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Nostalgia for Being Otherwise*

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RELIGION AND NATIONAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY IN
MODERN GREEK SOCIETY: A STUDY OF SYNCRETISM
BETWEEN ORTHODOXY AND HELLENISM

The present article is written as a theoretical exploration of the (actual, possible, or contingent) relations/processes that inform both the macroscopic and microscopic field of interactions between Orthodoxy and Hellenism in Modern Greek society. In particular, our exploration is interested in a social and cultural anthropology approach to Greek national/ethnic identity¹ in the light, on the one hand, and through the application, on the other, of such categories as ‘syncretism’, ‘performance’, ‘cultural capital’, ‘subjectivity’, and ‘dialogic’. More specifically, the present article is divided into three parts: the first deals with a histori(ographi)cal periodization of the engagement that took place between the representations of Orthodoxy and those of Hellenism during the 19th and 20th centuries; the second is an account of certain indicative bibliographical references with regard to the issue at hand from a social sciences point of view; and, finally, the third part attempts to propose a typological and, at the same time, a phenomenological utilization of the above-mentioned categories, in order to signify at least the possibility of an expanded hermeneutic understanding of the differentiated, complementary, or even contradictory versions of the national/ethnic discourse about the symbiosis of Orthodoxy and Hellenism.

I) HISTORI(OGRAPHI)CAL PERIODIZATION: FROM LATE
NEO-HELLENIC ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF
GREEK ORTHODOXY (*ΕΛΛΗΝΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΙΑ*)

During the first two decades of the 19th century, the movement of Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment was already covering the mature, third phase of its development (e.g.

Iosipos Moisioudax, Adamantios Korais). This phase, among other things², entailed a more conscious, critical, and explicit way of defining the presuppositions through which a national identity founded upon the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical affirmation of the classical heritage of Greece (see Kitromilides 1996 *passim*) was conceivable and viable. Such an affirmation, though, was found to function as an ideological challenge to the hegemonic rhetoric about the ‘Orthodox Race’ (Γένος των Ορθοδόξων): how could this ‘race’ re-define its identity on the basis of an element (i.e., Hellenism), which in the best case was at least problematic for Orthodoxy (both as a belief and a set of practices)?³ The answer to this question will finally emerge in the form of a rationalized and secularized Orthodoxy, which in turn will lead to a dialectical negation/affirmation of historical memory: *the denial of an allegedly mystified Byzantium, on the one hand, in favour of a compatible with Orthodoxy imaginary resuscitation of the ancient Greek world, on the other.*

The tension of this initial period will be succeeded by the enthusiasm of Greek romanticism (Georgios Typaldos-Iakovatos, Markos Renieris, Spyridon Zambelios). While Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment had pursued the (re)construction of Greek national continuity through a certain discontinuity (i.e., Orthodox Byzantium), which paradoxically could enable the return of ‘authentic’ Greek-ness and ‘authentic’ Christianity, *Greek romanticism/historicism would put forward the national continuity of Greeks through a single historical continuity that was regarded as expanding from classical antiquity through Byzantium to modern times*⁴. Furthermore, it is exactly this historical continuity that the newly-established ‘Kingdom of Greece’ will be called to embody programmatically at all institutional levels – responding, as it were, some times to a sort of divine election and calling with historic implications (for the latter, see Renieris 1990).

The third phase in the course of the experiential connections (*Sinnzusammenhänge*) between Orthodoxy and Hellenism was driven by the ideological project of Hellenic Christianity (*Ελληνοχριστιανισμός*). Basically, this project refers to the period that extends from the 1930s to the 1960s; a period laden with the traits of a nationalistic, chauvinistic, and fascist State. In particular, Hellenic Christianity was espoused by the leading theologians of the period (e.g. Panagiotis Bratsiotis, Panagiotis Trembelas) as a synthesis between Hellenism and Christianity; a synthesis that was thought of as having culminated in an unparalleled and emblematic way in the work of the great theologians of the 4th century CE⁵. In practice, *this synthesis constituted a renewed version of the modernizing project of the Enlightenment, which was*

concerned more with the promotion of cultural homogeneity within the Greek nation, rather than with the elevation of historical continuity at the level of individual consciousness. In any case, however, both Hellenism and Christianity became a subject of selective and normative representation (see a rigorous criticism in Theodoropoulos 1990).

