

Omeriye: A Mosque in Nicosia

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Abstract

The article deals with the Omeriye Mosque which was erected as a church in the 14th century and transformed into a mosque by the Ottomans in the 16th century. It was used exclusively by Turkish-Cypriot Muslims until the mid-1950s. Since the 1980s it has become a multinational place of worship. The mosque, located in the southern (“Greek”) part of divided Nicosia, is today a meeting place for hundreds of Muslims mainly from Syria, Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh; they include migrant workers, students, and asylum-seekers. After a short historical introduction, the article examines the spatial characteristics of the mosque, the ethnic and social composition of the mosque-goers, particulars of worship and teachings as well as the running of the mosque.

Keywords

Cyprus – diaspora Islam – Omeriye mosque – Nicosia – Turkish-Cypriot

Islam in Cyprus today is—at least since the island’s division in 1983—usually associated with the northern part of the island (“Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,” “TRNC”) where the overwhelming majority of the population is Turkish Cypriot and Turks from Turkey who have lived in Cyprus for almost forty years, now in their third generation. The lax or even indifferent approach to Islam of many Turkish-Cypriots has been contrasted with the more intense attachment towards their faith displayed by Turkish settlers. However, Islam is also present in the south of the island, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), although here Muslims are not Turkish-Cypriots and Turks, but rather migrants from

a dozen countries or so.¹ I became interested in the Muslim presence in the south a couple of years ago through a Pakistani student and when I heard about alleged troubles and disturbances between Sunnis and Shi'is at the Omeriye mosque in Nicosia. My collaboration in a project carried out by Beatrice Hendrich, mostly concerned with "Turkish Islam"² in the island, prompted me to take a closer look at the mosque and its people.³

The Omeriye is a mosque in downtown Nicosia within the walls, near the main shopping street Ledra and the central Freedom Square.⁴ The quarter

1 The number of Muslims in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is estimated around 15.000-20.000. Only a fraction are Turkish Cypriots of Roma background who moved from the "TRNC" to the RoC after Cyprus' accession to the EU in 2004; they gather at the Cami cedid in Limassol, see Ali Dayioğlu and Mete Hatay: "Cyprus", *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol. 5, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 173-193, 174. On the development of Islam in Cyprus see Altay Nevzat and Mete Hatay: "Politics, Society and the Decline of Islam in Cyprus: From the Ottoman Era to the Twenty-First Century," in *Middle Eastern Studies* 45/6 (November 2009), pp. 911-933. An overview of mosques and services for Muslims in RoC can be found at the website www.islammuslimcyprus.com. The website is maintained by people from the Muslim community in Cyprus. Although the website has not only the flag of the Republic of Cyprus, but also that of the "TRNC"—certainly to the displeasure of the Cypriot authorities—it can be assumed that the overwhelming majority of visitors of the website are not Turkish-Cypriot or Turkish Muslims. According to the information given there, the other mosques in the Republic of Cyprus which by and large fall into the same category as the Omeriye in terms of their frequenters (non-Turkish-Cypriot, migrant) are the following: the Cami Kebir, i.e. the Great Mosque in Larnaca (with a strong element of Palestinians from Iraq who came to Cyprus after the downfall of the Saddam Husayn regime; language of *khutba* Arabic), the Great Mosque (*khutba* in Arabic and English, *hadith* readings in Arabic and Urdu) and the Cami cedid (*khutba* in Turkish, see above) in Limassol, as well as a mosque in Paphos; there is also a mosque in Ayia Napa. In addition to these mosques, the mosque in the Hala Sultan compound has been increasingly used by Muslims (services carried out in English) under the leadership of Imam Şakir Alemdar, representative of the President of Religious Affairs in the "TRNC", accessed 12 March 2013. The Hala Sultan Tekke (tekke means "dervish lodge"), aka Umm Haram, situated at the outskirts of Larnaca, is the most important Muslim shrine on the island.

2 For a definition of "Turkish Islam" see M. Hakan Yavuz: "Is there a Turkish Islam? The emergence of convergence and consensus," in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24/2 (October 2004), pp. 213-231.

