

Christians and the Classics: War against Reason

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The Athens Olympics in August 2004 were as much a reminder of what Christianity did to the Hellenes in the past two millennia as it was a celebration of the coming home of this great ancient Hellenic tradition. It was the Christian emperor Theodosius who abolished the Olympics in the late fourth century after its life of some 1,169 years. The Hellenes started the Olympics to honor Zeus, father of both gods and people, and to remind themselves of their common culture. It was an athletic event and a Panhellenic religious and political celebration of athletic excellence that marked the unity of the Greek world.

Now the Olympics, which were brought back to life in 1896, have become the greatest show on earth, having nearly nothing to do with their Hellenic origins. The reason is that they are now tied to a different civilization whose defining characteristics are Christian monotheism and money. The ancient Greeks used money, too, and they gave plenty of money to those athletes who won immortality in the Olympics, but their polytheistic religion colored everything they did, including their organization of the Olympics, which was primarily a means of paying their respect to Zeus. Yet the people of the West, who now own the Olympics, have the illusion they are following in the path of the Greeks. They are not. On the contrary, Christianity and materialism have been an insurmountable obstacle in the vague Hellenic dream of the western people, including modern Greeks living in Greece and staging the non-Hellenic Olympics in Athens in 2004.

Western people credit the Greeks for their civilization. Yet, despite the Renaissance, which formally integrated Greek thought into Western culture, Christianity, an ancient enemy of Greek thought, remains as the core foun-

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dation of the Western world. In the best of circumstances, this makes Greek thought an ambivalent value in the Western tradition. In fact, during the late twentieth century, an industry of anti-Greek academics became more vociferous than ever before. So much so that a couple of American classicists, Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, were compelled to write a book lamenting the “murder of Homer” at the hands of elite philologists and theorists who prefer “therapeutics, moral relativism, blind allegiance to progress, and the glorification of material culture” to Greek ideas and values.¹ This may be true, but Christianity, more than anything else, made these philologists myopic in denouncing Homer and the Greeks. In fact, Christianity, not trivial philological pursuits, has been the first anti-Greek impulse in the West. This is particularly significant now that Christianity is ready to fight a war against Islam. Christianity, particularly in the United States, which is behaving and acting like the Roman Empire of the fourth century, is reverting to its crusading fervor, preparing the ground for another wave of global conversion and conquest.

What Christianity did to the Hellenes and their culture remains, by and large, a secret in Western historiography. Nevertheless, it is instructive as an explanatory model of the origins, nature, political, and global purposes of that religion. This “secret” Greek history also explains why modern Greece is facing an identity crisis of major dimensions. Christianity made Greece a palimpsest, that is, something antithetical to its very being. It forced Greece to become a country where Christians supplanted Homer and Hellenic culture and on top of them wrote Christian stories.

The Nature of Christianity: War against the Classics

The war of Christianity against Homer, the genius of Greek civilization, started in the fourth century when the Roman Emperor Constantine I (306–37) raised Christianity from a persecuted sect to official religion of the Roman Empire. Some sixteen hundred years later, Christianity is still fighting its war against Hellenism in Greece, the warfare being now conducted at a low level, almost invisible, but nonetheless effective in its ceaseless denunciation of Hellenic culture.

1. Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer?* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 158–9.

Experts on late antiquity hint that the ancient Greeks were in trouble at the hands of the Christians. These scholars, overwhelmingly Christian, treat the Greeks in a perfunctory manner, lacing their narrative and analysis with some of the bias of early Christians who used all possible forms of warfare and hatred against the Greeks, including calling them mad, pagan, and other dehumanizing names.

The war of early Christianity against the Greeks was a perpetual campaign of intimidation, punishment, and terror. It meant prohibitions against the worship of the Greek gods—the mere visit to the temple to pray and offer any kind of sacrifice to one’s favorite divinity might result in fines, torture, and death. It meant mandatory baptism at a Christian church, and the failure to do so resulting in exile or death. It meant the Greeks could not pass their property to their children. It also meant seeing black-robed monks smashing temples and all that the Greeks considered sacred without being able to do anything to prevent such desecrations and atrocities.

But even before Christianity became the official religion, its leaders knew what they would do to their Greek enemies once in power. One Christian apologist, Tertullian (circa 160–240), thought that the more Christians the Roman Empire mowed down, the more they grew. He was also certain the Christians alone were without crime since God himself taught them all about goodness.² Such hubris did not endear the Christians to the Romans and Greeks. Yet Christians marched to their proselytizing mission with the same habit as that which led them to death in defense of their doctrines. For example, Clement of Alexandria, an Athenian born in the mid–second century, converted to Christianity as a young man. His new religion gave him the insolence and stupidity of a barbarian, so he had no trouble insulting Homer himself, saying, in a sense, “Cease your song, Homer. It’s not beautiful anymore. It teaches adultery. We refuse to even listen to fornication.”³

Clement mirrors postclassical Greece, where everything was beginning to fall apart. Since 146 BC, Greece was captive to Rome, which was also on the road to ruin. Clement abandoned his ancestral gods, the gods of his father, denouncing his own ancestors, and traded Hellenic culture for Christianity.

