

Good Christian, Bad Roman?

(City to City Balkans Conference 2022, Think Tank)

By way of introduction, let me first of all state that I will not be seeking to approach this discussion so much from an academic perspective, although I will try to present historical data wherever relevant. For the most part, I merely wish to offer a few thoughts from the perspective of a child of the Greek diaspora, who is now doing ministry in a broadly post-orthodox context in the secular heart of Athens, a context which has played and continues to play an important role in the deconstruction of various dominant narratives regarding the modern Greek state.

Nationalism as a process of de-Romanisation

The title of this presentation is “Good Christian, Bad Roman?” but before we get into what I mean by posing such a question, I would first like to address the question of ‘Greek’ nationalism.

The term ‘Greek’ nationalism would seem to indicate that there was an idea of ‘Greekness’ that gave rise to the nationalist cause in this part of the Balkans. This notion should be dispelled from the outset. For many people we call “Greeks” today not so long ago still defined themselves as Romans, and by ‘not so long ago’, I mean within our lifetimes.

A case in point is my own grandfather, who was still using the word “Romios” (Roman) rather than “Hellinas” (Greek), to describe himself in the mid-1990s when he died. Despite being born in the north of Greece, in an Orthodox village, his first language was Makedonski, a south-slavic language that is closely related to Bulgarian, and this remained the main language he spoke with his peers and older family members until the day he died.

If even after almost 200 years of irredentist struggle and nationalist rhetoric, Makedonski-speaking Orthodox Christians, like my grandfather, were still calling themselves Romans, then it is clear that they must have had an ambivalent relationship with the Greek nationalism we are familiar with today.

It also serves as a reminder that the Greek nationalist project has always been a fairly fragile proposal that flattered to deceive. For the whole history of the Ottoman empire, ‘Roman’ had simply been shorthand for ‘Ottoman Orthodox Christian’. There was no ethnic component at all in this denomination; Greeks, Slavs, Albanians, and Vlachs were all included. Thus, since

the connection between the ideas of ‘Greekness’ and Orthodoxy was virtually non-existent before 1821, there was a need to generate a sense of a ‘Greek’ national identity in concert with Orthodoxy and then find a way to mainstream it.

This entailed a systematic discrediting of the idea of ‘Romanness’ to decouple it from Orthodoxy, which would then prepare the way for Orthodoxy to be reimagined as a Greek reality in the burgeoning national consciousness. So, for example, we may observe some common slurs arising during this period such as «Ρωμέικος καυγάς, τούρκικος χαλβάς» (Roman argument, Turkish delight) and «Πέντε Ρωμιοί, δέκα γνώμες» (ten Romans, ten opinions), the implication being that the Roman identity was a lesser and more debased identity compared to the noble Greek one.

Even the so-called language wars may be viewed through this lens. We might scratch our heads over why there was such a strong reaction in 1901 to the translation of the New Testament into the Greek vernacular. However, the suppression of the vernacular was all part of the process of decoupling Orthodoxy from its old Roman identity and attaching it to a new, Greek national identity. Viewed in these terms, it becomes clear that introducing the vernacular into the heart of Orthodoxy was not to be tolerated because it was construed as a threat to the nationalist project. This is shown by the fact that the students protesting the translation accused the publishers of “betrayal” and of bringing about a division in Greeks’ *religious* and *national* identity. There were even suggestions that the sponsors of the translation were “enemies of the nation” and were exposing the country to a “slavic threat”, since the translation had been commissioned by Queen Olga, a Russian and sister to the Tsar.

It seems that the irony of the situation was lost on the students dashing out to defend the Greek nation against a slavic ‘foreign’ invader, who until very recently had been part of the same people group as them, and even now was coming as a fellow Orthodox, seeking to give them access to their own Holy Scriptures. Yet this is how Greek nationalism took shape, through the gradual splintering of the Roman identity in order to create a Greek one. It was a long, drawn-out process that has had long-lasting effects on the Greek psyche. To this day, the Greek national identity ‘as quintessentially orthodox’ remains ring-fenced, and instilled with an oversensitivity to anything that might reveal its own fragility.

