market, religious consumers evaluated their costs and benefits of maintaining their affiliation to the non-Greek Orthodox Church. The costs were more, so they switched to the Holy Community, where they did not question the management of the church's finances. Consequently the solely Greek ethnic nature of the church had altered and people with different nationalities coexisted, such as Serbs, Macedonians, Russians and Romanians, that had to interact with a predominant Greek migrant community. According to Petros, 50 out of the 300 families that are members of the Holy Community are non-Greek.

Before the entrance of the dissatisfied members, in the mid 1970s a large number of converts affiliated to Orthodoxy. The chrismations that took place during that period were impressively frequent and since that period it was apparent that the traditional Greek Church was subject to changes.

Mrs. Papas served as a godmother during these massive chrismations and Mrs. Nikou agreed that the entrance of new converts was so large that the priest at that time was asking members of the church to help with the chrismation. New converts at that time were members of the Word of the Lord, a religious group that has as its mission to teach people especially college students how to apply Christian principles in everyday life. Kelly and her husband work for the Word of the Lord and that is what she defined their mission to be.

As quite a few subjects interviewed stated, the number of those converts that actually remained members of the church was low compared to the one of the people chrismated. Mrs. Julie took the stance that approximately 80% of them left after a certain period of time. Without knowing specific statistics, Mrs. Nikou and Mrs. Papas had the same impression; that the large number of converts coming from the Word of the Lord could not blend in and finally left the Holy Community. They could not preserve their rational choice of converting to Orthodoxy and substituted this choice with a new rational one, which was their departure. The evaluation of the costs and the gains led them to this decision. Mrs. Julie was frank enough to state that the new converts held regular meetings during the week at the churches building and that they would practice their own rituals

such as ‘talking in tongues’ and ‘holy rollers’. When some old members of the church came to know the details of these meetings the pressure against the new converts was hard as well the dissatisfaction towards them. The gain of leaving the Greek Orthodox Church would be to avoid the cost of encountering the dissatisfied and scared old members; so for that reason they left the congregation.

This remaining 20% that stayed for a period of 25 years is a significant part of the community. The majority of the choir of the church, Sunday school and a large percent of the parish’s council, all are run by convert families. The specific convert families that are participating, either on boards of the parish, either in Sunday school and choir are retaining their religious habits from their previous religious affiliation. Even though there is a religious switch, which would not occur under “normal circumstances” as Finke and Stark assert, Holy Community’s converts tend to maintain their religious choices. The priest was the first who mentioned that in his interview. He was hesitant to describe converts’ reasons for converting; he said that it is a personal matter for each one, but he did state that they are more likely to act and behave in Holy Community in the same way as they did in their previous churches.

America’s religious open market:

The priest of the parish is also a convert. When he was asked the reason he converted he answered that the freedom to believe in anything one wants in the Protestant religion is what discouraged him from remaining a Protestant. The same was asserted from Mary

and Kelly. Even though Mary was a Catholic she treasures the sense of belongingness to the Orthodox community and to the religious guidance that is given to its members. Kelly used the phrase “we are a barbarian land” and added that people are losing their religion. She also said that there were massive shifts and inconsistencies within each Protestant church along time that disturbed her.

Tracy and Sam who are spouses had the same insights on two Protestant denominations they used to belong in. They did not feel that the environment in both Protestant churches they attended was fulfilling. Sam said that they did not seem to answer a lot of his philosophical questions that had their applications in everyday life as well. He found inconsistencies between the preaching and the scriptures, and when these inconsistencies were questioned, the congregation would be asked to make their own choices. They both stated that Orthodoxy’s traditional nature and strict interpretation of the scriptures has helped them find the answers they were looking for. Orthodoxy is their final stop. There won’t be any religious switching further on. This example seems to prove one of Mary Jo Neitz’s multiple interpretations of conversion: “...it is possible for an individual to convert from ‘nothing’ – from nihilism – to a religious reality”. (1990, p 100)

An inclusive explanation of reasons for conversion in the American society is stated in Mary Jo Neitz’s article “Studying Religion in the Eighties” (ed Becker and McCall 1990, p 90-118): “... people do not convert unless they have acutely felt tensions; second they must be ideologically predisposed to accept, at the very least, the plausibility of the supernatural; third they must have some dissatisfaction with the ways that beliefs about

the supernatural are presented in the established churches, and fourth , they must be placed in a situation where they will develop social bonds with the members” (p96).

