

Orthodoxy and Hellenism

Rev Dr Demetrios J Constantelos

AS A PRIEST AND HISTORIAN, I'M OFTEN ASKED if it's correct and Orthodox to separate Greek education (paideia) from religious education. At the outset, I'll define my terms. Greek education includes but is not limited to the study of Greek language, ancient and modern. Greek education encompasses the study of Greek civilization in its entirety from Homer to the present day. It includes the study of the texts of Plato and Aristotle, among others, as well as the writings of the early Church fathers. Religious education, on the other hand, is too frequently defined narrowly as the study of the Scriptures and important writings, from the Church fathers to the present day, of our Greek Orthodox faith.

Is separating religious education from the body of Greek education Orthodox and is it spiritually and intellectually sound and desirable? Is such a separation consistent with the thought and experience of our people in history? Or are we dividing these two functions as a result of foreign influences which would indicate a misunderstanding and distortion of Greek Orthodox practice?

The compartmentalization of disciplines and the departmentalization of the mind and soul are artificial constructs and antithetical to Greek thought and Orthodox tradition. Life is one; body and soul, mind and heart constitute the totality of life. Greek civilization – music, philosophy, art, language, dance, and literature has always been infused and informed by religious thought and belief.

Religion as the deliberate quest of an ideal and the yearning for union with God cannot be divorced from the totality of human existence. Greek education, as the embodiment and crucible of Greek civilization, is holistic, an all encompassing principle that expresses the totality of our tradition. The rubrics that advocate the isolation of religious education from the totality of heritage are alien to Orthodoxy.

In the pre-Christian Greek and Greek Orthodox experience – ancient, medieval and modern – there has been no division or even a hierarchical arrangement of religious, linguistic, social and even political values. Our tradition is like a large body of water which flows on, even though it breaks out occasionally into rivulets or absorbs other smaller rivers and lakes. Tradition (paradosis) is what preserves the unity of a people and secures their identity. When a people forget their heritage, they lose their memory and disappear from history.

There is a temptation to yield to existing currents in the United States and allow religious education to develop independently of our cultural heritage. Many parishes have yielded to the un-Orthodox and artificial distinction between mind and soul and, while attempting in good faith to nourish the souls of our children and young people, have neglected their minds. Orthodoxy engages the whole person and is rooted in Greek thought. Teaching the Orthodox faith without reference to its intellectual and cultural roots is like putting a stick into the ground and expecting it to grow into a tree.

At the risk of being accused of ethnocentrism, an attitude I do not advocate or support, all the historical evidence leads to the objective conclusion that Greek Orthodoxy is unique. It speaks a language with an oral tradition of nearly 4,000 years and it writes a language with a written tradition of close to 3,000 years. Greek Americans stand in a unique relationship to this tradition. We are the latest link in a long, strong chain.

Bilingualism is necessary for our Church in the U.S. because most of our communities are bilingual. Mixed marriages and conversions from other faiths are altering the demographics of many communities. While some can use more English in their services, there are many others that need Greek. But all, regardless of the language of the Liturgy, need to retain their identity as Greek Orthodox if they are not to cut themselves off from the roots and spirit of Orthodoxy.

Those who advocate the elimination of "Greek" from the name of our Church, or who minimize its importance for Christianity, mutilate not only Orthodoxy but the Christian religion in general.

The term "Greek" is inseparably interwoven with Christian history and theology, East and West. In his excellent volume, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, Dr. Tomas Spidlik, a leading Roman Catholic theologian, a member of the Society of Jesus and a professor at the Oriental Institute in Rome, has summarized what we Greek Orthodox should consider a principle of great significance. He writes:

"We must stress one principle and stress it hard, that the Latin Church originated from the Greek Church as a branch grows from a tree trunk. The Church was implanted by the Greeks and expressed itself in the Greek language."

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The term "Greek" has a much better claim to Christianity, Orthodox in particular, than the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman, Russian or indeed American. Our Church should continue to be known as Greek Orthodox.

The foremost goal of the Department of Religious Education of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese is to help our parishes fulfill their goals of spiritual growth: "To grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Is this goal antithetical to Greek tradition? It is not.

