Greek Orthodoxy: an exclusive slogan or a universal mystery?

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All religious discourse is a struggle to reconcile the particular and the universal, the specific and the transcendent. At its best, religious experience enables us both to focus intently on a particular moment in time, and see that moment in the light of eternity; to understand the true significance of a particular place by grasping its relationship to the whole of creation.

Interpreters of the Christian revelation have faced this challenge in an especially acute form. When they explore the mystery of the Incarnation, they have to hold in balance the two poles of a great paradox. On one hand, the Word or Logos has existed from the beginning, and He is with us always; on the other Christ lived and died at a particular place and time. He spoke a particular language, lived under a particular regime, and was brought up within a particular culture.

A good deal of the New Testament, both the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, is devoted to reconciling the particular circumstances of Christ's appearance with the universal significance of his Incarnation and Resurrection. He represents both the Messiah awaited by the Jews, and the moment when Judaism is transcended. He has come not to abolish the Jewish Law but to fulfil it. Yet Christ redefines "Israel" to mean a community of believers which transcends the boundaries of geography and culture. He tells a Samaritan woman that in future, people will worship neither in Jerusalem, nor in the particular mountain which her people call sacred, "but in Spirit and in truth" (John 4, 23).

The Christian aspiration to sweep aside all cultural and linguistic barriers is most vividly conveyed in the second chapter of the Acts of Apostles, describing the descent of the Holy Spirit which miraculously enabled people from many different countries to hear the apostles' message in their own language

(Acts 2, 1-11). Inspired by the Pentecost story, eastern Christian thought places particularly strong emphasis on the role of the Spirit in overcoming the contradiction between particularity and universality. One of the most distinguished Greek Orthodox theologians of modern times, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, elaborated on this point during a recent lecture:[1]

> The fact that the Son of God entered a specific culture, that is the Hebrew or Jewish milieu, at a certain time in history, may be easily taken to imply that He sanctified and affirmed only a particular culture, calling all other cultures to be converted to this particular one. Indeed a Christology which is not conditioned by Pneumatology (an understanding of the Holy Spirit) may lead to such a conclusion.
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> But the Holy Spirit is present everywhere. He blows where He wills and fills all things, as the prayer to Him says [...]. In the Spirit, Christ ceases to be Jewish or Greek. The Spirit allows Christ to enter every culture and assume it by purifying it, by placing that culture in the light of ultimate meaning.

It is significant, from the Orthodox point of view, that the gift of Pentecost did not involve the apostles speaking some kind of Esperanto which all their listeners miraculously learned. On the contrary, the linguistic differences between the "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and dwellers in Mesopotamia" remained intact, but they were somehow rendered irrelevant.

The paradoxical ideal of universality without uniformity is also reflected in the Orthodox understanding of ecclesiology, or church structure. The world's Orthodox communities are, ideally at least, linked like an unbreakable chain, by virtue of common participation in the sacraments, but they are not subject to any single hierarchical authority, comparable with the Vatican. Nor are they expected to conform to any particular cultural or political model. On the contrary, from an Orthodox perspective, it is entirely to be expected that Church organisations in various countries will, in significant ways, reflect the political and cultural circumstances in which they find themselves – and therefore look very different from one another, at least on the

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[1] Lecture delivered at Balamand, Lebanon, on 4 December 1999 (see www.balamand.edu.lb/theology).

surface. In the Soviet Union, what remained of the Russian Orthodox Church was organised as a branch of the communist power structure; under the Ottoman empire, the Greek church was effectively a tool of imperial administration. More recently, as a tiny Christian island within overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has managed to carve out a new role for itself, entirely consistent with the Patriarch's position as a law-biding Turkish subject, by campaigning against environmental pollution. In the United States meanwhile, where the public face of Christianity tends to be more muscular and hearty, Orthodox bishops have been keen participants at political conventions and White House prayer breakfasts. What all these examples highlight is the way in which Orthodoxy – to a much greater extent than Roman Catholicism – can change its external appearance while keeping the inner core of its mystical life intact.

Most paradoxically of all, Orthodox Christians in one nation may find themselves at war with co-religionists in another nation; that state of affairs would certainly be regarded as tragic but it would not compromise the validity of the Orthodox faith in either country. In 1904, when war broke out between Russia and Japan, the Russian missionary to the Japanese, Bishop Nikolai Kasatkin urged his flock to pray for their own army and give thanks for its victories – while explaining that he, as a subject of the Tsar, could not join these prayers. At the same time, the Japanese Orthodox were told to remember that "they have another fatherland to which all men belong without distinction of nationality".[2] Theologically speaking, the fact that Japanese adherents of eastern Christianity were at war with the world's most powerful Orthodox empire did not make them any less Orthodox; nor did imply that the Holy Spirit was absent from the life of the Church in Japan.

