

The Architecture of Co-existence Resilience, the Dynamics of Migration, and Identity in Today's Cyprus

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*Cyprus is a country that
stands firm and proudly
reaffirms its role in the
history of Christianity.*

THE STORY of an island is written by its people, by everything they stood for and defended over time, by the events that marked its existence, and by the way in which religious orientations allowed its inhabitants to embrace and defend their identity while coexisting with others.

Cyprus, the third-largest island in the Mediterranean, and a member state of the European Union, has a rich and complicated history that dates to the 10th century BC. Being an attractive territory for both military control and trade, over the course of time many have been interested in the so-called birthplace of Aphrodite. The long history of Cyprus was marked

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by waves of settlers, including Mycenaean Greeks, and its strategic importance brought it under the rule of many empires like the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Persians. Following its conquest by Alexander the Great, it became part of Ptolemaic Egypt and then of the Roman Empire, before becoming part of the Byzantine Empire. The island was ruled by the Lusignans and by the Venetians, then by the Ottomans for three centuries, before becoming a British protectorate and finally an independent republic in 1960. Its modern history has been defined by the division between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, which led to a Turkish invasion in 1974 and a *de facto* partition of the island. The wounds are still visible today in a land divided by a United Nations buffer zone, which embodies the ethnic, religious, and linguistic separation of the main communities.

The Divided Island of Saints

DUE TO its proximity to the Holy Land, Cyprus has always been seen as a country deeply dedicated to religious faith. The Church of Cyprus is one of the oldest in Christendom, founded in the 1st century by Apostles Paul and Barnabas. The first mission of the apostles Paul and Barnabas was by God's command: "So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus,"¹ where they preached the word of God. Paul the Apostle and the Cypriot-born Barnabas made Salamis their first destination, landing there after heading out from Antioch, in Syria. Here they proclaimed Christ in the Jewish synagogues before proceeding through the rest of the island (Acts 13:1–5). Tradition says that Barnabas preached in Alexandria and Rome and was stoned to death at Salamis around AD 61. His bones are believed to be buried in the nearby monastery named after him: Ayios Barnabas. I visited the Monastery in November 2025, and I understood why the Orthodox Cypriots call him a saint.

*The history of Christianity in Cyprus has a long and beautiful tradition, whose beginnings are connected with four important figures: Saint Lazarus and Apostles Paul, Barnabas and Mark. The apostles came to Cyprus in the first half of the 1st century, when the island was under the Roman rule. According to tradition, by preaching God's Word they became the founders of the Cypriot Church.*²

Salamis³ and Paphos⁴ were, since the beginning of Christianity, important centers for the spread of the Gospels, and the apostles found safety there. The small island has always been the home of Christian monks and priests, and the mon-

asteries and churches that have been built here since the first centuries have contributed to the affirmation of the Christian identity of Cypriots. “The early Christian basilicas that have been discovered . . . demonstrate incontrovertibly how soon and how profoundly Christianity took root on the island.”⁵

Cyprus has been called the “Island of Saints” as the monastic community

*was enriched from time to time by the arrival of monks from Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor, when military conflicts and the appearance of Arabs and later Turks in those regions made the sojourn of Christian elements there unsafe.*⁶

Over time, the monks and nuns who settled in Cyprus helped to establish important places of worship and to grow the communities. Their work in support of others appealed to the population around the monasteries and significantly contributed to the cultural and religious life. Inside the monasteries, the word of God was not only celebrated, but important manuscripts were transcribed, icons and frescoes were painted, all equally important for the spread of Christianity. The Byzantine art in Cyprus reached unprecedented heights.

*The large number of monuments, the quality and degree of preservation of the artistic wealth of Cyprus, all go to make the island a true centre for the study of Byzantine painting.*⁷

The faith played a central role in Cypriot national identity, culture, and history. The Church of Cyprus had a long tradition of involvement in politics, known as Ethnarchy. Archbishop Makarios III, for example, had significant cultural influence and power, and served as both the spiritual leader and the first president of Cyprus after gaining independence. He also established the Educational Council of the Ethnarchy, which was responsible for the educational activities in Greek Cypriot schools. Unfortunately, the coup d'état of 1974, organized by the junta in Athens, was a disaster for the people and the Church of Cyprus.

*In 1974, Turkey staged a military intervention on Cyprus in order to counter enosis, namely efforts of the Greek military junta at that time to incorporate Cyprus into Greece. The occupation of over one third of the island led to massive displacements of people. In 1983, the declaration of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus sealed the de facto division of Cyprus.*⁸

Turkey not only invaded the island under the pretext of protecting the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community, but occupied 37 percent of the land, and destroyed communities, churches, monasteries, shrines, and cemeteries. Because

of this event, Cyprus became the only country in the whole world to have an internal migration, forced by political decisions.