Along the same lines Bellah says: “The very freedom, openness and pluralism of American religious life makes this traditional pattern hard for Americans to understand” (Bellah 1986, p 227). It seems in the case of the Holy Community that the converts encountered difficulties dealing more with this pluralism Bellah refers to than the traditional nature of the Greek Orthodox Church as they managed to persist and to overcome the difficulties entering a national church due to this very sense of tradition and the experience of a strict religious structure. But even though the converts have assimilated and have molded in the community just as much as the old members, it could be supported that the individual comes before the community. “For Americans the traditional relationship between the individual and the religious community is to some degree reversed” (Bellah 1986, p 228). And he goes on supporting that the thousands of churches in the United States define themselves ‘communities of personal support’.

In an extended interview Mary offered, she clearly stated that Holy Community was almost her family. When she was asked about what could be improved in the church in order to be viewed as her family without hesitation, she said that she would like it to work as a community which would help the elderly with issues of accommodation and financial support. In conclusion Mary wanted Holy Community to cover her personal needs which were correlated with her fears about aging. That is an exemplification of

what Bellah calls 'community of personal support'. On the one hand this pluralism and the freedom of interpreting the scriptures in any way that the individual pleases tired the former Protestant believers and urged them to convert to a strict church like the Holy Community. But on the other hand these new members want to give direction to this strictness and to turn it into a haven for its members.

According to Stark and Finke "to the degree that a religious economy is unregulated it will tend to be pluralized" (2000, p 284). In the *Churching of America, 1776-1990* the same authors seem to regard churches and denominations in the United States as firms that are run in a free market. The more religious costumers each church has, the more the benefits for the church. On the other hand, in Greece there is a religious monopoly. That could be one of the reasons conversions do not occur often. In other words, in Greece the principle of supply and demand cannot be applied. As a consequence Greek Orthodoxy is a vital part of a Greek's identity. It could also be the cause as much as the consequence of Orthodoxy's monopoly. In other words, it could be implied that from the jurisdiction's part there is a lack of involvement, due to the fact that the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece will be get the governments financial support no matter the size of the congregation.

Another way to explain the easiness by which Americans practice religious shopping is what Herbeg cites about the values on which American society and culture are founded. "The basic unity of American religion is something that goes deeper than the similarities and the differences of social patterns we have been examining. The basic unity of

American religion is rooted in the underlying presuppositions, values, and ideals that together constitute the American Way of Life on its “spiritual” side. It is the American Way of Life that is the shared possession of all Americans and that defines the American’s convictions on those matters that count most”. Herberg talks about a “fundamental unity of American religion, rooted in the American Way of Life”. (Herberg 1960, p 231) Along the same lines, we can claim that conversion for Americans to any religion does not have the same meaning for a Greek or a Greek American. There is no threat towards an American’s ethnicity when switching religion, whereas a Greek converting would mean that he or she is changing his or her ethnic identity.

Potential costs of conversions:

“These two cultures clash”, these were the exact words Mrs. Julie used to talk about the converts’ entrance. This clash is even more understandable when the Greek Orthodox Church has always had an ethnocentric approach. Alexei Krindatch (2000) asserts that this ethnocentric approach for the most of the 20th century has the following consequences: ecclesiastical and administrative unity within the jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church was discouraged due to the particular ethnic identity, the culture and language. Orthodox jurisdictions had no concern to reach out for new members from different churches, so in other words there was ‘little concern for mission’ (p558). And finally ‘The Orthodox Church felt no responsibility to the wider society because each jurisdiction tended to see itself as composed of people who were not really part of American society’ (p558).

From a Rational Choice perspective we could deduce that this lack of mission is produced because of the non-competitive environment Greek-Orthodoxy has developed. The absence of an open market and the fact that churches in Orthodoxy in Greece cannot possibly be considered firms, justifies Krindatch's assertion. To connect this theoretical viewpoint with Holy Community, we can deduce that the parish never really made an effort to increase the members of the congregation.

