

# The Problem of Modern Greek Identity



# The Problem of Modern Greek Identity:

*From the Ecumene  
to the Nation-State*

Edited by

Georgios Steiris, Sotiris Mitralaxis  
and Georgios Arabatzis

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of Modern Greek identity is certainly timely. The political events of the previous years have brought up yet again the questions: What does it actually mean to be a Greek today? What *is* Modern Greece, apart and beyond the bulk of information that one would find in an encyclopaedia and the established stereotypes? With this volume, we endeavor to go into the timely nature of this question and to provide the outline of an answer to it not by referring to the often-cited classical Antiquity nor by treating Greece as merely and exclusively a modern nation-state. Rather than that, we will be approaching our subject in a kaleidoscopic way, by tracing the line from the Byzantine Empire to the Modern Greek culture, society, philosophy, literature and politics. We do not claim that our approach is prominent or dominant—quite the contrary. Our intention remains within the confines of dialogue, since we aspire to provide new insights on a diachronic problem in order to encourage new arguments and counterarguments. Despite commonly held views among Greek intelligentsia, Modern Greek identity remains an open question.

The enquiry that led to the present volume began through a scholarly event that took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2013 in Berlin, Germany, during very difficult times for what has been named *the Greek crisis*. The Department of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University Athens and the Hellenic Student's Association in Berlin organized the conference “Reflections on Identity: Greek Identity as a Philosophical Problem—from ‘Byzantine’ Times to Today’s Greece in Crisis” at the Berlin office of the Greek Cultural Foundation on Berlin’s Wittenbergplatz, in order to bring this discussion to the heart of the European public square, as this has taken shape during the crisis’ transformative years. While the papers presented there have been included in the present volume, the latter is of considerably wider scope; new papers have been included, while—among other aims—we have tried to make some texts, written by influential Greek intellectuals (or analyses thereof) available in English for the first time, or for the first time *in such a context*, so that non-Greek-speaking scholars can peek into certain

discourses within the Greek public sphere, to which they would otherwise have no access.

As we do not wish to impose a particular and detailed view on how the reader should approach this volume's contents, we will merely present their sequence and flow before proceeding to the texts themselves. The volume begins with **Kostas Koutsourelis'** essay "Images of Modern Hellenism: Historical Dilemmas and Orientations," in which the author examines the concept of identity and counter proposes the notion of *image* to better portray the preconditions for a Modern Greek self-reflection. In chapter two, **Christos Yannaras** provides us with an introductory historical approach to the relationship between Greek Orthodoxy and the West as constitutive of the complexity of Modern Greek identity. Following this, **Ilias Papagiannopoulos** examines today's Greece through the piercing gaze of the late writer, director and public intellectual Christos Vakalopoulos. In chapter four, **Theodoros I. Ziakas** addresses the contemporary anthropological context that is presupposed in any question concerning each individual nation's identity, i.e. the crisis and deterioration of the subject in (late) Modernity.

These four very different chapters can be approached as a general introduction, a framework of diverse parts in which our question can be properly examined. In chapter five, **Dimitrios Faros** addresses the diverging worldviews concerning Modern Greek identity that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, having the polarization between the *principle of nationalities* and the *ideal of the Empire* as a focal point. The ideas and arguments linked to these key notions are thoroughly compared and examined in the context of their time concerning the debate on the most suitable strategy for the country and the nation, as well as within the framework of the still ongoing debate on Greek identity. The next chapter by **Dionysios Skliris** focuses on theological aspects: a number of thinkers in Modern Greece consider Trinitarian theology as a very peculiar achievement of the Byzantine tradition and extend their thinking to the possible impact it might have had on the Modern Greek condition, including sociological and political characteristics. In light of this, Skliris attempts a comparative panorama of the thought of four such thinkers: Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, Christos Yannaras, Stelios Ramfos and Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos. Following this, **George Contogeorgis** analyses what he terms the *Greek paradigm* from antiquity up to the present day, summarizing his wider research on this enquiry's constitutive questions.



In the eighth chapter, **Georgios Steiris** attempts to reappraise the ways 15th century intellectuals perceived identity. He suggests that the basis of philosophical elites' Hellenism in the 15th century was not only common language and literary tradition, but also historical continuity and cultural otherness. As a consequence commonly held views, according to which Hellenism, as cultural and historical identity, and Christian religion were incompatible, are not supported by the writings of the most prominent philosophers of the 15th century. Subsequently, **Athanasia Theodoropoulou** gives an interpretative presentation of the views of a most active scholar of the Greek Diaspora in Western Europe during the 15th century, Cardinal Bessarion, with reference to modern Greece. She analyzes Bessarion's take on the causes of the Byzantine Empire's decline and the reforms he recommended in comparison to the causes of the financial crisis in Greece and the implementation of austerity measures, in an attempt show that the identity crisis of modern Hellenism was first cultivated and formed gradually from the Renaissance to modern Greece. In an exercise on discerning identity through imperial otherness, **Nicoletta Hadjipavlou** proceeds then to examine the representations of the Ottoman Empire of Vasilis Michaelides (1849-1917), Cyprus' national poet. By reading Michaelides' representation of the Ottoman Empire parallel to the rise of nationalism, ethno-symbolism and the history of the island, Hadjipavlou sheds light on the quests for a 'Cypriot National identity' from a literary perspective. A very different approach to discerning identity through otherness is attempted by **Georgios Arabatzis**, who analyzes the profound bias of earlier Western European philosophy's reception of Byzantine philosophy and thought. In the next chapter, **Michail Mantzanas** provides us with a case study of Byzantine political philosophy, Greek identity and the goal of independence through the work of Leonardos Philaras (1595-1673), an early advocate for Greek independence. The volume concludes with **Sotiris Mitralaxis'** appendix, in which he draws attention to elements of political thought on Modern Greek identity that can be traced in an essay by the poet and Nobel laureate Odysseas Elytis.

