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Reading the Ancients: Remnants of Byzantine Controversies in the Greek National Narrative

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*Reading the
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In 1082, the philosopher John Italos (or Italos), a former disciple of Michael Psellos and his successor as Consul of the Philosophers in Constantinople, was condemned by an Orthodox council for being overzealous in his “reading of the ancients” – primarily Plato but also Aristotle. The following anathemas, directed against his doctrines, were incorporated into the *Synodicon* of Orthodoxy:

Anathema to those who introduce Hellenic doctrines of the soul, heaven, earth, and creation into the Church ...; to those who teach metempsychosis or the destruction of the soul after death ...; to those who honour, or who believe that God will honour, Hellene philosophers or heresiarchs who taught error above the Fathers of the councils who held to the truth, though these latter may have sinned through passion or ignorance ...; to those who think Hellenic philosophy to be true and try to convert the faithful to their opinions ...; to all of John Italos’ doctrines introduced in opposition to the Orthodox faith.¹

In the eyes of his contemporaries, as Anna Komnene suggests in her *Alexias*, Italos was a pagan wolf in the clothing of a Christian sheep, anxious to overcome Christianity in favour of Hellenic (i.e. pagan) philosophy.² According to Psellos, Italos once hit back at his critics by composing a speech in which he lamented the fact that the “wisdom of the Greeks” and the right and pleasure “of reading the ancients” had migrated to the East, “to the Assyrians, the Medes and the Egyptians”.³ This remark was apparently

commonplace among Arab intellectuals of the tenth and eleventh centuries who Italos would have encountered in his contacts with easterners who came to Constantinople to study with Psellos and seek patronage at the imperial court.

Time goes fast, however. A few centuries later, both western Europeans and modern Greeks became determined, rather over determined, each for their own reasons, to reclaim ancient wisdom from those 'barbarian easterners' who were obviously ignorant of the coming 'clash of civilisations'. The moderns rediscovered the ancients during the articulation of humanism and later on during the formation political and cultural doctrines of the western Enlightenment. When classical Greece arose as the 'cradle' of European civilisation, modern Greeks were appointed the role of its direct descendants in the Western imagination. When the new cultural geography became fully fledged at the end of the eighteenth century, Greek nationalism also emerged and became primarily based on an educational and political programme related to the foundations of the so-called 'glorious Antiquity'.

For Greek intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this practically meant that national history had its locus in ancient times. Reading the ancients became the primary cultural focus in a project attempting to connect old and new 'Hellenes' more intensely and to articulate a national history in which modern Hellenism was the direct descendant of glorious ancestors. It was not an easy task for three reasons. Firstly, popular culture and memory could not easily interact with any conceptualisation of 'Hellenism' despite all the arguments for the survival of pagan elements. Ordinary nineteenth-century Greeks did not designate themselves as 'Hellenes', which meant pagans, but mostly as *Romioi* while their identity was articulated around the cultural and symbolic capital of Orthodox Christianity as conceptualised in the Rum Millet.⁴ Secondly, despite all the committed efforts to directly connect ancient and modern Hellenism in both the Western European and the Greek imagination, one could not avoid noticing that there was a huge time gap between the ancient and modern 'Hellenes' in this interpretation of the Greek past. And thirdly, any attempt to promote 'Hellenism' at the expense of Christianity was confronted with the resistance of the Church, either in the form of the Patriarchate of Constantinople or the newly established Church of Greece (1833), which feared challenges to Christian doctrine and principles arising from this new obsession with the ancients.

This was a most paradoxical situation. On the one hand, modern Hellenes needed the ancients both for articulating an attractive version of the national past and for securing their inclusion in 'civilised' and 'enlightened' Europe. On the other hand, Orthodox Christianity and the Church represented a unifying force which neither national ideology nor state politics could (and would) overcome. Yet, if 'Hellene' meant pagan and if 'Christian' defined the non-pagan, how was it possible for anyone to be both a Hellene and a Christian? The Greeks were alarmed to discover that they were caught up in a puzzling process of naming and that their self-designation constituted a contradiction in terms.

It was in this context that the politics of 'reading the ancients' gained new meanings and became primarily related in an attempt to elaborate a convincing interpretation of the connection between

‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity.’ Byzantine controversies as the one concerning the philosopher John Italos re-emerged in the processes of reconceptualising the relationship between classical civilisation and Christianity and also of incorporating Byzantium into the national narrative. The term ‘Helleno-Christian’ was first coined in 1852 by Spyridon Zambrelios, a Heptanesian intellectual of the era.⁵ It was conceptualised as a depiction of Greek popular culture in which pagan and Christian elements were related. During the 1850s however, new interpretations of the term Helleno-Christian appeared, mainly evolving around the national historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos’ major synthesis on the *History of the Greek Nation* (1860–1874). From his perspective, the concepts ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ were not mutually exclusive but rather mutually inclusive and the term ‘Helleno-Christian civilisation’ referred to the privileged relationship the Modern Greek nation shared with both ancient Greek civilisation and Orthodox Christianity. Modern Greece stood as a unique hybrid cultural space in which pagan and Christian components were linked in an ideally harmonious manner and the “ancients” stood easily hand in hand with the Christians, producing mental and cultural artefacts of an extraordinary nature. The harmonious linkage was for Paparrigopoulos the product of a long process of rapprochement that was initiated in late Antiquity and became fully fledged in the Byzantine era.⁶