Nevertheless, at the end of the 1960s we witness the first reactions against the dominant ideology of Hellenic Christianity. More specifically, through a variety of revival processes within the theological/ecclesiastical domain a new discourse about the integral coexistence of Hellenism and Orthodoxy started to develop; a discourse that during the 1970s and 1980s took on its mature form in the guise of Neo-Orthodoxy (*Νεορθοδοξία*) (e.g. Christos Giannaras, Kostas Zouraris, Stelios Ramfos, Theodoros Ziakas). *The issue was not any more about the thoroughly rationalistic, Enlightened, and modernizing rhetoric of a philosophical and civilizing Christianity, but about a peculiarly mystical, subversive, and postmodern elaboration of the overlooked Byzantine Orthodoxy.* For a substantial period of time, Neo-Orthodoxy became a highly debated issue within the Modern Greek ecclesiastical domain, and this to the degree that it challenged the vested sociopolitical interests of Hellenic Christianity; interests promoted via the activity of Christian organizations and brotherhoods (for the latter, see Giannakopoulos 1999).

The 20th century will conclude with a further twist of the engagement between the representations of Hellenism and those of Orthodoxy. In the context of the postmodern tension between locality and globality⁶, *Neo-Orthodoxy will be transformed from an ethno-religious discourse with ecumenical claims to an ecclesiastico-national identity of local uniqueness.* At this point we are dealing with the gradual construction of Greek Orthodoxy (*Ελληνορθοδοξία*) (e.g. Ioannis Romanidis, Nikos Matsoukas, Georgios Metallinos, Lambros Siasos), which since the end of the 1990s has risen to prominence as the dominant ecclesiastical discourse, and at the same time affects great a number of groups within Modern Greek society. Moreover, it has been argued that in the course of time Greek Orthodoxy has developed as a distinct Greek version of the global phenomenon of fundamentalism (see Papparizos 2000). However, given the fact that within the context of modernity fundamentalism constitutes a reactionary process that simply intensifies the dialectics of the latter (*cf.* Bekridakis 2000: 446-447), it becomes evident that Greek Orthodoxy reproduces the dialectics that was from the very beginning intrinsic to the modern postulate of the national identity of the Greek people.

II) THE SOCIAL SCIENCES PERSPECTIVE: FROM THE SURVIVALS OF ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION TO THE FUNDAMENTALISM OF ORTHODOXY

Among the references of the social sciences about the issue under examination, indicative are those of folklore studies, ethnology, and anthropology. Although all these disciplines have focused on what we could call ‘popular’ religiosity, *folklore studies and ethnology have basically problematized the representations of Greek romanticism, on the one hand, whereas anthropology examines the factual/social presuppositions and implications of Orthodoxy, on the other*. For example, Nikolaos Politis has argued that in the case of Orthodoxy one can see the distinct traces of ancient Greek religiosity; traces which, far from being culturally out of place, preserve their integrity and are the irrefutable witnesses of a prior life still going on (*cf.* the relevant citation in Stewart 1994: 138). European ethnology offers a more or less similar perspective and has declared – one could say – through the words of J. C. Lawson that ‘with all this external Christianity they [the Modern Greeks] are as pagan and as polytheistic in their hearts as were ever their ancestors’ (see *idem*).

With regard to anthropological/ethnographic studies, one should not fail to mention the work of C. Stewart (1991-1994), M. Herzfeld (1982-1987), and L. Danforth (1984-1989). Stewart is particularly apposite to the issue under examination, since it is his work that has most emphatically presented the whole subject as syncretism. To be sure, for him the main objective is not so much whether one should speak of syncretism, synthesis, or hybridization, as it is the hermeneutic problem pertaining to the coexistence of Orthodoxy and ancient Greek religiosity; a problem that for him can only be solved through the consideration of the political strategies regarding (a coherent and consolidated) national identity in the context of the Modern Greek State. In turn, Herzfeld has proposed an extremely interesting category, in particular that of ‘disemia’, through which he attempts to define and explain the counteracting process that the Modern Greeks employ whenever they represent themselves, on the one hand as descendants of the ancient Greeks, and on the other as Orthodox Christians. Because they are in possession of two traditions, or sign systems, he argues, they are capable of negotiating – whenever necessary – the authenticity and integrity of their identity.

Finally, Danforth utilizes the category of syncretism in her research concerning the phenomenon of fire-walking (*αναστενάρηδες*) in Western Thrace. More specifically,

she reiterates a series of (research and/or theory) attempts aiming at reconciling two historically and phenomenologically heterogeneous entities: that of sacred fire-walking, on the one hand, and that of the cult of Christian saints, on the other. On the basis of her exposition, one gets the impression that the intended reconciliation – once again dubbed syncretism – between ancient Greek religiosity and Orthodox Christianity moves within a certain spectrum of combinations; for instance, the case of (ancient Greek) ‘essence’ vis-à-vis (Christian) ‘form’ (*a la* A. Chourmouziadis), or the case of (ancient Greek) ‘form’ vis-à-vis (Christian) ‘meaning’ (*a la* Megas) [see Danforth 1984: 70-85].