I thought it worthwhile to preface my remarks about Orthodoxy and Hellenism by offering those few hints of the subtle, almost baffling way in which the eastern Christian tradition seeks to solve the problem of universality versus

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[2] Quoted by Father Luke Veronis, *Missionaries, monks, and martyrs: Making disciples of all nations* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing 1994), p. 120.

particularity. The manner in which Orthodoxy expresses itself in a specific place and period will invariably reflect that place and period; but the Spirit transcends the limitations of space and time, often in ways which are not immediately visible to the individuals who are participating in this mysterious process. It may often prove impossible for people to make a clear distinction in their mind between their Orthodox faith and other claims on their loyalty, including the community and nation in which they have grown up. Nor, even from the most objective viewpoint, can the "essence" of Orthodoxy be extracted, or abstracted, by some simple technique from the national cultures which have been interwoven with that faith for many centuries. As Father Alexander Schmemann noted in a brilliant essay on Orthodoxy in the United States: "One cannot by a surgical operation [...] distil a pure 'Orthodoxy in itself' without disconnecting it from its flesh and blood, making it a lifeless form."[3] But the mere fact that there are so many different types of "flesh and blood" to which Orthodoxy can be connected is a reminder that in the light of eternity, there is no single culture, regime or society which guarantees its participants a swift route to salvation.

So much for theology. Having begun my remarks by exploring some of the paradoxes of Orthodox ecclesiology, I would now like to make an almost complete change of subject matter and tone by remarking, in an impressionistic way, on one of the most surprising developments which seems to have occurred in Greece during the 20 years or so in which I have been either a resident or a frequent visitor to that country. I am referring to the fact that for an increasing number of Greeks, of many different educational and economic levels, the Orthodox faith has, so to speak, resurfaced from the collective unconscious and become a powerful factor in their conscious experience.

Let me digress for a moment to say what I do not mean by this. On the face of things, the clearest sign of religion's increasing salience is the fact that relations between Church and state now generate far more passion than any other public issue in Greece. With the fading away of cold-war arguments over

[3] Father Alexander Schmemann. "Problems of Orthodoxy in America. The Canonical Problem", *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 8.2 (1964) 67-84 (see www.orthodox.info/ecumenism).

political ideology and economics, the traditional Greek parties of left and right are rapidly losing their appeal, and quarrels about religion and identity have to some extent filled that vacuum. It is the Church, rather than any political party, which now calls hundreds of thousands of people into the street to demonstrate against government policies. In summer 2000, it organised two huge rallies to protest against the government's decision to issue identity cards that make no reference to the holder's religious affiliation – and to warn the government against any further moves to downgrade the role of Orthodoxy as the semi-official creed of the Greek state. The Holy Synod has begun a campaign to collect millions of signatures in support of its demand for a referendum on the issue. With Prime Minister Costas Simitis unwilling to back down over what he, too, regards as a matter of principle, relations between the state and the Orthodox hierarchy are in a state of almost unprecedented ferment. All this makes for a very different climate from the one which prevailed in the early 1980s, allowing the newly elected Socialist government to ignore – at little or no political cost – the hierarchy's advice on matters ranging from civil marriage to nudism to abortion.

I would suggest, however, that the most important signs of religion's rising importance in the lives of many Greeks are not to be found in noisy public arguments or quasi-political protest meetings. The fact that such meetings can take place is, at most, a symptom of some profounder developments which are unfolding beneath the surface.

Something so elusive as the importance of religious belief can only be judged subjectively and perhaps tentatively; I do not believe that statistics about church-going or parish registers are an accurate indicator, especially in Greece where religious practice has often been a bewildering mixture of formalism and real devotion. All I can report is that among the individuals, communities and extended families I have known in Greece for the past 20 years, a much higher proportion takes the Orthodox faith seriously – not just as a slogan or national symbol, but as an abiding mystery, with the power to transform human beings and reconcile them to their Creator – than was the case when I first visited that country.

During my four years as a foreign correspondent in Athens in the early 1980s, I interacted socially and professionally with people from every walk of life. In all that time, I do not think I met more than a couple of people below the age of 40 for whom the Church was anything other than a faded relic of the past. Some saw it is a charming and beautiful relic, and others welcomed its decline. But it was very, very unusual to find a young, well-educated person who took the teachings of the Church seriously.

These days, by contrast, it is no longer a surprise to meet young Athenians who observe the fasts, use prayer-ropes, consult spiritual directors and make regular use of the Orthodox sacraments. Of course, these external signs of piety are confined to a minority, and they do always point to an authentic religious experience; but they sometimes do. In Athens and the provinces, churches seem fuller of people of all ages. There are a number of parishes in the greater Athens area which have had striking success in attracting young, professionally successful people and their families, not just as churchgoers but as active participants in community life. The monasteries of the Holy Mountain, which appeared to be in precipitous decline only 25 years ago, are experiencing something more akin to growing pains with numbers rising, the average age falling, and the average educational level much higher than before.

Of course, the picture is not a simple one. Even as the Church makes gains in some places, it is continuing to decline in others. The number of priests serving small villages is falling, simply because the number of small villages is falling. But as a broader trend, the resurgence of Orthodoxy as a force in people's lives is unmistakable. Moreover, at the risk of sounding contrarian, I would argue that it has no particular connection with the appointment, in 1998, of a charismatic and controversial figure as Archbishop of Athens, and the re-emergence of church-state relations as a hotly-contested public issue.