Most of the Turkish Cypriots living in the north part of the island have entangled identities, as they are citizens of both the Republic of Cyprus—and therefore the European Union—and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is under Turkish military control and is administered by the institutions of the TRNC. Or, as Thomas De Waal writes, “Turkish Cyprus is caught between two incomplete integration projects. On the one side is Turkey, and on the other is the EU.”⁹

In most areas of Turkish-occupied Cyprus, time stopped as of July 1974. Following the Turkish invasion, many Christian sites in the northern part of the island were abandoned or converted into mosques. A report on religious freedom in Cyprus, conducted by the United States Department of State in 2021, mentions that

*72 [Greek Orthodox] religious sites remained inaccessible due to their being located within Turkish military zones or the buffer zone. . . . A representative of the Church of Cyprus again stated that some religious sites to which Church officials had little or no access were deteriorating.*¹⁰

In many ways, this conflict was characterized as the ultimate form of identity and religious crisis. And when religious conversions happened, people suffered.

*Turkish Cypriots who converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity, faced societal criticism and feared losing their jobs. . . . Many members preferred to remain silent about their faiths and beliefs.*¹¹

Currently, only three churches from the north part of the island are officially permitted to hold liturgical services: Apostolos Andreas Monastery, the Monastery of Saint Barnabas, and Saint Mamas Church. In November 2025, during my visit to the Monastery of Saint Barnabas, I could see the sign “Icon Museum” displayed at the entrance to the church. Following the 1974 invasion, the monastery was converted into a museum by the Turkish Cypriot authorities. Thus, the Greek Cypriots and the tourists can only be visitors. It being a museum, rather than a place of worship, diminishes the religious significance of the church for believers. The painted frescoes and the icons of the monastery are extraordinary, but for believers they mean much more than an artistic representation.

*People’s identities are closely tied to their cultural heritage. This connection runs even deeper when those places hold sacred significance, adding an extra strain to reconciliation in Cyprus.*¹²

Maybe, one day, the reconciliation of the estranged communities will be possible, and the worshipers could return to their churches, and the hymns could fill the emptiness of the abandoned sacred buildings.

The Cyprus Problem: A Short History of Displacement

“THE CYPRUS problem embodies an unresolved nationality conflict between two ethnic groups indigenous to the island.”¹³ In the middle of Nicosia (Lefkosia or Lefkoşa), on a very busy street, a United Nations controlled buffer zone separates the Republic of Cyprus, a member state of the EU, and the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which—except for Turkey—is not recognized by the international community.

*On April 23, 2003, the Ledra Palace checkpoint in Nicosia was the first checkpoint to open, allowing both sides to cross the border for the first time in decades.*¹⁴

Nicosia is the last divided capital of Europe. For tourists, Ledra Street is fascinating: there are two different countries on the same street, the sounds of church bells complement the call of the imam and there's an open market where you can buy goods using two different currencies. But for the people living on the island this is a scar. The ongoing dispute between the two communities is known as the Cyprus problem. “Before the checkpoints opened in 2003, Greek Cypriots were forbidden from entering north of Cyprus, just as the south remained inaccessible to Turkish Cypriots.”¹⁵ Cyprus' history of displacement was something I was not aware of before.

*While constitutional issues, property and territory, and security represent the most significant points of disagreement, there is a range of other issues that serve to divide the two communities.*¹⁶

Crossing the border to the north Cyprus, I could easily notice the cultural differences and the transformations of many places of worship. This started long before the modern division of the island. Saint Sophia Cathedral (also known as the Agia Sophia of Nicosia), constructed in 1326 as a Catholic church, which served as the coronation church of the kings of Cyprus during the Lusignan rule, and was converted in 1570 into the Selimiye Mosque, is the best example of the religion transformation in Nicosia, and in Cyprus, to a great extent. Agia Sophia has been the main mosque of the city and is housed in the largest and

oldest surviving Gothic church in Cyprus. In our days, the monument is visited by thousands of tourists and there are many cultural events that exemplify and celebrate the long and complicated history of the building.

In Cyprus, like everywhere in the world, it is difficult to explain religious transformations as elements of integration and belonging.

*Despite the challenges of the small and troubled country of Cyprus—a nation that remains divided by borders, barbed wire, sandbags, political conflict, and religious beliefs—there is always a spirit of enlightenment that rises above differences to reveal our humanity and unites us in a common purpose.*¹⁷

And this comes from the resilience people have when it comes to their identities. As generally understood, cultural identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture. But what happens when a person is forced to leave their culture and to live in a different environment? Where is *home*? And what does *home* mean?