3 Supported by a Marie Curie fellowship, ACRIT CY, 2011-2013.

4 On the history and architecture of the building see the following publications: Tuncer Bağışkan, *Kıbrıs'ta Osmanlı-Türk Eserleri* (Lefkoşa: Kuzey Kıbrıs Müze Dostları Derneği Yayını, 2005), pp. 89-93; Chris Schabel, "Ecclesiastical Monuments and Topography," in:

where it is located—sometimes called Omeriye after the mosque—takes in historical buildings and museums and therefore attracts tourists some of whom also pay a visit to this mosque; the archbishopric of Cyprus is around the corner. Due to measures to preserve the historical monuments, supported by the EU and the UN, the formerly run-down quarter is now at least dotted with some restored houses, leading to a bit more orderly and well-kept appearance.⁵ However, many buildings are in a state of neglect, be they aesthetically pleasing buildings with oriental oriels or bland sixties and seventies architecture. There are still many long-abandoned buildings and run-down structures housing workshops. The poor state of housing results in relatively low rents and therefore attracts poorer people. Not a few of its inhabitants are migrants, from domestic helpers to Muslim migrants, some of them refugees and asylum-seekers, some of them students. Their presence has drawn several shops into the surrounding streets, e.g. internet and telephone shops (not the chic Vodafone version) and a *halal* butchery. Many of the regulars at the mosque seem to live nearby as at prayer times and other meetings there is not a markedly increased number of cars or scooters except on Fridays for noon prayer and sermon (*khutba*).⁶ Therefore, the Omeriye can be considered a neighbourhood and community centre which has long been the function of mosques something which is reinforced in the diaspora.⁷

The mosque is located at the square called *Plateia Tillyrias* which is a euphemism as most of the square serves as a grotesquely oversized parking lot because there are never more than a dozen parked cars although it could easily hold a hundred. A few details regarding the history of the building must suffice here: it was erected as the church of St Mary in Gothic style in the 14th century featuring one middle nave and a three-sided apsis; at its western end it has a porch with a triple arcade. The church formed part of an Augustinian monas-

D. Michaelides, *Historic Nicosia* (Nicosia: Rimal, 2012), pp. 192-195; Rupert Gunnis, *Historic Cyprus. A Guide to its towns and villages, monasteries and castles* (London: Methuen, 3rd ed. 1956, first published 1936), pp. 71-74, is still a valuable source.

- 5 These projects were carried out in the framework of the “Nicosia Master Plan,” funded by USAID, UNDP and the EU and executed by UNOPS during the 2000s: *Walled Nicosia. A Guide to its Historical and Cultural Sites*. Nicosia no date (brochure describing the restoration works in the Old City).
- 6 However, at the Friday sermon on 3 May 2013, the mosque and the courtyard were completely filled with approx. 800 people. It has been reported that during Ramadan in September 2009 even the parking lot was used for prayers because the mosque and the courtyard were overcrowded, cf. Ali Dayioğlu and Mete Hatay: “Cyprus”, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010) vol. 2, pp. 125-140, 138.
- 7 Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 117.

tery. It suffered heavy damage during the Ottoman siege in 1570. Legend has it that the second of the rightly guided caliphs, ‘Umar (634-644), had stayed at this place during a campaign of the early Muslims on the island. The Ottomans rebuilt the church as a mosque by adding a minaret and calling it Ömeriye or Ömeriye⁸ in memory of the Omar episode. The mosque had not been used since the second half of the 1950s when intercommunal strife prevented Turkish-Cypriot Muslims from accessing it because it was located in a predominantly Greek-Cypriot neighbourhood. In 1982 it underwent repairs and was reopened for worship under the auspices of the Embassy of Libya (called the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriyah).⁹ Travel guides from the 1990’s mention Syrian-Lebanese or “the city’s Arab and Persian population” as worshippers. The composition of the community seems to have changed further with the considerable influx of college students from Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 1990’s and 2000’s.¹⁰ According to the Imam of the mosque, today half of the mosque-goers are Arabs, mainly from Syria and Egypt, the other half Pakistanis and Bangladeshis with small numbers from other Muslim countries and a few converts. In this way the Ömeriye,¹¹ exclusively frequented by Turkish Cypriots until at least the mid-1950s, became Omeriye: a multinational mosque with its believers hailing from a dozen countries or so where Islam is the majority faith. The mosque is rarely visited by Turkish-Cypriots; even the Representative of the President of Religious Affairs (popularly known as Mufti) in the “TRNC,” Imam Şakir Alemdar (a Turkish Cypriot, whereas the President is a Turkish citizen), who is a frequent visitor to the south,¹² only seldom comes to the Omeriye, e.g. at the occasion of the Prophet’s birthday (*mevlid*).