This finding of a scientific study makes this conflict that existed in the beginning of the adherence inevitable. On the other hand it also proves that converts that endured and are still members of the Holy Community are people with strong will power. Kelly said that it was hard at first to feel like home. The choir was the most welcoming and the fact that she was a woman made her adjustment easier. There were organizations that could keep women occupied and help them socialize. They would get together and cook in Christmas and Easter for example. Mary said that, as much as she liked the Greek culture and the things she had learnt being in the same community, Greeks could be hard to get along with. In her interview she talked about old members pretending that she and her family were invisible. She also talked about an incident where a Greek member that attended church only on Christmas and Easter tried to explain the procedures of the liturgy to her. She was disturbed because she knew more than he did, as she attended church every Sunday.

Another side of this eagerness the converts have (most of the times stronger than the old members) is Mrs. Julie's point of view. Her understanding is that the converts are more

concerned about the 'letter of the law than about the spirit of the law'; these were her exact words. They have revived laws that do not seem to fit with the Greek culture and the most disturbing consequence for her is the 'attitude of the converts that they have come to show the Greeks what was right all this time'.

Carmen when asked if she felt welcomed rushed to answer yes, but she could understand and see that some converts might disagree with her. Sam and Tracy did not want to talk much about whether or not the old members were welcoming but said that they are mostly friends with another convert family. These are who they spend time with during coffee hour. Kiki, an old Greek member believes that there is in grouping within the members.

An example of the differences between the two cultures:

An exemplification of the difference between the Greek culture and the American culture the converts brought with them are the controversial reactions the previous priest caused. He was a Greek American who, judging from the descriptions of his attitude, would cause no reactions at all in a totally Greek setting. Mr. Smith, as a member of the parish's council, took action to remove him from his position for, as he said, there was no intention of communicating and discussing from the priest's side a possible solution for the parishioners' dissatisfaction towards him. Mr. Smith said that he would not attend

coffee hour and the parishioners would complain that they did not get to communicate with him as much as they would like. The priest also cancelled for a period of time functions and activities that were connected with solely American customs. A potluck and a membership gathering on Halloween is one example.

Mrs. Julie on the former priest's subject commented that she believed that there wouldn't be a problem if he were in Greece instead. She could understand his motives and she would not complain about him, but on the other hand she would also understand the tension towards him from some members as she had a dual ethnic identity: a Greek American.

The benefits of conversion: Harmonizing the marriage

Converts' motives vary depending on the subject interviewed. Kelly and Mary who are both converts almost using the same words assert that even though they converted at the same period with the rest of the people in 1977-1978, they went ahead for their own reasons. At this point we see that they individualize their process of evaluating their costs and benefits. Even though chronologically their conversion is along the lines of the massive conversion that took place, they distance themselves from that event. Mary wanted to have the same religion as her husband. He himself was thinking of converting

to Greek Orthodoxy because he was always searching for a sacramental church and after going to a wedding held in the Holy parish he was impressed by the traditional rituals and the mystic Medieval atmosphere that is part of the Greek religious tradition.

Kelly and her husband converted because they wanted to have the same religion. They were exposed to the Greek Orthodox Church because as members of the same religious group (called the Word of the Lord) they worked for the parish in order to use its building for their own meetings. Their involvement started out as coincidental, but their commitment proved to be strong. Kelly said that dealing with the predominant Greek community was not easy but that she, as opposed to the other converts that left, was thick-skinned.

Two more interviewees who seemed to have converted for the reasons were Carmen and Amy. Both of them converted in the late 80s but were not members of any religious group. They were both Catholics before becoming Orthodox and the reason they eventually became Orthodox was because, as both of them said, they were the only ones in their family that had a different religion. Amy actually said that if her husband were something other than Greek Orthodox she would convert to what he would be. In these 4 cases it is apparent that the conversion took place in order to “harmonize the marriage”, just like Loveland (2000) asserts.