For one thing, the revival of active interest in Orthodoxy predates the appointment of Archbishop Christodoulos by at least five years. Nor is there any simple correlation between support for the Archbishop over the policy issues currently in dispute, and religious sentiment as such. There are Orthodox Christian believers who think it would be better for everyone if

the Church were more clearly separated from the state; and there may well be people who take the hierarchy's side, on grounds of nationalism or cultural conservatism, but are not particularly devout.

It is probably true, however, that the decision by the Archdiocese of Athens to do battle over certain areas of government policy – and by implication, to challenge the right of secular institutions to be sole regulators of those areas – would not have been conceivable if there had not been some rediscovery of Orthodoxy's gifts at a much more private level. The underlying religious revival provided a context in which church-state relations could become a controversial issue; but I do not believe the relationship between those two developments is any closer than that.

How can this revival be explained? The theologically correct answer is that the Holy Spirit is at work But on a more worldly level, is there anything useful one can say about the circumstances in which Greece's "modernisation" – as a secular-humanist would define that term – has seemingly gone into reverse? I think it is possible at least to describe the background to this revival in political, cultural and even geopolitical terms, though it would be a mistake to view any one of those elements, or even all of them taken together, as decisive.

One factor has been negative. With the passage of time, the Church's image has recovered from the damage it suffered as a result of its close association with the military regime of 1967-74. For a decade or so after the Junta's fall, anybody in the social and political mainstream who laid particular emphasis on the link between Hellenism and Orthodoxy would have risked incurring ridicule or worse by conjuring up memories of the colonels and their slogan of "Greece of the Christian Greeks". For a whole generation of Greek citizens, religious teaching became associated with the sterile authoritarianism and bone-headed chauvinism that characterised official discourse – whether in schools or army barracks or public speeches – during the dictatorship.

A secular sociologist would no doubt add that Orthodoxy's revival is as a sort of rearguard action against the forces of globalisation and homogenisation. As the influence of global markets and mass culture sweep over Greece, like many other

countries, they seem to trigger a sort of defensive mechanism which gives people a renewed interest in and attachment to the things which mark them out from other places. If that is the main reason for the revival, one might expect the resurgence of Orthodoxy to go hand in hand with renewed attachment to non-Christian aspects of Greek culture, from the Karagiozis puppet theatre to rebetika songs.

It is also a commonplace of modern history that in societies undergoing intensive modernisation, there can be upsurges of popular piety – often prompted by visions or apparitions, or increased devotion to local saints or sacred objects – which are almost beyond the control of conventional religious authorities, and are in certain ways made possible by mass literacy and communications.[4] The current resurgence of Orthodoxy in Greece might certainly be described as a late example of that phenomenon, although that is by no means a full or adequate explanation.

Another part of the context is geopolitical, at least in the broad sense. The collapse of communism in the Balkans and the wars over the future of ex-Yugoslavia have revived deeply-rooted fears and atavistic loyalties, which are often conceived and described in religious terms.

Personally, I would argue that the objective importance of Orthodoxy as a geopolitical factor in south-eastern Europe has been exaggerated. It is by no means clear, for example, that the traditionally Orthodox nations of Romania and Bulgaria have had, either recently or over the past century, the same geopolitical orientation as Greece or Serbia. Nor has a common Orthodox heritage prevented tension between Athens and Skopje, or dissuaded Russia from backing the Muslim Abkhaz against the ancient Orthodox nation of Georgia.

But the wars of Yugoslav succession certainly did lay bare a deep well of pro-Serbian feeling in Greece. I would argue that this is not so much rooted in religious sentiment as in common fear of perceived adversaries such as the Turks and Albanians. But it so happens that Orthodoxy is the most obvious common denomi-

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[4] See Nadieszda Kizenko, *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian people* (Pennsylvania State University Press 2000), especially chapters 2-3.

nator in the Greek and Serbian heritages; so the easiest way of understanding and describing the friendship between those two countries is to call it solidarity among fellow Orthodox Christians. And some religious links between Greece and Serbia do exist. Most of the senior Serbian clergy, for example, have studied in Greece and speak fluent Greek – although, interestingly, many of them seem more western-oriented and universalist in their cultural outlook than their Greek counterparts.

To a striking extent, Greece's alignment with Serbia – a stance which puts it at odds with most west European nations – has tended to heal ideological differences within Greek society. Demonstrations against NATO's air attacks on Belgrade were supported with equal fervour by Greek Orthodox bishops who sympathised with their co-religionists and old-fashioned Marxists who instinctively disapproved of military action by an American-led alliance. This marks a contrast with the cold-war fault lines which ran down the middle of Greek society: on one hand there were people who were self-consciously Orthodox, politically conservative and therefore pro-American, and on the other, there were people on the mildly anti-clerical left who admired Soviet Russia, more on ideological grounds than cultural ones. In Turkey, too, the war over Kosovo led to a similar fading of ideological division in favour of geopolitical solidarity: leftists and traditional conservatives overcame their lingering anti-Americanism to endorse NATO's air war; and they hailed the outcome of that war as a victory against the "Orthodox axis".

But whatever the effects of a perceived "Orthodox axis" on people's cultural and religious consciousness, I think we should remain cautious about acknowledging that such an axis objectively exists.

