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A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON THE IDEA OF ‘GREEKNESS’ OF THE ANCIENT PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM

Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou

Two factors account for the difficulty of making a theological commentary on the concept of ‘Greekness’ in the ‘Ancient Patriarchates’ in general and in particular in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem: [1] The first factor is the multidimensional nature of any subject relating to the Eastern Patriarchates and thus to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Among these aspects are economic interests, diplomatic games between at least six governments and three religions, different Christian denominations and various same-faith Christian churches, Greek national interests, local nationalistic claims, and the drawn out history of tensions in each individual Patriarchate. In addition, socio political reorganisation, personal ambitions, corruption and theological disagreements are interwoven in such a way that they shape an explosive scenario, where much is at stake for many interests. [2] The second factor is the nature of theological thought. The theological mindset often slips into an epistemological error. It expresses weighty judgments for situations without taking into account the historical conditions, the factors which shape them, or its own notional and historical assumptions. The theological mindset, however, just like any other mindset, is not divine, nor can it view things from out of nowhere to assess objectively the rights and wrongs of each case.

Using theological and ecclesiastical criteria, what follows is an attempt to investigate, on the one hand, whether and how much the ‘sensitivity’ regarding the Greek national character of the Ancient Patriarchates shown by Greek politicians, clergymen and lay people is theologically justified, and on the other, whether it is theologically correct to worry that Orthodoxy may be damaged if the Greekness understood as the Greek national character of the Patriarchates and its affiliation to the Greek state are lost. The reason I focus on this Patriarchate is that for the last few years it has occupied popular opinion (and continues to do so) over the ecclesiastical crisis (or rather crises) which it is undergoing. Similar problems are also faced by the Patriarchate of Alexandria, but not after its arabization by the Patriarchate of Antioch.

1 Hellenic Open University, Athens.
Sparked off by the recent problems in Jerusalem, official political / secular and ecclesiastical voices often repeat how important it is to retain the Greek-Orthodox character of the Patriarchate arguing not just for its Christian Orthodox identity but also for its Greek national character: hence the hyphen used for Greek-Orthodox. This is evident in the interest and involvement of the Greek Foreign Ministry in the affairs of the Patriarchate. What is actually being sought after in what is called the 'preservation of the Greek-Orthodox character of the Patriarchate'? Certainly what is sought after is not just the preservation of the Byzantine liturgical rite, as that in itself does not constitute an issue. I should mention in passing that the Patriarchate of Antioch, which has devolved administration to its Arab ecclesiastic populace, is characterised as 'Greek Orthodox' (unhyphenated), and for many people quite correctly so since it follows the Byzantine liturgical rite and spiritual tradition.

Evidently something else is sought after, given our persistence regarding the Greekness of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Specifically, what is desired is the maintenance of the status quo as regards (a) the primary position of the Greeks for the protection of the holy shrines (b) the methods of administration of the Patriarchate and (c) finally, the involvement of the Greek state in Patriarchal matters on the pretext of both promoting national interests and also of protecting Orthodoxy and the Patriarchal institution.

Using theological and ecclesiastical criteria, however, the preservation of the status quo is problematic as regards the above points. Specifically, with regard to the methods of administration of the Patriarchate, it is governed by a 'Brotherhood', without the participation of the full ecclesiastical body. The 'Leader' or 'President' is the Patriarch of Jerusalem, who is voted in by its members. This involves a monastic Brotherhood or Order, which until very recently included only Greek clerics (from bishops down to novice monks). The laity, however, is mostly Arab-speaking (or more correctly Arabic). Thus, the Brotherhood and the Patriarchal throne constitutes a 'fief of the Greeks', as the eminent Greek theologian Christos Yannaras observes characteristically in his article of 2005 (Yannaras 2007:83). It is no surprise that the overwhelming majority of the laity, who are Arabs, protest against the

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2 For the crisis of 2005 that ended with the deposition of Patriarch Eirinaios see Roussos 2005:116-117.
3 From an ecclesiological point of view, I agree with Archim. Grigorios Papathomas' position that the usage of adjectival designations in institutional and statutory texts is ecclesiologically problematic. As he explains: 'we have one, and only one, Church in Corinth, only one Church in Galatia, and only one Church in Jerusalem. However, these are not three different Churches, but one Church, the one and the same Church of the Body of Christ, which is found in Corinth, Galatia and Jerusalem. [...] In precisely the same way, we do not have a Russian Church, a Bulgarian Church, a Jerusalemite Church; these would be three Churches and not one. But we have one and the same Church of the Body of Christ, found in Russia, Bulgaria, Jerusalem.' Papathomas 2007:26-47.
maladministration of the Patriarchal property and the neglect of their pastoral duties by the Greek higher clergy. It is particularly striking that the Arabs did not have a substantive input into the administration of the Patriarchate until the recent appointment of two Arabic speaking bishops to the Synod of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (following strong pressure by the Orthodox Arabs and by Arab governments which are in turn encouraging their own Palestinian nationalism).  

