

The Effect of the Greek Enlightenment on the Greek Revolution and the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church



Evi Psarrou

Department of Philosophy, University of Patras, Rion – Achaia, Greece

ABSTRACT: The present study aims to discuss the connection between the Modern Greek Enlightenment and the Greek Revolution. It reveals the decisive effect of this intellectual movement upon the Greek subjects of the Ottoman Empire supporting that the Greek Enlightenment contributed to the awakening of the Greeks who eventually revolted against the Ottomans establishing a new independent national state. Additionally this paper reveals the position of the Orthodox Church and its reaction towards the Enlightenment and moreover highlights certain actions taken by the Church against the Enlightenment thinkers. Finally, an attempt is made and to the reasons that led the Church to adopt this position against the Enlightenment movement and the Greek Revolution. This paper derives from an in-depth study of the bibliography relevant to the aforementioned issues.

KEYWORDS: Eastern Orthodox, Church Greek Enlightenment, Greek Revolution, Greek Independent State, Ottoman Empire, Patriarch of Constantinople.

INTRODUCTION

The 17th and 18th centuries were marked by the emergence of the Enlightenment in Europe. Various countries had embraced this intellectual and philosophical phenomenon adjusting it to their own culture and their own particular needs. The transmission of the Enlightenment ideas into the Ottoman Empire where the subjugated Greeks were living contributed to the development of a national consciousness, paved the way for the Greek War of Independence and challenged the authority of the Ottomans, proclaiming the necessity of an independent Greek state. The prominent figures of the Greek Enlightenment insisted on the secularization of the Greek society and challenged the Orthodox Christian authority. The Greek Enlightenment movement symbolized the hope for the awakening of the Greek nation and the subsequent claim of liberty from the Ottomans.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT

The Greek Enlightenment was a complex phenomenon which spread over a wide geographical area, from southeastern Europe to the coasts of Asia Minor. Due to the Greeks' commercial enterprises, it also spread to the Balkans and following to the Greek communities of central Europe and southern Russia.

The enlightenment movement did not invade the Greek "world" of the Ottoman Empire without resistance or reactions. Mainly the supporters of the old regime fervently opposed to the Enlightenment believing that it was merely a political program that emerged from a new western world aiming at overthrowing the status quo of people and societies. The views of the Orthodox Church on the future of the Greek people had little to do with the secular political demands promoted by the Enlightenment, which vastly contributed to the transformation of the Greeks' values and aspirations. This intellectual movement provoked reactions from conservatives both clergy and laity.

However, it should be emphasized that the Greek Enlightenment was not essentially anti-Christian. Religion was a sensitive and important issue for the entire Greek population of the Ottoman Empire and the Orthodox Christianity contributed to the unity of the Christian populations of the Empire mostly on the grounds of a coherent cultural tradition.

THE PATRIARCHATE OF CONSTANTINOPLE WITHIN THE OTTOMAN CONTEXT

The role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as an important institution of the "Old Regime" that is of the imperial and despotic power represented by the Ottoman Empire, is of the utmost importance in the present study. The Patriarchate regarded the ideas of the Enlightenment and following the ideas of the Revolution as hostile and opponent to its own power. Consequently the Patriarchate adopted a policy of political legitimacy to the Sultan himself who - according to the Patriarchate- had shown mercy to his Christian subjects. The Orthodox Church held a special status in the Ottoman Empire, exercising juridical practice among the Greek population as well as spiritual care over the Christian population. Furthermore the Patriarch was responsible for gathering

The Effect of the Greek Enlightenment on the Greek Revolution and the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church

the taxes from the orthodox Christians whom he also represented to the High Porte. The Patriarch was a high State Ottoman officer, his power dependent on the Sultan and he was the head of the *Rum-millet*, namely the Orthodox religious community. He was the head of the Greek subjects and thus the accessible figure for the High Porte to deal with. Furthermore the Sultan had favored the Patriarch granting him privileges that allowed him, and at the same time the orthodox clergy, to unhindered perform his clerical duties and spiritually guide his orthodox flock.

