

Against “Mute and Dumb Objects” – Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Kollyvades Fathers

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Under the Turks, there was the real threat of the total destruction of all things Greek. “Crisis” is too mild a term. Other than a handful of profoundly corrupt Phanar-bankers, the Greek ethnos was a tiny mass of ignorant, frightened and illiterate peasants easily swept under the rug of history.

However, ethnicity usually involves the native religion. State unity is rarely possible without a unity of religion, one that implies a unity of general moral foundations. Nothing can be “universal” including the concept itself. All things that exist occur under a cultural context. This is because human beings are social beings requiring language (in the broad sense) to function at even the most elementary level. In 2016, the west is in such a state of aboulia and lethargy that even that obvious statement requires vigorous defense.

Now, this paper will not seek to deal with the issues of Saturday commemorations or the theology of frequent communion. While this is where the group gets its name, it is not the root of their significance. Their real significance lies in the resurrection of a moribund Greek Orthodox faith as the Turkish grip weakened. Writers such as Christos Yannaras go to great lengths to avoid the real significance of these men, since, once a part of the present system, one must reject nationalism in all forms. The truth is that the Greek Orthodox resurrection in the 18th century was the result of a strong Greek Orthodox nationalism. An ideology that provided the backdrop for the rebirth of a whole people. The Kollyvades fathers were nationalists that equated the Orthodox faith with the Greek nation. This is an extraordinary sign of health at a time of universal demoralization. The result of their work is the Philokalia. It is no accident that its leaders came from Athos.

The Kollyvades Fathers had as their main ideological pillars first, of course, the resurgence of monastic Orthodoxy and second, Greek nationalism. St. Cosmas the Aetolian began his work under two general conditions: first, the growing decay and disintegration of the Turkish empire and second, the rise of the Enlightenment among the elites in Western Europe. For a Greek intellectual, he looked at a radically ignorant population on the one hand, and a tottering empire on the other. AG Zoitakis at Moscow State University writes:

People were hiding in the high rugged mountains, gradually lost the connection with the neighboring settlements and dissociated themselves cultural, traditional communal ties have been broken. In many villages had no church and as a result, schools. Of course, we can not say that the cultural life in Greece is completely stopped, but the economic and cultural centers were located far from their homeland Cosmas the Aetolian cities fertile Thessaly, Crete and the Peloponnese.

Many of the educated had long fled the area to the west or Russia. There was a great demographic crisis in Greece and, in truth, all aspects of life were in crisis. After the conquest of the Byzantine Empire, the Greek education system understood the profound crisis.

The 18th century was dark. Russia was under the foreign rule of Biron and his masonic clique. Outside of Elizabeth, no legitimate monarch reigned as a foreign oligarchy sucked the country dry. Monastic life was reduced to almost nothing due to Petrine regulations. The Skete of Manjava in the Austrian empire was founded exclusively to offer a haven for monks fleeing the empire. The Balkans was no better off. Under the Turks, all bishops bought their sees and anathemas were bought and sold. Rarely did bishops see their dioceses and education was reduced to nothing. Mount Athos alone remained as an island of sanity. Vatopedi Monastery had a school teaching philosophy and theology. In Greece, being an Orthodox missionary was to be an outcast, and the “bishops” that were to be the guardians of the faith were its main persecutors. Patriarch Procopius (1785 – 1789) threatened St. Makarios of Corinth with death for his activities in education the Greek nation.

It is almost insulting to the subject to even deal with the issues of the commemoration of the dead. That is to this movement what the killing of Archduke Ferdinand was to the start of World War I. It was a precipitating factor rather than a cause. It is more of a distraction for the simple-minded. The issue was the renewal of the faith and the victory of the spirit over the letter.