Across the square and the street are the Omeriye Turkish Baths (*hamâm*), built by the Ottoman General Lala Mustafa Pasha in the 1570’s. The structure was restored a decade ago and its interior decorated in a pseudo-oriental style,

8 It is also called Ömerge, according to Turkish-Cypriot pronunciation.

9 Kevork K. Keshishian, *Nicosia, Capital Of Cyprus Then And Now: An Old City Rich In History With Illustrations And Maps* (Nicosia: Moufflon Book and Art Centre, 1990, 2nd revised edition), p. 185; there is a picture with the caption “... prayer led by Imam Mohammed Sobhi Billo, there were Arab diplomats and a great number of Moslems from the free Sector of the island.”

10 Ralph-Raymond Braun, *Zypern* (Erlangen: Michael Müller Verlag, 2002), p. 135; Klaus Gallas, *Zypern* Nürnberg: Ed. Erde im BW-Verl., 1996), p. 282. Marc Dubin, *Cyprus: The Rough Guide* (London: The Rough Guides, 1996), p. 199.

11 I.e. the way the name ‘Umar and its derivatives are pronounced and spelled in Turkish.

12 He holds regular *dihirs* in the Bayraktar mosque and leads a campaign to reopen the Hala Sultan Tekke as a fully-fledged mosque and to bring it under Muslim authority; at present it is administered by the Department of Antiquities of RoC and the Turkish-Cypriot Properties Management, a department within the Ministry of Interior.

but it is apparently hardly frequented; the ensemble of the *hamâm* and the mosque remind us faintly of the former symbiosis of *hamâm* and mosque in Muslim cities. At the back and the south side of the mosque there is a narrow strip of green with palm trees separated by a half-dilapidated wall and a fence from adjacent workshops.¹³ The longitudinal axis of the mosque borders the parking lot without being set off against it. The canopied entrance is protected from the square and the streets on two sides by a wall and a fence. The forecourt (Arabic: *sahn*) constitutes an area of roughly 50 square meters part of which is covered by corrugated iron to offer protection from sun and rain. There is, of course, a fountain (*mîdât*) to provide water for ablutions.¹⁴

Entering the mosque we encounter all the essential insignia of a Friday mosque (*djâmi'*): In line with the conventional simplicity and the lack of distraction by paintings or figures,¹⁵ there are only Qur'anic verses on the walls, the name of the prophet, calligraphies with the 99 names of Allâh, depictions of the *ka'ba*, and explanations in English about Islam.¹⁶ The prayer niche (*mîhrâb*) is, of course, the most prominent feature of the interior indicating the direction of Mecca (*qibla*). As all churches stand west-east in Cyprus, the *mîhrâb* was built into the southern long side of the building. Over the niche Qur'anic verses are inscribed.¹⁷ The *minbar* has 9 stairs at the upper end of which there is a chair on which the imam rests when he interrupts the sermon for a break. Opposite the *mîhrâb*, at the northern side, there is a podium or platform (*dikka*; the imam used the word *saqf* which means roof) which is

13 There were beds in the garden at the time of my visits in May 2013 where people slept at least during the day; there was laundry hanging from lines, strengthening the impression that the mosque not only serves as a gathering place for prayer, but sometimes also as a shelter for the needy.

14 There are illustrated instructions how to perform the ablution, perhaps pointing to a presence of believers not familiar with the correct ritual or of converts and reverts, i.e. people who rediscover Islam.

15 Although it must be pointed out that pictures of the interior in the 1990's and early 2000's (taken by my colleague Chris Schabel, Department of History, University of Cyprus) show much less wall décor. There was green wall to wall carpeting. According to the imam the new red carpet was laid several years ago; the worn out green carpet can still be seen on the steps which lead up to the *dikka*. The green carpet was laid in 1985 at the expense of a certain "Abdül Celil el-Fetih," apparently an Arab frequenting the mosque: Bağışkan (2005), 93.