The present volume would not be what it is without the toilsome efforts of Fr. Joseph Bali and Nasia Lyckoura, both PhD candidates at the Department of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Lyckoura formatted the work and did the initial proofreading; Fr. Bali translated in English Koutsourelis', Contogeorgis', Papagiannopoulos' and Ziakas' contributions. In addition, their careful readings were crucial and provided us with valuable feedback.

Apart from being a kaleidoscopic one, this is also a volume that is introductory in character. Its aim is to start a discussion and to provide intriguing material for it, not to exhaust it. We remain in the hope that it will serve its purpose.

Georgios Steiris

Sotiris Mitralaxis

Georgios Arabatzis

## CHAPTER ONE

# IMAGES OF MODERN HELLENISM: HISTORICAL DILEMMAS AND ORIENTATIONS

KOSTAS KOUTSOURELIS

Today it should be common knowledge that we cannot generally use the term “identity” in the same way or with the same precision as it is used in natural sciences, i.e. by Leibniz or in modern mathematics. Thus, prominent theorists have often criticized its use to describe social phenomena. Wittgenstein said characteristically that the proposition that someone identifies with oneself is deprived of any meaning whatsoever.

Two basic interpretations of the concept of self stand out in modern philosophical thinking. The starting point of the first is the idea of a self that is more or less unchanging, divided in sections and clearly defined, of a self that I would call *singular*. The second considers the self as an entity which is always fluid, contradictory and difficult to determine. As a consequence, we may not refer to it as though it were a unit: there are many different selves. Depending on the moment, the conditions and circumstances, each one of us adopts a different version of it. For instance, Panagiotis Kondylis asks: “To what extent is the Self of the ten-year-old the same as that of the fifty-year-old?”

Does it change completely, like the ship, parts of which are replaced every now and then until all is left of it is its name—thus it is the same only because some consider it to be so? If society did not view the individual as identical with itself through the course of time, how would this person be aware of this identity? In other words: if the fifty-year-old was to see his ten-year-old self, to what extent would he be able to recognize the uninterrupted continuity of his Self? And even further: if I could see my present self moving and acting, would I be able to recognize who it was, if I had never seen him in the mirror? Why does the past sometimes seem like a dream, in other words, how much truth is there in the reconstruction of past experiences? Is it that the absence of an unchanging self does not

allow but scattered, intersecting scenes from the past? To what extent is the past, as a structured life story, necessary fabrication, much needed in the present?<sup>1</sup>

It is very interesting that we come upon the same questions in literature as well—expressed in more radical wording. In our country, Palamas summed them up with remarkable perspicuity in 1921, when he noted: “I am aware that I am not *one*. I am not with my *self* but with my *selves*.” In Rimbaud’s work we encounter the legendary apothegm which often causes scholars to shudder: “I *is* another.” Juan Ramon Jimenez titled his best known poem “I am not I,” while Pirandello introduced us to the perpetual game of improvisation, transformation and overlapping roles, and Fernando Pessoa demonstrated that a single man may conceal within him not just one or two but dozens of writers, each one of them with his own name and his own biography: they are the renowned *heteronyms*.

So for all these reasons, instead of the term “identity,” which corresponds to a misleadingly static outlook on the whole matter, I personally prefer the more dynamic one of self-comprehension or else “image”—in the psychological sense of the word. How does someone *comprehend* oneself in the course of time? What *image* does he have of himself, what does he perceive each time he turns his eyes to the mirror? And how does this glimpse of self-image fall into line with its preceding or subsequent counterparts? These are the questions at issue. And if indeed we imagine every such image as a “self-portrait,” meaning as an individual or collective portrait—because even collective entities obviously have an image of themselves—and if all these images are mentally placed one next to the other in time sequence, we will have a visual of the dynamic self-comprehension I mentioned above.

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There are many images of Hellenism in our literature of the past centuries. Each time that the historical circumstances dictated it, thinkers and writers would resume the ever open question of our self-determination. Their answers constitute a long series of portraits, to be precise a whole gallery of portraits of modern Hellenism. As such, they

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<sup>1</sup> Panagiotis Kondylis, “Identity, Power, Culture (Fifty Sheets from Unpublished Works),” in Greek: Ταυτότητα, ισχύς, πολιτισμός (Πενήντα δελτία από τα κατάλοιπα), edited by Evangelos Gkanas, *Nea Estia* 1769 (July-August 2004): 15.

carry a double seal: that of the historical moment which brought them about and that of the individual sensitivity which shaped them.

Depending on the viewpoint, there are multiple ways to study and classify these portraits. Thus, we may for instance distinguish between exclusive and inclusive images. The first are regulatory by nature and exclude certain facets or even entire periods of Greek history in favor of others, which they prefix as established or implied norms. The second are equally regulatory and seek to combine everything in one more or less organic unit. The first underline the inconsistencies, the incisions which disrupt the historical course. The second highlight the similarities seeking to prove that the continuity has been preserved. An example of the first is the Greek genealogy proposed by Korais when he overrides the middle ages and goes directly back to classical antiquity. An example of the second is Zambelios' *historionomy*, which rejects the Attic unilaterality and reinstates Byzantium as the indispensable link of a long chain.