THE POSITION OF THE EASTERN CHURCH TOWARDS THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Due to the advance of the Enlightenment ideas, the Church realized that its status was being undermined and was losing its power. Thus gradually the Church hardened its reaction towards the intellectual movement. Certain ecclesiastical circles, clergymen as well as secular leaders and scholars, strongly opposed to the new ideas trying to suppress and urgently revoke them. At the same time the Church hierarchy attempted to strengthen the traditional values of Eastern Christianity. All people who supported and spread the ideas of the Enlightenment were denounced as enemies of the social order. The conservatives of the Church also proclaimed them falsifier of the authentic Christian values of the Orthodox people. In that context progressively a methodically formulated Anti-Enlightenment theory emerged. The traditional forces were reorganized lancing their accusations forcefully against the Enlightenment. Conservative frustration was expressed with a full-scale attack on the Enlightenment. Under the guidance of the Patriarchate, which engaged in this struggle with great persistence, the crusade turned into various directions at all levels of Greek society.

The Holy Synod published a series of circulars urging the faithful and the clergy to protect themselves avoiding those who spread the ideas of the Enlightenment and consequently incited the Greek subjects to revolt against the Sultan. In support of these the Ottoman High Porte addressed similar proclamations to the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces of the Empire and especially the Greeks.

The sultan, interpreting the Greek Revolution on the basis of the Sharia, perceived the Revolution as "apostasy", and "betrayal" of some *zimmi (dhimmi)*, namely some protected non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, against his State. In this context, the Patriarchate perceived the Revolution as an apostasy of the Orthodox people against their "benefactor", the Sultan, and therefore it was a great sin. The non-Christian ruler had been recognized by the conquered Greeks and the Orthodox Church as their legitimate political leader to whom the Christians owed their obedience.

Furthermore the Church pursued a policy of legitimacy towards the Ottoman Empire trying thus to ensure the survival of God's people as well as to provide them spiritual guidance and strengthen the Orthodox faith. Therefore, as already said, the subversive and dangerous visions of freedom proclaimed by the Greek Enlightenment, very little sympathy could find amongst the representatives of the Orthodox high clergy and the Patriarch himself.

EASTERN CHURCH'S REACTION TOWARDS THE ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS

The Orthodox clergy, under the veil of the Christian doctrine and the authority of the Scriptures, had the power to recommend submission to the Ottomans because, in accordance to the ecclesiastical view, the Ottoman ruler served an explicit mission. Specifically the higher clerics believed the Sultan was ordained by God to protect the Christians from heresy and atheism that threatened the authenticity of their faith. These views are expressed in the most famous of the counter-revolutionary texts, the pamphlet *Didaskalia Patriki (Paternal Teaching - Διδασκαλία Πατρική)* attributed to the Patriarch of Jerusalem Anthimos VI (1798). Adamantios Korais, a Greek scholar and major figure in the Enlightenment, responded to this challenge with the pamphlet *Adelfiki Didaskalia (Fraternal Teaching - Αδελφική Διδασκαλία)*, where the arguments of the Paternal teaching were systematically confronted.

In the same context the Church trying to stifle the attempts of political renewal, unequivocally condemned the booklet *Stochasmoi tou Kritonos (Kritonos' Thoughts - Οι Στοχασμοί του Κρίτωνος)* which invoked the values of humanism. Eventually this booklet was publicly burned in 1820 in Constantinople labeled as a blasphemous text attaching prime importance to human and not to divine matters.

Additionally the Church took further action against the Enlightenment. Specifically the philosopher Benjamin Lesvios, a monk and prominent scholar- praised by the Lord Byron as a "free thinker"- was forced to resign in 1812 from his position as the principal instructor at the school of Kydonies (Aivali) after long disputes with the conservatives, because he had been persistently attacked by a senior official of the Patriarchate.

Moreover in Smyrna the *Philologikon Gymnasion* closed in 1819, because the principal of the school Konstantinos Koumas, a remarkable scholar inspired by the ideals of the European Enlightenment and Korais' follower, as well as his associates were deposed being undermined for a long period by the conservatives. .

In 1821 the *Gymnasion of Chios* also became the target of the conservatives. Eventually the Patriarchate of Constantinople with the initiative of the Metropolitan of Chios a few weeks before the outbreak of the Revolution removed from his office the director Neophytos Vamvas and closed the *Gymnasion*.