2. Tertullian, *Apology* 50.12–13, trans. T. R. Glover, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 227.

3. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Hellenes* 4.52, trans. G. W. Butterworth, Loeb Classical Library (1999), 136.

More than any other catastrophe in all of Greek history, Christianity doomed the millennial evolution and development of the Greek people and their civilization.

The Struggle between Christianity and Hellenism

We know practically nothing about the struggle between Hellenism and Christianity. The Christian victors took care to destroy most of the incriminating evidence, particularly the books of their Greek enemies, which they threw to the flames. What survives barely hints of Greek resistance to Christianity.⁴ This partly explains why my elementary and high school teachers in Greece and my college professors in America never even hinted there was a problem in the “transition” from Hellenism to Christianity in Greece and the Roman Empire. This deception was at the heart of my history graduate studies in the United States, where I earned a master’s degree in Eastern Roman or Byzantine civilization from the University of Illinois and a doctorate in Greek history from the University of Wisconsin. Yet the Hellenes resisted fiercely the Christian onslaught for about eight hundred years. Southern Peloponnesos remained a missionary country as late as the tenth century. And no monasteries were built in mainland Greece before the ninth century.⁵

Next to Constantine, Emperor Theodosius I (347–95) made a big difference in the legitimization of the anti-Greek policies of Christianity, forbidding sacrifices to the gods. Ancient religious traditions were neglected in the early 390s much more so than in the early 320s, when Constantine sided with Christianity. That is why Zosimos, the Greek historian who wrote during the late fifth or early sixth centuries, says that the Roman Empire declined and fell, becoming home to barbarians.⁶

That fatal transformation had started in the third century. Miroslav I. Rostovtzeff, the great twentieth-century historian of Rome, says the “social

4. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 285.

5. Frank Trombley, “Paganism in the Greek World at the End of Antiquity: The Case of Rural Anatolia and Greece,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78, nos. 3–4 (1985): 345–9.

6. Zosimos, *New History* 4.59.1–3, ed. Ludovicus Mendelssohn (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963), 215–6.

and political catastrophe of the third century” smashed people’s hopes for a better life so thoroughly that, in a sense, it prepared the ground for Christianity’s triumph and Rome’s decline and fall. The two fed on each other and became inseparable. Rostovtzeff sees the “horrors” of the third century finding an outlet or refuge not in politics but in religion. The Romans began to think that if they had any hope of happiness, it would be “happiness in a future life,”⁷ which, for Christians, was “life after death.” Reason was dead for the Christians. And Christianity was waiting patiently to harvest the fruits of barbarism, fear, and superstition, promising bliss in the aftermath.

In 394 Theodosius formalized the division of the empire between his two teenage sons, Arcadius (383–408) and Honorius (393–423). Arcadius was handed the east, with Rufinus as his supervisor. Honorius (age eleven) became the emperor of the west, with Stilicho the actual ruler. Once behind the throne, the barbarian managers of the young emperors conspired to kill each other. In order to get both east and west, Rufinus would wreck Greece. He appointed his own men, both Christian Greeks, to prominent positions: Antiochos, proconsul of Greece, and Gerontios, commander of the garrisons of the country’s two strategic defense bases, Thermopylae and the Isthmus of Corinth. Rufinus then urged the Visigothic barbarian warlord, Alaric, to invade Greece. Alaric was working for the Roman Empire for some time. He was angry, however, because the emperor did not give him a higher office. So his plans and those of Rufinus, if not identical, were complementary. Both wanted to teach the Romans they could no longer play around with them: they would wreck the Roman Empire and cared less that Greece would be the target of their premeditated murder.

The Universal Captivity of Greece

In 396 Alaric led his barbarian Goths from Thrace in northern Greece to central and southern Greece, Boiotia, and Peloponnesos, where he left ruins and a huge, destructive, bloody footprint. Everywhere he marched, he demolished the temples and everything else of value. Zosimos painted a vivid picture of what Alaric did in Greece: While the Roman commanders of Greece

7. Miroslav I. Rostovtzeff, *Rome*, trans. J. D. Duff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 324.

got out of his way, Alaric destroyed the countryside, killing all men and carrying women and children to slavery. Thebes escaped the wrath of Alaric because of its strong defenses. Alaric then marched on to Athens, but failed to take the city, which was defended by goddess Athena and Achilles. Legend has it that after seeing the images of Athena and Achilles on the walls of Athens, Alaric was so terrified that he negotiated a treaty with the Athenians and quickly abandoned Attica. He then crossed the Isthmus of Corinth and ravaged Peloponnesos, including Sparta, which was without defenses. “Roman greed,” says Zosimos, “was responsible for Sparta’s plight: neither arms nor brave men defended her. The Romans had handed Sparta to treacherous rulers who eagerly indulged the whims of their superiors in everything conducive to the ruin of Sparta.”⁸