What were the premises of the ‘Helleno-Christian Civilisation’? If pagan and Christian thought went hand in hand ever since late Antiquity, why was John Italos condemned for having read the ancients? If Byzantium provided the ideal locus for the preservation of classical tradition, why is the *Synodikon* of Orthodoxy full of anathemas against those who threatened Christian doctrine through pagan philosophy? In the Greek national narrative, the turbulent relationship between ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ was gradually smoothed as the versions of the national past put forward by Paparrigopoulos and Spyridon Lambros, his principal successor at the University of Athens, illustrate. In this process, Byzantine controversies over the possible threat to Christian dogma and over the intense interest in classical philosophy were reinterpreted in the context of the principles governing the relationship between ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ as set by the fourth-century Church Fathers.

Of all the Church Fathers, the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa) attracted greatest attention. They had all acquired an impressive background in classical philosophy. They had lived and written in a period of great interest and importance for the history of the Church and for the final articulation of Orthodox Christian doctrine. The essentially Trinitarian character of Orthodox dogma owed much to their work as they attempted to interpret the *homoousion* (of the same substance) and establish both the full deity of the Son and the eternal distinction from the Father. They modified and adapted classical philosophy, especially Platonism, for the needs of Christianity by developing eclectic affinities with the ancients.⁷ Defensive and rather cautious of the riches of antiquity, reflecting a mixture of an awareness of the dangers inherent in the full absorption of the spirit of Hellenism and of affection for it, the Cappadocians attracted the interest of modern Greek historical thinking as the advocates of a ‘happy marriage’ between Hellenism and Christianity. As their figures became predominant in eleventh-century Byzantium at a time when the Church Schism reinforced doctrinal debates and John Italos was condemned, this era gained new importance in the Greek historical narrative.

For Paparrigopoulos, for instance, the fourth-century Church Fathers represented the two central poles of Greek national culture, i.e. “faith and learning”.⁸ Interest in them in eleventh-century Byzantium was, according to Paparrigopoulos, the natural result of the celebration of classical thought in the Empire and of the natural bond linking ancient, Byzantine and modern Greece. The historian and university professor Spyridon Lambros (1851–1919), on the other hand, defined the fourth century as the “century of the last struggle” in the long conflict between paganism and Christianity pointing out that the “Greek Church” (sic) enthusiastically celebrated the Church Fathers as the champions of the harmonious mixing of “Hellenic beauty and Christian truth”.⁹ The rejuvenated interest in the Cappadocians during the eleventh century was related to this particular quality and was presented as further evidence of the ideal pairing of classical Greek and Christian values in the Byzantine cultural universe.

This interpretation of the long and turbulent historical relationship between ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ provided space for three major developments in Modern Greece. Firstly, it enabled the inclusion of the Byzantine era in national history. Secondly, it successfully connected ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ and established ancient glories and religious doctrines as the two principal features of national culture. Last, but not least, it enabled the re-appropriation of the term ‘Hellenism’ by dislocating it from its contextualised meanings as a diverse cultural and intellectual trend in late antiquity and early Byzantium and by giving it an ethnic content directly related to the fortunes of the Greek nation.¹⁰ Yet, two crucial details were missing: first, the recognition of the importance of the Cappadocian Fathers in eleventh-century Byzantium became implicitly related to the condemnation of all those who read the ancients outside of the framework set by the Church authorities and who attempted to upset the balance between classical philosophy and Christian doctrine; it is not accidental that this new interest emerged in the years following the trial of John Italos. Second, the new image of these Church Fathers in particular resulted in the exclusion by the Orthodox Church in the eleventh century of one of the Cappadocians, namely Gregory of Nyssa who was thought to be the most ‘philosophical’ and whose reading of the ancients did not fit into the canon.¹¹ The three Fathers of the Orthodox Church are not the Cappadocians. They are instead the so-called Three Hierarchs. In this triplet, Gregory of Nyssa was replaced by John Chrysostom. This detail, however, went unnoticed. The three fourth-century Church Fathers were recognised as the champions of ‘Helleno-Christian Civilisation’ while their day of remembrance in the Church calendar was even established as a school holiday. Ever since, the image of Gregory of Nyssa haunts the allegedly ‘happy marriage’ of Hellenism and Christianity and reveals their intense conflicts.