The presence of the children in the family:

Kelly actually started to feel the community more welcoming when she had children, so in other words when her family started to expand. Her special attention to her family's well being is also obvious from the answer she gave to the questionnaire in the survey held in 1999. Her suggestions about the parish's future included the increase of GOYA's (a youth organization) budget. Children were also mentioned in the interviews taken from Carmen and Amy. They both felt the need to convert when their children reached a certain age where they could get more involved with the Holy Community's activities. They both converted several years after their wedding but felt the need to switch later on in their marriage. This is similar to what Sherkat and Wilson say about people with children being "less likely to become apostates" (p 999). In this case they converted because they were the only apostates in their family. Carmen and Amy converted in order to homogenize their family.

The redefining their identity:

The next topic that emerges is the one of identity. Kiki and Kostas are members that came originally from Greece and Cyprus respectively. They were both surprised when entering the Holy church for the first time because they had a preconceived idea about what a Greek Orthodox Church is. But their insights were from their place of origin, which is not the case in this town in Michigan. The rules are different as well as the setting. Their first reaction was as far as the language was concerned. They were not used to a liturgy run half in Greek and half in English. The surprise was similar to the non -

Greeks that entered the Holy community coming from the other Orthodox Church and for the converts that adhered to Orthodoxy coming from either a Catholic or a Protestant Church. They had difficulties following the liturgy when it was in Greek. An interesting point is that even Greeks and Greek Americans have the same difficulty due to the fact that the Greek psalms are in ancient Greek, a language that hardly anyone is fluent in.

But the attachment to this language is not because of reasons of comprehending the meaning. The meaning of the liturgy for Greeks and Greek Americans is the bonding with the sense of Greekness. This term might be different for various people, but the common trait of this identity is its distinction from the predominant American ethnic identity that exists outside the Holy church's territories. Mrs. Julie talked about how important the Greek language was for her and seemed to be dissatisfied by the fact that Mr. Smith was fighting for an all-English liturgy. The priest also saw the language issue as something that needs to be resolved, as the new members who were increasing in number were not following the service. He believes that when everyone is complaining the solution has been achieved.

A similar study of two Hindu Indian religious groups in Los Angeles by Prema Kurien shows that "... forming religious "congregations" as a means of creating an ethnic community and preserving cultural distinctness comes with its own dilemmas and contradictions." (ed Warner and Wittner 1998, p 63). In addition to that "... if 'ethnic closure and support' continue to be the goals of the ethnic churches, their future 'is likely

to be one of eventual disappearance' as cultural and structural assimilation proceed". (1998, p 64)

Along the same lines, Alexei Krindatch's article and the fact that the Orthodox Church in an American setting views itself as excluding people that are part of the American society (Krindatch 2002, p558), seems relevant to the significance ethnic identity has for the parishioners of the Holy church. But with the passage of time, the American environment and the structure in which the immigrant church exists readjusts the community; the former (structure) preexisted the latter (community). From the book *American Mainline Religion* the following quote seems most appropriate: "Immigrants arrive with their sects and churches. America then teaches them to be discreet. It does though by means of its unique creation: the denomination, or better more denominations. This is known as pluralism. America also tames churches into denominations" (Roof and McKinney 1987, p 34)

An interesting point about whether or not Greek Americans can adapt to the pattern Rational Choice Theory suggests is the one made by Luis Leon. He specifically examines Chicanos in Los Angeles and cites: "... the choices of many of these folks have been deeply determined by their social conditions that the ability to imagine choices is itself limited. That is years of oppression have limited not only choices but the ability to choose. [...] The research does not suggest that, however that [...] members have been duped into becoming passive citizens and thus more productive workers. Undoubtedly,

Pentecostalism helps them to deal with overwhelming circumstances immediately, sensually and experientially” (p192).

Reflections

Within the same context Roof and McKinney talk about rationalization of religion: “Privatized faith is a subject, often concerned more with style than with substance and more with sensibility and taste than with shared meanings and shared realities” (p33). Rational Choice Theory stresses the action of people evaluating their gains and losses and finally making a decision that is more profitable and more rewarding for the subject. From the analysis of the interviews, discussions, field notes and secondary data above, there was an attempt to prove that religion is subject to rational decisions. Holy Community is the microcosm which was analyzed to prove this assertion.