Our gallery also includes assessing images, positive or negative ones, depending on where the scales tilt each time. The description of contemporary Greece, e.g. in the works of scholars such as Kondylis or Yannaras is directly critical or even aggressively dismissive. On the opposite side, the paragon of Greece in the works of Sikelianos or Elytis is decidedly laudatory, at times even highly eulogistic. On one hand, the philosophers are openly judgmental; on the other, the poets are nothing but praising.

Finally, there are closed and open images, depending on whether they can be broadened or enriched or if they are considered *ab initio* perfect and definitive. For instance, the idea of Hellenism projected through the paintings of Kontoglou is a closed one. On the contrary, Engonopoulos' Greek view is open. The first chooses to banish all things foreign-like, western or simply incompatible with the Byzantine line. The second attempts to incorporate all the above into his art so as to build one more step towards progress.

It is self-evident that there can be no conclusive resolution of such dilemmas. History rarely proceeds in a straight line. Circumstances change, so do viewpoints. Different opinions alternately prevail, depending on the need of the moment. However, on a political level they all have the same goal: collective self-preservation. Despite the fact that their ideologies clash, they cooperate on a functional level and they even

complement each other in terms of content. None is as broad as to fully cover reality and none as narrow as to not touch at least one crucial part of it.

As Georgios Theotokas believed, the “Modern Greek character” is multiform and contradictory and rich. And if it is rich, he would add, it is exactly because it is multiform and contradictory. Any attempt to tie it down to a “rigid definition, is not Greek purity but pure didacticism.”

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Despite this richness and multiformity or even the contradictions of all these images that modern Hellenism has created for itself, it is clear that they are not all at the same level of hierarchy. Their historical importance varies. Depending on the circumstances, each one of them plays a different role. However, even when they are diametrically opposed, they have a mutual goal. To quote the most characteristic example of all, Paparrigopoulos’ epic synthesis as well as the various attempts to refute it are both based on the shared concern of political orientation. Which is the safest path for Greece to claim its rightful place in the modern world? Is it by holding on to its historical origins or by denying its inherited contradictions in the name of a symbolic unity? Or is it, reversely, by liberating itself from the past and attaching itself at any cost to Western Modernity?

In the official gallery of our national self-portraits, this concern—the country’s political orientation—is undoubtedly the main exhibit; more precisely, it is the motif depicted more or less obviously, directly or indirectly, on all different portraits. The question whether contemporary Greeks “belong to the West or not” (and if so, to what extent and under which terms) is sometimes used as a highly polarizing choice, as a dilemma of ancestry, as a standing mental discordance. At other times it is moderated or rendered relative, ceding its place to attempts of theoretical or other synthesis or conciliation.

Historically, of course, our dilemma originates in the later Byzantine era, where it found its theoretical outlet in the dispute between integrationists and anti-integrationists. With the foundation of the Modern Greek state, when this conflict was essentially reignited, there was an effort to resolve it mainly by way of compromise, which assumed various expressions and forms: ideological (the multiple versions of the culture

known as “Greek-Christian”), institutional (mostly Church-State relations), aesthetic (the proposed synthesis of tradition and Modernity which is manifested in the works of almost all important Greek authors) etc.

On a social level, all these attempts reflect the correlations of power in the interior of the country, which were present already from the birth of the Modern Greek state. As initiators of the national emancipation, the urbanized, westernized Greek social classes, would not have been able to organize a successful struggle against the Ottoman Empire without turning to allies, they were compelled to reduce their claims and readjust their ideological arsenal so as to suit the circumstances. The western nation-state model shed its purely urban, Enlightenment-bred characteristics and mutated in order to include supporters of both modernist and anti-modernist political ideals. Thus, under the flag of national integration, it was possible to conciliate forces and groups which not only did not share the programmatic objectives of the domestic acolytes of the Enlightenment but, on the contrary, were openly against them.

The cornerstone of this compromise was the hypothesis that the two contracting parties, the enlightened social classes and the old world, would be able to set a common and widely accepted course for the newly founded state. In practice, this hypothesis proved excessively optimistic, as from the beginning both sides strayed towards different directions. Because, without a doubt, the aim of the followers of the Western orientation was not to create a “national” state, generally and abstractly, but to bridge the gap with the advanced Europe at any cost and to re-establish the vital connection with the momentous events that were taking place there. It was already evident in the political visions of the front-runners of the Greek independence that the “national state” was not a goal in itself but was more likely considered the proper means, the vehicle which would bring them closer to the West. Those who doubt the truth of these statements, could just observe how eager today’s “modernizers” of all political colors are to give up the country’s national sovereignty, in order to secure its participation in a united or federal and in any case supranational Europe. On the other hand there is the anti-Western party, with deep roots in the pre-urban, patriarchal social structure and the organization of the economy and public life based on trade unionism and favoritism as well as in the spiritual world of the Orthodox Church and its culture, which adopted the idea of the national state—even though as an afterthought—and gave it from the start anti-Western content, regarding it

as the ark of the “idiosyncrasy” of Hellenism and the “East of the Greek ways.”