Certainly, the existence of an "Orthodox bloc" in international affairs has been posited both by outsiders – of whom the most famous is Professor Sam Huntingdon, the ideologue of "clashing civilisations" – and by insiders, such as the Greek, Serbian or Russian nationalists who regard recent events in the Balkans as a conspiracy against Orthodoxy. But is there even a trace of truth in the assertion that the recent history of the Balkans reflects some sort of anti-Orthodox plot? Or do such theories dangerously ignore the possibility that leaders, govern-

ments and nationalist movements may at times prove to be their own worst enemies?

On reflection, I find only one, tiny grain of truth in the conspiracy theory. When outside powers – and I am thinking particularly of the United States – take stock of the Balkans and their interests there, they do not only consider the region's internal dynamics. They also consider the likely knock-on effects of events in the Balkans on other regions which may be of similar or greater strategic importance. And it is certainly true that one of the factors, though by no means the only one, which informed American policy towards the Bosnian war was fear that a collapse of the Bosnian Muslim cause would discredit the United States in many other parts of the Islamic world, and make it harder for pro-western leaders of Muslim countries to retain credibility.

It was also true that the likely knock-on effects of a defeat for the Bosnian Muslims were more damaging than the likely knock-on effects of a defeat for Serbia. While the latter outcome would certainly cause unhappiness in Greece and Russia, this reaction was less likely to have unbearable political consequences – such as a complete reversal in either country's orientation – than a surge of an anti-Americanism throughout the Islamic world. This does not imply that there was any conspiracy against Orthodox Christianity – merely that factors other than the welfare or sentiments of Orthodox nations took priority in the calculations of the leading western powers.

What connection, if any, exists between the trade-offs of geopolitics and the private deliberations of Greek citizens as they rediscover their historic faith and explore the answers it provides to the mysteries of life, death and God? Arguably, none whatsoever. Geopolitics never saved anybody's soul – or condemned anybody's soul, as the paradoxical story about the Japanese Orthodox makes clear. But I think it is true that some Greeks were prompted to re-examine their spiritual heritage as a result of fear and uncertainty engendered by conflict in the Balkans – and therefore embarked on a voyage of discovery which turned out to be a spiritual quest rather than a purely political or cultural one.

Moving far away from the world of high politics or geopolitics, I think another important factor in Orthodoxy's revival

has been the influence of perhaps half a dozen *startsi*, individuals who have been credited with mystical and pastoral gifts as a result of ascetical discipline and prayer. There is only one of these people whom I feel able to describe in any detail, and I think it worth digressing for a moment to speak of him.

Before he passed away in 1991, Father Iakovos Tsalikis was the abbot of the monastery of Osios David in northern Evvia, leading its revival from a state of near-extinction to become one of the most important places of pilgrimage in Greece. He was born in Asia Minor to a family which had produced many generations of monks. He was brought to Greece as an infant and raised in the austere conditions of a remote Evvia village. He had very little formal education but his piety, humility and ability to discern people's innermost feelings exercised an extraordinary influence over everyone who met him. People who sought his advice included judges, army officers and churchmen who were far senior to him in rank. Some of the 20 or so monks who make up the Osios David community today are highly educated and could easily have made successful worldly careers. Their community, and the memory of Father Iakovos, are held in enormous esteem throughout northern Evvia and indeed throughout Greece, although they are virtually unknown to the wider world.

Father Iakovos was certainly not a Greek nationalist or a nationalist of any other kind. He was utterly indifferent to earthly powers. He often used to speak of intense, secret piety practised in Ottoman times in his ancestral homeland of "Asia Minor" and, in a gentle way, make unfavourable comparisons with his adopted country, Greece. This does not mean that he was an irredentist who wanted to claim Asia Minor for Greece, or a nostalgist for the Ottoman Empire. He was simply more interested in the kingdom of God than in the realms of this world.

The contrast between Orthodoxy as a geopolitical slogan, and Orthodoxy as a mystical path to union with God, open to human beings of any ethnic background, is vividly brought home in a thought-provoking new book on the "Orthodox world" by the journalist and travel-writer Victoria Clark.[5]

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[5] Victoria Clark, *Why angels fall: a portrait of Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (London: Macmillan 2000).

Without fully explaining either, she makes particular use of two terms to describe what she regards as least attractive, and most attractive, in the Orthodox heritage. The first is "fyletism" or racial exclusivity, a heresy that was roundly condemned by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1872 but continues to rage in much of eastern Europe. The second is "hesychasm", a term she uses to cover Orthodox mysticism in general, although in some contexts it has a more specific meaning.

She has certainly hit on an important point: the human heart, defined in Orthodox theology as the part of our being which longs for communion for God, has no nationality; yet there is a great deal of religious and quasi-religious discourse in traditionally Orthodox countries, including Greece, which seems to obscure that point – as though the salvation of a person's soul mainly depended on being born into the right ethnic group or geopolitical bloc.