Let's look for a moment at history. If it were not for Greek thought, language and custom, Christianity would have had no ecumenical appeal. Christianity was borne at a time when the Jewish people had become, over a period of three centuries, profoundly Hellenized and Jewish national destiny was in decline because of Roman military power. The thought and form in which Christianity was cast were primarily Greek. Greek was the lingua franca of Christ's time and the Greek mind found ways of responding to and recasting Christianity, making it appealing to people of the Roman Empire and beyond, far from the borders of Christ's birthplace.

History, archaeology, linguistics, and biblical studies confirm beyond any doubt the powerful, seminal interrelationship between Greek civilization and Christian faith.

Greek studies and Orthodox religious education, therefore, are not contradictory efforts and disciplines. Study of the works of our remote and recent forefathers and the study of the Greek language itself can give Orthodox Christians a wealth of thought and analytical tools with which to better understand and implement the message of Scriptures in our lives.

Religious education must be conducted in the context of this rich intellectual and spiritual heritage or it will degenerate and lose its Greek and Orthodox identity. The two are one and indissoluble.

A few years ago I received a letter from a Greek-language teacher in Connecticut. She wrote that non-Greeks were taking advantage of her Church's Greek-language school and were sending their children to Saturday morning classes. Also, she wrote, "I have a Korean student, an adult who squeezes himself into a child-size desk every Saturday morning in my class. He is an engineer at one of the big companies in this state and he also studied classics, Greek and Latin, in his native land." Now, she wrote, he wants to learn modern Greek. I wrote back, congratulating her on her success in drawing students to her class from various backgrounds and countries, and I heard from her again a few months later. My Korean student, she wrote, has decided to become Greek Orthodox. He asked me to be his nouna and I accepted. He attends church every Sunday and Greek school on Saturday mornings. He also hinted that he would like to meet a Greek young woman, the teacher wrote.

I didn't hear from her again so I don't know whether the Korean gentleman was able to meet a Greek young woman, but I was not surprised by the progression of his education (from the classics to modern Greek) and the development of his faith to Greek Orthodoxy.

The Church fathers set an example for future generations. Their writings synthesized the old and the new for they observed no disruption, no discontinuity between God-revealed-in history and God-revealed-in Scripture. Our task and our challenge, then, is to revitalize our communities as centers of religious and education and Hellenic learning.

In the history of the Greeks, from remote antiquity through the Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods to the present, no part of life was without the divine and the divine was never divorced from the daily experience of the people. The religious outlook so evident in the Homeric age, its literature and art, has always been an integral part of our culture. Religious belief was always expressed in a cultural context as a vital force in everything that was thought, said and done.

Revitalizing our community lives by making our communities centers of faith and learning is not an unworthy goal. How is it to be achieved? To start, bishops and priests, teachers and community leaders need to coordinate their efforts, avoid duplication of resources and expenses, and rise above any antagonisms. Greek religious and cultural education must become a leading priority in any list of diocesan and parish programs. More and better-trained teachers are needed than have graduated from Hellenic College in recent years. The re-opening of St. Basil's Academy as a teachers college has been recommended and deserves careful study.

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For many college students (and not all of them Greek-American), Greek studies are an attractive and desirable alternative to other humanities concentrations. The Archdiocesan Department of Education can further the goal of paideia in the U.S. by becoming a coordinator of Greek studies programs in the nation's colleges and universities, providing both moral and financial support. Can we, as an ethnic and religious segment of the American population, make a better contribution to American culture?

Allan Bloom, in his thought provoking book *The Closing of the American Mind*, makes an appeal for the rediscovery of the Greek humanities and a return to the Socratic mind as seen through Plato's dialogues, which are relevant "in almost all times and places... Throughout this book," he writes, "I have referred to Plato's *Republic*, which is for me the book on education, because it really explains to me what I experience as a man and a teacher..." Greek culture is a continuum; the Greek language is an indispensable tool for the study of heritage, including religion." The whole of Greek culture or civilization is a tightly woven tapestry," Bloom adds.