Moreover, we should mention the contribution of social and political history studies to the elucidation of the background of the relationship between Orthodoxy and Hellenism in Modern Greek society. In particular, the work of Kitromilides (*op. cit.*) and P. Matalas (2002)⁷ is quite telling with regard to the sociopolitical processes that led to the formation of Greek nationalism – and by extension Balkan nationalism – as well as to the redefinition of the attitude of the Orthodox Church towards historical memory. Although such approaches do not pertain to Modern Greek society, we should not fail to appreciate the fact that in the last analysis they are of paramount importance to the understanding of the developments that determined the dynamics, mentality, and practices of the individual, collective, and institutional crystallizations of Hellenic Christianity, Neo-Orthodoxy, or Greek Orthodoxy.

Kitromilides makes it clear that the type of Orthodoxy that was to be embodied and promoted by the newly found Greek State was bound to incorporate the legacy of Greek revivalism and to consolidate the distinctiveness of its own identity not on the basis of Orthodox ecumenism, but on that of Greek localism (or Greek particularism). All this, of course, is directly related to the problem of ‘racism’ (*εθνοφιλειτισμός*) and by extension to the religio-political pursuit of independence (*αυτοκεφαλία*) on the part of the various Orthodox Churches in the Balkans. This dimension is splendidly analyzed in the work of Matalas, who demonstrates the pursuit, the tension, and the limits of the appropriate relationship between a traditionally transnational Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and an unduly nationalistic Orthodoxy, on the other.

Lastly, special reference should be made to the sociological approaches to the appropriation of Hellenism on the part of Orthodoxy during the 20th century, especially the case of Neo-Orthodoxy. Amongst the very interesting studies on the

subject⁸, noteworthy is the article ‘Neo-Orthodoxy, Communitarianism, and Modernity’ by A. Giannakopoulos (2004). Situating the ‘trend’ – as he calls it – of Neo-Orthodoxy within the wider context of ‘globalization and cultural assimilation’, Giannakopoulos refers to ‘processes of “spiritual decolonization”’ (*op. cit.*, 282), due to which ‘the elements of a “useful” *national* past are promoted, elements that are capable of moulding a new type of solidarity within the *national* body’ (*idem*; our italics). In other words, both the proponents and the recipients of the claims of Neo-Orthodoxy represent a certain Christian-based experience of Hellenism which aspires at rendering the latter functional in the light and under the pressure of the homogenizing processes of globalization. This, to be sure, apart from being a strategy of resistance or dialogue, can evolve as well towards the direction of a reactionary or introvert attitude, i.e., towards the direction of fundamentalism. Indeed, judging from the further transformations of the engagement between the representations of Orthodoxy and those of Hellenism in Modern Greek society, it seems that eventually Neo-Orthodoxy did not avoid this specific development, since – intentionally or not – it provided for the ideological claims of Greek Orthodoxy fundamentalism.

III) SYNCRETI(STI)C IDENTITIES: THE VARIETIES OF THE ‘SYMBIOSIS’ BETWEEN ORTHODOXY AND HELLENISM

Both the histori(ographi)cal periodization and the social sciences approaches with regard to the ‘symbiosis’ of Orthodoxy and Hellenism may possibly create the impression that what we are dealing with is either well-placed theoretical constructions or one-dimensional and consolidated practices/performances. In other words, it seems that in each case we are confronted with successive or coexistent, but at the same time distinct national identities. However, the tangible experience of everyday life and the personal experiences of social agents are far from substantiating such an impression; on the contrary, they possibly represent a field of intense dialectical character, unresolved or even pursued tensions, as well as fluid demarcations and constantly shifting performances. In short, *at the level of subjectivity, it is reasonable to suppose that the ‘symbiosis’ of Orthodoxy and Hellenism specializes and particularizes the problematic structure that has always characterized their relations at the historical level*⁹.

In order to delineate this problematic structure, we propose the category of ‘syncretism’¹⁰ as an analytical tool, and this due to the fact that the latter presupposes: (a) the heterogeneity of the elements involved in its dynamics, (b) the paradox that

goes along with the ‘necessity’ of their ‘coexistence’, and finally (c) the indeterminacy of the postulates that these elements are supposed to satisfy. Thus we have in mind syncretism as a dialectical, procedural, and antinomic notion. This entails that any ‘coexistence’ of Orthodoxy and Hellenism at the level of individual or collective identity is determined by constant contradictions, remains always open, and sustains itself through its own shortcomings. This kind of ‘coexistence’ is a hybrid one, a fact that has certain implications since the category of ‘hybridity’ has been adopted by the social sciences at large¹¹ – and anthropology in particular – in order to designate the ‘grey zones’, mixtures, fluidity, and in general the interpenetration that determines the dynamics, plethora, and complexity of life-forms (*Lebensformen*) at the fundamental level of everyday experience.