Indeed, this paradox is such an acute one that it risks torpedoing the whole premise of her book – whose self-imposed task is to describe "eastern Orthodox Europe, an entity whose separate values, traditions and therefore history we have at best denigrated and at worst ignored". But is there really such a thing as "Orthodox Europe" or any territorially-defined "Orthodox world"? This very proposition is cast in doubt by one of her most interesting informants, Father Sava Janjic, who is known as the cyber-monk because of his prolific use of the Internet to highlight the predicament of Kosovo's ancient Serbian monasteries. If there really were a territorial standoff between Orthodox nations and the rest of the world, then Father Sava's job would presumably place him in the front line. But he makes the opposite point: he believes the future of Orthodoxy lies mainly in the West, which has become thirsty for eastern Christendom's spiritual refreshment; the traditionally Orthodox countries, by contrast, may be too fascinated by western technology and consumerism to make proper use of their own heritage.[6]

If Father Sava's thesis sounds far-fetched – as it certainly would to many Greek ears – it may be worth noting that Orthodoxy is almost the only form of Christianity which is gaining

[6] Ibid., p. 88.

significant numbers of new adherents in western Europe (while also losing the active allegiance of many migrants of "ethnic Orthodox" heritage). The number of Orthodox parishes in Britain has doubled over the last 15 years to about 200 – to a large extent because of converts from various forms of Western Christianity. (I should put my own cards on the table and say that I have the great joy to be one of them.)

Orthodoxy is also taking deep root in France and Germany among worshippers whose ancestry, a couple of generations back, may have been in Russia or the eastern Mediterranean but who are now firmly established in their adopted homeland. Distinguished Orthodox Christians with no "ethnic" connection to the faith include Olivier Clément, the French theologian, and Sir John Tavener, who is perhaps the most important composer of contemporary religious music in Britain.

Is there any connection, then, between the revival of Orthodoxy in Greece, and in other places where it has deep historic roots, and the growth of Orthodoxy, albeit from small beginnings, in the western world? Are the two phenomena related, and even if they started separately, will they eventually converge?

For the reasons suggested at the beginning of this paper, it is inevitable and perhaps even desirable that Orthodoxy's style and appearance, and its public discourse – insofar as it touches on matters other than the faith itself – will vary enormously from country to country and time to time. So perhaps it is neither tragic nor amazing if Orthodoxy as a newly-discovered faith in western Europe, appealing in the first instance to the relatively highbrow, should look and sound rather different from the same faith in Greece and other traditionally Orthodox societies.

Perhaps understandably, "cradle Orthodox" are often a little wary of those from other cultures who embrace their faith, without adopting the cultural baggage that goes with it. In the United States, for example, a group of former evangelical Protestant ministers who had become Orthodox by conviction found it very hard, at first, to persuade any of the established, "ethnic" Church organisations (Greek, Serbian, Russian and so on) to accept them; eventually the (Damascus-based) Patriarchate of Antioch took them in. Now they are a significant part of the American Orthodox scene.

Bishop Kallistos Ware, the Oxford academic who is probably the best-known exponent of Orthodoxy in the English language, has told the story of meeting a Greek dentist who declared himself to be an atheist, but nonetheless Orthodox by dint of cultural and ethnic heritage. All English people, the same informant argued, should be Anglicans for similar reasons. Such an attitude comes close to "henotheism", the belief that there is one deity for each nation, but no universal or transcendental truth. Every eastern Christian who is not of "ethnic Orthodox" heritage will from time to time face a reaction of scepticism, puzzlement or plain hostility among those who were raised in the faith.

Given the significant differences of political culture and historical experience between Greece and most west European countries, it is perhaps not surprising that the political causes associated with Orthodoxy in Greece are somewhat remote from the concerns of Orthodox converts in, say, Britain or Germany. Take the issue of identity cards. Whatever their religious beliefs, most British people would instinctively be suspicious of any requirement that they be required to carry proof of their identity – let alone one that specified their personal convictions.

If it is possible to make a generalisation about the encounter between "cradle" Orthodoxy and "adopted" Orthodoxy, it is probably this: whatever the cultural or political or economic variations between them, Orthodox Christians who understand their faith as a path to union with God, which all human beings are called on to tread, will invariably find ways of understanding one another. (Nothing about the cultural or personal background of Grand Duchess Elizabeth, raised as a sheltered Anglo-German noblewoman, prepared her to care for destitutes in the slums of Moscow or face martyrdom at the hands of Bolsheviks. But she has become one of the revered saints of the twentieth century.) On the other hand, those who regard their Orthodox identity primarily as a cultural or geopolitical determinant, like the dentist described by Bishop Kallistos, are bound to be suspicious when "outsiders" lay claim to their heritage.

Ultimately it is not the cultural or political communities of the world that will converge, or form alliances, on the strength of their common faith. On the contrary, it is the hope and belief of Orthodox Christians that they, almost by definition, will

form a new sort of community, perhaps not visible to the naked eye, as fellow citizens of the "heavenly fatherland" to which the Russian missionary in Japan referred. But that mysterious process has no automatic implications for the civic or geo-political loyalties of the people involved.

Having said all that, it is sometimes hard to observe the difference in tone and style between Orthodoxy in, say, the theological lecture-rooms of Cambridge and, say, the streets of Athens without feeling a twinge of regret. After all, neither camp sets out with any insuperable prejudice against the other. While voices do exist in the Greek Church which are openly hostile to western Europe in general, and to the European Union in particular, that is not the position of the Holy Synod of Athens, which has repeatedly emphasised Greece's integral role in "European civilisation" and its support for Greek participation in the European Union, including monetary union.[7] Like the more sophisticated variety of British Tory Euro-sceptic, the Church of Athens has carefully steered its criticism away from the European Union as such, and aimed it instead at a government which is alleged to be acting over-hastily and unnecessarily to sacrifice national identity on the European altar.