What is interesting in the Greek paradigm is that this historical compromise, as described above, despite its diverse and politically self-destructing character, was stabilized hence long-lived. Many factors contributed to its perpetuation, the main of which being the incapacity of the enlightened classes to impose their political volition on an environment where the bourgeoisie had no foothold. And it was the petty party-related factionalisms or the ghost of the centuries-old enemy and the liberation of the enslaved brothers or the annihilation of any opponent in the interior, which alternately rendered the assistance or the tolerance of the other side useful if not vital.

We know very well the outcome of this tug of war: while for Modern Greeks compliance with the Western ways is a matter of basic economic and political survival, the terms they use to comprehend themselves and their history are from many aspects directly anti-Western. The unquestioning fascination with Hesperia and Progress (and mostly with the material goods they bring with them) is counterbalanced by the equally unquestioning aversion to the Western way of life and the abhorrence of the foreign new evils. Underneath the Modern Greek institutions, if you lift their Western-like legal cover, you will discover that the traditional Byzantine-Ottoman concept of transactions and the state is still alive; in exactly the same way, in the sphere of the Modern Greek mentality, behind the superficial welcoming and adoption of all imported novelties, you will always encounter instinctive reservations and retrenchment. This deeply rooted love-hate relationship, this constant attraction to repulsion from the West and their own past and present that Modern Greeks have developed, has become an intrinsic element of their character. And if today we talk about a Modern Greek national identity, it is precisely this personality split that we have in mind.

From a psychological aspect, of course, the mechanism of this internal split was proven remarkably functional. Fluctuating between adoration and persecution of all things foreign, the Modern Greek ambivalence is very telling of a society where the balance between reality and ideology, hope and fear, has always constituted a particularly complex task. This mental dissension offered an outlet and release to a nation which was politically backward and economically underdeveloped and, on top of all this, sentimental and narcissistic. Whenever historical circumstances would



lead Hellenism to believe that its schooling in the advanced world had started yielding fruit, the pro-West feelings would have the upper hand, expressed with enthusiastic and unreserved extroversion. And whenever tough reality would bring the ambitious but somewhat lazy apprentice back to his humble beginning, he would make do by resorting to the consolation of introversion; Europe and the West would become once again something spiritually alien, distant, even hostile. There is no sector of the Modern Greek life, from politics and economy to the arts and literature, where its history does not unravel, before our very eyes, this lasting and traumatic vacillation.

I recapitulate and conclude: each collective subject has a variety of images of himself, often contradictory. Politically, these are never neutral; the groups that clash inside it, seek to present their own individuality as the only correct and binding one. While this struggle was never completely silenced (instead, it is vital to the subsistence of the same subject and to its adaptation to the constantly changing external conditions), practically buffered greatly whenever the scales tipped decisively toward one of the warring sides—and as long as it lasts. In this case, the vital question of the immediate political orientation resolved provisionally and the winner imposes his will.

However, what happens when the opponents exist in a relation of prolonged equivalence among themselves? When none of them possesses the necessary superiority so as to prevail? Moreover, when this necessary symbiotic synthesis does not lead them to reconciliation over time, in an essential and sustainable synthesis, i.e. as it would have been contingent in the first place, but in the mutual weakening through constant and dead-end collision?

I think that this is the case of Modern Greece. An ongoing, weakening and mutually hitherto insurmountable rivalries, whose recent episodes follow—and along with us the whole planet—from the year 2010 in direct transmission. In many cases, since the opponents in the arena of the current crisis are nothing else than successors, heirs of that old and unresolved conflict. Anyone who knows the details of the 1932 bankruptcy, for example, and also what preceded it since 1915 onwards, will not be surprised by the striking homogeneity of the two circumstances: a country threatened by immediate bankruptcy, a raging global crisis, an opposition that refuses any assistance to the government and bets on its failure such that it will “gather the shipwrecks” (El.

Venizelos), and even more, the unrealistic expectations of the electoral body, the ravaging populism, the demonization of foreigners, the adventurous isolationism which is baptized as “dignity” and “national sovereignty,” etc.—the work that is displayed in these days on our electronic screens is indeed very old...

With pretty much equally strong opponents and their discord firmly misunderstood, it is not a coincidence that many times the country was brought to an extreme state, and a way out was sought primarily in the memory expansion, at the blame game, the hypocritical moralism. Namely that the uproar about who should be held accountable for the past has replaced the necessary questioning about the future. Without such a thing, certainly nothing whatsoever would lead to the equitable division of responsibilities. If foolishness of those who call into question the orientation of the country towards the West was timeless proverbial (what other route would they ever suggest?), our repeated failure to conform to the requirements of an actual modern state lies primarily in their modernized opponents. Hence, it is not accidental for example that all recent adventurous bankruptcies of the country—in 1893, 1932 and 2010—occurred after ambitious attempts at reform. Based on insufficient economic and institutional foundations, without broad political support, these projects were next to succumb to the pressure of the first negative situation. They remained shallow and without continuity—exactly like the social forces that gave them birth.

Already alone, the last twenty years shows why the liability cannot be allocated to only one side. When it continued, we saw the modernizers from all parties reassured by the virtual convergence of Greece with its partners and ignoring the productive dislocation of its real economy—a dislocation which was indeed intensified by the premature and wasteful adoption of the single currency, facilitating even further the foreign debt and exaggerating the already intense parasitic consumerism. At the same time, their opponents which were scattered equally in almost all political parties, systematically undermined the more cowardly attempt to greatly rehabilitate the public finances and preserved the illusion that the country can stand on its feet without lengthy and painful sacrifices.