Zosimos is wrong that Alaric abandoned Attica untouched. Another Greek writer, Eunapios (circa 346–414), a philosopher and a former hierophant or chief priest of the mysteries at Eleusis, an eyewitness to the works of Alaric, reports that the Gothic barbarian, with the guidance of Christian monks, smashed Eleusis, a sacred polis by the sea, about twenty kilometers northwest of Athens. The year 396 was the time, says Eunapios, “when Alaric with his barbarians invaded Greece by the pass of Thermopylae. He did so as easily as though he were crossing an open stadium or a plain fit for cavalry. The impiety of men dressed in black clothes made that possible. There were no longer any laws that protected the chief priest of the Eleusinian mysteries. The black-robed men threw the gateway of Greece open to Alaric and, together, marched unhindered to destroy Eleusis.”⁹

But Zosimos is right: Alaric contributed to “the universal captivity of Greece.” The barbarians completely devastated the country, now standing defenseless, in ruins, and on the verge of additional calamities—even death.

The devastation of Greece by Alaric was no accident; it was an integral part of the Christians’ policy against the Greeks. The first Christian emperor, Constantine, set the foundations for state and church policy toward the Greeks: First, he sent some of his most trusted deputies to Greece and to the eastern regions of the Roman Empire, where they plundered the treasur-

8. Zosimos, *New History* 5.5–6, 221–3.

9. Eunapios, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* 476, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, Loeb Classical Library (1998), 438.

ies of certain temples. Constantine displayed some of the stolen antiquities in Constantinople like war trophies. He forbade non-Christians from building any other temples and made it illegal for them to use the temples and the oracles they already had for religious celebrations and for sacrifices.¹⁰ He then destroyed some of the most famous temples in the Greek world.¹¹ The Christians embraced Constantine's anti-Greek campaign and smashed nearly all of Hellenic material culture. They destroyed the temples of the gods and did as much damage as they could to all sculpture everywhere in Hellas and the Roman Empire. Worst of all, Christians also burned most of the books and Hellenic libraries.

Emperor Theodosius exceeded the ferocity of Constantine by far. He did more than butcher seven thousand to fifteen thousand innocent Greeks in Thessaloniki in 390 for having the audacity to kill the barbarian commander of his troops stationed in the city. He killed countless other Greeks all over the Greek world. In 391 he prohibited sacrifices to the gods. Even approaching the shrines, wandering through the temples, and offering libations and prayers to the statues of the gods and heroes were crimes. If judges entered temples with the purpose of worshipping the gods, they had to pay fifteen pounds of gold to the state.¹² And, as I said, Theodosius stabbed Hellenism in the heart with his ending of the Olympics in the 390s.

Chronology of Murder and Genocide

The violent march of Alaric through Greece in 396 was a milestone of how low the country had fallen. The Christian bishops legitimized and sanctified coercion and violence as means to convert the pagans and guided the emperors to kill Hellenism. Even an incomplete summary chronology of Roman state-church anti-Hellenic policies—always in the guise of fighting “paganism” or the “error of the Greeks”—shows the Christian core of those policies: first, vigorous suppression of sacrifices, then smashing the temples and shrines, then prohibiting even the private worship of the household gods.

10. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.54, 58; 4.25, 28, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 143–4, 146–7, 161–2, 163.

11. Eunapios, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* 461, page 378.

12. *Theodosian Code* 16.10.10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 473.

Such violent and terrorist state policies, blessed by the church and executed for the benefit of the church, decimated the non-Christian Hellenic population—so much so that the emperors were nearly certain that, by 423, there were no more “pagans” in their realm. The emperors were wrong, of course. Greeks and other polytheists did not disappear by 423. Here is a sample of the anti-Greek legislation in the fourth and fifth centuries: In 320 Emperor Constantine prohibited sacrifices. In 341 Constantine’s son, Constantius, again ordered the end of sacrifices. In 346 Emperors Constantius and Constans declared that all men shall abstain from sacrifices, the disobedient would be “struck down with the avenging sword.” In 380 Emperors Gratian, Valentinian, and Theodosius committed the Roman Empire to the service of Catholic Christianity and declared non-Christians “demented and insane” who would suffer “the infamy of heretical dogmas.” In 392 Emperor Theodosius and his sons, Arcadius and Honorius, proscribed all Roman household gods: They ordered that no person ought to, “by more secret wickedness, venerate his lar with fire, his genius with wine, his penates with fragrant odors; he shall not burn lights to them, place incense before them, or suspend wreaths for them.” It is “an enormous crime” that any person should wish to “investigate forbidden matters” and disclose hidden secrets. Those guilty of violating Christianity’s dogma would be punished with the confiscation of their house or land in which they practiced their “pagan superstition.” In 396, the year when Alaric smashed Greece, including Eleusis, Emperors Arcadius and Honorius brought the Eleusinian mysteries to an end. Three years later, in 399, the brother emperors, Arcadius and Honorius, decreed that all remaining temples would be destroyed: “If there should be any temples in the country districts,” they said, such temples “shall be torn down without disturbance or tumult. For when they are torn down and removed, the material basis for all superstition will be destroyed.” Finally, in 484, killing Hellenic culture became state policy. Bishops and clergy punished teachers of Hellenic studies, effectively bringing the “impieties” of Hellenism to an end.¹³