Nonetheless, speaking ecclesiologically, the supranational character of every local Christian community (Church) is emphasized by Orthodox writers from the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11.1) through to Maximus the Confessor and to modern Orthodox theologians. Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) Bishop of Pergamon highlights the perception of the local Church as the catholic Church, far removed from any expression of ecclesiastical nationalism. As he states: ‘But a local Church is a strictly geographical concept and must not be understood in a phyletistic way; it is even meant to contradict and exclude phyletism. The geographical or better territorial principle in ecclesiology implies that in a local Church all divisions, natural, social, cultural etc., are transcendent in the one body of Christ. Just as there will be “neither Jew nor Greek” in the Kingdom, in the same way the local Church is meant to include in it all nationalities, races etc. that happen to live in that place. [...] Nationalism, when it becomes the basic ingredient of the concept of the local Church is contrary to this principle of ecclesiology.’ (Zizioulas 1991:101) Arguing against nationalism and racism as being incompatible with Biblical and patristic ecclesiology, Archimandrite Grigorios Papatheos, recently elected Professor of Canon Law at the University of Athens, states that: ‘Essentially, the Church has always been Eucharistic and, as far as geographical areas are concerned, territorial in the expression of its identity and its presence in history. Paulinian ecclesiology, as well as the whole patristic ecclesiology which followed, has never designated a “local” or “locally established” Church in any other way but through a geographical name, as the terms themselves indicate. The defining criterion of an ecclesial community, an ecclesial body or an ecclesiastic circumscription has always been the location and never a racial, cultural, national or confessional category. A Church’s identity is described, and has always been described, by a local designation, ie. a local or locally established church (eg. Church which is at Corinth, Church of Galatia, Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Patriarchate of Rome, Church of Russia, etc), but a Church preceded by a qualitative adjective (eg. Corinthian Church, Galatian Church, Jerusalemite Church, Roman Church, Russian Church, etc) has never previously existed as it exists today. And this is because, in the first case, we always refer to the one and only Church, but established

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4 For the long history of the Arab struggle for inclusion in the administration of the Patriarchate see Kedourie 2002:134-137.
at different locations (eg. Church being at Corinth, at Galatia, at Rome, in Russia, etc), whereas in the second case it appears not to refer to the same Church, since it is necessary to describe it using an adjective (ethno-phyletic or confessional category) in order to define it and to differentiate it from some other Church: Serbian, Greek or Russian Church - just as we say Evangelic, Catholic, Anglican or Lutheran Church.’ (Papathomas 2007:13)

Theoretically speaking Ecclesiological ethno-phyletism and nationalism have been condemned as heresy by the Panorthodox Council of Constantinople (1872). When ethno-phyletic Ecclesiology started flourishing in the 19th century, the Orthodox Church had the courage to condemn ethno-phyletism as heresy. However, after that Council, as Archim. Grigorios Papathomas points out, ‘almost all National Orthodox Churches have nothing to show for themselves, statutorily or canonically, other than ethnophyletic Ecclesiology, ie. statutorily speaking, the heresy they condemned conciliarly. So today, everyone behaves ethnophyletically, acts ethnophyletically, and organizes their “ethno-ecclesial diaspora” (sic), continuing to organize themselves ethnophyletically to this day (21st century).’ Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia expresses himself in a similar way, emphasizing that ‘nationalism has been the bane of Orthodoxy for the last ten centuries.’ (Ware 1963:86) In another of his texts he states: ‘With respect to national identity, we ought not to forget that the Church is One and Catholic in its deeper essence. The fundamental factor in the structure of the Church on Earth is not the nation, but instead the local congregation, the gathering around the bishop every Sunday for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. And this Eucharistic gathering should unite all Christians in a given locality, regardless of their national origins. According to the holy canons, the bishop does not bear the weight of a national group, but of a particular region. The Church as a Eucharistic community has not been organized on a national basis, but rather on a local basis. Consequently, the national dimension must serve the Church, not subjugate it.’ (Ware 1983:54)

