World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:7, No:6, 2013

Venice 17th Century: The Greek Ethnic Identity in Danger

T. Roussopoulos

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:7, No:6, 2013 publications.waset.org/15199/pdf

***Abstract*—**At the end of the 17th Century the Greek orthodox Archbishop in Venice -Meletios Typaldos- decided to turn the doctrine of the orthodox Greeks into Catholicism. More than 5.000 Greeks were living in Venice then. Their leadership -the Greek confraternity- fought against Meletios. Participants in this conflict were the Pope, the ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople and Peter the Great of Russia. All the play according to my opinion -which is followed by evidence and theoretical support is a strong conflict between the two actors -the Archbishop and the Confraternity- and the object of conflict is the change of the Greek orthodox beliefs to Catholicism. Ethnicity especially for Greeks of the era is identified with orthodoxy. So this was a conflict of identity. The results of that conflict were of tremendous importance to the Greeks in Venice and affected them for long.

***Keywords*—**Greek ethnic identity, Meletios Typaldos, Confraternity, Venice Pope, Patriarch Constantinople Peter the Great Russia**.**

I. Introduction

THIS study aims to enlight the life of the Greek "Arcivescovo di Philadelphia," Meletios Typaldos, and particularly of his conflict with the Greek confraternity of Venice. This conflict, according to this research, represents in general, clearly and sophisticatedly, the ambiguities of a historical period such as that of the European pre-early enlightenment, when questions of ethnic identity prepared the emergence of the notion of Nation and its connection with the nascence of the modern bourgeois state. It was the time when new forces were carried along with the old. The dissolution of old political formations and the reshaping of the new were linked to the enhancement of new social classes, a regression of the religious spirit and its replacement by the upcoming move toward science. In this turbulent era, great European powers, including Venice, were involved in intensive conflicts and deep changes. Another reason that renders the research of Typaldos' affair worthwile, is because it represents the contradictions emerged in the social context of the Greek Diaspora, at the end of the 17th century, when the Greek immigrants of Western Europe, in this case of Venice, despite the fact that they were involved in the new economic activities of their times, as ship-owners and merchants, incorporating the new ideas about individuality and freedom of consciousness, maintained with fervor religious and cultural components of their homeland, that nourished their collective sense of belonging and built their ethnic identity.

The crucial issue at stake in this conflict was Typaldo's attempt of "turning" the Greek community into Catholic doctrine, while the reaction of the fraternity was triggered, due to this attempt, as shown by historical documents, because of the fear that a possible change of religious doctrine would cause a change of their National Identity.

Taking the latest into consideration, the subject of ethnic identity is further explored. As the ethnic identity of a community during the premodern era is composed of religious and cultural elements, these elements will be used in order to show the deep rooting of culture and religion in the human consciousness and their importance for the shaping of political entities.

Theodoros Roussopoulos is postgraduate st. at School of History, Classics & Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, (th.rouss63@gmail.com)

II. The Story

A. The Story Is Composed by Two Actors: Typaldos and Greek Confraternity

Regarding Typaldos. He surely was a strong and ambitious personality but he already acquired some important social status. At the age of 14 he left his island –Cephalonia Greece- and became a student at the Flanghini College –a Greek school in Venice. Then he studied philosophy in the University of Padua and went back to his island where he became a teacher and a preacher. He was very young when was proposed as a director of the Flanghini School in Venice. At the age of 28 he was ambitious enough to try to be elected as the Archbishop of Philadelphia, the most important Exarch of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the western word. He failed that time but no longer than seven years later he was unanimously elected as an Archbishop –by the Greek Confraternity in Venice- and based in Venice.

During his epoch, theological and philosophical ideas derived from the Padua University and spread to the territory of the city- state of Venice. A Greek circle of intellects and theologists who belonged to the University of Padua contributed at moving forward the ideas of the Renaissance Humanism and the revival of Aristotelism. In alignment to the argument of the Neoaristotelians tried to differentiate the philosophy of Nature from Theology.They were against scholastic aristotelism, claiming that the law of physics is the knowledge for all things of the world; therefore they cannot be based on theology.

Typaldos was strongly influenced by the aforementioned

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ideas. Under their impact, he did not only proceed to the unfolding of those ideas to his students and peers, but, as we suppose, he was morally and theologically emancipated by the Orthodox dogma, ready to follow religious beliefs which could be useful for the realization of his ambitions and plans. Of course, the attribution of motives is not an objective method to approach the actions of somebody. However, in Typaldos case, the need of determining the personal impulses that caused an important official to take risks during a dangerous time could not be avoided.