To start with, we have to emphasize that as much as the superimposition exercised by the theoretical constructions and consolidated practices concerning the ‘symbiosis’ of Orthodoxy and Hellenism is real, possible or contingent, equally real, possible or contingent is their very specific reception on the part of the individual social agents. This entails that between the two levels, i.e., the macroscopic and the microscopic, there exists a fundamental interaction that affects both sides and conditions proportionately the multiplicity of the ‘symbiosis’ in question. Nevertheless, it is at the microscopic level of social agency that the variety of the syncretism between Orthodoxy and Hellenism is performed in the most obvious way; and this because the abstract socio-symbolic identity – herein, national identity – presupposes, is mediated by, and entails the varied and shifting way in which the individual/personal identity is performed¹².

In particular, according to J. E. Côté and C. G. Levine (see 2002: 141-171), what we call ‘identity’ is in practice an ‘identity capital’, that is, an individualized set of resources – material and symbolic, tangible and non-tangible – which in turn are acquired, exchanged, and invested in an equally individualized way. In the case of the issue we are examining, the collective national identity of the Modern Greeks comprises a plethora of subjectivities that perform their identity according to the access or the exposure they have to the cultural and social capital of the various theories and/or practices about the ‘symbiosis’ of Orthodoxy and Hellenism. Thus depending on the given access or exposure, individuals – either consciously or not – choose their own, timely, and particular ‘syncretism’ (*σύνκρησις*) between Orthodoxy and Hellenism, or on the other hand conform – in their own, but less innovative way – to one of the normative versions of this ‘syncretism’ (cf. the diagram in *idem*, 163)¹³.

Consequently, in the context of the multiple possibilities offered within Modern Greek society, individuals may sometimes be more inclined towards Hellenism, and sometimes towards Orthodoxy. It should be noted that this ‘sometimes’ must be considered in individual terms, but most importantly it has to be regarded in experiential terms, that is, it refers to the differentiation observed within the same individual at different experiential connections. At this point, we deem extremely apt the categories of ‘dialogical self’ and ‘positioning’, as these are presented and analyzed by H. J. M. Hermans (2002). According to Hermans, ‘dialogical self’ can be defined as a dynamic multiplicity of ‘I-positionings’ within an imaginary scape (*cf.* 71)¹⁴. Indebted as it seems to the thought of M. Bakhtin (1981), Hermans goes on stating that these ‘I-positionings’ finally enable the emergence of innovation and self-regeneration processes (*cf.* 79, 81-94).

Returning to the issue of the present article, we would say that within the ethno-scape (see Appadurai 1993) of Modern Greek society, each individual has to constantly move during the temporal formation of his/her identity, which means that s/he continuously changes positions within a nexus of ideas, symbols, practices and habitusxv concerning the relations between Orthodoxy and Hellenism. As a consequence, through and within this constant shifting and re-positioning, individuals experience a series of imperceptible or intense ruptures/discontinuities, which constitute the substratum needed for the performance and construction of his/her own symbolic continuity/unity. In other words, it is not at all odd that the coexistence of a number of different versions concerning the engagement of Orthodoxy and Hellenism give rise to a single national identity; besides, this is the gist of the tangible, observable, and living syncreti(sti)c identity, which once again confirms ‘W. James’ paradox’ about the simultaneous experience of a unitary self and multiple selves (*cf.* Foddy and Kashima 2002: 5).

However, we should have in mind that the syncreti(sti)c performance of subjectivity with regard to the appropriate relation between Orthodoxy and Hellenism does not always follow the pattern of performance, which consists in the exercise of cultural literacy, as individuals and/or groups are creatively identified with roles that embody symbolically the meaning of certain socio-historical conditions (*cf.* Bauman 1989). Termed differently, in the case we are examining we should understand performance in a broader sense, so that it comprises a large spectrum of psychological parameters, extending from heightened self-consciousness to unconscious compliance. In any case, symbolically constructed self-definitions are capable of participating

in the creation of historical processes (*cf.* Kashima and Foddy 2002: 204). Nevertheless, in the case we are examining this is equivalent to acknowledging an open, fluid and a priori undetermined historical inscription of the representations and practices about the engagement of Orthodoxy and Hellenism; *the experience of individual national/ethnic identities renders the field of national history a field of constant negotiation.*