The first ones are held responsible for the error that Greece’s typical adjustment to the European laws would almost automatically lead to an essential coordination between the institutions and its economy. Through it, they nourished, not only parasitism, the main feature of which the

public and private debt was, but also the mimicry and imitation that temporally characterizes their likely portion. Although the second ones correctly discerned that the European Union is not the ideal commonwealth that their opponents claim, but it is an arena for diverse struggle and divergent interests that do not always comply with the corresponding Greek, they were led to the other extreme: with their false-patriotic crowns, they opened the way to vulgar Euroscepticism which, according to the present circumstances, would mean for Greece its wanderings in the geopolitical margins. Flattering the masses, they promoted what Eleftherios Venizelos called the “politics of autonomy, i.e. isolation,” at the moment when the country needed the opposite, to follow the “politics of “subjection,” i.e. “coalition.”

Ultimately, both sides participated towards the Greeks’ view of Europe today either as a naive benefactor or as an evil punisher, as a source of easy wealth or as an ambassador of unprovoked deprivation and suffering. Both practically ignored the need of the country to survive in international competition and to stand with claims in the global distribution of labor.

\* \* \*

Where are we today? Independently from the change that they will make in the coming months or years, the country’s relations with its partners, the question of our collective self-understanding, and therefore of our political orientation in the modern world, is in fact pressingly addressed. The simplistic shapes of the past can no longer accommodate the complexity of the present. As much blurred it is from desires and dislikes, from hopes and fears, the image that faces a historical people in its mirror, has at least one aspect: not to shade the obvious. For example, it is obvious that Modern Greece, compared with the prototypes of the Western world, does not have to show comparable achievements, neither institutionally nor economically. However, it is equally obvious that interfering with their immediate geographical neighbors, the successes of the Greeks are far from negligible. Such successes, for instance, are that they are at the forefront of political and social developments in the Balkans and the Middle East already since the 18th century—that they were the first to confer the ideas of the Enlightenment—that they were the first to build a state totally independent of the Sublime Porte—that they have one of the longer parliamentary and democratic traditions in Europe—that they maintain a living standard which, even today amidst the crisis, is significantly superior than that of their neighbors, and not only

that, but they participate on the hard core of the most powerful transnational organizations and alliances, etc.—the list is very long.

If our political elite have failed in other areas, in terms of international relations of the country, they showed insight and wisdom. Compare the historical fate of Bulgaria after the Treaty of San Stefano till now, or the adventures of Serbia in the 1990s. With the bitter exception of two years 1920-1922, Modern Greece correctly valued international correlations of power and drew maximum benefit from them. Even the parasitic post-dictatorship period occurred paradoxically from our attitude within these correlations. Initially, it was our admission to the European Communities, and then in the Economic and Monetary Union, which made this fateful luxury even more possible. However, we are dealing here, not with the use, but the abuse of an advantage.

From this historically realistic perspective, our own image becomes different. It is less absolute and apparently less dramatic. Moreover, the determination calls for question that, rarely, we resort to this perspective when we consider our situation. Here, the possible answer is that rivalry with neighbors was never the quest of new Hellenism. Others were always the comparative ideals, political standards that nourished it. Why and what have the pioneers of the Greek national rebirth not aspired to achieve! To reinforce the grandeur of classical Greece and to revive its language; to restore the Byzantine world to its power or even a multinational arrangement capable to succeed the descending Ottoman Empire; to nullify, within a short time, the dizzying range that separates them from the advanced West—even to overcome it countering it morally with another, higher example.

Romantic expansionism of this kind led once to impressive excesses, from those that, in the eyes of the contemporary observer of that period, seemed initially to be completely unattainable—the Battle of '21, the Balkan Wars, 1940 are such instances. Even with dramatic disappointments, whenever the maximalist aiming precluded violently at the limits set by reality—the case of 1897, of the Asia Minor Campaign, of the Cyprus issue. A people who consider themselves able to permanently work, and even think that it is their destiny, and they are close to drifting adventures. Or to easily abandon trying when achieving the goal is not as opportune as they believed it to be at the beginning. In a similar situation today, at the eve of the 1944 Civil War, Constantine Karamanlis contributed with unique insight:

Hellenism always lived within the temporary and exaggerated. It can make miracles for a moment, can't it make a long-term endeavor? However, politics is predominantly a long-term endeavor. Our people, who are intelligent people and are therefore able to find the correct thing to do, are unable to realize it because of mental weakness.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the museum of our self-portraits, the hypothetical collection of images of ourselves which we created over time, tells us, in its own way, this story of the temporary and exaggerated. In turn, the question of perspective is raised. Will we continue, even in the future, to recognize ourselves in them? Or will we succeed this time to see more pragmatically, with its positive and negative sides, beyond the optimism or pessimism of the ideologists, outside of the logic of the eternal victim or unenforceable narcissism? From the answer which we will give, it will be clear whether the gap between our self-understanding and self-knowledge will converge—or it will open more and propagate.

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<sup>2</sup> From Constantine Karamanlis' Letter to friend and lawyer G. Avtzis (12/07/1945), cited in Constantine Tsatsos' *The Unknown Karamanlis*, in Greek: Ο Άγνωστος Καραμανλής (Athens: Ekdotiki Ellados, 1984), 148.