I asked these questions to a refugee from Varosha,¹⁸ the ghost city I visited in November 2025, as part of my research on Cyprus's religious identity, and she replied: "Home is where your family is." In 1974, her family was displaced from Varosha, they were forced to leave their house with only the clothes on their back. They first stayed in tents, and they had to start all over again. What kept them together was the thought that maybe one day they would go back to their home. But after many years, they understood that home is where their family is at that moment. So, the idea of "home" has transformed from the representation of a place (house) to that of a feeling (togetherness). "Home is where your family is." If they were together, their home was with them. Her parents never saw their house again. After the authorities opened the city to visitors and she became a tourist guide, she asked for their permission to see her parents' house. She was not allowed to. The house is very close to the open zone, but inaccessible. Her story deeply impressed me. It's only one of many. It is a very sad one, but also a very compelling one, as it speaks about resilience and the human capability to endure and start over repeatedly.

*Trust is never a given—it is earned, and it is always put to the test, especially in communities where religious, racial, political, and ethnic conflict has been cultivated for centuries.*¹⁹

Today, up to 78% of the total population of the entire island is Christian. Most Turkish Cypriots are officially Sunni Muslims. After fifty years of partition and

numerous unsuccessful negotiations, Cyprus's two distinctive communities—Greek Cypriots in the south and Turkish Cypriots in the north—are trying to live their lives and to help each other to preserve their history.

*Since 2011, the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYP) has served as an important platform for fostering interfaith dialogue among religious leaders from different communities in Cyprus. . . . It garnered overwhelming support from the religious leaders of Cyprus, encompassing not only the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, but also minority religions on the island, such as the Maronite, Armenian, and Latin churches.*²⁰

Recently, the communities of the island have developed many and diverse activities, covering all aspects of life and society in Cyprus. They built schools and set up cultural, philanthropic and humanitarian foundations for the benefit of the people, no matter their religious orientation or nationality. National identities are challenged by globalization and migration, everywhere in the world, and Cyprus probably offers the best example of a nation that has never been homogeneous, given the multiple minorities that have lived in the island for hundreds of years.

The Dynamics of Migration

“CYPRUS IS seen as both a lifeline and a gateway to the European Union for many risking the perilous sea journey.”²¹ This is what the official report published by the Mixed Migration Centre—a knowledge center engaged in collecting and analyzing data on migration—states. Cyprus has been at the forefront of irregular migration in the European Union for years, frequently recording the highest number of asylum applications *per capita*. Due to its geographic proximity to Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and also Africa, the island faces significant pressure, leading to a recent shift towards stricter migration policies.

UNHCR (The United Nations Refugee Agency) offers different useful reports²² and updates on arrival demographics, statistics (including data on religion and ethnicity) and other data on the movement on the island, all very helpful when trying to explain the dynamics of migration. But in Cyprus, like everywhere in the world, this process has changed a lot in recent years. “Migration has always been, since the very beginning, central to the human story.”²³ Not only conflicts,

but also climate changes are pushing people, increasingly often, to leave their homes and seek to settle in places temporarily safe from such threats. Cyprus is a multicultural island, consisting mainly of Greek Cypriots (approximately 78%) and Turkish Cypriots (approximately 18%), alongside some minorities (4%—Armenians, Maronites, Latins). The Greek and Turkish communities retain their distinct identities, based on religion and cultural ties with Greece and Turkey, respectively. This can be seen even in the educational system: while Greek Cypriot education is associated with the Orthodox Christian religion, the Turkish Cypriot education is associated with Islam.

*Cultivating relationships and friendships among different ethnic, racial, and politically diverse societies is a perpetual endeavor, especially when conflict among these groups has been rooted for centuries in peoples' minds and character. . . . While centuries of occupation brought a cultural legacy and cultural diversity to Cyprus, it also resulted in ethnic and religious conflict among the different Cypriot communities, as well as political disputes among the country's governing bodies.*²⁴

In the last 30 years, there has been an increase in the number of migrants arriving in Cyprus in search of a better life. Their reasons might differ, but the quest is the same: people have the right to decide where they want to live; they can improve their lives and can hope for more. Do we belong to a specific place or are we destined to find our place in this world? Sometimes this is the question that motivates people. But recently,

*Migration has . . . become a modern proxy for a whole range of other issues that impinge on our lives and our thinking: identity, ethnicity, religion, ideas of home, patriotism, nostalgia, integration, multiculturalism, safety, terrorism, racism. . . . Migration is such an important element of the human story.*²⁵

According to the Statistical Service of Cyprus (CYSTAT), a unit that works closely with the Ministry of Migration of the Republic of Cyprus, more than 184,000 third-country nationals held valid residence permits in Cyprus as of December 2025.²⁶ The top 10 nationalities comprise Russia, the United Kingdom, Nepal, India, Syria, China, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Ukraine, or Egypt. In addition, more than 40,000 residents of Cyprus are citizens of non-EU countries, including Israel, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Most of these people have work permits; some are highly skilled employees of companies with foreign interests. There is another category of people who have an international protection status. All of them feel safe in Cyprus and consider that their life is consistently improving.

