

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION IN THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE OF THE GREEKS

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Abstract: This paper provides several indicative insights into the ‘religious’ dimension of the Greek language. It refers not only to the specific notion of the Divine, but also to the general disposition towards piety which is expressed in a people’s language, even when speaking about the most mundane matters. Several Greek terms are analysed. For instance the term *ὑπάρχω* represents a higher order above each person, a higher being, to which one submits by definition; the very term therefore indicating a ruler second in order. The abstract nouns *καθήκον* (duty) and *ἀλήθεια* (truth), *ἐξήγηση* (explanation) *vis-a-vis* *ἑρμηνεία* (hermeneutics), and *σῶμα* (body) *vis-à-vis* *πνεῦμα* (spirit) are used as examples. While parallels have also been drawn from time to time between Christ and Dionysos as well as Christ and Apollo, a similar correlation between the Theotokos and Ariadne offers astonishing analogies and likenesses. Beyond the ontological and ethical levels there is also a gnosiological level at which significant Greek terms clearly indicated the direct reliance of the human being upon God.

When Isocrates asserted that it is right ‘to call Greeks those who partake in our education, rather than common ancestry’, he was formulating a cultural truth of universal value - the antithesis of every form of chauvinism or racism. This truth was repeated – and complemented to some extent – in more recent times by G. Tertsetis through his well-known aphorism that ‘language is the custom of customs’. Isocrates is in fact complemented by Tertsetis for, while the former underlines the educational factor in general, as a collective condition of the unity and homogeneity of a people, the latter extols the instrument of language *per se* both as an indicator of the inner psyche and as a reflection of the particularity of a national entity. We must nevertheless confess that, to the degree that these insights are perceptive and convincing in relation

to peoples who possess an authentic cultural tradition, they also appear to be ironic when we consider the modern mixture of languages and artificial linguistic constructions (not technical terms themselves of course), which enter our lives in an increasingly surreptitious way. They are like coins that have buying power, but with which our soul feels no connection – nor will it ever – no matter how long they are held in our hands!

However, in the face of this bitter experience of recent grotesque upheavals, one acquires an even deeper awareness of the value of cultural treasures that are endangered at the present time, and feels the need to counter this leveling process by recalling the deep-rooted origins of his or her own genuine spiritual tradition. In the spirit of such a salutary response, I have chosen the current topic. Not only to call to mind the God-bearing quality of the Greek language, but also to honour with an appropriate tract the memory of a saintly Hierarch, my spiritual father and Dean, the late Metropolitan Iakovos of Ikonium, whose ambition throughout his brief life was nothing other than to devoutly ‘tithe’ nature itself in order to give God His portion, especially in a period when human voracity grows with ever-increasing impiety.

The words ‘religious’ and ‘national’ that appear in the title of this paper require an explanation. By ‘religious’ dimension I mean here not only an exclusive linguistic reference to the specific notion of the Divine, but also the general disposition towards piety which is expressed in a people’s language, even when speaking about the most mundane matters. Perhaps there is no more authentic piety than to express the sacredness of all things precisely by beholding them as an integral whole, within the diffuse presence of God in all, rather than arbitrarily divide Creation into ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. And again, in saying the ‘national’ language, I do not wish to emphasise so much the ethnological factor in the tool of language, but rather that distinctive period in the language’s history which had not yet witnessed the christianisation of the Greeks. I would therefore like to examine the more general religiosity of our people, as has been expressed in our language both before and apart from the influence of Christianity.

One final introductory comment relates to the method of approaching the topic. The intention here is not to present or analyse the thoughts of the ancient Greeks concerning the relationship of the Divine

to the world and the human person. Such thoughts have neither the power nor the depth required by our sacred bond with ‘the final things’. In other words, the comments of antiquity are not equipped with the degree of sincerity required by the topic as such because, as statements, they undoubtedly served some political, social or pedagogical purpose, and for this reason cannot be evaluated as being free and disinterested expressions of the religious conscience of the ancients. For this precise reason, we shall try to decodify the religious convictions of the ancients through their moral vocabulary in general which, having been designed for widespread and permanent use – and indeed with spontaneity, rather than with underlying intentions – certainly reflects more authentically the religious core of their conscience. It is however self-evident that the results of such an attempt cannot be purely systematic, but essentially representative of a larger picture. Nor can all terms of decisive significance be examined within the framework of this essay, just as the few that are examined here could not practically be evaluated in all their possible correlations. We need to restrict ourselves, then, to merely several characteristic examples, the importance of which is decisive for an understanding of the entire spirituality of the Greeks.