## CHAPTER TWO

# ORTHODOXY AND THE WEST: PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON HELLENIC SELF-IDENTITY'S PAST

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### **Introduction**

This text consists of an introductory historical approach to the relationship between Greek Orthodoxy and the West. It can be regarded as a synopsis of my *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2006) and is comprised of its first four chapters—I am grateful to Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell for translating and editing the Greek text. The book which this contribution summarizes is a revised edition of a text published in Greek in 1992. Its title implies a contrast between the Orthodox or Eastern version of the Church and its Western counterpart. This contrast is not abstract or ideological, but is embodied in the history of a specific people at a particular time, the experience of the Greeks from the fourteenth century to the present day.

Like any other metaphysical tradition, the Church cannot be described in static terms. It defines our mode of life, our culture. In the early Christian centuries, Greek civilization provided the known world with its chief cultural paradigm. Reflection on the Church's experience was expressed in the Greek language, a language highly developed through philosophy, poetry and drama to shed light on the meaning of existence, the world and history. The new meaning conveyed by the Church's experience literally refashioned Greek culture, enabling it to flourish in a new form for another thousand years. The name given to the Greek cultural embodiment of the Church in the first eight centuries or so was "Orthodoxy." For it was Orthodoxy that guaranteed the primitive ecclesial experience, preserving it unchanged. But in the fifth and sixth centuries

another version of the Church's Gospel appeared. This was embodied in the new peoples who entered the western part of the Roman Empire and settled in its territory. These peoples, who were culturally far less advanced than those they conquered, finally produced the first truly global culture in human history. Today this culture, which we call "Western," has prevailed everywhere. In the present work the reader will find a necessarily brief and schematic account of the historical process by which Orthodoxy (the ecclesiastical culture of the Greek people) was swallowed up by the new global culture of the West. My aim is not to lament the past in a sentimental fashion, nor is it to resurrect the Greek experiential version of the Church in pursuit of a lost culture. But neither is it simply to present a historical survey. What most concerns me is to study the consequences of the differences between "Orthodoxy" and the "West" in today's world.

We are faced with difficult problems. A vast number of publications discuss the threats which the mode of life common to us all in both East and West—our Western culture with all its astonishing achievements—presents to us. In the pages of that book, which is summarized here, I try to contribute to this discussion. I attempt to identify the cultural consequences of some of the West's deviations from the Greek embodiment of ecclesial experience, to trace these consequences in the social body of the historical transmitter of Orthodoxy, to study in Westernized modern Hellenism a cultural tragedy which is perhaps of general human interest, and to highlight the real spiritual problems that have been created by the Western "religionizing" of the Church. Let me therefore make one thing absolutely clear. The critique of Western theology and tradition which I offer in this book does not contrast "Western" with something "right" which as an Orthodox I use to oppose something "wrong" outside myself. I am not attacking an external Western adversary. As a Modern Greek, I myself embody both the thirst for what is "right" and the reality of what is "wrong": a contradictory and alienated survival of ecclesiastical Orthodoxy in a society radically and unhappily Westernized.

My critical stance towards the West is self-criticism; it refers to my own wholly Western mode of life. I am a Western person searching for answers to the problems tormenting Western people today. The threat to the environment, the assimilation of politics to business models, the yawning gulf between society and the state, the pursuit of ever-greater consumption, the loneliness and the weakness of social relations, the



prevailing loveless sexuality—all these seem to go back to the theological differences that once provoked the “Schism” dividing Christendom into two. Today’s individualism and absolute utilitarianism appear to have theological origins. The Westernization of modern Hellenism is a field in which one can study the dynamics of the global spread of Western culture. These dynamics are founded on the subjection of ecclesial life to the rules of natural religion’s individualistic demands: a revealing cultural tragedy.

## The Historical Context

We usually begin the study of the history of “modern” Hellenism with the Fall of Constantinople (1453), the final act in the collapse of what we call “Byzantine” Hellenism, which marks the end of the “medieval” and the beginning of the “modern” period of Greek history. From the point of view of the development of Greek culture, however, the starting-point of the “modern” period is not 1453 but 1354, when Demetrios Kydones, at the invitation of the Emperor John Kantakouzenos, translated into Greek the *Summa contra Gentiles* of Thomas Aquinas. Fired by an enthusiasm for the new “light” coming from the West, Kydones undertook to transmit it to his fellow Greeks.

This event marks the beginning of a new era for Hellenism, a new historical period in which the Greeks gradually transferred the focus of their attention from their own tradition and their own civilization to another vision and another ideal. Hellenism was always at a crossroads of cultures marked by different scientific and philosophical ideas and concepts. From the start, Greeks were passionately interested in foreign traditions and accepted elements from other civilizations. Their distinctive talent was to assimilate what they borrowed, each foreign element enriching and renewing Greek self-awareness. This capacity to assimilate seems enfeebled or lost during the era of Kydones’ translations. The Greek way of life and the Greek vision no longer acculturated the borrowed elements, which progressively eroded the cultural self-awareness of the Greeks, dissolving their sense of identity. Oppressed by the Ottoman Turks for four hundred years, and then gathered into a state with conventional boundaries after 1827, they now lived with their spirit and gaze turned towards the “luminaries” of the West. Regardless of popular resistance and the opposition of a few intellectuals, Greeks increasingly misconceived, or were ignorant of, their cultural tradition. They were often indifferent to their Greekness or even contemptuous of it. Admiration for

developing Western civilization prevailed, monopolizing the popular consciousness of “progress.”

