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For the healing of the nations (Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Nationalism is our form of ... idolatry ... »Patriotism« is its cult. It should hardly be necessary to say that by »patriotism« I mean that attitude which puts one's own nation above humanity, above the principles of truth and justice; not the loving interest in one's own nation, which is the concern with the nation's spiritual as much as with its material welfare ... Just as love for one individual which excludes the love for others is not love, love for one's country which is not part of one's love for humanity is not love, but idolatrous worship."

(Erich Fromm)

I once asked an Orthodox Cypriot nationalist, "If you had no other choice but to

worship at either a Greek Anglican Church or a Russian Orthodox Church, which would you go to?" She replied, "I would go to neither". It could have been worse: she could have said, "I would go to the Greek Anglican Church". But it is a sad state of affairs when an Orthodox Christian fails to recognise that, regardless of the specific tradition that he or she is accustomed to, he ultimately belongs to something far bigger and more inclusive than the Greek or Russian or other Orthodox Church. I often wonder what Greek nationalists are thinking when they claim to believe in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church", especially considering that most of the Orthodox world is comprised of Slav churches and not Greek ones.

Let me be clear that I am not condemning *per se* the fusion of religious and ethnic identities. Indeed, one of the great achievements of Orthodoxy is that it is never merely a part of a nation's identity. Rather, Orthodoxy assumes and permeates every aspect of a nation's life, its language and culture, its customs and holidays – baptising and sanctifying an ethnic identity – and makes it Orthodox. Surely the greatest legacy of Byzantium is that vision which saw no limits to the transforming power of divine grace, which sought to Christianise, to baptise every aspect of human existence, however mundane or seemingly profane.

That being said, religious and ethnic identities can become so fused that we are in danger of a false ecclesiology, that we understand the Orthodox Church in terms of an ethnic group. Indeed, the Cypriot nationalist I mentioned above fell into that false ecclesiology. The Body of Christ, if she believed in such a thing, was comprised entirely of Orthodox Greeks (or maybe only Orthodox Greek Cypriots). The majority of the Orthodox world simply fell by the wayside. And so, from Orthodoxy sanctifying one's nationality, nationalism leads us to the idea that one's nationality sanctifies one's Orthodoxy. Here there is no room for St Paul's teaching that "there is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4: 5-6). The early Christians would surely not have been able to understand the mentality of Christian nationalists. As we read in the Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, written in the 2nd century: "the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe... They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners... As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a foreign land".

How far we Orthodox Christians are from early Christian thought! It seems today that Orthodox Christian groups are defined almost exclusively by country, language

and customs! Even within the Greek Orthodox Tradition, Greeks and Cypriots are often divided by these very things, and often ethnic religious customs become inseparable from Orthodox Tradition. Sometimes, a certain superstition and religious folklore among simple Orthodox peoples comes to replace the Faith and Tradition of the *Catholic* Orthodox Church, and the God of our Fathers becomes the god of our grandmothers.

Each Orthodox People has its own religious customs, which are not the same throughout the Orthodox world. The Service for the Feast of Pentecost is the same in all Orthodox Churches (this is Orthodox Tradition), but Russians on the Feast of Pentecost decorate their churches with flowers, while the Greeks do not (this is custom). On the Feast of the Transfiguration, there is special service for the blessing of fruits (Tradition), but while the Russians bless all fruits, the Greeks bless only grapes (custom). The Creed is the same throughout the Orthodox world (Tradition), but it is recited in different languages (custom). The style of vestments and icons in Russian churches is slightly different from those in Greek churches, but in both cases they are clearly recognisable as Orthodox. These are just a few examples of how Tradition, while it is the same in every Orthodox Church, also finds a slightly different expression among different Orthodox peoples in accordance with their own ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities. Tradition means unity, but it does not mean uniformity. There is room for a variety of customs, cultures, languages and practices within Orthodox Tradition.

Many Greek Orthodox nationalists claim that we cannot separate our Orthodoxy from our ethnic identity. But in practice this tends to be rather one-sided. What usually happens is that they are happy to leave Orthodoxy aside when it comes to their social and educational interests, celebrating Hellenism without the Orthodoxy, but they are never willing to leave their Hellenism aside when it comes to their religious affairs. The most classic example is the conjoining of the Feast of the Annunciation with the celebration of Greek Independence Day. Celebrating only the Feast of the Annunciation is regarded virtually as heresy among many Greek people. We are told that these two feasts are inseparable. And yet “the crowning moment of our salvation” barely gets a mention in our sermons and celebrations on the 25th March. Moreover, the idea that a Greek revolution in the 19th century can be placed on an equal footing with an ancient feast of the Orthodox Church and the conception of Christ our Saviour is disturbing, to say the least.

But nationalism is to be found not only amongst those who have grown up within a specific Orthodox tradition, but also amongst converts in Britain. It always amuses me that often the very people who condemn terms such as “Greek Orthodox” or

“Russian Orthodox” as nationalistic, erroneously regarding these terms as references to ethnic groups rather than traditions, are the same people who express a desire for a “British Orthodox Church”. If, as I said, “Greek” and “Russian” refer to traditions and not to ethnic identities, it is far from clear what would define a British Orthodox Church apart from nationalism. Is this dream of British Orthodoxy perhaps a desire for the most classic form of Christian nationalism – that of the state church?

Nationalism amongst converts also finds an expression in a certain opposition to anything that has an ethnic flavour, and a certain lack of empathy with those ethnic Orthodox groups who have come to settle in this country. It is only natural that such groups will feel more comfortable and at home in a church where their own ecclesiastical language and liturgical tradition are preserved. My earliest childhood memories are of the Greek Orthodox Liturgy, and so, naturally, its language is one which has a significant psychological impact for me. And this is the experience of many other Orthodox people also.

Nationalism is not simply a matter of language. There are, for example, Roman Catholics who wish to preserve the Latin Mass for reasons which have nothing to do with nationalism, and there are many Greek Orthodox who, while open to the idea of an English liturgical tradition, are simply unable to respond to the need for it. It is somewhat unreasonable to expect those who have known nothing other than the Greek Orthodox Tradition to take a small library of Orthodox liturgical books and suddenly be able to chant their contents in worship in the English language with the same competence, nor can we expect it to have that same air of antiquity and authenticity. Some British converts, it seems, would prefer to turn the Liturgy into a ‘Reader Service’ or, at best, a very poorly chanted service in English, rather than have a beautiful Liturgy in Greek with all the richness of ecclesiastical art and tradition that the Orthodox Church has developed and articulated throughout the ages. This attitude, I believe, attaches far too much significance to language and far too little to other aspects of Orthodox liturgical practice and tradition.

What we need is far more compassion and empathy from all sides in order to meet the needs of the various Orthodox groups within the United Kingdom. We also need to take more seriously our affirmation that we are One Church, not a federation of churches. It is sad that the Orthodox in this country seem to have closer and more vibrant relations with the heterodox than they do with each other. Perhaps it is time that we started recognising that our Eucharistic Communion is no small matter – it is something precious which is to be celebrated, valued, preserved and built upon. It is, ultimately, what makes us one body. Alas, we too often allow our

various traditions to take precedence over the one Tradition in which we are united. On the other hand, we must resist the temptation to replace unity with uniformity, and to replace Greek or Russian nationalism with British nationalism. The Orthodox Church is neither an ethnic ghetto nor a state church, but the Kingdom of God, in which all ethnic differences are joined together in one eternal doxology:

“You were slain and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on the earth”. (Rev. 5: 9-10).

May that Kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as in heaven!