The pint of the Philokalia was to challenge western rationalism. The four major propositions of the Kollyvades are:

1. Greece is a self-sufficient nation and culture. It does not require an outside epistemology or theology. It is a civilization to itself;
2. “Progress” can only be defined morally. Regardless of any other measure, morality alone can permit the proper use of science;
3. Liberalism, the egocentrism inherent in Descartes, is corrosive. It is deceptive;
4. The hierarchy in Greece had no legitimacy. The entire movement was excommunicated in 1776 and had been anathematized before.

One of the reasons nationalism was so essential was that the church was in the process of being overwhelmed by Latinism, the Enlightenment or Islam. Soon, there would be no Greeks left to convert. St. Cosmas worked at the grassroots to teach basic literacy, Greek history and theology. Often, historians and even Orthodox people forget how bad the situation was in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia in the 18th century. No education, no legitimate hierarchy and even the libraries had long since been pilfered by foreigners over the years. In such ignorance, superstitions and all manner of magic herbs, talismans and fortune tellers proliferated.

It has been noted that the violent reaction of the “hierarchy” over a simple question of ritual on Athos makes little sense. It only makes sense when the broader issues of clerical corruption and illegitimacy are factored in. Frequent communion was an important issue that suggested clerical confession was not an automatic “forgiveness machine” that the simpletons sometimes think it is. Communion itself forgives sin and no one, at any time, is worthy to receive.

The Balkans had a small layer of the very rich ruling over a shrinking population of ignorant poor. He developed a strong national socialism in that he stressed the revival of the Greek nation on a basically egalitarian and Orthodox basis. The extended family developed widely to protect the ethnos during this era, so it took on a great importance.

From the beginning, the western Enlightenment was about something more than mere rationalism. It sought to deny the spiritual realm based on the proposition that only empirical methods can grasp the material realm. If it could not be quantified, it must not exist. While this is

a caricature, it pales in comparison before the caricatures of this movement in western academia.

St. Athanasius Parios is one of the best representatives of this movement partly because he was one of the most overtly political. The rationalism of the Enlightenment found its final manifestation in the French Revolution. Reason nor equality had anything to do with it. Long cut off from the Christian life, the west was lost to constantly thrash around searching for utopia. The Europe that the Enlightened Greeks looked to both then and now is one of chaos and destruction. When reason is merely a slave to the passions, it can be worshiped only as that which makes their temporary satisfaction easier.

St. Cosmas writes:

My work is your work, it is of our faith, of our nation. I have two thoughts. One says for me to bless you and for you to bless me and then for me to get up and go to another place so that others who wait for me might hear me. My other thought tells me, no, don't go, but stay as you did in other villages and complete the remainder of the work because what we have said in three talks was brief. It is like a man who builds a church without a roof. What is left to be said is like that roof. What is the roof? I see our nation which has fallen in many bad ways; these are curses, excommunications, anathemas, oaths, blasphemies and others such as these [of which it is necessary] for Christians to cleanse themselves, to sanctify their villages, and be cleansed in body and soul (Teaching IV).

Cosmas is stating that there can be no renewal without the raw materials needed to build anything. A unified population, one purged of their sins and rescued from demoralization is just the beginning. As always, modernity offered nothing but cheap credit and imperialism. In a fragment without a date, St. Cosmas states:

Today, however, because of the dreadful state in which we find ourselves due to our sins, such wise and virtuous men, who can preserve unaffected our Orthodox brethren, are absent or at least extremely rare. For how can our nation be preserved without harm in its religion and freedom when the sacred clergy is disastrously ignorant of the meaning of the holy Scriptures, which are the light and foundation of the faith? When a shepherd doesn't know which grass is nourishing for his flock, he can't cure its possible passions; he can't guard them from the wild beasts and thieves. How can that flock be preserved for very long? So, my children of Parga, to safeguard your faith and the freedom of your homeland, take care to establish without fail a Greek school in which your children will learn all that you are ignorant of.

The Kollyvades were either a lay or monastic movement, independent of the "hierarchy." The resurrection of Christ was paralleled by the resurrection of the Greek nation and language. The nation is a large parish, a brotherhood based around the ethnos and the faith. The beast from the east was Islam, while papism and rationalism were the enemy from the west.

