

‘Greek Identity Throughout History’ at St Catherine’s Greek Orthodox Church, Mascot



With the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop Makarios of Australia, and at the initiative of the Revd Father Athanasios Giatsios, St Catherine’s Greek Orthodox Church, Mascot, has organised an evening directed to both our faithful and to interested members of the public on ‘Greek Identity Throughout History.’ This will take place at the ‘new’ Church at 180 Coward Street, on Friday 1st of November (7pm).

Several events took place at St Catherine’s this year that addressed, in some way, the Orthodox Church’s welcoming approach to positive aspects of culture, namely its ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ series of talks (organised in conjunction with St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College and Macquarie University’s Ancient History Department), and the ‘Christianity and Culture: Ancient and Modern Perspectives’ Forum (organised together with the University of New South Wales’ Fellowship of Orthodox Christian University Students (FOCUS)). The upcoming event, ‘Greek Identity Throughout History,’ will expand the lens to trace Greek identity both

before and after its embrace of Christianity.

The designation of the local Orthodox Churches according to their ethnic majority—Greek, Russian, Romanian, etc.—can give the impression of a disconnectedness between them to the uninformed that, on the level of faith, is simply not there. The Orthodox Church, as the body of Christ, is united in Christ above every culture, and this remains so despite differences and tensions that may arise from time to time among its various local manifestations. What the Orthodox Church has managed to do—by God’s grace—is to appropriate and reinterpret positive aspects from local cultures in light of the Christ experience, transmitting them from generation to generation within its traditional framework. This was the case in Greek-speaking Byzantium—the Christian Roman civilisation within which the Orthodox Church flourished—as well as in the Near and Middle East and in Slavic lands that embraced Orthodoxy; and even in Western Europe during the first millennium AD before the Great Schism (when, as is well known, there was no distinction between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism).

To say that contemporary Greek identity owes a great deal to Orthodox Christianity is an understatement. If it were not for the positive approach of the Byzantine Empire towards culture, its Greek-speaking inhabitants—calling themselves Romans and comprised of various ethnic groups—would have lost all touch with their ancient and classical past. There are many these days who would dispute this: but it remains a truism that the Orthodox Romans preserved all that was good in philosophy, literature, art and architecture from the classical Greek world. While giving priority to God’s revelation in Christ within the Church, they nevertheless expressed their faith using language and concepts drawn from Greek philosophy, literature, and poetry, reinterpreting these in light of their spiritual experience. They also dressed this experience in art and architecture that borrowed from Greek elements (among others), and in Hellenic (and Hebrew) customs, rites and gestures which they imbued with Christian meaning. Indeed, once the Byzantine civilisation collapsed, it was—without a doubt—the Orthodox Church that preserved the classical culture within its sacred confines, even as the identity of the inhabitants of the lands occupied by the Ottoman Turks evolved from Roman to Hellenic (or Greek).

A similar process of ‘baptism of cultures’ occurred within all nations in which Orthodoxy took root. This represents a positive challenge to the many Orthodox belonging to diasporas, who are compelled to communicate their faith to their immediate context while preserving, first, the Church’s faith and way of life, and second, those aspects of culture—Greek, Slavic, Arabic, or otherwise—that have

been transformed by Christianity. Yet despite this association of Orthodoxy with, in this instance, Hellenic culture, Greece is unique among the Orthodox lands in having a celebrated history before its embrace of Christianity. This is in fact a double-edged sword. For while Slavic Christian identity, for example, begins and remains largely bound up with the embrace of Christianity—and in the case of many Eastern European countries this is Orthodox Christianity—Greeks have a long ancient historical pedigree. While undoubtedly having many positive aspects, this pedigree has nevertheless been magnified by the modern West in opposition to the Christian Middle Ages in Europe for the purpose of serving as the bedrock for its own self-consciousness and identity, both in terms of politics and culture. This has resulted in two problems. First, many modern Greeks have appropriated the Western embellishment of the classical Greek past at the expense of the Christian Middle Ages, that is, their Byzantine legacy. For them, they are Greeks first, and Orthodox second (if at all). The second problem, related to the previous, is that such an approach presupposes a radical disjuncture between the classical and Byzantine Greek periods.

While the classical and Byzantine periods in Greece were not identical in terms of content of faith (among other things), there was, nevertheless, an organic continuity between them. Here are just a few examples. While the latter rejected the pagan propensity to worship personified aspects of human behaviour and elements of nature (i.e. the Greek gods)—in consonance with the Greek philosophers (Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato) who did the same—it retained the classical literature that described these entities.[\[1\]](#) Byzantium also borrowed the best elements of language and most accurate conceptions of virtue from the Greek philosophers, and took much from Greek architecture and art. At the same time, it forged a unique Christian identity anchored in an immediate experience of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies within the Church which offers us the possibility of eternal life as exemplified in the saints. In the Orthodox Church, when one prioritises the faith in Christ while at the same time celebrating positive aspects of culture, one gets the best of both worlds. This is the same in Greece as it is in Russia, Romania, Serbia, Georgia, Lebanon, etc. It is the preservation of the best aspects of culture from a Christian perspective that the Church offers to contemporary society while prioritising participation in the very life of the eternal Son of God, who, as creator of the world with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, is above and beyond any culture.[\[2\]](#) What more could one ask for?

