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Spreading Hellenic Culture in the United States

By E.G. Vallianatos

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was probably the greatest political architect of America's independence, democracy, and the separation of church and state. Jefferson was steeped in Greek culture. He donated his books, some of which were Greek classical texts, to the American people and, in that exemplary manner, those books became the seed for the Library of Congress.

Jefferson was a philhellene who met Adamantios Koraes (1748-1833) in Paris, the revolutionary home of the protagonist of Greek freedom. During the Greek Revolution of 1820s Jefferson sent Koraes a letter on how to organize the emerging Greek republic. Koraes, like Jefferson, was in love with Hellenic culture, seeking moral, political and practical guidance from the ancient Greeks for the freedom and happiness of their struggling descendants.

Koraes had great influence in the making of the Greek Revolution. His edition in Paris of the Greek classics was the first effort of the post-Byzantine Christian Greeks to bridge the huge gap between them and their ancient ancestors. By the time Koraes arrived in revolutionary Paris in 1789, the Turks had occupied Greece for 336 years. The country was a bleak military camp. Its best people left for Russia and Western Europe. Koraes abandoned Smyrna and went to Holland as a merchant and then to France as a student where he became a medical doctor.

The Greeks who stayed behind, however, were in perpetual revolt and war. They had often to kill to make a living. They made the mountains their home and raised their sons as guerrilla fighters. But they were also hungry, illiterate, and desperate. Their leaders worked for the Turks who killed or plundered everything of value in Greece. Koraes accused the collaborators, especially the clergy and the monks, of treason, being the ruthless agents of the Turks. In 1806, when Greek population was considerably less than a million, Koraes figured there were about 100,000 monks in Greece. These monks, Koraes said, kept the Greek people in an enclosure, the better for the Turks to enslave or murder their victims.

Koraes' books were textbooks on how the Greeks could break out of their Turkish prison. They highlighted the courage, wisdom, and timeliness of the Greek tradition. His books also underlined the seminal importance Greek learning played in the liberty and enlightenment of the Europeans. All in all, Koraes' books became declarations of war against Christian monkish and Turkish oppression. They made up an agenda for building a new society on the Greek values of freedom, justice, and democracy.

The Greeks won their political independence in the late 1820s, but they left Koraes behind. The power of the church and Christian European interests set the foundations of a tiny Greek state that merely changed its Turkish master with European

“protectors.” Koraes’ classics were forgotten, and Koraes himself was dumped into the linguistic debate on archaism. His enemies made him synonymous to “katharevousa” or puristic archaic Greek.

Yet Koraes remains a paradigm for anyone contemplating dipping into Hellenic culture for the beauty of the Greek language, or the inestimable value of Greek political theory, democracy, philosophy, science, literature, theater and the arts.

For the Greeks living in the United States, Koraes offers a model of how the Greek tradition can become a secure means of preserving their identity.

It is good that Greek Americans are funding Hellenic studies in American universities. But it is a mistake building Christian chapels next to classrooms for Greek history and language.

First of all, Christianity and Hellenism are dramatically different and antithetical cultures. A Hellene can only be a Hellene. He cannot be Christian. And he cannot be a Christian and a Hellene at the same time. Mixing Christianity with Hellenism always creates monsters, terata. Peter Bien, professor of Greek literature at Dartmouth, is right saying that “Christian Hellenism” is an oxymoron. Christianity borrowed ideas from the Greek philosophical and religious traditions, but it is still an alien anti-Hellenic system.

Second, Christianity is an overshoot of Judaism. Hellenism is Greeks and their culture. Hellenism is the epic of Homer and Hellenic reason. Christianity “converted” the Greeks by horrendous doses of violence. It closed Plato’s Academy in Athens and brought the Olympics to an end. It destroyed most of Hellenic culture and led to the near extermination of the Greek people. Christians fought an 800-year war against the Greeks so that they could suppress the worship of the Greeks for Dionysos, son of Zeus, and god of theater, wine, and rural culture. Christian black-robed monks were the shock troops of the Visigoth warlord Alaric. At the end of the fourth century, in 396, they led him and his barbarian soldiers to Eleusis, Megara, Corinth, Olympia, Argos and Sparta. The governor of the Roman troops in Greece was ordered by the authorities in Constantinople to offer no resistance to Alaric who left nothing standing or living in those Hellenic poleis.

Third, Church Fathers like John Chrysostom anathematized the Greeks and never ceased preaching the insidious lie that the Greeks stole their philosophy and science from the Jews, the Phoenicians and barbarians. The followers of the “black Athena” slander today in the United States are repeating the hatred of the Church Fathers against the Greeks. Even the name Hellene was banned from Greek speech and international discourse from about the 5th to the late 18th centuries. The Greeks who survived the Christian massacres called themselves Romaioi (Romans).

Fourth, as Koraes documented in his “Hellenike Nomarchia,” a book he published anonymously in Rome in 1806, the Christian church supported Turkish tyranny in Greece for more than 400 years. Patriarch Gregory V attacked the Greek Revolution as the work of the devil.

Fifth, Greek Americans would do well to remember both Koraes and Jefferson who kept Christianity away from both Greek culture and the state. With limited resources, Greek Americans have also a lot to gain by focusing on the teaching of Greek and Greek history in as many American universities as they can. That way they preserve their Greek identity and culture and inform American society of the rich Greek tradition that shaped the mind of Jefferson and set the foundations for America's democratic and cultural traditions.

The more Americans appreciate Greek culture, the more secure and proud the Greeks will be in the United States, and the more difficult will be for propagandists to spread lies about Hellenic culture and Greek history. In addition, Hellenic programs at American universities, working collaboratively with classics departments which teach ancient Greek, may be able to bridge the gap between the ancient and modern sides of Hellenic culture. In other words, Greek is too good to be primarily the province of philologists. We all benefit from reading Homer, Hesiod, Archilochos, Sappho, Pindar, Korinna, Herakleitos, Aeschylus, Sophokles, Euripides, Herodotos, Thucydides, Hippokrates, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Archimedes, and Plutarch.

Finally, the work of Koraes strongly suggests that Greek Americans must fund the publication of the Greek classics so they become student textbooks and pocket books for those who thirst for the fresh and timeless ideas of Greek culture. This is particularly an urgent project at this time when ancient crusades of Christianity and Islam are coming to the surface in the Middle East, Southeastern Europe, and the catastrophic attack on New York and Washington. Greek reason is a good antidote to religious hatred.

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