And on the "western Orthodox" side, there is no certainly no anti-Greek prejudice. Indeed, the encounter of a small but influential group of Englishmen with Orthodoxy (some of whom became sympathetic observers of that faith, while others actually adopted it) was a by-product of the last great wave of "philhellenism": the war service of classically-educated British officers who found themselves exposed, in the Cretan mountains or the plains of Thessaly, to a new sort of Greek and a new sort of Greekness.

Perhaps the outstanding member of this group was Philip Sherrard, the Anglo-Irish translator, critic, man of letters and theologian, who had a deep knowledge of Greek history – whether ancient, medieval or modern – and was also a thought-provoking interpreter of his adopted Orthodox creed. His critique of modern Greek religious discourse was a contrarian one, but I think a useful one for anyone trying to understand why

[7] Speech by Archbishop Christodoulos at a public meeting in Athens on 21 June 2000 (available on www.ecclesia.gr).

Orthodoxy sounds and feels so different in different environments. He did not upbraid the Greek hierarchy for being too anti-western, but for being too western, in outlook. Sherrard applied this critique both to the post-schism eastern Church in general and to the Church of independent Greece in particular.

As a convert to Orthodoxy, Sherrard naturally believed the "eastern" side was in the right over the specific issues which led to the schism: Papal supremacy and the inclusion of the "filioque" in the Creed which seemed to downgrade the Holy Spirit. But as Sherrard saw things, the schism was not only a disaster for western thought; it also did serious harm to the east, by prompting it to abandon Christian universalism in favour of a self-conscious, defensive Hellenism. An extreme example of this was the neo-Platonist crypto-pagan atmosphere which prevailed in Mystra during Byzantium's twilight years.

While some readings of history emphasise the way in which Ottoman rule, in a sense, "saved" Orthodoxy by sealing it off from western influences, Sherrard makes the opposite point. Even while pickled in Ottoman aspic, Sherrard argues, the Patriarchate was buffeted by unfortunate western ideas about the respective merits of different moments in Greek history. In the sixteenth century, for example, the Patriarchate appointed a rationalist Aristotelian philosopher to be head of its academy in Constantinople; later in the Ottoman period, it tried to establish a college to teach western rationalism on Mount Athos – which the monks, commendably in Sherrard's view, burned down. [8]

If the wrong sort of western influence infected the Patriarchate, located in the Queen of cities and heir in some sense to Byzantium's universalist tradition as well as its Hellenist one, then this problem was even more serious – again, from Sherrard's idiosyncratically Orthodox perspective – for a Church hierarchy which was based in Athens, the great metropolis of pre-Christian Greece, and was closely involved in the creation and administration of a modern Greek state.

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[8] For this point, and for Sherrard's argument in general, see John Campbell and Philip Sherrard, *Modern Greece* (London: Ernest Benn 1968), especially Chapter 6.

Since the foundation of that state, the Archdiocese of Athens has gradually extended its authority at the expense of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, through a process that roughly, but not precisely, coincided with the expansion of the Greek state. The secular statesmen who forged modern Greece regarded the creation of a Church that was independent from Constantinople as an essential component of state-building, whatever their own religious beliefs or lack of them.

For a number of overlapping reasons, the Athenian hierarchy's ideology – and here I am referring not to the Orthodox faith's unchanging essence, but the particular manner in which it was presented – was almost bound to be more occidental, in certain ways, than that of its mother church on the Bosphorus. (Here again I am following, and perhaps slightly elaborating, the argument advanced by Sherrard, who was second to none in his fascination with Hellenism, and his devotion to Orthodoxy, but regarded them as "two incompatible ways of thought".)

Why then was the Athens Church, whose organisation was modelled in part on the great seculariser of Russia, Peter the Great, destined in certain respects to grow more "western" in outlook? For one thing, the project in which it played a part – namely the creation of a linguistically and "ethnically" homogenous nation-state, based on a self-consciously cultivated national identity – was itself a modern, western idea, exported to the traditional empires of eastern Europe from Napoleonic France and later from Germany and Italy. For another, the construction of the Greek polity was largely, if not wholly, made possible by one of the characteristic devices of modern state-building: the reinvention of religious communities as territorially-defined political units.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon has been the state of Israel, created as a homeland for people who were of Jewish heritage but not necessarily believers in the Jewish faith or even theists. But the Jewish diaspora, which the state of Israel was designed to gather in, had always been a more or less well-defined community in which religious practice and cultural identity were viewed as co-extensive, and unique to that community. In the case of Greece, the application of the "re-invention" principle was in some ways stranger, since it required a "fencing in" of certain adherents of the Christian faith, which

aspires to be a universal creed, not confined to one ethnic or cultural group.