Based on the above arguments, and on the above ecclesiological criteria, the maintenance of the status quo of the administration is not justified ecclesiologically. The writings of the Metropolitan Ierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios express the ideal and theoretically acceptable situation for the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to be the following: ‘The ideal situation which should and could prevail at the much discussed Patriarchate of Jerusalem would be the universality in administration and in pastoral service, in the “spirit” of the Orthodox Church and “Romiosyni.” This means that the Orthodox Christian Arabic speakers and Greek speakers would constitute one flock and the most suitable candidates would become clerics, bishops and Patriarchs, without distinction as regards language and origins.

5 Papathomas 2007:20. On a similar approach but from a historical point of view see Matalas 2002.
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That would be the ideal aim and the highest aspiration of the Orthodox Church.’ (Vlachos 2007) Nonetheless, we are obliged to point out that, although the Metropolitan of Nafpaktos states that this is the correct solution ecclesiastically, in the end he proposes the exact opposite: in other words, that the Patriarchate should remain ‘Greek-Orthodox,’ as it is characterised, and should administer the places of pilgrimage, without the Arabic-speaking Orthodox being involved in the administration. Apparently, he believes that possible Arabisation would create more problems than it would solve. In order to satisfy the demands of the Arabic-speakers he suggests establishing semi-autonomous Arabic-speaking ecclesiastical administrations. In this article, His Excellency does not discuss who would control the estate and property of the Patriarchate.

Furthermore, as regards ‘the primary position of the Greeks in the protection of the holy shrines,’ we should say the following: the Holy Sepulchre Brotherhood bases the reason for its existence on the conviction that it is a great privilege for Greeks and the Greek government to control the management of the holy shrines in Palestine (this control is almost equivalent to property ownership according to the legal framework [of 1958] to which the Patriarchate is subject, the estate belonging no more no less to the Patriarch himself). The privileged position of Greece is regarded as self evident. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Arab Orthodox revolted against the Greek guardianship of the Holy Sepulchre, competing for a role in the administration of the Patriarchate. The Greek side reached the point of publishing in Greek a book, On the National Origins of the Orthodox Christians of Syria and Palestine (Athens 1909). The author was the historian Pavlos Karolides, who was originally from Cappadocia and so had a personal interest in arguing for the case of the non-Greek speaking ‘Greek-Orthodox.’ This book and two others (both written in Greek), one by the then Archimandrite, later Archbishop of Athens Chrysostomos (Papadopoulos), entitled History of the Church of Jerusalem (1909), the other by the then Archimandrite and later Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios (Metaxakis) entitled The Claims of the Arabic-speaking Orthodox of Palestine (1909), resulted in an inconsistent conclusion by the Greek side: ‘The Arabic speakers, as ‘Greek-Orthodox’, are in essence Greek (whether they know it or not), but they do not have rights to administration of the Patriarchate.’ (Matalas 2007) The primary position of the Greeks in the safeguarding of the holy places of worship is not in question. This is unchallenged up to today and is indeed founded ideologically in the most problematic metaphysical interpretation of the idea of ‘Christian Hellenism’ of Fr. George Florovsky. This idea is reformulated in the texts of Yannaras as ‘the gift of Greekness’ (Yannaras 1977:273) or as ‘Greek Catholicism,’ or ‘Ecumenical

