

## To whom does Greek civilisation belong?

Toynbee believed that the whole of ancient civilisation was Greek.<sup>13</sup> This historian did not hesitate to use the term ‘Hellenism’ also to describe the Roman period. Hellenism had an impact on other civilisations in time and space. It was the template for Eastern Roman civilisation (i.e. of the Orthodox world), Western European civilisation, which arose out of the successive waves of classicism, and Islam and Judaism. In the history of these worlds, which share Greek points of reference, cultural elements were exchanged, combined, and yielded new forms. For instance, Orthodox Christianity

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12. Toynbee (1953), 73.

13. Toynbee (1959), *passim*.

under the Ottoman Empire intersected the Moslem branch of its Greek genealogy, creating a new synthesis. This synthesis continues to culturally define the nations that emerged after the dissolution of this empire.

Thus Hellenism in its broader sense—of antiquity and its ramifications—does not belong exclusively to the Greeks of today nor can it be monopolised by any one. It is the common property of Western Europeans and Americans, Russians and people of the Balkans, Jews and Muslims. Hellenism is the only symbolic reference that might serve as a common link in an expanded Greater Europe.

The Greeks' disavowal of their hereditary proprietary claims to Hellenism would hardly be a loss, contrary to what people may think. Such an act would simply be an adjustment to the reality principle and in fact would rid us of the picture of Greece as a quaint poor relation liable to the well-meaning condescension of others. Liberated from the mean-spirited construction of Hellenism, Greeks are capable of fulfilling a lofty, though not a megalomaniacal, role. They can attain the status of *primi inter pares* along with the many inheritors of Greek civilisation. Only in this way can we speak of contemporary Hellenism as marking out the community to which we belong, the collective 'who we are'.

What gives contemporary Hellenism this potentially unique position? The main factor is linguistic continuity. The criterion of language, however, should not be treated as something static, as happens in the case of linguistic nationalism. Non-Greek speakers may also belong to the Greek family. Among present-day Greeks there is a high number of descendants of speakers of Albanian, Vlach, Slavic, and Turkish. The centrality of the Greek language to identity is no reason to exclude these populations. This datum may be hard to understand for Westerners, accustomed as they are to formal linguistic criteria. This explains why in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Macedonian question elicited an unremitting war of

propaganda, Westerners disparaged the Greeks' claim that 'Slavophone Greeks' lived in Macedonia, which was still Ottoman. But those who held this view were in fact expressing a profound truth: the prime material of Greek identity survives in various forms. If not inherent in the language, it may exist in other elements of collective psychology.

Orthodoxy is an analogue. Greeks are in principle Orthodox Christians. It may nevertheless be the case that some adhere to other confessions or religions without being any less Greek than the Orthodox. Greek Jews are a typical instance, since most not only feel Greek but also emphatically lay claim to their Hellenicity.

It may seem paradoxical to seize upon the centrality of language and Orthodoxy in defining Greek identity and at the same time to uphold the Greekness of Jews and Turkophone populations. This paradox leads to two seemingly opposed views, which reflect an inability to comprehend the phenomenon of identity in all its complexity. 'Nationalists' remedy the contradiction by excluding the non-Orthodox and the non-Greek speakers from Hellenism. To be sure, they have to grapple with further contradictions by engaging in impressive intellectual acrobatics. How, for example, to exclude the Vlachs without stumbling on grave political and historiographical complications? Their solution is to invent *ad hoc* the theory that the Vlachs are actually 'Latinised Greeks'. Their ancient forebears can thus be assigned to the 'Greek nation'; hence contemporary Vlachs, suitably Hellenised (their language having been requisitely reformed), can unproblematically partake of Hellenic life. The murder of one language ushers in the restoration of another!

The alternative solution is the 'progressive-liberal' answer. Abolish any reference to language and religion. Faced with a problem, dismiss its terms. Yet this levelling approach sidesteps the question 'Who are we?'. The creation of such a gaping void cannot but lead to dissolution and decadence, to a society softened to pulp and at the mercy of every wind—and withal incapable of any kind of creativity.

## CONTEMPORARY HELLENISM AS A CULTURAL SEDIMENT

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The solution to these contradictions is to search for some element deeper than either language or religion, for a basic item that resides in language and religion alike and in an array of aspects of collective existence: song, dance and music, customs, family traditions, the sense of locality, gastronomy, the relationship with nature and landscape. Language and religion thus change from absolute criteria of identity to receptacles, among others, of a vital cultural material. We cannot easily formulate a definition or a description of this vital material. Its recalcitrance lies in its ability to elude us. We can however determine its function; we recognise this material from its effects. It makes collective existence possible, it creates the belief that there is an answer to the question, 'Who are we?'. It allows everyone to recognise who can and cannot fit into the boundaries of 'us'.

We must do more than merely take note of difficulties and complexities. In order to proceed to the investigation of ‘Who are we?’ we must further approach this cultural material, hidden as it is beneath language, religion, and customs yet not equated with any of these ingredients. We must better understand what is the essence of contemporary Hellenism and which of its ramifications connect it to participants in wider Hellenism.

According to Jean Gottmann, the founder of the French school of geography, Pierre Vidal de la Blache, compared civilisations with clocks: they needed to be wound if they were to function. That is, they occasionally required some external action in order to continue to tick. Classical Greek civilisation was ‘wound’ repeatedly. During the Hellenistic period it drew energy from the populations con-

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15. Sintès-Prevelakis (2010), 193-212.

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quered by the armies of Alexander the Great. Rome provided serious renewal; thanks to the energy of the Empire, Hellenism extended its life in the East even beyond the fall of Rome. This impetus was on the point of exhaustion when the Crusaders occupied Constantinople. The efforts of Byzantine rulers to revive the Empire after its barbarous 'Balkanisation' by the Crusaders had limited success. It was only after the fresh actions of the Ottomans that the unity of imperial territory was restored.