The island of Aphrodite has also become home to tens of thousands of Romanians. They live in the southern part of the island, where they have grown into the third largest community in the country. Romanians have found hospitality and prosperity here, and they established in Nicosia the first Romanian school in the Diaspora. According to the Romanian Ministry of External Affairs,²⁷ The Romanian School in Cyprus is currently operating in six localities (Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Paphos, Dali, and Paralimni), with 14 classes and 180 students. In Paralimni there is also a Romanian Orthodox Church which offers religious services for the Romanian community and a mass is organized every Sunday. During my sojourn in Cyprus, in November 2025, I spent one Sunday morning in Paralimni and I could see that the Romanian community is homogenous and well-integrated in Cyprus, but also eager to affirm its identity and preserve its values.

*By focusing on our deep history, on our common descent, on our history as migrants—ancient and modern—we might begin to place a greater emphasis on our shared heritage and identity as human beings above all others.*²⁸

Migrant experiences are both similar and different. Nowadays, people not only flee from conflict areas or try to find a better life for their families, but they also choose to live in areas with multicultural significance. There are many so-called “cultural nomads,” and they spend parts of each year in different locations. Many of them chose Cyprus due to its impressive history and because of its almost all year long sunny location in the middle of Mediterranean Sea. They stay for a while, learn about the culture and customs, and then they move somewhere else, and start all over again. These people strongly oppose the idea of sedentarism, but they also are in the search of some idea of *home*.

*Migration, forced and unforced and everything in between, is at the heart of the human experience. . . . We can only hope to understand ourselves better as a species if we remember that.*²⁹

No matter the reasons behind someone’s migration, the most important is the openness of the community in which those people arrive and live for a time. During my stay there, I was deeply impressed by the programs offered by the members of the Ayia Napa parish, and their openness towards different cultures and their genuine desire to help people, no matter what their religious background. We have more in common than we usually think we have.

Conclusion

CYPRUS IS probably the best place to investigate the historical, contemporary, socio-cultural, and political-economic conditions of living together in a globalized, entangled Europe. The country has borders inside its territory, and a traumatic recent past that needs the support of the international organizations for it to re-establish its identity.

*For over fifty years, the conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots on the small island of Cyprus has been a source of concern in the Eastern Mediterranean.*³⁰

But Cyprus is also a country that stands firm and proudly reaffirms its role in the history of Christianity, as a land blessed by the proximity to the Holy Land and a place chosen by the first Apostles to spread the Word.

The island is marked by a complex history of displacement, division, and deep-rooted religious tradition. But what I learned in my stay at Saint Epiphanius Cultural Academy Ayia Napa was that Cyprus is a place where everybody is welcomed and helped to find his/her own place and encouraged to be actively involved in society and be part of the changes that can create a better future for all of us. The small island of Cyprus was and still is the home of many cultures and faiths and sometimes things were difficult and still remain so, in manners we cannot fully understand.

*Given its distinctive insular geography between Christian occident and Muslim orient, as well as its apparently insurmountable international and historical problems of domestic co-existence involving two different ethnic groups with different ethno-religious identities,*³¹

Cyprus is a unique example of democracy that has the most important “role as stability provider, peacemaker, and prosperity benefactor in the Eastern Mediterranean.” And this is something Cyprus is proud of. In our days, Greek and Turkish Cypriots work together to restore the island’s shared cultural heritage. The Ayia Napa Monastery, which hosts the Saint Epiphanius Cultural Academy, is amongst the best examples: it is a sacred and historical landmark that stands as a testament to the enduring spiritual and cultural heritage of Cyprus.