This is where my first use of the phrase, “Good Christian, Bad Roman” comes in, since it serves well as an overview of the early history of Greek nationalism. Despite the word ‘Roman’ denoting ‘Christian’ for almost one and a half millenia, to be a ‘Good Christian’ in Greece *post 1821* meant becoming a ‘Bad Roman’. A Roman identity implied a continued affinity with our surrounding Orthodox neighbours in the rest of the Balkans, and was therefore to be rejected as a threat to the Greek national project.

Nationalism as a re-establishment of Empire

There is, however, a second way to use this phrase, and it is with regard to the idea of empire. After all, the word “Roman” is more often than not associated with ‘empire’; in our case the Eastern Roman or Byzantine empire. Even during the Ottoman period, the memory of the Roman empire persisted in the *millet rûm*, or ‘Roman nation’ and there was always a dream for it one day to be restored.

The Greek nationalist project sought to resurrect this idea of empire, but in a new nationalist form, displacing the Roman nation with the Greek one. These efforts at empire building were encapsulated in the so-called Μεγάλη Ιδέα (Great Idea), which did at some point briefly succeed in delivering a Greece “of two continents and five seas”.

Even though the Megali Idea eventually died in the 1920s, the displacement effect was complete, with the Greek nationalist project becoming the new standard bearer of imperialist dreams. It is no coincidence that the two-headed eagle, the symbol of empire, has been appropriated by Greek nationalists, and even more significantly, by the Greek army and the Orthodox Church. Nowhere is the idea of empire more on display than the buildings of the Greek Orthodox church and the Greek army, with the Greek flag sitting next to the two-headed eagle of the empire.

This marriage of church, nation, and state, on full display for all to see, formed a kind of unholy alliance in the new Greek state, making life very difficult for anyone wishing practice Christianity outside the bounds of Orthodoxy. Due to its self-understanding as the standard bearer of empire, the natural instinct of the Orthodox majority was to be fairly territorial. If the Greek national identity was Orthodox, then non-Orthodox expressions of Christianity were to be considered non-Greek, since to allow for their Greekness would be to undermine Greekness itself.

In practice, this meant that religious minorities were historically relegated to the status of second class citizens... ironically, much like the Orthodox themselves had been as subjects of the Ottoman empire. By no choice of our own, our relationship to our Orthodox brothers and sisters has always been mediated through the rubric of empire. Orthodox dignitaries have traditionally enjoyed the privileges afforded to courtiers of the emperor, whereas the evangelical church was not even recognised in law as a Christian church until 2014, more than 160 years after its creation.

There was also a social stigma attached to being evangelical, much like other minority groups such as Jews or homosexuals. Even to this day, many evangelicals will not divulge that they are evangelical in their workplace for fear of repercussions. My mother worked for many years as a

teacher at a Greek school in north London that served the diaspora community. When one of her co-workers discovered that she was evangelical, she promptly went to the headmaster the same day in order to get her fired, simply for being a non-Orthodox in a ‘Greek’ school. She only saved her job by pulling out her Greek ID card, which stated her religion as Greek Orthodox.

What this means is that we should not make the mistake of thinking that we are ‘just’ dealing with another church tradition. Greek nationalism has made this a nonsensical idea. There might be many Orthodox today who are just as uncomfortable with this arrangement as we are, but this does not change the fact that the Greek Orthodox Church is inextricably intertwined with Greek nationalism, and thus functions as an imperial power, or at least as a proxy of the empire.

I hope you see where I am going with this. If this is the case, what does being a ‘Good Christian’ entail in today’s Greece? It means sometimes being a ‘Bad Roman’ — Roman in the sense of subject to imperial power. Of course we are to honour the emperor, of course we are to obey just laws of the land (except where our conscience prevents us from doing so), and of course we are to form friendships with faithful brothers, sisters, and ministers of the gospel within the Orthodox church wherever possible, and break bread together with them, if they are happy to do so. Yet in doing so, we must understand that breaking bread together as brothers and sisters is already in itself an act of resistance, for the empire does not do horizontal relationships. The kingdom of God and the empire can never truly be friends.