Let us first of all take the verb which of itself expresses our presence upon earth. While its Latin equivalent is *existere* – from which other European terms are derived – the Greek term is *ὑπάρχειν*.

The prefix *ex-* in the Latin certainly indicates a starting point of being, yet its direction is unclear. This is because this prefix can equally indicate an origin which is from one side (horizontally) as well as from below or above (vertically). By contrast, the prefix of the Greek term is *υπό* which denotes an entirely specific determinative significance and clearly conveys the vertical. So *ὑπ-άρχω* means ‘I reign’ (*ἄρχω*), but not absolutely and unconditionally. I reign *beneath* (*ὑπό*) another in authority, and within certain limits. In other words, there is recognition of the ruling position of the human person in the natural world, but without functioning as an unaccountable monarch above scrutiny. There is a higher order above each person, a higher being, to which one submits by definition, the very term therefore indicating a ruler second in order. Naturally, when we use the term *ὑπάρχω*, we hardly ever have an awareness of this dependency from

above – the direct confession that we draw the very possibility of existence from somewhere else, from a power and authority that is superior to us. It is characteristic that the relevant noun still retains exactly the original meaning of the verb in the Greek language. In nautical terminology, for example, the officer immediately after the captain is still called the *ὑπαρχος*, that is, the second-in-command! We are therefore entitled to say that a people who has managed to contain in one seminal verb the sense of absolute dependency on a higher power, as well as a sense of its own unmistakable responsibility within the entire creation, has without doubt expressed epigrammatically and in exemplary fashion its own religiosity for all time.

Now no matter how fundamental the notion of existing (*ὑπάρχειν*) may be for us on an *ontological* level, it is even more so in terms the *ethical* level. I refer to the meaning expressed by the abstract noun *καθήκον* (duty). This noun is etymologically derived from the verb *καθήκω*, which means ‘I descend’. While other Europeans use terms for moral obligation which plainly imply a horizontal origin (such as duty, *devoir*, or *Aufgabe*, meaning that which is given, or handed over), the Greek term *καθήκον* again speaks about the vertical dimension. Consequently, whereas for other Europeans that which is handed over may be dictated by current society or past tradition, for the Greeks it is something that, by descending, constitutes the ethical command imposed from above, and which for this very reason acquires an incomparably greater sacredness and binding force.

Having such a perception of human dependency upon an authority above, it was only natural for the Greeks to believe that the human person is *sub-jected to* or, at most, *under-goes* certain things, living a submitted life and hypostasis (*ὑπόσταση*), as one who is *subject*. This means, however, that persons are not self-sufficient creations closed unto themselves, but rather that they are open by definition to God and fellow human beings. This *ecstatic* human nature (coming from *ἔκστασις*, which means to literally stand beside oneself) is very effectively conveyed by the other Greek term *prosopon* (*πρόσωπον*, lit. looking towards another), the deeper existential meaning of which was however only fully revealed after the time of Christ, and moreover during the formulation of the Christian doctrine *par excellence*, that of the Holy Trinity.

There is a third level of human presence (beyond the ontological and ethical) which is in fact a more indirect by-product and which is also brought out by significant Greek terminology clearly indicating the direct reliance of the human being upon God. I refer to the *gnosiological* level, which is not unrelated to the *aesthetic* level. If the content and aim of the *gnosiological* level is knowledge as intellectual truth, then the content and aim of the *aesthetic* level is the beautiful as aesthetic truth. In both instances, then, the central term is the abstract noun 'truth' which in Greek is *ἀλήθεια*. This encompassing yet enigmatic term (the unraveling and deeper understanding of which was largely due to the great M. Heidegger) is made up of the negating prefix 'α-' followed by the verb *λανθάνω*, which means 'I hide'. In which case, *ἀλήθεια* is not, according to the subsequent scholastic definition of Descartes, the *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, but rather that which is 'the opposite of hidden' and therefore 'revealed'. Is not the notion of 'revelation' even before the time of Christ therefore shown to be a religious category *par excellence*? If then the Hebrews were considered to be a highly religious people for having characterised the religious aspect of conscience in that way, the Greeks must be considered equally religious, if not more so, for having placed within their comprehensive term for 'truth' all three levels of the cognisable, namely the ontological, the ethical and the aesthetic.