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6 For a relevant bibliography see Ios 2007.
Hellenism,' or ‘Greek-Orthodox Civilisation,’ which is reflected in an unchanging substance and is distinguished as the highest of all civilisations. The Orthodox Arabic speakers therefore are effectively Arabic speaking Greek-Orthodox, even if they themselves call themselves Arabs or Palestinians, because they participate in the civilisation which is defined as Greek-Orthodox. Not only does this idea of the supremacy of Greek-Orthodox civilization conceal a particular Greek nationalism with ecumenical dimensions, that is a kind of cultural nationalism, but it also hides another paradox. As Matalas expresses this paradox: ‘The Arabic speaking Orthodox therefore are and are not Greeks, or are Greeks of a different category, with different rights from the norm.’ (Matalas 2007:115) According to its supporters, cultural nationalism, which identifies Orthodoxy with Greek-Orthodoxy, has absolutely no relation to ethnорacialism but maintains that every Orthodox person is also Greek, not racially but culturally. This logic, which has become prevalent nowadays due to the prolific body of writings of Christos Yannaras, provokes the question: why do the Arabic speaking Orthodox, who according to this Greek-Orthodox ideology partake in “ecumenical Hellenism”, not have rights equal to those of first class Greeks? Is it maybe that in the end first class Greeks administer the Patriarchate and ‘safeguard Thermopylae’ against those who have designs on it? Could it be that this danger is embodied by the Arabic speaking Greeks of the second category? In the Church, however, divisions of race, language, culture, birth, gender, and social class cannot exist and even more cannot be justified. All nations, all races and all cultures have their own value. Supporting this point of view, Kallistos Ware quotes the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn: ‘the nations are the wealth of humankind, the collective personalities. The least of these wears its own particular colours and carries within itself a particular side of the fulfilment of the divine cause.’ (Ware 2000:13) Similarly, the words of Archbishop Demetrios (Trakatellis) of America, regarding the event of Pentecost, could comprise an ecclesiological answer to the view that Hellenism represents an ‘eternal category of Christian existence’ (Florovsky 1979:226) and that there are peoples whose linguistic and cultural inadequacy cannot manifest the ecclesiastical reality. (Yannaras 2003:13-14) For Archbishop Demetrios, however, ‘the miracle consists in that one Gospel was expressed equally in a variety of languages. Whoever recognizes the close bond of language with culture must also accept the bold proposal which arises from Pentecost: the truth of Christ can be embodied in more than one linguistic cultural system. The work of the Church is not to build one unified global culture: instead of that, the Kingdom of God which was created from the one Holy Ghost, contains many languages, many cultures.’ (Trakatellis 2006:48)

For what constitutes this civilisation, see works of Christos Yannaras, such as 2001.

For an analysis and criticism of this cultural nationalism see Athanasopoulou-Kypriou 2007:49-55.
Theologically, the Church is a ‘new’ nation, eschatological in history, in effect Eucharistic and is not to be identified with any other people or earthly nation. The Church is seen as a spiritual country, and since it is not identified with any nation or civilisation, it cannot serve nationalistic aims, nor can it promote the advantages for any one nation, nor obviously can it protect national interests. The theologian of the 4th century, Gregory Nazianzen, (in the same vein as the Epistle to Diognetus of the 2nd century) argues in relation to this point: ‘My friend, every one that is of high mind has one Country, the Heavenly Jerusalem, in which we store up our Citizenship. All have one family—if you look at what is here below the dust—or if you look higher, that Inbreathing of which we are partakers, and which we were bidden to keep, and with which I must stand before my Judge to give an account of my heavenly nobility, and of the Divine Image. Everyone then is noble who has guarded this through virtue and consent to his Archetype. On the other hand, everyone is ignoble who has mingled with evil, and put upon himself another form, that of the serpent. And these earthly countries and families are the playthings of this our temporary life and scene. For our country is whatever each may have first occupied, either as tyrant, or in misfortune; and in this we are all alike strangers and pilgrims, however much we may play with names.’ Gregory’s words stand at the other end of the spectrum from the support of national interests, or regarding higher and lower civilisations, or the privileges of the Greek guardians of the Holy Sepulchre.

With a feeling of responsibility, a professor of law supports the view of the Greek state, in other words the need for delineation of national ecclesiastical politics, (Konidaris 2007) and this distorts in reality the supra-national character of the Church. Without doubt there are Greek national interests which are related to the management of the estate of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, among other things. Without doubt the situation in the region is unsettled and some suggest that the Greek presence could play a peacemaking role, so that tension between Palestinian nationalism and Zionism would not become extreme. The presence of the Greek state in the region can be considered necessary by different political centres. However, this does not mean that it is justifiable ecclesiastically.