The empire requires allegiance, but without adopting an Orthodox identity, this is impossible. I say this with utmost respect, but reminding people that evangelicals produced the first ever female surgeon in Greece, or that our community did our part in the war by serving in the army, is never going to satisfy the empire’s demand for fealty, and we need to be fine with that. In a sense, we will always be bad Romans. As non-Orthodox, we were never Romans in the original sense of the word, and we remain bad Romans, as those who do not swear allegiance to the new imperial entity of the Greek nation.

Yet none of this means that we cannot draw close to Orthodox believers and even Orthodox ministers. Indeed, it may be the only way we can, as once we recognise that it cannot be on the basis of empire, we will seek other, more creative, more practical, and ultimately, more Christian ways to draw near in service and love.

A case study on women’s rights

Let me close with a case study of what Greek nationalism looks like today, which I hope demonstrates my point about the danger of trusting empire. And let me emphasise here that

this is not a political statement but simply an analysis of the phenomenon of Greek nationalism in its current form.

- A few years ago, the Greek government set up a General Secretariat for Gender Equality. For many in the feminist movement, this seemed like an answer to prayer, so to speak. The Secretariat was even placed in the State Department, with its own budget and executive powers. Since 2019, however, things have taken a rather different turn. The incoming government, with clear nationalist leanings, immediately transferred the Secretariat to the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs and proceeded to rename it the General Secretariat of “**Family Policy** and Gender Equality”. This was a clear indication that the issue of gender equality was no longer a matter of society-wide policy, but more narrowly of work and family. In short, the government was telling women, “*as long as you work and make babies, we will try and make your life easier*”.
- And perhaps this made sense for a more conservative government to do, to bring the focus back onto the family, but it didn’t stop there. A year later they fast-tracked the creation of a whole new Department within the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs called the ‘*Department of Demographic and Family Policy*’ and then subsumed the General Secretariat of Family Policy and Gender Equality into this new Department, in the process taking away all its budget and powers, and giving them to the Junior Minister in charge of the new Department.
- The General Secretariat was then renamed once again to the ‘General Secretariat of **Demographic** and Family Policy and Gender Equality’, and in a final twist, the term Gender Equality was completely left out of the job description of the Junior Minister in charge of the new department.
- This means that the chief instrument for forming policy around matters of Gender Equality is now little more than window dressing. It has no budget, no powers, and no brief, where it once had all these things. Anything it wants to do must be signed off by the new Junior Minister, who is no longer even responsible for Gender Equality. In the meantime, one of the first acts of this new Junior Minister was to create a campaign, together with the Orthodox Church and one of the major banks, to give money to Greek families who live in remote parts of Greece who want to have children.
- In short, the agenda for gender equality has been completely replaced with an agenda for replenishing the dwindling stock of Greek babies, to build up the Greek nation, especially in certain coastal areas where more immigrants are entering the population.

Obviously, the women who campaigned to create the General Secretariat are bitterly disappointed, but they shouldn’t be surprised. This is how empire functions. The Greek

nationalist project might be as fragile as it ever was, but the alliance of church, nation, and state is still very much in place.

Rome as the spiritual 'other'

At the end of the day, as Christians, we do not desire *any* form of identification with Rome. Whether showing toleration or actively oppressing, Rome remains an institution that is spiritually 'other' to the church. One cannot be a good Roman and also a good Christian, and it is to our peril when we attempt to do so.

As Reformed Christians we often say that being good citizens of the city of God makes us great citizens of the city of man... and there is a good deal of truth in this. Being faithful to Christ should turn us into good neighbours. It should make us less politically partisan. It should lead us to works of service. But there is one place it cannot and will not lead us, and that is into the arms of the emperor. So when I see evangelicals getting more worked up about privileges granted by the government to our community than about friendships being cultivated with gospel-believing orthodox priests, I do wonder if we are seeking to be good Romans rather than good Christians.

Understanding that to be 'Good Christians' we must sometimes be 'Bad Romans' is really the only way we can start making authentic moves towards our Orthodox context and our brothers and sisters there. For they are being equally oppressed by the legacy of Greek nationalism, and it is there that we will ultimately find common ground. For while the gospel has no qualms about appealing to the emperor, it has no expectations he will grant a hearing, and it does not base its plans on the emperor's good pleasure, but rather focuses its attention on those outside his reach... those on the margins, those not in thrall to his power, those who are being called out of the empire to serve the one true king, the Lord Jesus Christ.



About the Author

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