13. *Theodosian Code* 16.10.1–4, 12, 16, 21–3, trans. Clyde Pharr (Nashville, Tenn.: Department of Classics, Vanderbilt University, 1944–46), 472–6; Paulus Krueger, ed., *Codex Iustinianus* 1.11.8–10. (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1959), 62–4.

Agrarian Reign of Terror

Greek peasants, and peasants in the Roman Empire in late antiquity, paid the heaviest price in the war of Christianity against them. They put up a courageous and protracted struggle against Christianity in defense of their gods and culture. Libanios (314–93), an adviser to Emperor Julian and a distinguished professor of Hellenic rhetoric and philosophy in Antioch and Constantinople, protested against the imperial government's reign of terror against the Greeks and Romans. Libanios had such a reputation that even the killer of the Greeks, Emperor Theodosius, appointed him to an honorary post. Libanios complained to Emperor Theodosius in 386 that armed Christian gangsters led by black-robed monks were smashing the temples, terrorizing the peasants, stealing their land, and fighting a war in time of peace.

The Christian paramilitary would march on the temples in the cities and smash them to pieces. However, they targeted primarily the temples in the countryside. Their fanaticism was so excessive, they would strip roofs, demolish walls, and wreck statues and altars. The priests of the temples, witnessing such a desecration and destruction, would often remain silent, or the monks killed them as well. The monks would go from the demolition of one temple to the destruction of another. They were, says Libanios, like rivers, sweeping across the countryside, ravaging both temples and farms. Wherever the monks wiped out a temple from a farm, it was like the farm was blinded, lying dead. "Temples," said Libanios to Theodosius, "are the soul of the countryside."

Rural people put their hopes, aspirations, and security in those temples. They did that as much for the safety and happiness of husbands, wives, and children as well as for the well-being of their oxen and the preservation of their seed and the land they sowed and planted. When a farm suffered the destruction of its temple or altar, it suffered decline and fall. The peasants believed that without their gods their labor would be in vain. Only the gods could bring their work to fruition.

The political implication of that tradition, Libanios said to Theodosius, was of great importance to the state, if for no other reason than that a diminished peasantry meant less rural tax revenue for the treasury and even less security for the emperor. The monks, meanwhile, kept up with their deadly work.

They knew they had the covert support of the state. Though they claimed they attacked only the temples, they did much more than that, according to Libanios. Smashing the altars and shrines of non-Christians in the countryside earned the monks and their friends a living. Some of the monks assailed the shrines, appropriating the land of the peasants; others plundered them, grabbing all that the rural people raised from the land, including their seed and animals. And when the peasants complained about their misfortunes to Christian officials in the city, those officials—pastors—praised the Christian gangsters, telling the peasants they ought to be grateful they got off so lightly.¹⁴

During the reign of Emperor Theodosius, the destructive reach of Christianity touched Alexandria. In 391, soldiers raided the shrines of the gods and demolished the temples of Serapis in the fashion of fighting a war against statues, stones, and votive offerings. The soldiers destroyed and stole whatever they pleased. They boasted they had defeated the gods, gloating over their impiety and sacrilege. After the government troops had their fill of vandalism and plunder of the sacred world of Alexandria, the authorities imported monks to finish the job. These men, says the Greek philosopher Eunapios, were men in appearance, but, in reality, they were “swine, living the lives of pigs,” committing countless unspeakable crimes. They felt proud and pious whenever they could do something that expressed their utter contempt for the gods and things divine. These monks, or men wearing black robes and behaving in crude manners, had the power of tyrants. The government settled them at Canobus, a community at the mouth of the Nile. The monks then forced the residents of Canobus to abandon the worship of their gods for the worship of slaves, and in fact not even honest slaves but criminals. The monks would collect bones and skulls of criminals, declared them to be those of Christian martyrs, and would force the people to venerate them. The monks called the dead criminals ambassadors to the new gods.¹⁵