Notes

1. Acts 13: 4. King James Bible online: <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Acts-13-4/>.
2. Łukasz Burkiewicz, "The Beginnings of Christianity in Cyprus: Religious and Cultural Aspects," *Folia Historica Cracoviensia*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2017): 13–36 (24); doi: <https://doi.org/10.15633/fhc.2204>.
3. The earliest archaeological finds at Salamis go back to the 11th century bc. The city had an incredible history, being an important place for Greeks, Persians, and Romans and holding extraordinary wealth. At the beginning of the 4th century, Salamis was destroyed by a series of earthquakes. The town was rebuilt under the name Constantia by Constantius II (337–361) and became an episcopal seat. Saint Epiphanius, one of the fathers of Cyprus's Orthodoxy, was a Bishop of Salamis. Present-day Salamis is in the Turkish part of the island, in the north of modern Famagusta.
4. Probably founded by Nicocles (d. 306 bc), the last king of Palaepaphos, the town's name is linked to the goddess Aphrodite, who emerged from the sea on the shores on the island. It is important for Christianity, as Acts 13: 9 identifies Paphos as the first place where Saul was called Paul. See Acts 13: 6–9: "They had gone through the isle unto Paphos . . . Then Saul, (who also *is called* Paul)."
5. *Cyprus, Island of Saints: A Devotional Journey*, ed. the Church of Cyprus, second edition (Lefkosia, 2011), 10.
6. *Cyprus, Island of Saints*, 28.
7. *Cyprus, Island of Saints*, 90.
8. Thomas Wrießnig, "Report," *Security Policy Working Paper* 5 (2016): 1.
9. Thomas De Waal, "Cyprus: In Europe, In Limbo," in *Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories* (Report of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), 59.
10. See the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2021*, conducted by the Office of International Religious Freedom, United States Department of State; online: <https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/cyprus/area-administered-by-turkish-cypriots>.
11. Ibid.
12. Elene Chkhaidze, "Religious Heritage in the Shadows of Reconciliation: Cyprus' Journey toward Unity" (2025); online: <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/religious-heritage-shadows-reconciliation-cyprus-journey-toward-unity>.
13. Peter A. Zervakis, "Cyprus in Europe: Solving the Cyprus Problem by Europeanizing It?", *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2004): 111.
14. Elene Chkhaidze, "Cyprus: Home for Cooperation and Roads Leading to It" (2023); online: <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/cyprus-home-cooperation-and-roads-leading-it>.
15. Ibid.
16. James Ker-Lindsay, "The Cyprus Problem," in Anton Bebler, ed., "*Frozen conflicts*" in Europe (Leverkusen, 2015), 27.

17. Constantia Constantinou, “Transcending Ethnic, Racial, and Political Conflict to Achieve Understanding between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot Library Communities,” in Constantia Constantinou, Michael J. Miller, and Kenneth Schlesinger, eds., *International Librarianship. Developing Professional, Intercultural, and Educational Leadership* (New York, 2017), 55.
18. The city of Varosha is located the Famagusta area, a *de jure* territory of Cyprus, currently under the control of Northern Cyprus. Between 1970 and 1974, Varosha was one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world and was a favorite destination of celebrities.
19. Constantinou, 51.
20. Elene Chkhaidze, “Cyprus: Bridging the Divide through Interreligious Dialogue” (2023); online: <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/cyprus-bridging-divide-through-interreligious-dialogue>.
21. Julia Litzkow, “Cyprus’ Migration Dilemma: Hardline Measures, Regional Conflict and Rising Pressures” (2024); online: <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/cyprus-migration-dilemma-hardline-measures-regional-conflict-and-rising-pressures/>.
22. See the reports and data offered at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24473>.
23. Sam Miller, *Migrants: The Story of Us All* (London, 2024), 3.
24. Constantinou, 43–44.
25. Miller, 3.
26. See <https://www.cystat.gov.cy/en/> and https://x.com/CYSTAT_EN.
27. See <https://nicosia.mae.ro/local-news/844#null>.
28. Miller, 193.
29. Ibid., 234.
30. Ker-Lindsay, 19.
31. Zerkavis, 129–130.

Abstract

The Architecture of Co-existence: Resilience, the Dynamics of Migration, and Identity in Today’s Cyprus

My research mobility from November 2025 at Saint Epiphanius Cultural Academy Ayia Napa, Cyprus, as part of the EU-funded RESILIENCE program, offered me the opportunity to explore and understand Cyprus’s religious traditions and especially the role played by religious beliefs in fostering the openness of its people towards the others, no matter what their religion might be. The Ayia Napa Monastery is just one of the numerous monasteries of Cyprus that promote the spiritual, historical, and cultural heritage of the island, while responding to the constant challenges for European society, especially when it comes to migration. The efforts of both Greek Cypriots

and Turkish Cypriots towards living together in peace and harmony are significant steps toward reconciliation amid the troubled history of the island of Aphrodite.

Keywords

Cyprus, migration, coexistence, identity, religion, reconciliation