In the attempt to unravel the mystery that surrounds us and is within, one naturally draws upon all cognitive powers through every available means. In so doing, one believes that he or she can thereby provide an 'explanation' (*ἐξήγησις*) or conduct hermeneutics (*ἐρμηνεία*) of the surrounding unknown, within the limits of one's ability. Both these pivotal Greek terms, which in recent usage are in danger of being considered synonymous through a rough and superficial understanding, relate to two completely distinct processes which in fact should be seen in succession. This is why we can state that these terms basically distinguish the mystery of being between the *physical* and *metaphysical* categories. Consequently, *ἐξήγησις* pertains to the former, whereas *ἐρμηνεία* pertains to the latter. The former, deriving from *ἐξ* (out) and *ἡγοῦμαι* (to lead), literally means to *lead out* of the historical data in order to reach a possible understanding of them, again via the historical data alone, which is a horizontal journey within the confines of this world. *Ἐρμηνεία*, on the other hand, is to invoke the

guidance of the god Hermes, which is to say the inspiration from above of the Logos, so as to decipher the meaning of the historical in a perspective that is beyond time, thereby traveling in a vertical direction, which is a journey into the height of things, but also into their depth.

Yet even the distinction of our very being into body (σῶμα) and spirit (πνεῦμα) also employs terms that similarly testify to deep religiosity. If the Platonic scheme of σῶμα = σήμα (i.e., the body is a tomb) is not very optimistic with regards to the material aspect of the human person, πνεῦμα triumphantly declares the permanent presence of God in the human person as the result of divine intervention. The term πνεῦμα, ending as it does in the suffix -μα (which in Greek signifies a certain outcome), means the result of breath (πνοή). Just as θεώρημα (theorem) and μάθημα (lesson) signify the outcome of accomplished thought. So spirit, which is the noblest and highest component of human nature, is the work and fruit of breath. A breath that has itself been 'breathed' and 'deposited'. From where? From above, of course, since 'whatever is less is blessed by that which is greater'.

One last etymological comment reminds us that the Greek people, with their religious intuition – immortalised incomparably in the language and events of their mythology – were truly the most perfect 'instructor unto Christ', as the early Church Fathers would say. We know that many parallels have been drawn from time to time between Christ and Dionysos, Christ and Apollo etc. From a similar correlation between the Theotokos and Ariadne arise astonishing analogies and likenesses, as pointed out to me some years ago by my esteemed friend N.G. Pentzikis:

First of all they are both virgins. In addition, they both have the mission to redeem people who are sentenced to death. Thirdly, they do not execute this mission forcefully – with an instant intervention in the style of *deus ex machina* – but soberly and patiently, while showing and overseeing the way, no matter its length. So while one borrows the 'thread' and in some sense proceeds protectively, the other holds in her right arm her son, the only *intercessor* between God and humanity, and ceaselessly remains the *one who shows the way*, the *guide of the people*, the *one who is swift to listen*, the *consoler*, the *one who sets free*, the *sweet-kissing and compassionate mother*, to name but a few of her titles in popular devotion.

And we have yet to mention the most amazing analogy and likeness between these two virgins. This is to be found in the very names *Panagia* and *Ariadne* respectively. If we recall that the latter comes from the word ἄδνός which is another form of ἄγνός (meaning ‘pure’) coupled with the prefix ἀρι- (meaning ‘to a great degree’), then Ariadne in fact means ‘all-pure’, which is not all that far from the meaning of *Panagia* (all-holy), given that the major feature of holiness is always purity.

One could of course make a more extensive study to highlight a host of other characteristic linguistic examples, the etymological analysis of which easily underlines the depth of the religiosity of the Greeks. Yet, as already stated at the outset, the purpose of this article is not to offer a systematic and exhaustive study of the topic, but simply several indicative insights. Perhaps at a later stage, when time for research permits, I may be able to return to the topic that is so dear to me, and which from my student days has not ceased to move me with ever-new delights.

In closing this preliminary overview of the topic, however, I believe I can claim without any hesitation that I do not think there is another people whose religious character is as openly manifest in its own language as the Greeks. Perhaps it could not have been otherwise when we recall the astonishing saying of the father of European philosophy, Heraclitus, for whom the dwelling place and hearth of the human person is, in the final analysis, God alone: Ἦθος ἀνθρώπου, δαίμων.



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