An American historian, Ramsay MacMullen of Yale University, says that the Christians silenced, burned, and destroyed Greek civilization as a form

14. Libanios, *Hyper ton Hieron (Oration 30)* 6–13, trans. A. F. Norman, Loeb Classical Library (1977), 104–12.

15. Eunapios, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* 465–73, 392–428.

of “theological demonstration.”¹⁶ In their theological frenzy, the black-robed monks murdered Hypatia (circa 370–415), the beautiful and brilliant Platonic philosopher and mathematician, in Alexandria. Sokrates (circa 380–439), a lawyer and an ecclesiastical historian, was a contemporary of Hypatia. He says that the monks “waylaid her returning home. They dragged her from her carriage, took her to the church called Kaisareon, where they completely stripped her naked, and then murdered her with tiles. After tearing her body to pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Kinaron, where they burnt them.”¹⁷

The Christians dug the Greeks into obscurity and nothingness, destroying both their spirit and the outward signs and material culture of their civilization. Emperor Zeno (474–91) plundered the precious possessions of the Parthenon, dismantling the chryselephantine statue of Athena by Pheidias, already a millennium old by the time of that barbarous act in 484. Zeno did the same thing to the Asklepieion, the healing shrine and dormitories for visitors, and temple of the medical god Asklepios on the south slope of the Akropolis. The Asklepieion, next to the Parthenon, was the most important institution of Hellenic culture in the Greek world. In addition, Zeno’s barbarian reach trampled the Aphroditeion, the temple of Aphrodite in Aphrodisias, a Carian polis in Asia built in honor of Aphrodite.¹⁸

The Justinian Persecutions

Emperor Justinian (527–65) thought the non-Christian Greeks were evil. He spent five years, from 532 to 537, and huge amounts of treasure to build that massive church in Constantinople, Hagia Sophia. That’s where he put his efforts—constructing churches and plundering ancient monuments. He outdid Theodosius’s atrocities and murderous policies against the “pagans”: Justinian brought barbarism to Greece in 529 with his closing of the acad-

16. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, AD 100–400* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 119.

17. Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.14.12–15.7, ed. Gunther Christian Hansen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 360–1; also in James Stevenson, ed., *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, rev. ed., W. H. C. Frend (London: SPCK, 2000), 284.

18. Frank Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 82, 323.

emy of Plato in Athens. Plato's academy had been the greatest university of the Hellenic world for more than nine hundred years. But Justinian's Christian government officials saw nothing wrong in turning off the lights of civilization in Greece. Now that they had a monopoly of knowledge, they were not about to allow other Greeks, whom they considered mad, to have anything to do with it. Soon they shut down all Hellenic schools in the empire.¹⁹ With Justinian, there was no turning back: The Dark Ages had found a booster, and the Hellenes had found a determined enemy who launched a policy to "extirpate paganism," and by that he meant he wanted to exterminate them. Genocide had finally found its greatest patron.

We have reliable evidence about the madness of Justinian from Prokopios, a leading Greek historian of the sixth century. He served as a senior adviser to Belisarius, Justinian's top general. Prokopios said Justinian was a "calamity" and a "pestilence" that left nothing untouched in the Roman world. Not only had Justinian "abolished the heretics" by killing as many non-Christians as he could, but he converted the empire into "a scene of massacre and flight." In the sick mind of Justinian, killing Hellenes and plundering their property were seen as Christian virtues. After all, the Hellenes were the pagans of pagans, the people against whom the mighty Roman state and its wholly owned subsidiary, the Christian church, were fighting a war. Meanwhile, barbarians (Huns and Slavs primarily) overran Greece nearly every year Justinian headed the Roman Empire. In each invasion of Greece, from 527 to 565, the barbarians would slaughter or enslave the Greeks they captured so that, Prokopios says, Greece (and a large swath of southeastern Europe) became a desert like that of Skythia.²⁰ And to win his genocidal religious war, Justinian "bent his armies and his treasury, his power to mutilate or crucify, exile or bankrupt, build and bribe."²¹ Justinian wanted all the pagans dead; he viewed all Hellenes as "pagan," "mad," "unclean," and "abominable." Under his administration of Greece and the Roman Empire,

19. Kyriakos Simopoulos, *He Leelasia kai Katastrophe ton Hellenikon Archaioleton* (Athens: Photoekdotike, 1993); Diamantes Koutoulas, *He Autokratōrike Politike tou Vyzantiou Enanti ton Hellenon Ethnikon (4os–6os ai. m.x.)* (Thessalonike: Ekdoseis "Dion," 1998).

20. Prokopios, *Anekdotia (Secret History)* 6.18–24, 11.1–33, 18.14–21, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (1998), 74, 128–40, 216–8.

21. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 151.

the Greeks were reduced to extreme poverty. Their property was taken; they could pass nothing to their children. If they were not murdered outright, they, and all other polytheists, were condemned to “civil death.”²²

John of Ephesos (507–88), a missionary who worked closely with Justinian, said that the year 542 was an exceptionally good year for him. He bragged about his “conversion” of Hellenes living in rural Anatolia. This is how he implemented Justinian’s “extirpation” policy against the “pagans.” “When God opened the minds of the pagans,” he said, “and made them know the truth, he aided us in destroying their temples, in overturning their idols, in eradicating the sacrifices which were offered everywhere, in smashing their altars defiled by the blood of sacrifices offered to pagan gods, and in cutting down the numerous trees which they worshipped, and so they became estranged from all the errors of their forefathers.”²³

The Violent Logic of Christianization

Justinian was a killer, but he was not an innovator. He worked within a well-established Christian tradition stating that ends justify means: The fourth-century historian and lawyer, Sozomen, says that the Christians routinely destroyed the temples of the polytheists, “thinking that it would not be that easy otherwise for them to be converted from their former religion.”²⁴ Augustine (354–430), a prominent Western father of the church, used all sorts of sophistic arguments in favor of coercing the pagans to Christianity. He also sided with repressive legislation as that “stimulus of fear” necessary to shake people of their negligence in seeking the Christian lord.²⁵ In 428, Nestorios, bishop of Constantinople, and a “furious prosecutor” of the Greeks, addressed Emperor Valentinian III this way: “Give me, O Emperor, the earth purged of heretics, and I will give you heaven as a recompense. Assist me

22. *Codex Justinianus* I, 5, law 12, chap. 4; I, 5, laws 10, 14; I, 11, law 10, in Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B. A. Archer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 132–7.

23. John of Ephesos, *Ecclesiastical History* (fragment), quoted in Trombley, 333.

24. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.15, trans. Edward Walford (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), 331–4.

25. Augustine, Letter XCIII, 5, 17–18, trans. J. G. Cunningham, *Letters of St. Augustine* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1872), 399, 409–11.

in destroying heretics, and I will assist you in vanquishing the Persians.”²⁶ In other words, Augustine and Nestorios, the bishops of both west and east of the Roman Empire, recommended that killing the pagans who refused to convert to Christianity was the right state policy. In addition, since Theodosius in the fourth century, imperial laws made it a crime punishable by death to offer sacrifices to the gods.²⁷ This meant the Hellenes would have to abandon their agrarian culture so much infused with the gods and love of nature. Saint Nicholas started his career by chopping down sacred trees in the Hellenic community of Lycia in Ionia (Asia Minor).²⁸ In the Ionian Magnesia on the Maiander River (some fifteen miles from Miletos), peasants expressed their piety toward Apollo by planting trees and, occasionally, uprooting some of them.²⁹

Since the very beginning of assuming power, Christianity sided with the ruling class. For example, sometime between 340 and 376, an ecumenical council met in the Paphlagonian city of Gangra, in Asia, for the excommunication of some heretic named Eustathios. The council also blessed slavery and in its third canon cursed all would-be radicals or revolutionaries who would try to do away with the evil of slavery. The bishops decided that “if anyone teaches a slave, under pretext of piety, to despise his master, to forsake his service, and not to serve him with goodwill and all respect, let him be anathema.”³⁰

In 691–92 the bishops were more severe in their proscription of Greek culture. They said whoever dared go back to Greek festivals would be excommunicated. Like modern-day ayatollahs, the bishops could not stand the public dancing of women, a practice they said caused great “harm and destruction.” They equally hated the rites and dances of men in honor of their gods. For good reason, the bishops also forbade men from dressing “in feminine garb” and women from wearing men’s clothing. The order of

26. Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.29.5–6, 377.

27. *Theodosian Code* 16.10.1–25, 472–6.

28. Ihor Sevcenko and Nancy Patterson Sevcenko, trans., *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* 15, 16, 18 (Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1984), 35, 37, 39.

29. Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 10.32.4, trans. Peter Levi, 2 vols. (New York: Penguin, 1984), 1:490.