16 They are intended for non-Muslim tourists and not for Muslims, as the imam explained.

17 Quran 3, 37: "kullamâ dakhala 'alayhâ Zakariyya l-mîhrâba wajada 'indahâ rizqan" ("whenever [the prophet] Zakariyya came to her [Maryam] in [her private prayer] room, he found her (supplied) with food." The same inscription also adorns the prayer niche at the mosque of Hala Sultan/Umm Haram at the outskirts of Larnaca.

supported by columns and can be accessed through stairs and faces Mecca;¹⁸ in the Omeriye children accompanying their fathers at prayer time use it as a kind of playground from where they have an overview of the interior. There are several niches which serve as shelves for hundreds of books (Qur'an, *hadīth* collections in Arabic, English and Urdu, and brochures). The imam and the officials at the mosque have an office which is used for meetings and confidential conversations; here the imam prepares his sermons and *tafsīr* sessions. The floor is covered with a red wall-to-wall carpet; from the ceiling hang three chandeliers and a dozen fans which can hardly reduce the summer heat in the building.¹⁹ There is a small passage leading to a room reserved for women, which was a chapel in the original Christian building. This room can also be accessed from outside so that female mosque-goers are not obliged to enter the building through the main door. There is a small niche indicating the *qibla*. Women praying here cannot see the interior of the nave of the mosque. Light fills this room through the original filigree rose window. A group of officials (the imam, the boss of the World Call Society, the Pakistani caretaker and some other regulars) have lunch here after the sermon and prayer. I never saw any women participating in the prayers or other activities such as the *tafsīr* sessions, reinforcing the impression of the almost exclusively male community at the mosque, except one Sunday when families came for a Qur'an recitation competition and other activities. The Ottoman minaret, another essential of Muslim religious architecture, is located at the long northern end of the structure.

As regards the organisation and financing of the mosque, it has been overseen and maintained by the World Islamic Call Society (*jam'iyat ad-da'wa al-islāmiyya al-ʿalamiyya*) for roughly 30 years.²⁰ This society was founded by the former leader of Libya, Muammar al-Gaddafi, in 1972. It runs branches in dozens of countries, with a focus on Africa. Its aim is to promote Islam, first and foremost among its fellow Muslims (not a paradox because the perception is wide-spread that secularism and materialism have caused many Muslims to stray from the straight and narrow path), but also among non-Muslims (publication of Islamic literature, establishment of educational centres, promotion

18 Such a *dikka* served in large Friday mosques as platform from which a functionary repeated aloud the words of the imam: Jacques Jomier: "Dikka", *EI*, 2nd ed., vol. II, 276 a.

19 Temperatures of 29 C can be observed already at the beginning of May during Friday prayer inside the mosque.

20 Egdunas Raciū: *The multiple nature of the Islamic Da'wa*, Helsinki 2004 (University of Helsinki Acad. Diss), pp. 102-104, 106, 194, accessed 30 March 2013; the mosques in Larnaca and Limassol are also maintained by this organization.

of the Arabic language, construction of mosques). The Society has relations with non-Islamic bodies such as the Vatican. Islam in Libya has strong Sufi leanings (there are many venerated Sufi shrines) and this is allegedly reflected in the orientation of the Society. The recent uprising in Libya and the fall of the Gaddafi regime have led to a strengthening of more hard-line or radical Islamists (like the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafis) opposed to Sufism and to the Society because of its association with the ancien régime (they burnt copies of the Qur'an published by the Society). There has been a strong Libyan presence in Cyprus for decades because of third world ideology ties and exchanges with the Communist AKEL party. The Libyan Embassy, formerly called the "Bureau of the Great Socialistic People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya,"²¹ is, after the US-American, Russian and several EU missions, one of the most well-staffed diplomatic representations in Cyprus; the local representative of the Islamic call society is a trained sheikh.