St Catherine's 'Greek Identity Throughout History' event will address four distinct periods of Greek culture on their own terms by esteemed experts in a range of fields. The first speaker, Dr Sonia Pertsinidis, is Lecturer and Convenor of Ancient

Greek in the Centre for Classical Studies at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra. She will talk about 'Key Aspects of Greek Identity in Homer's *Odyssey*,' and her abstract reads: "In this talk, Dr Pertsinidis will explore how Homer's *Odyssey* presents Greek identity, with particular emphasis on the place of humans in the cosmos, the importance of practical intelligence and resilience, the significance of proper hospitality, and the centrality of marriage, family and the home." The second speaker, Dr Gil Davis, is the Director of the Program for Ancient Mediterranean Studies at Macquarie University, where he lectures in Greek history, and runs the Archaeology of Ancient Israel and Schools Outreach Programs. Dr Davis' talk is entitled 'Ancient Greek democracy—an Evolutionary Process.' His abstract reads:

How and when did democracy evolve in ancient Greece? Why did this 'fragile flower,' as it has been called, bloom in Athens? The answers can be found in the mythical past and in unique aspects of Greek cultural and political development. But it wasn't inevitable and it didn't last being trampled by the spectacularly successfully Macedonian monarchy in 322 BC. This talk provides a quick over-view of its evolution.

The third talk will be given by the lawyer, poet and journalist, Mr Konstantinos Kalymnios. Titled "'What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?" Greek Identity During Byzantium,' it will cover the Christian Roman civilisation described above and within which the Orthodox Church flourished. Mr Kalymnios is an acclaimed member of the Victorian Greek community who we look forward to welcoming to Sydney for this event. The final presentation will be delivered by Dr Patricia Koromvokis, Lecturer in the Department of International Studies, Languages, and Cultures at Macquarie University. It is entitled 'Language and Identity: the case of the Greek Diaspora, What the Research Says?' Dr Koromvokis will address the manner in which language and identity are negotiated and formed in diasporic communities, particularly those that are Greek in origin, before summarising the previous papers. Finally, the panel of four speakers will take questions from the audience.

I do not presume that the distinguished speakers—whom I look forward to learning much from—will share the views that I expressed in this short article. Nevertheless, I believe the fact that this event is taking place within the sacred precincts of St Catherine's demonstrates the Church's continual role as a protector and transferrer of the positive aspects of culture, in this case the Greek cultural identity and learned reflections upon it. This is an event not to be missed!

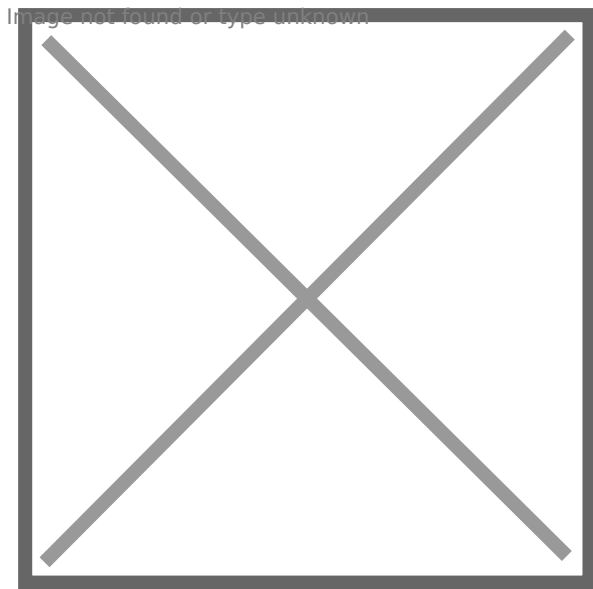
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[1] Mount Athos, the monastic peninsula in North-Eastern Greece, is a veritable repository of the oldest copies of some major classical Greek texts. Moreover, it is well known that if the Byzantines had not retained classical Greek literature to teach grammar and rhetoric, then these texts would have been lost. Their ‘rediscovery’ in the West just before the Renaissance was actually on account of Byzantine émigrés taking their libraries with them to Italy and other places around the time of the empire’s collapse in the fifteenth century. Thus, the argument has been made that the Renaissance—the rebirth of classical culture in Western Europe that led to the Enlightenment—was sparked by the Byzantines.

[2] Indeed, the very fact of the Son of God’s incarnation—his taking on human nature as Christ Jesus while remaining fully God—in a particular culture, namely, the Hebrew one, legitimises the Orthodox Church’s positive approach to culture.



* Above image is of a fresco at the entrance to the Great Meteoron Monastery, Greece, indicating, through the representation of figures like Homer and Socrates (among others), the Church’s embrace of classical Greek literature and philosophy within its sacred precincts which nevertheless prioritises Christ as the ‘Lord of Glory’ (ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῆς Δόξης) and his saints who immediately participate in him (as indicated by their presence within the vines stemming from Christ, and their

halos). This fresco also indicates that Christ is the source of all wisdom and holiness.

- Source: kosmosnewspaper.com.au