30. *Canons of Gangra in Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, 2.

the bishops was especially severe against the Greek theater. They said no one could put on comic, satiric, or tragic masks or cry out the name of that “abominable” or “execrable” Dionysos while crushing grapes and preparing wine. It was also forbidden to laugh and provoke laughter among those pouring wine into jars.³¹

Of course, ordering peasants treading on grapes and making wine to be silent, ignoring the most pleasurable and sacred work of the year, was too much. The peasants made mockery of the clerics’ injunction and anathemas for five hundred years. The Greek people continued to worship Dionysos down to the twelfth century.³² Yet Dionysos, because of his intimate connection with the dramatic theater and agrarian culture and freedom, suffered the most savage prosecution imaginable in the Christian Dark Ages and, in particular, in Orthodox Christian Greece and Byzantium. No wonder the theater in Byzantium never matured. The culture of the empire froze and stunted its rich Greek tradition before it had a chance to bloom.³³ Indeed, for all practical purposes and in the eyes of the law, in some four hundred years the Hellenes ceased to exist. The Roman state and the Christian church punished by death whoever admitted to being a Hellene. Since to them Hellenic meant pagan, these murderous anti-Hellenic laws were in the legal books of the Eastern Roman Empire at least until the mid-fourteenth century.³⁴

Lessons from the Christianization of Greece

The consequences of the Christianization of Greece were catastrophic for the ancient Hellenes. Their Christian Greek descendants were and to a considerable degree continue to be crippled. They largely do not know who they are; they never had a Renaissance and passed from Byzantine colonialism to Turkish slavery to European and American domination. European and American archaeologists excavated the most important ancient sites in Greece. Now

31. “Council ‘in Trullo,’” canon 62, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Henry R. Percival (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 393–4; Michael Maas, ed., *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 183.

32. Phaidon I. Koukoules, *Vyzantinon Vios kai Politismos*, vol. 5 (Athens: 1952), 292–3.

33. Marios Plorites, *To Theatro sto Vyzantio* (Athens: Kastaniotes, 1999), 13, 19.

34. Constantine Armenopoulos, *Procheiron Nomon* 6.11.4–6, ed. Konstantinos G. Pitsakes (Athens: Dodone, 1971), 360.

Christian Greeks see their archaeological treasures as strictly business— attractive tokens for tourists. They read Greek history, though the Greek histories are written by non-Greeks. They celebrate the Olympics in 2004 not like their ancestors but like the Australians with Coca Cola as the sponsor. In ancient Greece all wars were suspended to celebrate the Olympic games. Now Greeks spend billions alone on “security” because the Americans and the Israelis say so. They are building their country using the architecture of foreigners and ignoring their own. I visit Kefhalonia, the island of my birth, and I see nearly nothing that is Greek. Churches overwhelm the island, and the entire country, as well. And the Church of Greece, which owns all those churches, retains a stranglehold on the country. Orthodoxy is the official religion of Greece, written into the country’s constitution. The Church of Greece is the largest landowner of the country, with tremendous influence in state policies, particularly on how Christians view ancient Greeks.

Christianity’s greatest orator, the “golden-mouth” John Chrysostom, a cleric who was the patriarch of the Eastern Roman Empire from 398 to 404, preached that fishermen, tent makers, and illiterate men were by far superior to Hellenic philosophers, including Plato. He had nothing but contempt and hatred for Hellenes. Their philosophy, he said, was just talk and fables without any trace of wisdom, and he declared that ancient Greek philosophers were no better. They were full of ashes and dust, with everything about them reeking with foulness and ulcer. Their teachings were worm-eaten.³⁵

With Chrysostom’s ideology becoming the militant ideology and politics of Byzantium, is there any doubt why the Greeks were nearly wiped out? Small Hellenic communities survived on the mountains of Greece. Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–59), writing in mid-tenth century, reported that the people living in the mountainous region of Mane in southern Peloponnesos were Hellenes down to the late ninth century, when they were “converted” to Christianity during the reign of Basil I (869–86).³⁶ The defiant “converted” Hellenes of Mane, however, never lost their sense of freedom. They made it all the way to our times.

35. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist*, homily 66, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1960), 224–5.

36. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), 236–7.

Chrysostom's rejection of the Greeks, shared by the other church fathers and Christianity, became fodder for the persistent mistrust of the Greeks in the Western tradition. The British censored Aristophanes down to the 1960s. Archaeologists mutilated Greek male statues because they labeled the statues' genitalia indecent. An American best-selling popularizer of Greek history, Thomas Cahill, in 2003 savaged the religion of the Greeks, being utterly vulgar in his contempt of classic artists who used nudity in their art. He equates nakedness in Greek art and the Olympics to "humiliation, not only to the neighbors of the Greeks, but throughout human history." He compares nakedness in Greek art to the naked Jews thrown into gas ovens by the Germans during World War II.³⁷ Academic classicists take their cues from Christian propagandists like Cahill. They murder Homer because the larger Christian society does not trust the Greeks. Underneath the veneer of democracy and science, there lurk nuclear armaments and the destruction of nature.

What the Christians did to the Greeks suggests that the horrors of the Crusades and the genocide of the Native Americans by the European settlers of North America were no aberrations in the policy of Christian nations. Monotheism is blind, and determined because it is blind. That is why the current rising wave of Christian "fundamentalism" in the United States is so unnerving, potentially tyrannical at home, and revolutionary in international affairs. A Christian American nation, the only superpower in the world, can now declare war on Muslim heathens and Christian heretics with nearly apocalyptic results.