Within the limits of our approach, then, we believe that the syncretism between Orthodoxy and Hellenism can be thought of as conforming to the typology of syncretism in general. This typology comprises the possibilities of *competition, borrowing, combination, and integration*¹⁶. In practice, all these possibilities constitute appropriations – in all or in part – of the ‘Other’. The cultural and social capital of both Hellenism and Orthodoxy – precisely in the context of their ‘syncrasis’ – may possibly contradict one another, borrow elements from one another, pursue or tolerate a plethora of combinations, and finally realize integral meaning-units. The case of competitive syncretism is characteristic of the exclusive claims peculiar to the rhetoric of ecclesiastical institutions. The case of borrowing syncretism is evident in the multiplicity of selves (see Rosenberg 1997: 23–45) that express themselves in each individual. The case of combining syncretism is probably indicative of the formations that have recently emerged within Modern Greek ‘neo-paganism’ and ‘ethnic religion’ (e.g. *Δωδεκαθεϊστές*). Lastly, integrating syncretism should rather be located in the age-long meaning-patterns observed in the numerous ancient Greek survivals embodied in popular religion practices, on the one hand, and in the theoretical and practical embodiments of historical continuity present within the theological and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present article we attempted – via a hermeneutic phenomenological approach – to explore the historical, social, and individual engagement of the representations and practices concerning the relations between Orthodoxy and Hellenism. Firstly, we saw that all is about a highly differentiated field depending on the historical period and the socio-political claims. However, secondly, this differentiation could not but acquire the dimensions of an exuberant and complicated set of experiential peculiarities; a set that only through the acknowledgement of the parameters of openness, fluidity, and mixture could be adequately demarcated. In the light of this, we utilized ‘syncretism’ as an analytical category, and proposed a reasonable explanation of the

emergence, construction, and experience of the individual national/ethnic identities and ‘synchrases’ between Orthodoxy and Hellenism. These specific identities and ‘synchrases’ were located within the broader typology of syncretism, reflecting thus a spectrum of possibilities of ‘coexistence’ and appropriation (competition, borrowing, combination, and integration). The final conclusion of this article can be summarized as follows: *the much-debated relations between Hellenism and Christianity, despite any systematic/theoretical approaches, can and have to become the subject of a more realistic interpretation; to be more precise, anthropological observation, participation, and criticism with regards to everyday, personal, and tangible identities can reveal the dynamics, the tension, and the contours of an age-long historical encounter, which is usually comprehended in a static, superficial, and one-sided way, depending on the ideological standpoint and the interests at stake...*

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We use 'national' and 'ethnic' interchangeably, and at the same time as distinct from one another. Basically, 'national identity' denotes an identity formed and promoted through the implementation of institutional policies, whereas 'ethnic identity' signifies an identity created and perpetuated through social agency and cultural inter-subjectivity.
- 2 Among these one could include for instance the following: a more thorough critique of religious tradition, a radicalization of social and political sensitivities, and an unequivocally positive reception of modern philosophy and science.
- 3 For this problem as a search for the appropriate Greek national identity, see Livanios 2006.
- 4 The advocate *par excellence* of this ideological trend was Kostantinos Paparigopoulos' monumental *History of the Greek People* [Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους] (1860-1877).
- 5 In a more or less similar perspective one could consider the work of a number of leading philosophers of the period. See for example Tatakis 1977.
- 6 For this tension, see for example Robertson 1995; Joseph 2002.
- 7 Undoubtedly, the relevant bibliography is not confined to the work of these two scholars. See, for example, Iliou 1978, Makridis 1997.
- 8 See, for instance, Makris 1983, Makridis 1998.
- 9 This problematic structure constitutes a topic of discussion at various points in Paparizos 2001.
- 10 In this part of our article we use 'syncretism' as an analytical category, and not as an object of observation per se. For further argumentation, see Adrahtas 2003.
- 11 See for instance the entry 'syncretism' in Kuper and Kuper 1999.
- 12 See M. Foddy and Y. Kashima 2002: 3-25.
- 13 For 'capital' and 'resources', see Bourdieu 1990, 1991, 1998.
- 14 Hermans himself makes it clear that this 'scape' should not be regarded as wholly imaginary (*cf.* 77), probably implying that it has a certain objective quality over against which any given 'I' is positioned.
- 15 For the category of 'habitus', see Bourdieu, 1990, 1991.
- 16 At this point we draw on Adrahtas 2006: 32-32.