Cosmas was adamant that the national language and the culture it implies be the engine of rebirth in all senses. Language contains the wealth of tradition since it is the foundation of all communication. The national, living language should be used always.

St. Cosmas was dedicated to the revival of the nation and nationalism. The nation was to

be unified through the language and a firm understanding of the faith. Opposing immigration from Islamic areas, he preached a strong, ethnic Greece to fight enemies eastern and western. The language was the simple language of the peasantry: honest and direct.

The faith without the Greek language makes no sense. A Greek nation ruled by oligarchs makes even less. St. Cosmas was convinced that priests and bishops would destroy both church and nation, since they will be the first to compromise with masonry and leftism. Yet, St. Cosmas insisted that there needs to be something that has the capacity to be independent. If he were not a nationalist, then he's have to support Turkish and Islamic rule. If nations do not exist, then neither do imperial states. Greece, a strongly ethnic and pure Greece must be built through education before independence can be contemplated.

St. Cosmas made the obvious connection between the ethnos and the development of spiritual life. The monastics were the engine of ethnic rebirth and the rise of a liberatory nationalism. The priest needs to be an example "of unity for his compatriots." The priest is a symbol of national unity. This unity also knows no classes. The wealthy are required by natural law, utilitarianism and divine law to assist the poor with their excess resources. Nationalism also requires this sacrifice.

St. Athanasius Parios was the most political of all the Kollyvades. It was bad enough that Greece was forced under the heel of Ottomans, but the Enlightenment was using "progress" to justify colonizing the world. He argued that liberalism in France was, in destroying all inner buttresses against appetite, was forcing the total state to emerge. The west developed its own nationalist tradition only in the rejection of the Enlightenment in late 18th century Germany. The Enlightenment, by its very nature, was egocentric, positivist and materialist. These, the likes of Voltaire and Condorcet would say, would liberate humanity.

As individualists, western "missionaries of Enlightenment," often at the barrel of a gun, were opposed to nationalism. The two concepts are inherently opposed. Hence, this sort of distorted social notion could not be the engine for anything but further colonization. Apart from theological grounds, the western modernist idea needed to be rejected since it would destroy the philosophical basis for national rebirth. By using "reason" as their rhetorical foundation, he knew the modernists just meant "the state" or "the ruling class." Orthodox apologetics and western scholasticism were immensely logical in their development. "Reason" meant something else, it was a code word.

Contrary to the writing of such luminaries of Christos Yannaras, the "humanists," an absurdly vague term to begin with, did not advocate a "purely Greek state." The statement reads: "The enlightenment and [Adamantios] Korais reflect European ideas which require a purely national state, according to visions of humanists, based on an ancient geographic composition limits, while Athanasius the most conservative shape of a traditional multi-ethnic state." No one in the history of the Enlightenment believed in a purely ethnic, or national state. This was rejected over and over again from Bacon to Locke to Kant. The ethnos is not amenable to scientific measurement, therefore, it cannot exist.

The state was an abstraction that found its purely ethereal expression in the western Enlightenment. This was accepted. On the other hand, the nation, the ethnos, they rejected vehemently. Johann Herder pointed this out while Kant was still alive. Yet for many, the memo is still lost in the mail.

The Greek "Orthodoxwiki" article on Athanasius Parios borders on the historically illiterate, yet remains influential. Almost universally, the problem is the amateurish use of vocabulary. It all hinges on the equivocal use of the term "state." Empires are not "states."

Empires are confederations of ethno-nations that actually, as units, perform many tasks of the modern state. The silly phrase “So in the eyes of Athanasius the establishment of the national state means the near extinction of Hellenism” is not only inherently contradictory, but historically absurd.

Freedom was, for St. Athanasius, what the church had always preached: the liberation from appetites. External forces were not the problem; they were consequences of moral distortion and sin. Rather, it was our internal struggle against the desire for power, money and reputation that were at the root of evil in political and social life.