How ought the reading of the ancients be read in this context? The main argument here is that the formation of a national tradition interconnecting ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ took place in the nineteenth century by inaugurating a system of overlapping significations. As Roland Barthes has convincingly argued in his *Mythologies* (1957), myths employ first-order sign systems, re-appropriate and use them as platforms for their own signifiers. These second-degree sign systems establish new relationships between primary and secondary signification and function as would-be natural texts of culture. They are articulated as constant and persistent processes of connotation which, as critics of Barthes’s semiology have pointed out, are performed within dialogic and heteroglossic

contexts. The suggestions here draw heavily on this analytical trend. I argue that the act of reading the ancients was associated with religious conflicts from late Antiquity onwards in the Orthodox world and resulted in the formation of a canon that promoted a strict, hierarchical and eclectic relationship between the intellectual and cultural trend of ‘Hellenism’ and the doctrines of Christianity. Each time this barrier was transgressed, as in the case of John Italos or even Michael Psellos himself, ecclesiastical control emerged. In the nineteenth century however, this relationship was re-conceptualised and turned upside down in order to fit the needs of Greek national ideology. A secondary signification system emerged in which both ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Christianity’ functioned as new signs that stood hand in hand. In this new signification system, reading the ancients was presented as a top priority for Orthodoxy while Hellenism was no longer the signifier of a cultural and intellectual trend but of the Greek nation itself.

Under the rubric of time, this interpretation of history and this form of national rhetoric have been established and circulated extensively in public historical culture. Currently, the official website of the Church of Greece celebrates the conflation of the Greek classics and Christian doctrine. Moreover, it identifies its own ‘barbarians’ as being in the West. According to a study by Demetrius Constantelos advertised on the website, the

Latin Christian West for several centuries, in particular from the late sixth century to the age of Thomas Aquinas, proscribed profane Hellenism ... Western monasticism contributed to a drastic decline of Greek thought in Western culture for four centuries (600–1000). Champions of Greek thought such as Boethius ran the risk of being charged with heresy and magic.

In the Greek East, the author continues, heresies and religious sects

kept cropping up in the course of more than a millennium [which] is indicative of a fertile intellectual ground and the tolerant religious atmosphere there ... The Byzantines took pride in being the inheritors and preservers of the Hellenic classical tradition. Byzantine society was an educated society, and its education rested on two legs, the Greek and the Christian.¹²

Apparently, the Greek Church itself is very selective in its reading of the *Synodikon*. In the new system of signification as well as in the new vocabulary launched in the nineteenth century, being a Hellene primarily means being a Christian while all the age-old conflicts surrounding this troubled relationship from the fourth century onwards either escape notice or seem completely insignificant.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jean Gouillard, "Le Synodikon de l'Orthodoxie: Édition et Commentaire", *Travaux et Mémoires* 2 (1967), pp. 1–316. My translation.
- 2 Anna Komnene, *Αλεξιάς*, transl. Aloe Sideri, Athens: Agra, 1991, vol. 1, p. 209.
- 3 Cited in Paul Magdalino, *The Byzantine Background to the First Crusade*, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies, 1996.
- 4 On the issue, see especially Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More. Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
- 5 Spyridon Zambelios, *Άσματα δημοτικά της Ελλάδος εκδοθέντα μετά μελέτης ιστορικής του μεσαιωνικού ελληνισμού* [Folk Songs of Greece, published with a study on Medieval Hellenism], Corfu, 1852.
- 6 Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, "Λόγος τη 30^η Ιανουαρίου 1883 επί τη εορτή των Τριών Ιεραρχών [A Speech on 30 January 1883 on the occasion of the Feast of the Three Hierarchs]" in B. D. Kallifron, *Συλλογή Εκκλησιαστικών Λόγων εκφωνηθέντων υπό Ιεραρχών και Ιεροκηρύκων της Ορθοδόξου Ανατολικής Εκκλησίας από του ΑΩΞΑ-ΑΩΠΣΤ* [A Collection of Speeches by Priests and Preachers of the Orthodox Eastern Church], Constantinople: Anatolikos Asteras, 1886, vol. 3, pp. 14–28.
- 7 For an analysis of the Cappadocians' works and activities, see Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995.
- 8 Paparrigopoulos, "Λόγος τη 30^η Ιανουαρίου", p. 15.
- 9 Spyridon Lambros, *Ιστορία της Ελλάδος μετ' εικόνων από των αρχαιστάτων χρόνων μέχρι της βασιλείας του Όθωνος* [An Illustrated History of Greece from the most Ancient Times to Otto's Reign], Athens, 1892, vol. 3, pp. 368–9.
- 10 For an analysis of this process, see Effi Gazi, *Ο Δεύτερος Βίος των Τριών Ιεραρχών. Μια γενεαλογία του «ελληνοχριστιανικού πολιτισμού»* [The Second Life of Three Hierarchs. A Genealogy of the "Helleno-Christian Civilisation"], Athens: Nefeli, 2004.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 135–232.
- 12 Demetrius Constantelos, *The Formation of the Hellenic Christian Mind*, available at http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/Constantelos_1.html (last accessed on 2 September 2005).