What does the Friday sermon (*khutba*) tell us about the Omeriye and its people? The *khutba* is an integral part of Friday worship. The protocol at the Omeriye seems to follow general regulations concerning the sermon. It is given in Arabic which is not or hardly understood by perhaps half of the faithful (Pakistanis, Bangladeshis); in the winter and spring of 2013, when I became a more or less regular listener of the *khutba*, it was summarised by a student from Ghana, a graduate of an Islamic college in Yemen, in English. After the translator (*tarjuman*) returned home, the English summary of the *khutba* was cancelled (at least during my visits in spring 2013) leaving the non-Arabic speakers a bit helpless. Perhaps the Libyan sheikh will take over the summary in the future. Almost all sermons I followed concentrated upon spiritual or social aspects of Islam. Topics were the creation of things by Allah, and the necessity of giving alms to the poor and needy. An acquaintance, Ahmad (not his real name), a long-term resident of Cyprus from a neighbouring Arab country, spoke critically to me about the contents of the *khutba* saying that, with their general pious orientation, they were out of touch with the real world and that people had to be addressed in a more concrete fashion. On one Friday at the beginning of April 2013 it was not the imam who delivered the sermon, but the Libyan official from the *da'wa* society who is the more political or public figure. That was probably no accident because the topic was the recent financial and economic crisis in Cyprus (several days earlier Cyprus had narrowly avoided bankruptcy) which has had a strong impact on the community as there is less demand for day labour, and state support for asylum seekers (of whom there are several at the mosque) has been curtailed. In his sermon he

21 Djamâhiriyya means "people's masses."

urged the faithful not to despair because God would help them. He advised his listeners to deal with Islamic banks, since interest (*ribâ*) was forbidden.

Let's take a closer look at the composition of the mosque-goers. The majority is male, migrant, single, mostly well-educated and roughly in their twenties and thirties. As regards their nationality, they hail from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Syria, Egypt, and several other countries where Islam is the predominant religion, e.g. from Palestine, Somalia, and West-Africa. A number of Egyptians and Syrians have put down roots in Cyprus by marrying Cypriot women. The economic situation of most Muslims at the Omeriye is precarious. The students among them (mainly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) came to Cyprus to obtain a college degree (i.e. a higher education diploma of non-university level); many of them were given the impression that they could study and work at the same time, which was, to say the least, exaggerated, and is now, with the drastic down-turn of the economy, almost impossible. Muslims who have established themselves here have small businesses (e.g. Oriental sweets shop), work-shops and building-firms. There are very few, if any, mosque-goers who are well off. In sum, it is a rather poor community. Without the money from the World Islamic Call Society maintenance of the mosque (e.g., the salary for the Imam) would be impossible. Therefore, the Libyan Director of the Society seems to exert strong influence at the mosque, as a kind of *éminence grise*. I believe it was no coincidence that it was he who gave the *khutba* at the beginning of April because the topic was religious and economic; spiritual matters are usually dealt with by the Imam, the second-most important functionary at the mosque, an Azhar graduate from West Africa who speaks Arabic and French fluently. There is also a caretaker, a sharp and intelligent Pakistani student, who looks after the mosque and serves food after the *khutba* on Fridays. Sometimes believers drop in who come for several days or weeks visiting family or friends as e.g. a young man, an inhabitant of the old city of Jerusalem, who sold religious items such as perfumes or incense.

From the rather homogenous "mass" of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, and Arabs from various countries (both long-term residents of Cyprus as well as recent refugees from Syria), several individuals stood out, perhaps through their rather individualistic attitudes. A young man, perhaps 20 years old, named himself after a famous sheikh of the Naqshbandi order. He was a Spaniard whose father had converted to Islam and married a Muslim woman from North Africa. A follower (*murîd*) of Sheikh Nazim al-Qubrusi, he lived in Morphou/Lefke (in the "TRNC"), but came occasionally to the Omeriye. He was familiar with central religious terms such as *tarîqa* and *sharî'a*, although the exact meanings and context of these terms were not known to him due to a lack of Arabic which he deplored. The young man, who could be called

a “Sinnsucher“ (a person in search of meaning) participated also in religious conversations at the Bayraktar mosque where the representative of the Mufti in the “TRNC” and member of the Naqshbandi order, Imam Şakir Alemdar, chairs *dhikr*-meetings on Thursday evenings. This circle of Muslims, in contrast to the believers at the Omeriye, includes several Turkish Cypriots.