Meletios Typaldos wanted and decided, as head of the Orthodox Church in Venice, to convert the Orthodox Greeks to Catholicism without taking into consideration the church body, i.e., the Greek orthodox clergy and congregation. By using Venetian authorities, Typaldos imposed on his subordinate priests of the St. George Church a confession of faith to Catholicism, in order to spread through them his plans. The explanation that is usually attributed to this action is that his ambition to become cardinal pursued him to this initiative. One could conclude that Typaldos wanted to play a more crucial role between the two Churches which, during that time had almost no direct contact. He believed that the Pope was the leader of Christianity because Apostle Petros founded the Christian church in Rome. Thus the Constantinopolitan patriarchate was coming second in the rank. Over all he believed that differences between the two dogmas was not very serious. Moreover he thought that this change would give more benefits to him and to the 400.000 Greeks who lived under the Venetian regime. His plan was to Uniate the two churches. To built a new patriarchate under the Pope which would include all Greek orthodoxes in Venice, Italy, the Ionian, the Adriatic, the Peloponnese and Crete.

At the end of the 17th century, there was no longer any debate for Reunion between Rome and Constantinople. It was this interruption of the religious dialogue, as well as the lost of Catholic dominance in the European areas that were proselytized to Protestantism, that led the Pope to adopt the strategy of "Unia" for the Orthodox populations of the Eastern Europe. Unia was a religious regime where the Catholic faith was coupled with the traditional rituals (rito) of the Orthodox Church. Typaldos, after long negotiations with Rome and Venice, tried to convert the Greeks of Venice to Unia, breaking in this way their traditional ties with Constantinople. By this initiative, the fate of Typaldos was sealed and a new entity stood up against him: the Greek confraternity of Venice.

The second actor of the play is the Greek Confraternity in Venice. I will give the social characteristics of the Greek Confraternity in Venice during the 17th century: Rich merchants and ship-owners, artisans, lawyers, doctors, scientists. According to the Venetian law no more than 250 Greeks were allowed to be members of the Confraternity among the 5000 Greeks who lived and worked at that time in Venice. Those individuals –who participated into the Confraternity-, were traveling a lot and they had good relationship with other communities in the East and the West. They had an open mentality. However in all of their public demonstration which in the first look is strange is that they declared and maintained their Greek ethnicity. They cultivated the Greek language and they hired teachers for their children. They offered a lot of money for the establishment of Greek Schools as well as of printing houses for publishing Greek books. They connected their Greek origin with the orthodox dogma. The church was their center of social and religious life. They participated in ecclesiastical ceremonies declared their Greek ethnicity.

The community reacted against Typaldos not only by informing the Patriarch of Constantinople but by opposing him to the courts of Venice. They sent letters to the Patriarch in Constantinople and to the Doge in Venice. A long litigation took place in Venice between the Greek Confraternity and Typaldos. Despite the fact that it would be more convenient for the Greeks to change their dogma to Catholicism, since they would me more respectful living and venturing in a Catholic environment, they denied their economic benefits in the name of their ethnic memory and religious belief. Reading their letters to the Venetian authorities and their reactions in Typaldos's plans they proved their strong will to defend their religious and ethnic identity.

The Venetians at the end supported Typaldos. The confraternity lost the battle but not the war. Typaldos was unfrocked by the Constantinopolitan patriarchate. The Greek Confraternity in Venice continued the battle for the next 70 years. They denied accepting a catholic Archbishop or Catholic priests to lead in the Greek orthodox Church or Saint George in Venice and by the end of the 18th century they won the war. The Venetians stepped back.

Greek orthodox's in Venice were allowed to serve their dogma and keep untouchable their Ethnic Identity. Then, our conclusion is that the battle of the Greeks of Venice against Typaldos was mainly provoked by their passion to keep unchangeable their ethnic identity. Of course, their decision to keep their independence in front of Vatican, and not put the Pope as partner in their affairs also plaid a crucial role, but this last cause is out of our present argument.

III. The Question of Ethnic Identity

In order to clarify one's ideas about ethnic identity, that is the identity of an ethnicity, it is good to denote that this study gives the notion of "ethnicity" the meaning of the word "ethnie" [1]. that Anthony Smith uses in order to describe a pre-national ethnocultural group. The necessary requirements for the attribution to a social group the characterization of "ethnicity" are: a collective name, a myth of descent, a shared history, a "distinctive shared culture", an association with a particular territory, and a sense of solidarity. Such entities have existed throughout history but not all of them have been developed to nations. They are transformed in nation-states "only if and when a single ethnic and cultural population inhabits the boundaries of a state and the boundaries of that state are coextensive with the boundaries of that ethnic and cultural population."[2].

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The connection of the ethnic identity with ethnie, or "ethnicity" as it is herein conceptualized, makes it to differ from other interpretations of ethnicity used today by the most of political scientists specialized on ethnic politics [3]. The latter usually adopt the definition of Horowitz, who sees ethnicity as a concept that "easily embraces groups differentiated by colour, language, and religion: it covers 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities', and castes"[4]. Horowitz definition refers to contemporary ethnicities and cannot capture the meaning of the pre-modern ones therefore, for the purposes of the current analysis, it seems pertinent to identify ethnicity with that of "ethnie", as it is defined by Smith.

