

# THE VANISHING OF CONSCIOUS HELLENISM

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I was invited as a participant in a panel discussion entitled "*The Future of Hellenism in America.*" The other panelists were a professor of philosophy and a professor of ancient history. The professor of philosophy spoke about the modern borrowings and inspirations that sprang from the glorious achievements of the ancient Greeks. He enumerated some of the plays, operas, musical compositions and artistic works in subsequent centuries that would not have been possible without the legacy of Hellenism. The historian, the only non-Greek in the panel, echoed the philosopher, praised the ancient thinkers that all people must cherish and expressed his optimism for the Hellenic ideals.

When my turn came, I spoke about Greek America by reminding the audience that we are addressing our remarks on the future of genuine Greekness. Pessimism, of course, has never been popular, so I was obliged to qualify my remarks by explaining that my kind of Hellenism is not just history and culture in their bare reality, in their invulnerable substance. Such Hellenism is bound to survive, in spite of the barbarians at the gates - the afrocentrists, multiculturalists and cultural relativists. My Hellenism, I explained, is impassioned knowledge. It is a compulsive affection, not unconditional (as chauvinism would be) but persistent and true. It is getting a lump in your throat when the Greek national anthem is heard or when you read some lines from George Seferis or Yiannis Ritsos. It is the Hellenism that will bring those involuntary tears to your eyes when a Greek village girl stands on the Olympic winner's platform while the Greek flag is raised and flutters on the high mast. It is the gloating and rejoicing when you read Sappho's lyrics or Thucydides judicious prose. It is the urge to wish to fight back when you hear or read Greece and the Greeks unfairly denigrated. [It would be chauvinism, however, if one did so when the criticism was fair].

Far from chauvinism, my Hellenism is an instinctive, patriotic love for a vulnerable, much-tormented, achievement-rich, little country where I first saw the sun's light. Yes, I am cautiously pessimistic about my kind of Hellenism in, say, the year 2060. What with intermarriage [estimates of Greeks marrying outside of their ethnic origin now range from 65% to 80%], with no migrations from Greece, and with the third and fourth generation having their ethnic consciousness rapidly and most noticeably diminish, I see no light in the end of the proverbial tunnel.

While some of us among the more ethnically vigilant, for instance, puffed our chests with pride because a Greek by the name of Tom Pappas was to represent the United States in the decathlon in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the blond athlete himself was hardly aware that he was Greek. An article a few months after the Olympics, in the weekly *The Greek American* who interviewed him, pointed out that, "Tom's only connection to his Greekness was his name." (December 9-10, 2000). Tom is, in my view, the mainstream direction of the future, and, judging from similar examples, the future in some respects is already here.

Projections indeed suggest that even by 2040 Greek-American communities as we know them will be shadows of their former selves. AHEPA, the PanCretans, the PanArcadians and other such organizations are already becoming geriatric. The lament "Where are the young?" is constant and persistent in specifically Hellenic organizations. Inter-marriage and assimilation, already rampant, are bound to increase and, though Greek names will still remain and may raise a knowing eyebrow or two, the throbbing musculature of Hellenism, that which is informed by passion and pride, is on its way to becoming a crumbling, osteoporotic skeleton. In certain pockets of America, I presume, even 50 years from now, we will still have the superficially Greek parochial festivals, with those Hellenes who are largely attracted by the catnip of mousaka and tsamiko. Yet, even these, I predict, will be smaller and only remotely as Greek as we have come to know them in the twentieth century.

As for the role of the Greek Orthodox Church of the future (if it will still be called "Greek Orthodox"), it will have - as it has for almost three decades - turned its back to ethnicity in general. I know there are exceptions, but the liturgy performed increasingly in English, the Church's distance from secular celebrations, the galloping multiplication of converts, in both clergy and laity, should lead us to some conspicuous conclusions. Patriarch Bartholomeos' recent unfortunate comment that the Church needs to be divorced from Hellenism is indeed a portent of the future. That the Phanar recently did not permit the patriotic Archbishop Christodoulos to lead the Greek Independence parade in New York should not surprise us.

Though my cynicism does not consort with some strident anti-clerical Greeks who think of the Church as the perennial enemy of Hellenism, there are those who will even argue that in general the Church in America has been trying to subvert Hellenism for decades, forgetting the inextricable connection of the language of the Gospels with the essence of Orthodoxy or of the importance of Hellenic (even if pagan) thought to the precepts of the early fathers and of Greek Orthodox theology. But I do surmise that here and there in the Orthodox churches of the future there will still be encouragement for those festivals. Such celebrations, after all, will help to raise funds and those for whom the name Aristotle can only mean Onassis will be parishioners who will have to understand that such ethnic affairs must emphasize hedonism more than Hellenism and that in themselves they are unnecessary to being a good Orthodox steward.

I hope, of course, that I am mistaken in my pessimism. And I do wish that my optimism were not so overwhelmed by my pessimism. Oh, yes, I do hope that if there is light at the end of the tunnel it is not the oncoming train. I even could here find it possible to light a candle, besides cursing the darkness. Though diluted and with some of the passion diminished, genuine Greekness may survive with people, Greek or non-Greek, who will concentrate on its values and its ideals. Some of the young Orthodox converts may indeed see beyond the religiosity; some non-Greek mates may move beyond the culinary and such and become truly interested in the essence of their partner's ethnicity.

Non-Greeks, in general, may indeed out-Hellenize the shallow Hellenes as they become what Isocrates called "participants in our education" ("tis imeteras paideias metehontes"). In turn (and I have met such people) they may indeed promulgate the glory and ideals of

Hellenism with an intellectual (even if not patriotic) zeal. It may be that our secular organizations will soon be alarmed enough to institute and subsidize schools - tutorial or of any other kind - that will teach the young their Hellenic heritage and culture. Perhaps, as well, such organizations will initiate closer and more frequent contact with the motherland.

Concurrently, the Greek government itself will have to increase its serious involvement in such endeavors. One can also hope that there will be more and better sponsored trips for our youth to Greece, organized by both the Greek state and our diaspora organizations, and all in consonance with an accelerated program of Greek teaching in the language, the culture and the history of mother Hellas. In this regard, a genuine, continuous dialogue between Hellas and the Hellenic diaspora is bound to enrich both. There is also a ray of hope in the "Greek Chairs" being instituted in American universities, though I do wonder how committed their graduates will become to their acquired Hellenism.

The Greekness whose gradual loss I lament here is a mode of thought and the love and passion that accompany it. For a culture to persist, its past and simple nostalgia, though very important, are not enough. To sustain themselves, traditions must stand fast at their core but ought to carve new pathways into the future. The diminution of Greekness does have much to do with the imperatives of evolution. Each generation, by the very nature of things, is bound to adopt its beliefs, its own priorities and its own perceptions. And yet, in my constitutionally-protected opinion, the Greek Americans, though commendable in many ways, have not done enough to sustain what is significant in their ethnicity; to pass on to their offspring the pride that comes from knowing who they are. Even if something of what had been may be salvaged, as I have here suggested, overall, I am sadly compelled to feel that we are headed toward "the cursed misfortune" of succumbing to their fate.

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