The general conclusion after evaluating all the material collected is that the community covers a large aspect of the members’ secular life. The majority of the members that converted were dissatisfied with their previous religious denomination. They were seeking to join a strict church in order to find answers to questions that were linked to their everyday life. The idea of seeking for their own answers, as encouraged by the Protestant Church was not satisfactory, that did not offer a sense of security to its members. By their Protestant churches they were constantly encouraged to make rational choices, but this was something that did not lead them to answering their questions and covering their salient needs. So what they did was to practice their right to choose rationally and changed churches. Their goal was to find a church that did not give them the freedom of interpreting the scriptures on their own. They wanted to follow given interpretations. In other words, they did not want to be in a church where they would have to make their own choices.

The benefits from converting to Orthodoxy were not only on a philosophical level, but also covered aspects of their everyday life. Harmonizing the marriage by not being the only member in the family that has a different religious affiliation is one benefit from affiliating with Orthodoxy. Offering their children the convenience of not having to choose between their parents' different religions is also another concern converts had. One interviewee actually wants Holy Community to be a family for her that will provide her security when aging. All the above are expressions of the everyday life issues that members wanted to deal with by converting, with correlation to questions about life in general and about more abstract and philosophical issues.

A question that rises from this study is whether or not Rational Choice Theory is an appropriate approach only in the case of the conversions in the United States. A possible answer to this question could be that Rational Choice Theory can be applied when choices are involved. Compared to the religious reality that exists in Greece, religion in the case of Holy Community's converts is subject to choices and preferences and to evaluating the costs and benefits. In the latter case Rational Choice Theory is the theoretical approach that can be best applied. But the same theoretical model would not be applied to its full extent when examining the case of religion in Greece; or even so, the case of the old members of Holy Community. They were more likely to be born and raised in the congregation. They were either Greek Americans, or Greek immigrants or Orthodox Christians from other Eastern European and Middle Eastern Christian

countries. Their ethnic identity is expressed through their traditions and their traditions are tightly connected with their religion, with the Orthodox Church.

Their need to maintain their ethnicity in the United States is a linked to the notion of belongingness and being a part of a social network that will facilitate them in ways they were trained to from their country of origin. There is no space for choice in this case. It is more a matter of survival. Religion in the case of the old members of the Holy Community does not serve as a means to get closer to philosophical questions concerning life in general, so in other words they do not have the luxury to convert and to practice religious shopping. They would rather not choose to rationalize their membership.

Based on the argument above, it is implied that converts in the case of Holy Community did have the opportunity to switch their religion. They were not faced with needs that were equivalent to the ones old members were faced with. That does not mean that their conversion was not a choice emerged by valid and significant needs. On the contrary, we proved and outlined the needs that were covered by affiliating to Holy Community. What is argued is that in order to form their identity (something vital for old members as well) they were encouraged due to the circumstances they were exposed to, to rationalize and to select a religious affiliation and a church that best suited their complementary choices in their life. Both groups (old members and converts) associate either consciously or unconsciously their participation in Holy Community with their formation and preservation of their identity, either in an individualistic level or as aggregates. The

difference is that one group out the two is urged to consciously choose the means which form their identity. This group in Holy Community is the converts.

Appendices

The following list outlines the previous religious affiliation of the members that were converted since 1994:

- 4 from the Roman Catholic Church
- 2 from the Christ Lutheran Church
- 5 from the United Methodist Church
- 2 from the United American Orthodox Church
- 1 from the Southern Baptist Church.

Out of which:

- 7 males
- 7 females

So the variable gender is not correlated with the frequency of conversions, at least between 1992 and 2000.

Here is the coding of the information gathered by the analysis of the notebook.

Case	Year of birth	Gender	Date of Chrismation
1	1942	M	Sep 1994
2	1961	F	June 1995
3	1955	M	March 1997
4	1962	M	Dec 1998
5	1964	F	April 1999
6	1927	M	April 2001
7	1978	M	May 2001
8	1966	F	June 2001
9	1957	M	March 2002
10	1969	F	March 2002
11	1973	M	April 2002
12	1970	F	April 2002
13	1993	F	April 2002
14	1995	F	April 2002

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