Greeks learned about their own cultural heritage from Western scholars, the “humanists” and European admirers of classical antiquity, without suspecting any misunderstandings or deliberate distortion. The pivotal date of 1354 raises further questions. Is it appropriate to speak of Hellenism and Greek culture in the fourteenth century? Were the Byzantines, the inhabitants of the multi-ethnic Eastern Empire, really Greek? We must summarize the great mass of historical material available to us schematically if we are to make sense of it today. We divide historical time into periods and distinguish between different civilizations or nationalities. Our present understanding of what constitutes a “civilization” or a “nationality” often shapes how we schematize the past, and we don’t use the same criteria as the period we are examining.

For many decades, Greek schoolchildren have been taught to separate their history into three broad periods: (i) ancient Greece—ranging from the proto-Helladic and proto-Minoan (2900 BC) up to the Roman occupation of metropolitan Greece (146 BC) or the closing of the last philosophical schools of Athens (AD 529); (ii) “Byzantine” or medieval Greece—from the founding of Constantinople (AD 325) to its fall in 1453; and (iii) Modern Greece—from 1453 to the present. This academic slicing-up of Greek history presupposes the unity of Hellenism through the ages, and more especially its ethnic homogeneity—a continuous biological succession through the generations from the most ancient times to the present. When Fallmerayer, a minor nineteenth-century German historian, put the direct descent of contemporary Greeks from ancient Hellas in doubt, the resulting disturbance revealed a very profound confusion in the small Modern Greek state. The neo-Hellenes could not define their own Hellenism. The “Byzantine” or medieval period occasioned the greatest scandal. In what sense were the multi-ethnic inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire Hellenes? Greek had been the dominant language, while philosophy and art had cherished and reworked the ancient Greek legacy. Certainly the “Byzantine” Church Fathers, some of whom had studied at Athens, worked within the same tradition as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Neoplatonists and studied the same questions. But they also wrote orations “Against the Hellenes” because the word “Hellene” referred exclusively to pagans. The general population too must have been familiar with pagan Greek texts, Homer remaining the reading and writing primer for nearly a thousand years. The problem of defining Hellenism remains

unresolved in the small Modern Greek state. Certain “progressive” intellectuals consider every admixture of Hellenism with Christianity demeaning, and persist in doubting the Byzantine Empire’s Hellenism. Some ideologically motivated Christian intellectuals prefer “Roman” and “Romanism” (*Romiosyni*) to “Hellene” and “Hellenism.” A Modern Greek prime minister, later President of the Hellenic Republic, even went so far as to speak of the different oppressions which the Greeks had undergone: “first under the Romans, then the Byzantines and later the Turks ...!”

We cannot approach the relationship between Hellenism and the West in the modern period without resolving this enormous confusion. We need a proposition that defines Hellenism: we must see Greece fundamentally not as a *place* but as a *mode of life*. Hellenism acquired geographical boundaries for the first time during the nineteenth century—a mere 160 years ago. The small Greek state’s boundaries after the 1821 revolution against the Turks left three quarters of the Ottoman Empire’s Greek-speaking population outside its territory. Ancient Greece was not a unified state, nor did it have fixed boundaries. It was the “Hellenic cities” taken as a whole that constituted ancient Greece. These independent city-states stretched from Macedonia to Crete, from Ionia to Sicily and Southern Italy. They were considered “Hellenic” for their common Greek language, but also for their common way of life and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Although the term *culture* calls for extensive study, identification with a mode of life may serve as an initial definition. Alexander the Great’s military rule united most Greek city states in the fourth century BC for his ambitious campaign against the Persian Empire. He routed the Persians, leading his army as far as Bactria and India. His idea was to establish Modern Greek cities to propagate the Greek way of life throughout his vast conquests, from the southern shores of the Caspian Sea to Palestine, Babylonia, Egypt and the Indian Ocean—every corner of the then known world. The “great world” of the Hellenistic kingdoms that resulted was an explosive cultural expansion unequalled in history. When Rome later conquered and unified many lands Hellenized by Alexander under its own administrative system, Greek civilization remained the common and unifying element of its empire. Paul the Apostle was a deeply conservative Jew whose texts indicate the extent, depth and quality of the Roman world’s Hellenization. Of all peoples, the Jews resisted Hellenization with

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<sup>1</sup> The common Hellenic consciousness is manifested most clearly in the great festivals and games (Olympic, Nemean, Isthmian, Corinthian, and Delphic) in which only Greeks could participate regardless of their city of origin.

the greatest energy, and at the cost of much blood. Paul belonged to the most conservative group, the Pharisees. But for all his conservatism, he used the national language and philosophical thought of the Greeks, and certain Greek authors, as dexterously as any contemporary Alexandrian or Athenian. Even in the second century BC, the Latin aristocracy in Rome preferred Greek for social intercourse. When Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in the first century AD, he never considered writing in Latin. Two hundred and fifty years later, Diocletian's political and military genius discerned that historical development had shifted decisively to the Greek East, and as a result he spent most of his reign in Nicomedia. He anticipated Constantine the Great, who would transfer the empire's center to a new Greek capital, New Rome, popularly known as Constantinople.

The Roman Empire, now centered on New Rome, embarked on a historical journey which would last one thousand years, and each phase would be astounding. Its cultural identity was neither purely Roman nor purely Greek. It was the Christian element that prevailed, faithfully adhering to the orthodox tradition of the early church. The Roman Empire absorbed and transformed elements from both Rome and Greece, the legal and administration traditions of the one and the philosophy and art of the other. But at the center of its life was an ecclesiastical understanding of human existence, the world and history. Officially a Greek-speaking empire after the sixth century, and adopting the terms "Hellene" and "Hellenic" after the tenth, this rich cultural identity distinguished it from the civilization arising in the West following conquest by barbarian tribes and races.