At a Sunday gathering I sat with the afore-mentioned Ahmad who has lived in Cyprus for many years and is engaged in various business activities. He was approached by Georgios (not his real name), a young man in his mid-twenties from Greece, a fact he demonstrated by taking out his identity card. Georgios explained in broken English that he had lived in London for several months and was filled with consternation because there was so much *harâm* (forbidden, sin) there.²² It was his wish to embrace Islam; he already called himself Ali. Ahmad asked Georgios why he wore a white cap when he was not a Muslim (yet) emphasizing that even an emblematic headdress did not in itself indicate an affiliation with Islam, but that this could only be established by a fixed set of rules and the firm intention to belong to Islam.²³ Georgios showed us a picture of Sheikh Nazim in his wallet which incurred Ahmad’s displeasure. He argued that a true Muslim needed neither a *tariqa* nor intermediaries to believe in Allâh. But Ahmad probably belongs to a minority in his rejection of *tariqas* and Sufi sheikhs. A Pakistani acquaintance and occasional mosque-goer called himself a Naqshbandi and an admirer of Sheikh Nazim. He believes that intermediaries between the faithful and Allâh are necessary.

It seems that the central theme and overarching experience at the Omeriye is the unity as opposed to the diversity of Muslims. In this context membership in *tariqas*, although potentially dissociating Muslims from one another, is not considered as a violation of unity, except perhaps by a few individuals of the ilk of Ahmad. Muslims believe, in fact it is a basic commandment, that Islam is the same everywhere and always and should not differ from country to country. This means that they tend to reject anything that stands in the way of equality and unity among Muslims. This can be illustrated with a conversation

22 Tina Gudrun Jensen: “Context, focus and new perspectives in the study of Muslim religiosity,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/7 (July 2011), pp. 1152-1167, 1163, writes that “Danish converts and young Muslims who experience a revival into Islam would often express their attraction to Islam as having to do with Muslim notions such as *halal* and *haram* (‘allowed’ and ‘prohibited’).”

23 There is a variety of dress at the Omeriye. Pakistanis sometimes wear their traditional clothes, whereas Arabs very rarely do except the official from the Call Society. Particularly colourful were the very neat and chic African-style clothes of the imam. Most believers prefer their everyday dress of jeans, T-shirts etc., with many wearing white or coloured caps.

I had with a Pakistani member of the community. I had brought a Japanese colleague, a Middle Eastern scholar, along to a *tafsîr* session which was chaired by the Imam and in which the Libyan sheikh participated as well.²⁴ After the session the latter urged us to tell the congregation (there were approx. 40 people) something about our field and experience. We, i.e. the Libyan sheikh, the Japanese scholar and I sat in front of the *mihrâb*, while the faithful formed a semicircle. I thanked them for the friendly reception and spoke about my teaching (I had taken my students to the mosque), research interests, “Turkish Islam“ and my fascination with the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of Muslims—or did I say Islams?—at the Omeriye—things you say when you have to make an impromptu remark. After the discussion the Pakistani acquaintance came to me, obviously offended that I had spoken, at least as he had understood it, of many different Islams by pointing to various traditions and cultural differences.²⁵ He stated quite categorically that there was only one Islam.²⁶ Although he did not use the word *tawhîd* designating primarily the unity and uniqueness of Allah, but also meaning “unity of the Umma,” it was clear that he rejected the notion of heterogeneity of Islam. I tried to reassure him that I what I had meant to say was a diversity in unity, many different peoples united by one religion, for which the local *djamâ'a* at the Omeriye, as part of the world-wide *Umma*, was a good example. One should not overestimate this one-off experience. However, it indicates two antagonistic trends in the

24 Such a *tafsîr* session took place in the following sequence: first, the imam recited verses from the Quran, e.g. surah 9, verses 100 ff.; then, the participants, usually no more than a dozen, each read the *âyât*, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes fluently, depending on whether they were Arabic speakers or not; at the end, the imam interpreted several verses. After that he repeated certain parts of the *tafsîr* in English for the non-Arabic speakers.

25 There is a report of an incident at the mosque in 2009: according to one version it was about several Shi'is from Pakistan who expressed views different from the Sunni majority; another version—which is more concrete and therefore perhaps more credible—states that “Wahhabis” from the town of Paphos entered the mosque, argued with the imam about the colour green in his dress whereupon a scuffle broke out between the Wahhabis and other worshippers: “both eyewitnesses insisted that it was a combination of ethnic and religious differences that caused the subsequent violence, not Sunni against Shi'i,” *Cyprus Mail* 2 September 2009.