Consider the paradox. The Hellenic Kingdom, or Republic, has always been organised as a largely secular state, in some ways more so than Britain where the Queen is head of the Church and bishops sit in the legislature. Yet its defining principle, the yardstick by which some people were granted citizenship and others denied it, was to a large extent a religious one. I am thinking both of the fact that the first Greek constitution defined Greek citizens as Christians living on the kingdom's territory, and also, in particular, of the population exchange of 1923, through which Greece and Turkey became "mono-ethnic" states. The criterion by which the population exchange was enforced was a religious one – so that Greek-speaking Muslims from Crete were deported to Turkey, and Orthodox Christians in central Anatolia who spoke no language but Turkish were dumped in the northern Greek plains. Whatever these people "really" were – and it is only in the minds of feverish nationalists that such questions have clear or meaningful answers – they or their children were soon told what they were: "ethnic" Greeks or "ethnic" Turks, and heirs to the partially real, partially invented histories of whichever country their religion had assigned them to.

So in a certain sense, the statement that "to be Greek is to be Orthodox" (which can often be reversed, so that "to be Orthodox is to be Greek") is more than an assertion about cultural or religious history; it is a plain statement of fact. Orthodox Christians who lived in Asia Minor (leaving aside the minorities that were allowed to remain in Istanbul and two Turkish islands) were pronounced Greek, whether they liked it or not. And people living on Greek territory who happened to be Muslims (unless they were in western Thrace or a couple of other pockets) were pronounced non-Greek – again, whether they liked it or not. In medieval central Europe, the expression "cuius regio, eius religio" had been coined to describe the principle that people should follow the religion of their ruler; nation-building in the Balkans employed almost the opposite principle: "cuius religio, eius regio".

Small wonder, then, that religious as well as political language in modern Greece should lay enormous emphasis on the

idea that Hellenism and Orthodoxy are co-extensive, and that religious as well as political leaders have great difficulty accepting the idea that Greece could ever turn into a multi-cultural, multi-confessional state, as most of its European Union partners have become. Nor is it surprising to hear the assertion that without Orthodoxy, there would be no Greece. As well as being a value-judgement – on the way the Church preserved certain aspects of Hellenism during the Ottoman period – it also expresses a factual truth, almost a tautology – given that modern Greece was quite literally constructed out of the Orthodox Christian subjects of certain parts of the Ottoman empire,

For most of the time since it helped to found the modern Greek state, the Church has never had to think twice about the stance it should adopt in worldly affairs. It merely had to remind people of its historic role not just as a standard-bearer of the Greek national cause, but as co-manager of the whole project of statehood: a project which did not so much imply the semi-sacralisation of the state as the semi-secularisation of the religious community of Orthodox Christians.

Now the role played by the "Church in captivity" – serving as a department of state for a Muslim theocracy, the Ottoman Empire – may have been a strange enough function for Orthodox bishops to carry out; but the Church's post-independence role – which involved merging itself with a modern, ethnically-defined nation-state – has also required some ideological contortions.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was the fact that the Church of Athens had to make concessions, in its "public" ideology, to a notion of Hellenism which seemed to place more emphasis on Greece's pagan past than on Christian Byzantium. That is because the ideology of the modern Greek state, of which it is in a sense the co-sponsor, was based to a large extent on the cultural choices of western philhellenes, who in the nineteenth century at least, found far more merit in Aristotle and Aristophanes than in St Gregory of Nyssa or St John Chrysostom.

One of the characteristics of modern, nationalist ideology is that it seeks to play down contrasts and contradictions between different phases in a people's history, if necessary by sweeping inconvenient facts under the carpet and exaggerating continuity. Once it has been firmly established that history's most powerful

truth is the abiding genius of (say) the Irish, the Serbs, or the Lithuanians, then it hardly matters which phase of the nation's glorious past is under examination. At any given moment, the "ancestors" can be presented either as exceptionally noble savages, or remarkably civilised for the times they lived in, or perhaps both at once.

Greek nationalist discourse – whether secular or semi-religious – rests on an attempt to iron out or play down the differences between ancient Athens and Christian Byzantium. But that is not easy – given that the very term Hellenism was used in a pejorative sense during the first millennium of Byzantine history. It is particularly difficult to construct a version of the Greek past which maintains the primacy of the Christian revelation as the most important event in human history, while continuing to bask in the compliments of westerners who – at least until recently – found vastly more merit in pre-Christian than in post-Christian Greek thought and art.

The difficulty of solving this almost insoluble problem has often resulted in a nationalist discourse – whether secular or religious – that is somewhat shrill and defensive. It contrasts the glorious past of Greece with the inferior heritage of western Europe ("we were building theatres and temples while you were painted savages") while succumbing slavishly to certain western prejudices as to which aspects of the Hellenic past are meritworthy.

Quite justifiably, the "Athenian" (as opposed to Byzantine) understanding of history always assigns a crucial role to the appearance of St Paul in Athens and his assertion that the Christian revelation represents in full what his listeners have dimly apprehended. To recall the words of the apostle: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by [...], I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you" (Acts 17,22-3).

The story's references to Athens ("a city wholly given to idolatry") and its philosophers (who "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing") are hardly flattering, but for modern Greek readings of Christian history, St Paul's speech plays a pivotal role: it provides a link between Orthodoxy and the philosophy and art of the ancient

world, whose high standing in the eyes of the West is crucial to Greece's legitimacy and self-esteem.