Western and central Europe's new inhabitants had subdued and weakened the Latin-speaking Romans, but aspired to appropriate the name and historical continuity of the Roman Empire by the logic of geographical boundaries. They denied the name of Roman to the citizens of the Hellenized Eastern Empire. They derisively called them "Greeks," and in the seventeenth century their historians invented the new words "Byzantine" and "Byzantium." Byzantium, of course, certainly existed historically: the large town on the Bosphorus, founded as an ancient Greek colony, where Constantine built New Rome. Westerners went back to the former name as a substitute for New Rome, which they could then consign to oblivion.

Until the period of Turkish rule, the name "Byzantium" would have been unintelligible to most Greek-speaking Romans—as strange as calling

Modern Greeks “Plakiotes” after the old name of the district below the Acropolis around which the present city of Athens was built. But the Westerners’ arbitrary invention has prevailed, and is well established now in common parlance and scientific history. From the second century BC to the nineteenth AD, a succession of some seventeen Barbarian invasions overran the lands where the ancient Greek cities had flourished. Successive waves of conquest harried the Greek-speaking inhabitants of regions from the Danube to Crete and from Southern Italy to the heartland of Asia Minor and Pontus. Settlements of foreign peoples brought inevitable intermarriage with indigenous Greeks. Claims to Modern Greek racial homogeneity or “purity of blood” have little real basis; they are mostly romanticism.

General Makriyannis affirmed the historical paradox in his habitually colorful language: “From beginning to end, from ancient times to the present, all the beasts have struggled to consume us Hellenes, and they cannot; they eat away at us but there still remains some leaven.” This “leaven” was a relic of Greek cities and later “communities” that had survived conquest and intermarriage, ultimately preserving a particular Greek identity: a language, a mentality, a vision of the world and of life. All this was finally absorbed into ecclesiastical Orthodoxy. Genealogical trees of successive families and names cannot reveal the “leaven” of a dynamic and perpetually renewed Hellenism. It shows itself in popular poetry, the people’s ethos, their way of building churches and decorating them with icons in even the most remote Greek mountain community; in the people’s music and clothing, dowry agreements and various trade association contracts.

Under Turkish rule it was a way of life and expression of a common ecclesiastical faith (free from racial or ideological criteria) which distinguished the Orthodox Christian Greek from the Muslim Turk or heterodox “Frank”: it was the practice of fasting, celebrating church festivals and dancing at the *panegyreis* afterwards; it was the burning of the vigil lamp on the family icon stand; it was the baking and offering of bread for the Divine Liturgy, and the blessing of the waters and all creation every month. When the Greeks gathered at Epidaurus for their first constitutional State National Assembly during the second year of the revolt against Turkish tyranny (1822), they had only their religious faith with which to define themselves and their particularity. Section B, paragraph 2 of the Epidaurus Constitution reads: “All those indigenous

inhabitants of the State of Hellas who believe in Christ are Hellenes.” Here is the real reason for defining Greece as a mode of life rather than a place.<sup>2</sup>

### The Creation of the “West”

Let us return to Demetrios Kydones, the first Greek translator of Thomas Aquinas, whose work transformed the Greek people’s historical and cultural sensibility. I use the expression “cultural transformation” to mean a loss of confidence in one’s own culture combined with an exaggerated admiration for an alien culture. This is difficult to understand at a time when art and thought were enjoying a last brilliant renaissance in the Byzantine Empire. Kydones’ translations of Aquinas’s works tried to assert their philosophical and theological superiority while a strong Greek philosophical tradition was still capable of refuting his rationalism. Kydones seems not to have understood what was going on around him. He did not appreciate the thought of Gregory Palamas, who was then writing in Thessalonica (their common birthplace) never valuing his significance for the history of philosophy, let alone his theological and spiritual importance. He seems oblivious to the achievements of Greek artists at Mistra, at Thessalonica and at Constantinople’s monastery of St. Savior in Chora. The first Greek Thomists, or Latinizers, could not appreciate the blossoming of Greek thought and art in the fourteenth century, which synthesized ten centuries of tradition. They were contemporaries of Gregory Palamas yet preferred Thomas Aquinas, even though philosophy, painting, architecture, political and social institutions, and popular culture were all of the highest standard in the East.

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<sup>2</sup> On the cultural rather than ethnic definition of Hellenism in Late Antiquity see G. W. Bowersock, “Hellenism in Late Antiquity,” in *Jerome Lectures* 18 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). On religion and “nationalism” in the Byzantine Empire see Deno John Geanakoplos, *Interaction of the “Sibling” Byzantine and Western Cultures in the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance (330-1600)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 36-54. On the debate about cultural identity in Modern Greece see K. Th. Dimaras, *A History of Modern Greek Literature*, in Greek: Ιστορία της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας (Athens, 1968), xiii-xiv; N. Svoronos, “Interview,” in Greek: Συνέντευξη, *Synchrona Themata*, in Greek: Σύγχρονα Θέματα 35-37 (1988); E. P. Papanoutsos, *Modern Greek Philosophy*, in Greek: Νεοελληνική Φιλοσοφία, 2 vols (Athens: Vasiki Vivliothiki 35 and 36, 1970), 7-8; Z. Lorentzatos, *Studies*, in Greek: Μελέτες (Athens: Galaxias, 1967), 17, 160.