In his extremely important and articulate report on the state of higher education, former Secretary of Education William Bennett calls for a return to the fundamental principles of Western civilization. His assessment calls on Americans to reclaim our legacy and bring humanities back to the center of the college curriculum. The humanities, according to Dr. Bennett, should communicate Western culture's "lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage. "What are the humanities? English, certainly, as well as history, art history, philosophy and the classics. I mention classics last because they include the principles and components of what we refer to as our Greek heritage: our language, literature, history, philosophy, ethics, religious and political thought. The texts studied as "classics" include Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Plutarch and the Bible.

Recently, the Congregation for Catholic Education of the Roman Catholic Church issued a document emphasizing that "students for the priesthood need to return to the basics, learn Greek and Latin and study the teaching of the earliest writers" most of whom wrote in Greek.

There are some 3,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. And there are more than 2,500 Greek-American professors in higher education and tens of thousands of Greek American students in many of the country's major institutions. It is our responsibility as heirs of the civilization to which our nation owes its democratic system of governance to exert every effort to introduce and maintain Greek studies in as many institutions of higher learning as possible.

This need not be accomplished exclusively through the establishment of expensive endowed chairs. It's possible to introduce and maintain Greek studies in a major institution with an annual subsidy of \$25,000 to \$35,000. There are many qualified scholars, Greek Americans as well as philhellenes, who would welcome the opportunity to teach, either as an overload or as visiting lecturers, courses in Greek language, religion, art, literature, history and folklore. Promoting Greek studies is not an unrealistic goal for the Greek-American community. It requires leadership, commitment, dedication and funding. Primarily, however, it requires a change of attitude. We need to return to our Greek Orthodox roots and demand a rigorous educational program for our children that includes Greek language, history, the Bible, and the writings of the Church fathers, all unfashionable subjects today but essential nevertheless to the education of a Greek Orthodox American.

We can learn from the experiences of other ethnic groups with similar concerns. For example, many colleges and universities maintain Jewish studies as a topical concentration. You don't need large sums of money to do this. At the small liberal arts college (4,800 students) where I teach, the Jewish studies concentration has only two visiting lecturers. The rest of its instructors are regular members of the faculty and offer Jewish studies courses as an overload. The program has received the support of neighboring Jewish congregations, which contribute a few thousand dollars annually.

With \$25,000 we could do the same for Greek Studies.

Our college students are probably the most neglected component of our community. Of the 35 Greek-American students that I canvassed at my college, most expressed a desire to take a Greek-language course if offered. Similar polls at Barnard College and other universities have produced similar results. To support our students' needs and aspirations, we need to coordinate the efforts of the Archdiocese, laity, fraternal and other Greek-American organizations for the purpose of strengthening Greek education in the U.S.

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Unfortunately, there are priests and lay leaders who see Greek studies as an ethnocentric concern. Some, perhaps because of their own inadequacies in the Greek language and Orthodox history, see the Church as an institution divorced from its cultural heritage. Their attitude reveals a misunderstanding of Christianity and Orthodoxy in their historical and spiritual dimensions. It also reveals an anti-intellectual, know-nothing bias that is alien to Greek Americans as individuals and as a community. The early immigrants who came to the U.S. may have been simple country folk, but they understood the value of education and made it the top priority for their children. We can do no less, especially since we have the advantage of being English speakers from childhood and fully assimilated into American society.

Every Diocese needs to make Greek paideia (religious and cultural education) a top priority. As a first step, institutions with a large enrollment of Greek-American students should be identified. Interested students can be approached to survey the student body and determine how many would take courses in Greek Language and literature. Next, teachers of Greek studies should be approached and asked whether they would be willing to teach either as visiting instructors or as adjunct member of a concentration in Greek studies. Third, a Committee on Greek Studies should seek the cooperation of the appropriate department (e.g. Literature, Religion and Language) and negotiate the introduction of Greek into their programs. The Archdiocese, each local diocese, our major organizations – all should assume the responsibility of raising the necessary funds.

Just as moral education begins in the home, with the family, so does Greek education begin on the parish level with Sunday and Greek-language schools coordinating and complementing, not contradicting, one another's efforts. Both are essential, if we are to prepare our children to be Orthodox, educated members of American society. The biblical aphorism "nations with no vision perish" is apropos for Greek Americans. We should not disappear and perish in a land of opportunity and freedom where everything is possible, including the study and perpetuation of our Greek Orthodox faith and Greek cultural heritage.