The nation was at the root of the revolution. The Philokalia could not have come into being had not the revival of the Greek language been at the center of the Kollyvades' teaching. The rise of scholasticism in the east provided the foundation for a harsh, overly-legalistic spirit to develop. The Philokalia was the answer. The Philokalia was the synthesis of several essential factors: the Greek nation, the Greek language, moral reform, social reform and the rebirth of an independent and a church independent of the Phanar.

Part of the reason why this movement was excommunicated and anathematized by the Phanar Patriarchate was that they stressed the sobor, or synodia, as the essence of the church rather than the hierarchy. Hierarchs do not “lead” nor, think God, do they “rule.” That is the business of monarchs. All members of the body are bound by grace but differ in function. They do not differ in any other way. The concept of frequent communion might seem a strange political doctrine, but it did have a political side: it was to democratize the church in the best sense of that term. Hyper-clericalism placed clergy above the laity as if they were “rulers” of the latter.

One went to communion only after one made a confession (usually very rapid and perfunctory) that then gave “permission” for the soul to approach the chalice. Orthodox doctrine does not place the clergy in this role. One's spiritual father is another matter, but that is not the issue in the long confession lines at church. That is not an actual confession in the true sense. Further, being able to read the fathers on these issues was indispensable: The Kollyvades were a threat because they preached literacy, sobornost, free will, egalitarianism and demoted the bishops from their simoniacal perch.

The grace of the Spirit and the sacraments, including the community itself, is an egalitarian doctrine. These do not depend upon nor are subjected to any clergy. They elect one of their own to serve them as priest, but this is not the same as a spiritual father and certainly does not bespeak of any ruling. In Russia, the Old Belief retained the tradition of Sobornopravna, or bishops that are servants of the people rather than their masters.

Secularization, especially for St. Athanasius Parios, meant that Christianity becomes just one philosophy among others. Morality is reduced to rules since the positivist cannot see anything above the arbitrary “individual.” Bishops then “rule” since there is no quantitative way to express the notion of the synodia or spiritual brotherhood.

For St. Cosmas, wealth is a curse. Dealing with the Jews (who soon were to kill him), he says “look at these golden Jews, his teeth are [artificially] whitened; his face is pale because he is under a curse from God. He is possessed and those demons never leave him” (Didachai, 2015, IV). He then speaks at length as to the Jewish control of the slave trade and dishonesty in retail. These are not marks of intelligence, but are nothing but mere deviousness. While Americans might see them as virtues, they are nothing more than vices.

He remarks that he has “learned five languages” and yet, “sees no truth” outside of the Orthodox faith. This is why the independence of Greece and a strong Greek consciousness is an

absolute necessity: it is not merely about independence, but the liberation of the truth. This is the heart of the nationalism of the Kollyvades. Independence was coming, but it would be useless if it took place right at this moment. Moral reform must precede it.

The social duties of all Greek Orthodox are to, first and foremost, to “love all Christians” and our own families first. Social unity comes only when men and women, as well as older and younger, exist in mutual love. Education (that is, school work) is essential, but 'always remain Greek.’ If one is ignorant of his own people “you will not be able to understand that which binds our church together.” (Didachai, 2015, V).

It should surprise no one that nationalism is often scrupulously avoided in the literature on the Kollyvades. So intensely corrupt has the church become that it adheres far more to the New World Order than it does its own spiritual foundations. The Kollyvades showed the limitations of the hierarchy by continuing their work even after being excommunicated without trial or hearing. There is no Greece without Orthodoxy and no Orthodox without Greece. This was the message. Without clergy anywhere (as dioceses were bought by businessmen and used as tax farms), the laity and monastic tradition kept the faith alive despite the attempts of the Phanar to strangle it. Neither the Phanar nor the Porte could handle nationalist health, so they needed to destroy their Orthodox brethren by any means possible. The Phanar was inherently connected with the multi-national Ottoman state, so nationalism threatened their ill-gotten gains.

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