But ironically, the very "westernism" of this emphasis may be rather off-putting to westerners who are interested in Orthodoxy. Whatever drew Sir John Tavener or Olivier Clément or Philip Sherrard to Orthodoxy, I suspect it was probably not any conventional theories about the role played by Greece in "founding European civilisation". On the contrary it is more likely to have been a questioning of the very premises on which the notion of European civilisation is based.

Whether Christian or not, few modern observers would deny the brilliance of the Greek philosophical tradition. But the story of how it was distilled by the Fathers of the eastern Church – who wrote in Greek but were not necessarily Greek in any narrow sense – is in fact far more interesting than any crude nationalist rendering would suggest. The articulation of the Christian mystery – insofar as it could be expressed in human language, an important qualification – was made possible by a subtle cross-fertilisation between Greek, Jewish and other strands of east Mediterranean thought.

For many theologians, the high point of Greek-Christian thought was attained by St Maximus the Confessor, a brilliant, courageous mystic who took refuge in Rome but was captured, mutilated and exiled by the rulers of his native Byzantium because he insisted (correctly, as posterity judged) that his fellow Greeks had fallen into heresy with respect to vital theological issues which had to do with human freedom. The thought of St Maximus is often described as a perfect synthesis of the New and Old Testaments, ancient-world thought and the traditions of the Desert Fathers, whose work comes down to us in Greek but who were not necessarily Greek themselves.[9]

Early Church fathers like St Maximus and more explicitly Saints Justin and Clement of Alexandria saw merit in ancient Greek philosophy but they were still unshakeable in their belief that the Christian revelation superseded everything which had gone before – so the merit or otherwise of classical thinking was not the most important issue for them.

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[9] See Maximus Confessor, *Selected writings*. Translation and notes by George C. Berthold (London: SPCK 1985).

In modern Greece, the relationship between pre- and post-Christian Hellenism has often been described in a more defensive way. Whether in the mouths of village schoolmasters or neo-Orthodox intellectuals, modern Greek discourse often seems to justify Christianity as an expression of Hellenism, rather than praise Hellenism as one, among many, of the building blocks of the Christian tradition.

Ask a secular or even a religious Greek what makes Orthodoxy different from western Christianity, and he will often defend Orthodoxy on grounds that it is Greek, rather than on grounds that it is true. Two lines of argument are commonly heard: that Orthodoxy is closer to ancient Greek philosophy, or that it is closer to the popular folk-religion which long predates Christianity.

As an example, consider a recent commentary in the Sunday newspaper *To Vima* on the huge crowds which turned up at the main cathedral in Athens to venerate a miracle-working icon of the Mother of God.[10] Some Greek intellectuals had been shocked by this outburst of popular piety and blamed the Church for "failing to educate" its flock, the commentary noted. But in fact, the phenomenon was nothing to worry about; it was really just a thinly disguised continuation of the devotion of the ancient Athenians to gods like Asclepius; so all was well.

At least until recently, most people in Western Europe found Plato, Aristotle and even Asclepius to be of much greater interest than St Maximus or St Clement of Alexandria. Western commentaries on late antiquity, by secular or even religious writers, tended to treat the early Fathers with a certain condescension: we should be grateful to them for keeping alive classical learning, by keeping copies of Euripides and Thucydides in their libraries; what a shame they had to waste so much time on Christianity. The openly anti-Christian bias of Gibbon played an important part in shaping western views of the ancient world – and it also moulded the world-view of western-educated fathers of the Greek state, such as Adamantios Korais.

To this day, this western enthusiasm for the ancient Greek past (as interpreted through the prism of nineteenth-century England or Germany) is regarded as one of the foundations of the

[10] *Το Βήμα της Κυριακής* (13.2.2000).

modern Greek state; and foundation stones cannot simply be tossed aside.

But there is a problem here of time-lag. Modern Greece may be too attached to a legitimising principle which has lost some of its currency in the western world. It may no longer be able to count on presenting itself to western Europe as the repository of rational, enlightened humanism which has its roots in Aristotle; both because the general level of liberal arts education has declined in the West, and also because the assumptions of liberal secular humanism are no longer universally accepted. Whatever has prompted western intellectuals to explore the mysteries of Orthodoxy, it is not the belief that Aristotelian rationalism holds the keys to human understanding, but the very opposite – a sense that the real answers must lie somewhere else.

It would take courage for Greece's hierarchs to start putting more emphasis on the fathers of the Universal Church – whether they were Jews like St Paul, Greek-speakers like Chrysostom or Romans like Jerome – and less on the men of Athens searching for a new thing. And it may seem presumptuous, or even absurd, for a layman in London to advise the Greek clergy on how to interpret history. But I think a return to the Church's mystical roots, which are not confined by any ethnic boundaries, might turn out to be more attractive to the spiritual seekers of the West than a determination to remain locked forever in the classrooms of Victorian England. And such a return might also reduce the distance between the streets of Athens and the lecture-rooms of Cambridge, even though those places will always be, and indeed should always be rather different from one another; and we should learn to rejoice in those differences.