In general, if we bear in mind the interventions and the substantive involvement of the Greek government and the Greek Church in the administration and control of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (often in a way which does no honour to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of our country, as could be seen in the 2005 crisis in the Jerusalem Church), some observers correctly contend that it concerns ‘Greek’

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9 Gregory Nazianzen http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/pnf207.i.html.
10 Clearly, this raises a major issue, which will not be analysed here, specifically, the church-state relationship in Greece but also more generally the complicated relationship of religion and politics.
ecclesiastical supremacy in Palestine and Jordan, indeed of a colonialist type. (Kalaitzides 2005:16) The numbers are indicative: 300,000 Orthodox Arabs are represented by only a few bishops, whereas about a few hundred Orthodox Greeks take part in the Synod with most of the bishops. Based on theological criteria and their ecclesiastical sensitivity, Greek theologians criticize the nationalistic religious language and the imperialistic politics of the Greek side and wonder: 'How conscientious are we therefore with our triumphalist proclamations on Orthodoxy which always respected the local traditions and idiosyncrasies of the populace and which never identified with colonialist phenomena? Does or does not the ecclesiastical situation in the Jerusalem Patriarchate constitute an instance and example of ecclesiastical colonialism and cultural imperialism? Either every means of trying to perpetuate the presence of Greeks in the Holy Places and the preservation of Christian worship under Greek control, bears witness to our ecclesiastical sensitivity and the priority of our theological criteria, or on the other hand it reconfirms the substitution of the criteria by "national," neo-colonial, racist and ultimately neopaganistic type of priorities.' (Kalaitzides 2005:16-17) 'With what theological logic is the Patriarchate considered... to be the dowry of a country, of a nation or a race? How is it possible for ecclesiastics to determine unchecked Greek DNA as the main merit of a Patriarch?' (Papathanasiou 2005)

At the beginning of this paper, I wondered whether the sensitivity regarding the maintenance of the Greek national character of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem is theologically justified and whether it is theologically correct to worry whether Orthodoxy might be harmed, if the 'Greekness' of the Patriarchates is lost. In accordance with all we have said above regarding the supra-national character of the Church, Orthodoxy is not likely to come to any harm. On the contrary, Orthodoxy is harmed by the prevalence of nationalism and neocolonialist and racist behavior. Some point out that if the Patriarchate is Arabised in essence the Patriarchate will fall into the hands of Arab nationalists (and obviously they do not understand this might be a rebirth of the local Church). Indeed, this is a danger, as intense nationalism is being cultivated in the region, as much on the part of Israel as on the part of the Palestinians. However, this does not justify the perpetuation of Greek nationalism. The logic 'we are nationalists because the others (Russians, Jews, Arabs) are too,' is not in agreement with the Orthodox ethos of self-sacrifice. As Orthodox we should strengthen each local Church and not deprive the Orthodox Palestinian community of its educated members and clerics who come from local communities. That which every member of the Church should pursue is the revitalisation of the local Orthodox Church in Palestine and the increase and spiritual success of the 'Body of the Living Christ,' in other words the Church. It is probable, of course, that the rebirth of the local Orthodox Church in Palestine would also be accompanied by negative factors (common to
almost all the national Orthodox Churches in our region), specifically, religious nationalism and identification with the State. P. Kalaidzides comments as follows on this possibility: ‘As much as these phenomena are condemned and rejected, as long as for years we personally fight the nationalisation and state institutionalisation of Orthodoxy, the latter are ultimately less repulsive than neo-colonialism and religious imperialism. These are imposed in the name of Christ and Orthodoxy and change the living images of God, the baptised members of the Church, into spiritual serfs and objects of supremacy and power.’ (Kalaitzides 2005:17)

If the Arabs were to acquire access to the administration of the Patriarchate they would probably harm Greek national interests rather than Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, speaking theologically, ‘you cannot serve your nation at the expense of another nation. The interests of a country cannot be above justice, otherwise the nation becomes an idol.’ (John of Korea 2004:79) Metropolitan John of Korea cites Lactantius’ understanding of justice and personal interest as follows: ‘What are the interests of our country, other than the misfortunes of another state or nation, in other words the expansion of the borders which we annex through violence at the expense of others, the increase of the strength of the State and the improvement of its wealth? All these things are not virtues but rather their overthrow: Why, first of all, is the unity of the human community being eroded, innocence being abolished, abstention from another’s property being abolished? Finally, even justice itself which cannot tolerate the fragmentation of the human race is being done away with, because wherever weapons have been glorified, justice has been exiled and has disappeared from there.’

All the above points comprise a test of the idea of ‘Greekness’ of the most Ancient Patriarchates, especially that of Jerusalem, using theological and not political criteria. I agree with Kedourie that ‘It is foolish to expect that political settlements are “natural” or “logical.” Politics does not resemble either a geometrical theorem or a sexual instinct.’ (Kedourie 2002:24) I would like to add that politics does not resemble the ecclesiastical ethos. In every case, nevertheless, this ethos, consciously or unconsciously, influences and gives meaning to the political act.

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