26 According to Garbi Schmidt: “Understanding and approaching Muslim visibilities: Lessons learned from a fieldwork-based study of Muslims in Copenhagen”, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/7 (July 2011), pp. 1216-1229, 1224, activist Muslims frequently claim that Islam is One. Cf. Mandaville (2001), 56: “. . . the vast majority of Muslims, despite a clear cognisance of their religion's diversity, see themselves as adhering very firmly to a single Islam.”

diaspora: on the one hand, precisely due to the multitude of languages, ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as affiliation to a rite, believers become aware of differences among themselves;²⁷ some Muslims see an increasing need for unity in order not to lose the essence of their faith.²⁸ On the other hand, there are Muslims who see diversity and heterogeneity as enrichment.²⁹

On the above-mentioned website www.islammuslimcyprus.com the Muslims in the RoC are characterised as a “fragmented community” due to a lack of communication and cooperation, a self-assessment which the Imam dismissed. I think he is justified in doing so because Friday prayers attracting crowds of 400-800 people are hardly a sign of a “fragmented community.” It is true that the community consists, as mentioned above, of various nationalities and diverse religious cultures/backgrounds, although I am not aware of any struggles or dissension among them. If, however, the term is used to characterise the situation of Islam on the island as a whole, it is not incorrect. Therefore, one could speak of several mosque communities of which the Omeriye is but one in the RoC with believers from different countries, backgrounds and cultures, with Turkish Islam being absent. In the north, on the other hand, there are Turkish-Cypriot Muslims, Muslims from Turkey as well as Alevi and Bektashi communities³⁰ each with their own distinctive features also accounting for some degree of diversity.³¹ The division of the communities in the south and in the north, then, reflects the political partition of the island. The only group with a mixed composition of both diaspora Muslims and Turkish

27 E.g. concerning the various postures during prayer dependent on the affiliation to one of the four canonical rites (*madhhab*) which could be observed at prayers at the Omeriye; this is in harmony with a general trend that differences between the four “juridical rites” seem to become less important, cf. Brigitte Maréchal: “The Question of Belonging”, in: Brigitte Maréchal/Stefano Allievi/Felice Dassetto/Jørgen Nielsen (eds.): *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe. Religion and Society* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), 12 (Muslim Minorities, 2).

28 Mandaville (2001), 127.

29 Mandaville (2001), 132, points to the significance which a *hadīth* has for Islam in the diaspora; according to the *hadīth* the Prophet reassures his followers that “differences of opinion in the community are a blessing” (“*ikhtilāf al-umma rahma*”).

30 See the article by Hendrich in this volume.

31 One of the differences between the Omeriye and the Selimiye, the main mosque in the northern part of Nicosia (“TRNC”), is that the “Turkish” mosque is off limits for visitors (tourists) during prayer times; at least there are the relevant signs and I was a witness that this is also applied; on the other hand, I was always accepted at prayer times and to the *tafsīr* sessions at the Omeriye.

Cypriot Muslims³² gathers around Imam Şakir Alemdar and meets for *dhikr* on Thursday evenings at another Nicosia mosque, the Bayraktar.³³

What we see at the Omeriye is that—in addition to various forms of Islam in the north—another variant of Islam is evolving on the island, namely a diaspora Islam. Some of the people at the mosque stay in Cyprus only temporarily as students and refugees, while others have established themselves for a longer time or even permanently. In either case these people are economically and often also legally in a precarious situation. The multi-ethnic context at the Omeriye brings with it a greater awareness of religious differences leading some mosque-goers to emphasise the unity of the *Umma*, the oneness of Islam, whereas others do not seem to be concerned about the diversity.

32 Not Turkish Muslims, i.e. Turks from Turkey, as they are not allowed to enter the Republic of Cyprus through the so-called Green Line.

33 In June 2014 a third mosque in Nicosia, the Tahtakale Mosque, built in the 19th century and restored in 2003-4, was reopened for prayer by the Mufti of the “TRNC,” but it seems that this was a one-off event, “Religious service in mosque after 51 years,” *Cyprus Mail* 3 June 2013. All three mosques, Omeriye, Bayraktar and Tahtakale, are located within 10 minutes’ walk of each other.