Making such a scenario less likely would require (1) Greece divorcing itself from Christianity, allowing Homer to sing his song, once again, in the land of beautiful women, and (2) Western philhellenes bringing back home another Renaissance so that the ethical standards and reason of the Hellenic tradition return to the vital role they deserve to have in their societies.

We need to remember that the Greeks are our intellectual ancestors. They set the foundations of the modern world of science and reason. The distinguished British classical scholar Hugh Lloyd-Jones says the Greeks did all

37. Thomas Cahill, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 210.

that primarily because of their polytheistic religion, their gods being forces working in the real world and acting through nature. The Greeks would use their “ancient gods or reason” in explaining the natural phenomena in the cosmos, an ordered system, governed by causal laws that they tried to understand. “Such a notion,” says Lloyd-Jones, “was a prerequisite of rational speculation about cosmology, science and philosophy; this explains why it was the Greeks rather than their neighbours who began such speculation.”³⁸ But the gods were more than the spark of reason for the Greeks. They humanized and civilized them as well. The Greeks had many gods; but they had no holy book or a clergy. They were in charge of their lives. Greek religion, says Mary Lefkowitz, a classicist and a philhellene at Wellesley College, “is a religion for adults, and it offers responsibilities rather than rewards. Yet despite its realism, and its clear differences from any of the religions we are now used to, these same stories [of the gods] can still offer a reliable guide to life in our own time.”³⁹

The Christians, in contrast, have had a religion based on revelation, which is not amenable to reason. In addition, the Bible is full of contradictions. We don’t even know anything that is reliable about Jesus, the founder of Christianity. Says Helmut Koester, professor of New Testament studies and ecclesiastical history at Harvard: “No direct and first-hand information about Jesus survives. Information from outside Christian sources is not available. . . . The semibiographical framework of the gospel stories . . . is the result of the editorial work of the gospel writers . . . and can . . . not be used for the reconstruction of the ministry of Jesus.”⁴⁰ Koester describes the early Christian writings, including the documents of the New Testament, as “highly problematic literary sources for our understanding of the beginnings of Christianity.”⁴¹ Another American scholar, Burton L. Mack, professor of early Christianity at the School of Theology at Claremont, reached similar conclusions. He says the New Testament, and the Bible in general, were the

38. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Greek in a Cold Climate* (Savage, Md.: Barnes and Noble, 1991), 223, 226–7.

39. Mary Lefkowitz, *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from Myths* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 239.

40. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 78.

41. *Ibid.*, 1.

early Christians' mythological policy documents to satisfy Emperor Constantine and the global agenda of the new religion.⁴² Add this mythological origin to the fear of the Christians for reason—what Augustine described as disease of curiosity—and we get close to the nature of this religion. Tertullian, the North African apologist of the second century, captured precisely the war of Christianity against reason. He asked: Where's the likeness between the Christian and the philosopher, the Greek and the disciple of Heaven? Then he turned his hatred against the Greeks, particularly Aristotle: "Wretched Aristotle!—cunning, shifty, making forced guesses at truth! What has Athens to do with Jerusalem—the [Platonic] Academy with the Church? Away with those who have brought forward a 'Stoic', 'Platonic' or 'Dialectic' Christianity!"⁴³

The Roman state adopted Christianity, making slaves of the bishops, and they, using political power, not reason, settled the theological arguments in arriving at certain truths. The combination of church and state authority in forcing theological consensus, "backed by Christian suspicions of scientific argument, crushed all forms of reasoned thinking." The result was the Dark Ages—a thousand years during which "serious mathematical and scientific thinking" became extinct in Europe.⁴⁴ To this condition of intellectual impoverishment, Edward Gibbon, the eighteenth-century historian of the Roman Empire, added the habit of Christians to worship relics, making the bones of saints and countless nameless skeletons "more valuable than gold or precious stones." Such "religion fiction" and "superstitious practice," says Gibbon, "tended to increase the temptations of fraud and credulity, [and] insensibly extinguished the light of history and of reason in the Christian world."⁴⁵

This suppression of Hellenic thought by Christianity shut down the Western mind. The Arabs, however, did not allow developments in Europe to hin-

42. Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 293–310.

43. E. C. Dewick, *The Christian Attitude to Other Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 114.

44. Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 337, 340.

45. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Hugh Trevor-Roper, 6 vols. (New York: Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 3:163.

der their own path of using Greek literature for their culture. For a period of some two hundred years, from the eighth to the tenth century, they translated into Arabic most of the philosophical and scientific works of the classic Greek philosophers—a renaissance, which allowed them to make outstanding contributions to medicine, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, and science. The legacy of this Arabic Renaissance had salutary effects, five hundred years later, in the emergence and flowering of the European Renaissance in the fifteenth century.