The Effect of the Greek Enlightenment on the Greek Revolution and the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church

Having closed the three above major educational centers, the Church achieved the suppression of the Enlightenment in the East. Generally the Church turned against the schools of secular character and scientific orientation.

The final episode of persecution by the Church took place in panic caused by the retaliation of the Ottomans towards their Greek subjects in Constantinople following the outbreak of the Revolution in the Peloponnese. The then Patriarch Gregory V taken into surprise by the rebellion in March 1821 anathematized the Revolutionaries condemning overall the Greek revolutionary activities. However, by the text of the aphorism, which was essentially a political text, the Patriarchate condemned in total both the Revolution and the ideology that developed through it. Nevertheless the Patriarch did not manage to appease the Ottomans and eventually the Ethnarch of the Orthodox millet had a tragic end, being hanged by the Ottomans on Easter Sunday of 22 April 1821 blamed by the Sultan Mahmud II for his inability to suppress the Greek uprising.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE EASTERN CHURCH'S POSITION

The Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Orthodox hierarchy were bound to follow the Empire's own policy out of necessity due to their coexistence with a non-Christian ruler. Furthermore, the Patriarchate had to collectively approach and manage all issues concerning the Orthodox people, in accordance to its own perception of responsibility and protection towards its flock. In our days it is important to historically understand the attitude of the Church in that specific context, namely its long-standing and vital role for the prosperity and mostly the survival of the Orthodox Greeks who were subjects of a despotic and tyrannical regime. The role that the Church was then called to play and the interaction with the Sultan remains foreign to the later nationally defined way of thinking.

In fact the Patriarchate for centuries compromised with a non-Christian ruler in an unremitting effort to keep the balances. At the outburst of the Revolution the Church would not risk its position by taking the side of the rebel Christians, especially since the Revolution bore the signs of the influence of the Enlightenment and was inspired by visions of national and social emancipation. Actually the Church tried to keep distance anathematizing the revolutionaries. Nonetheless this was proved inadequate as the shock caused by the Revolution to the Ottomans was immense and eventually the Patriarch paid with his life.

THE GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT AS A FORERUNER OF THE REVOLUTION

The Greek Revolution was not merely the outcome of new intellectual ideas that intensified within the phenomenon called the Greek Enlightenment, but also the result of an economic, social and cultural process influenced by the developments in the western world which vastly affected the southern Balkans and the Mediterranean territories, namely the dominions of the Ottoman Empire.

However, it should be emphasized that the pioneering social group of the Enlightenment that contributed to the rapid progress of the nation's education by establishing schools, improving their curricula, publishing scientific books, expanding the circle of educated Greeks who now demanded independent social and political existence and, most of all, they demanded liberty from the Ottoman theocratic despotism, led to the awakening of the nation, the Revolution against the Ottomans with a final ending the remarkable achievement of establishing a modern nation-state, the so called Greek national state.

The political controversies of the French Revolution turned the Church actively against the Enlightenment. However, at least until 1789 the strong reactions to the Enlightenment did not come from the leadership of the Church, but from conservative bodies of "conventional education", who felt threatened by the Enlightenment. The challenge of the new intellectual phenomenon caused great insecurity to its secular opponents who accused the Enlightenment thinkers of being atheist aiming directly at undermining the Church.

The controversy between traditional and modern scholars was fierce and enduring. In addition to the confrontations between conservatives and the innovators, ideological differences were also observed in the enlightenment community itself. The ideological diversity focused mainly on determining the route and ways to liberation from the Ottoman Dynasty. These different political views derive from the scholars' social position and interests. In any case, the effect of the French Revolution, the reactions and the debates the Revolution provoked in the Balkan society, formed the context of the Greeks' new vision for liberation. During the years 1790-1820 this vision strengthened in the Greek political thought. On top of the ideas spread by the French Revolution, the Greek Enlightenment gave birth to expectations for national independence as well as provoked demands for the reformation of the Greek society in accordance to the standards set by the civilized societies of Western Europe.