Smith's theory, despite that it does not touch the political aspect of an ethnic identity, he could be viewed as a bridge "between stark modernist theories defending the recent, invented and constructed nature of nations and nationalism (Gellner, Hobsbawm and Ranger, Anderson), and primordialist theories emphasizing the permanence of nations (van de Berghe, Geertz, Armostrong)"[5].While Smith agrees with the previous mentioned authors that *nationalism* is a modern phenomenon, he insists that *nations* have pre-modern origins.

The importance given by the people to a presumed common ancestry and shared historical memories, as well as their connection with a specific 'homeland' and a developed sense of solidarity, do not derive only from identity politics, but also from the desire of people for security and rootedness; also, from their need for dignity and respect [6].These human needs have been used not only by nationalist politics but also in the pre-modern years by ethnic politics in order to obtain social cohesion and centralization. The members of a group of people, through the historical memories and legends about their distant ancestors, cultivate the myth of their common origin, which, in continuity, becomes the focus of identity politics.

In any case, in the pre-industrial societies of early modern Europe, religion was of fundamental importance in making sense of personal and collective social, cultural and spiritual practices. In agreement with von Greyerz's [7]. interpretation of religion (who cites the respective definition of Thomas Luckmann [8]. religion could be seen as a socially constructed, more or less solidified, more or less obligatory system of symbols, that combine the legitimation of natural and social orders and meanings with practical instructions given to the individuals on how to live.

Arguing about Greek ethnicity we would like to say that this is a kind of cultural – religious beliefs and values but also a sense of common origin. This sense of common origin tied Greek individuals together; it was a strong connection among them and cultivated also –as it seems out of their writings- a common nostalgia and pain for their enslaved fatherland. It's obvious that these beliefs, values and the sense of common origin separated them from other people and created their ethnic identity. In order to define this identity, Greeks used the word "Genos"- and very often the word "Ethnos", a Greek synonym of Nation. The word genos affirms a kinship group which identifies itself as a unit. The term derives from the word "ginomai" which can be translated as "becoming". So the word "genos" is connected with the common origin as well as the common cultural and religious features of a group of people, therefore, we can see it as a synonymous of the term "nation", from the latin verb nacsor. During Ottomans occupation, the word acquired an additional meaning because it has been accompanied with the dreams of the Greek people for liberation from the Turkish slavery. As it is proved from many local rebellions, written documents. In the eighteenth century, under the influence of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the optimistic outlook for the creation of an autonomous Greek state, the concept of the genos escaped the boundaries of ethnicity and was identified more or less with that of the nation [9].

One could ask, how could be explained the long term continuousness of the Greek Ethnic Identity in the communities of the Greek Diaspora, from the middle of the fifteenth century, till the war of the Greek Independence, that is, in 1821? From the many reasons of this duration, we summarize the followings:

First. *The deep historical roots of the Greek ethnic identity. Due to its historical origin it is founded in the Greek myths and customs and, through them, it is well embedded in the collective memory and consciousness of the Greek people.*

Second. *It is connected with the Greek language and the orthodox dogma which dominated in the Byzantine Empire, and the Greek consciousness that the upper class of this empire shaped, particularly during the last centuries of it, before its occupation from the Ottomans. Due to the politics that the Greek intellectuals cultivated in the cities of the Greek Diaspora after their exile from Constantinople and, mainly, due to the religious politics of the Greek Patriarchate, which institutionalized Greek schools, churches and monasteries, the Greek ethnicity remained alive till the eighteenth century, when the representatives of the Greek enlightenment worked hard for the transformation of the ethnic identity to a national one.*

Third. *This duration is particularly manifested in cases that Greek minorities were established in Western cities or states, such as Venice, which were religiously tolerant.*

Therefore we insist that the question of Ethnic identity was the only accountable reason to explain such a sharp contrast to Typaldos's plans.

At that point we would like to refer more analytically to the religion's side of the Identity. Let's take into consideration that an ethnicity to be strong need to be anchored by the human consciousness during the first years of socialization of a human being. This anchoring is shaped by the use of symbolic mechanism such as religion, language, habits etc. The orthodox religion is full of symbols and icons that grasp the individual consciousness from its childhood. Also we must take into consideration that the Greek people, during his long enslavement under the Ottomans, found in their religion a spiritual space of belonging. Through religion and their myths and customs even in rituals they maintained this sense of

belonging which is one of the main elements for the formation of an ethnic Identity.

Certainly, religious faith, just like language, does not always differentiate one ethnicity from the others. Different ethnicities may share the same religion and the same language. Only in cases that religion or culture in general, is accompanied by a shared belief, as previously mentioned, in regard to the common descent of its members, the formation of ethnic identity takes place. In the case of Greeks in Venice, a deep faith in their common origin, on the one hand, and a long tradition of religious, orthodox rituality, on the other, both contributed, through their repetition from generation to generation, to the creation of a powerful ethnic identity. Moreover, identity politics, elaborated by Orthodox Church, contributed to the maintenance and enforcement of this tradition and consequently to the forging of their ethnic identity.

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