CONCLUSION

The Greek Enlightenment overturned the image of the "eternal world of the god and the long-lived emperor" proclaimed by the Orthodox ecclesiastical aristocracy and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The ecclesiastical aristocracy, based on the privileges granted to the Patriarch, functioned as his proxy authority. This orthodox hierarchy was responsible for the administrative and spiritual surveillance of the Christian subjects of the Sultan. Through this surveillance the Church secured its own particular ideological and political interests. The Church was the center of education and political power of the old regime, holding a strong

The Effect of the Greek Enlightenment on the Greek Revolution and the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church

position in the administrative system of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore even if the new intellectual phenomenon was urgent and forceful it was not so easy to change the course of events overnight. On the contrary, many struggles and sacrifices were needed for the establishment of the new regime. In the end, nothing could stop the outbreak of the Greek Revolution. However, it should be emphasized that the Church unwillingly contributed to the strengthening of the Enlightenment bearing in mind that many new ideas became known through its criticism to the Enlightenment's supporters.

Although the Greek Enlightenment was not distinguished in science, philosophy, arts, technology, it nevertheless formed a new worldview for the *reyas*, namely the non-Muslim subjects of the Sultan. The Greek Enlightenment infused the notion of the citizen overthrowing the status of the faithful Christian subject. The notion of freedom was formed as a system of political and civil rights that people were entitled to enjoy. The Greek Enlightenment brought about a major fundamental change in the consciousness of the Greek *reyas*. This change in mentality and way of thinking successfully led to challenging the Ottoman system of power with the main end being the establishment of the Greek Independent state.

REFERENCES

- 1) Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Translated by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- 2) Demos, R., 'The Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment (1750–1821)', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (October 1958), 523–41;
- 3) Gourgouris, S., *Dream Nation. Enlightenment, colonization and the institution of Modern Greece*, Stanford University Press, 1996.
- 4) Kitromilides, P. M., 'Orthodoxy and the West. Reformation to Enlightenment', *Cambridge History of Christianity: Vol. V: Eastern Christianity*, ed. by Michael Angold, Cambridge, 2006, 187–209.
- 5) Kitromilides, P. M., *Enlightenment and Revolution: The Making of Modern Greece*, Cambridge, MA and London 2013.
- 6) Kors, Alan, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*. 4 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- 7) Mackridge, P., "The Greek-Intelligentsia 1780-1830: A Balkan Perspective" in *Balkan Society in the Age of Greek Independence*, ed. Richard Clogg, London, pp. 63-84.
- 8) Makrides, V., «The Enlightenment in the Greek Orthodox East: Appropriation, Dilemmas, Ambiguities», in *Enlightenment and Religion in Orthodox Word*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016.
- 9) Muncck, T., *The Enlightenment. A Comparative Social History 1721–1794*, London: Arnold, 2000.
- 10) Nicholls, D., *God and Government in an Age of Reason*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- 11) Runciman, St., *The Great Church in captivity: a study of the patriarchate of Constantinople from the eve of the Turkish conquest to the Greek War of Independence*, Cambridge, 1968.
- 12) Shaw, St., *Between Old and New. The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim II, 1789-1807*, Cambridge 1971.
- 13) Αποστολόπουλος, Δ., *Οι Ιδεολογικοί Προσανατολισμοί του Πατριαρχείου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως μετά την Άλωση*, εκδ. Ίδρυμα Γουλανδρή – Χορν, Αθήνα 1995.
- 14) Δημαράς, Κ.Θ., *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, Αθήνα, 2009.
- 15) Κιτρομηλίδης, Π. Μ., *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός. Οι Πολιτικές και Κοινωνικές Ιδέες*. μτφρ. Στέλλα Νικολούδη, Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, Αθήνα 2009.
- 16) Κιτρομηλίδης, Π.Μ., *Γαλλική Επανάσταση και Νοτιοανατολική Ευρώπη*, εκδ. Διάττων, Αθήνα 1999
- 17) Νούτσος, Π., *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός. Τα όρια της διακινδύνευσης*, εκδ. Ελληνικά Γράμματα, Αθήνα 2005.
- 18) Πιζάνιας, Π., (επιμ.) *Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση του 1821. Ένα Ευρωπαϊκό Γεγονός*, εκδ. Κέδρος, 2009.