

The American Way and the Greek Orthodox

American Evangelical Protestant Missionary
Efforts in Greece and towards Greek Orthodox Christians
in America prior to World War I.

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Introduction

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, poverty stricken and stripped to one-third of her original land mass, as well as much of her former dignity, tiny Greece was emerging as an independent new nation after four hundred years of heavy-handed oppression under the Ottoman Turks. At that time, Greece began to be confronted by Protestant Missionaries emerging from the revivalistic missionary fervor of America's Second Great Awakening. What made this unusual was that unlike the missionary efforts to what were considered to be "heathen" lands, like China or Africa, Greece had been, and very much continued to be a Christian land. Despite the great zeal and good intentions of the American missionaries, they were not met receptively by the citizens of Greece.

Greece certainly welcomed outside assistance where that assistance would support the building and unification of the new independent nation. However much of the assistance from America came in the form of evangelical Protestant missionaries with a desire to spread their own form of Christianity. A few of these missionary groups adopted a "no proselytize" policy in Greece, offering assistance in the form of much-needed schools. However, the preponderance of missionary efforts in Greece had been focused on attempting to convert the Greek Orthodox to another Christianity, a pattern which would be repeated on American soil during the boom of Greek immigration in the early twentieth century. The proselytizing of Greek Orthodox Christians by Protestant missionaries both in Greece and in America prior to World War One was fueled by misinformation about the Greeks, and a desire to spread "the American Way" of Christianity, ultimately affecting future ecumenical relations.

A Brief History of Oppression

The Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in A.D. 1453, and despite atrocities of the most horrific kind, which continued for nearly four centuries, the conqueror, Mohammed II was

determined to leave his conquered subjects to their own religious ways. The Turks granted privileges to the Greek Orthodox patriarch which preserved the integrity of their faith, language and customs. Thus there was established a state within the state, which gave a status of double dignity and authority to the patriarch as the head of the Greek peoples as well as the Church. The patriarch held a position similar to that of the Jewish high priest under the Romans. Rather than being imperiled by the Ottoman Turks, the Orthodox Church was almost strengthened by the cohesion of a common faith during those years of economic and social darkness:

For the next four centuries after the fall of Constantinople, the Greek was ground down with worse than slavery by the unspeakable Turk. 'Tis a bitter tale of continuous misrule, grinding taxation, indignities, atrocities, massacres, and, bitterest of all, the conscription of little children to be brought up Mohammedans and serve in the armies of the Sultan. It was the Greek Church that kept alive the spark of patriotism and education, and the modern Greek has never forgotten his incalculable debt to his Church.¹

In many ways, the Greek Church and the Greek nation had become synonymous terms. A large proportion of her people had come to believe that one was dependent on the other. The Orthodox Church was not only a cornerstone of the spiritual foundation but of the social and political structure as well. This close connection made the idea of revolt an almost "religious" obligation. The Greek revolution received the blessing of the Bishop Germanos of Patras at the termination of the Liturgy of Annunciation Day (March 25th) in 1821, resulting in a hard-fought victory after nine years of struggle. In the process of Turkish domination, repression and revolution, Greek culture had become wedded to Christianity. What developed was a Greek character, way of life, shrewdness and a unique xenophobia characteristic of a people who had learned to survive by their wits during economic hardship, with little help from their neighbors:

In our judgment of the modern Greek we must never fail to take into account these tremendous handicaps he has had to face, chiefest among which has been the abominable lack of sympathy and support from Christian Europe. Until the Balkan War of victory, Greece has become known to English readers largely through the prejudice of English writers.²

¹ Thomas Burgess, *Greeks in America* (Boston, 1913), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

The Missionaries Arrive

As a result of the fervor of the Second Great Awakening in America, many missionary organizations were established. Among these, The American Board of Commissioners For Foreign Missions, founded in 1810 by Lyman Beecher on behalf the Congregationalists selected Greece and Asia Minor as their first mission fields. Protestant missionaries from the Presbyterian, Episcopal as well as Congregational churches first arrived in Greece in the 1820s, mainly to evangelize the Moslems and Jews. As missionaries realized the doors were closed to the Moslems, who faced certain death if they converted to Christianity, their attentions were turned to the various other Christians - Greeks, Armenians, and Syrians - who had all been oppressed under the Turks. Intrusion into Greek religious life was a new experience for the Greeks, and their first encounter with American Protestant missionaries was not pleasant. A large part of the problem seemed to be ignorance on the part of the Americans missionaries of the difficult history of these Christian Greeks, and especially the role that the Church had played in securing independence:

This neglected section of history should be given much greater attention in our colleges. The history of the Middle Ages is far more than a mere history of the rise of the papacy as is so often taught. The Dark Ages of the East – and the East means in fundamentals Christian Hellenism – did not begin till 1453. Unless we appreciate all this, we cannot appreciate the proud claims of the modern Greek, nor understand the Eastern Orthodox Church.³

The Orthodox Church, never the subject of a reformation, had no connection to the Protestant revolt against Roman Catholicism in the 16th century. She had always encouraged free access by laity to the scriptures, had a married priesthood, offered Holy Communion in both kinds, and rejected papal claims of infallibility. But these common theological points at the heart of the Protestant reformation were overlooked as a result of the Protestant's discomfort with the unfamiliar external forms of worship of Orthodoxy, which they considered to have little

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

or no spiritual value. Orthodox worship was long, highly liturgical, rarely with a sermon, with priests clad in elaborate vestments, employing incense and making the sign of the cross, kissing icons, and chanting in ancient Greek:

A noteworthy feature of the service is the sound of the music which precedes and accompanies the Liturgy. At first it strikes a musical ear as a weird and monotonous wail always a little off the key. But as one grows accustomed to it, the very monotony becomes restful, almost hypnotic.⁴

There were also differences of opinion as to the overall vigor of the Church in Greece. “The Greek Church is weak, and religion is strong,” said Professor Burnouf, of the French Institute at Athens in an article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. “The Greek Church is strong, and religion is weak,” says the historian Finlay in a letter responding to Burnouf’s article.⁵ Charles K. Tuckerman was Minister Resident of the United States at Athens during the rebuilding years after revolution. In his report to America entitled “The Greeks of To-day,” Mr. Tuckerman observes that the Church in Greece was *so* visible, perhaps outsiders had expected a corresponding greater piety of her people than may have been found to be the case:

When we see people, as we do in Roman Catholic and Orthodox countries, pouring into the ever open churches, and note the vast number of those churches; when bells peal for matins and vespers on week days as well as Sabbaths; when the clergy of all grades, clothed in imposing canonical robes, make so large a feature in the street processions; and crosses and shrines meet the eye at every roadside, the natural inference is, not only that “the Church” is a prominent part of the social system, but that the religious faith and religious conduct must be the chief characteristic of the people...A perpetual exhibition of external religious forms and ceremonies is a perpetual challenge to investigation; and hence the deficiencies, if found to exist, in the moral and religious life of such a people, are the more open to criticism and to stricture.⁶

But it was undeniable that from whatever perspective one viewed the Church, and however one defined terms, Christianity, in the Greek Orthodox Church, had a strong visible presence in the fabric of Greek life before, during and after the revolution.

⁴ Marguerite Ogden, quoted in Thomas Burgess, *Greeks in America* (Boston, 1913), 102-103.

⁵ Charles K. Tuckerman, *The Greeks of To-Day* (New York & London, 1886), 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

The American Way

Perhaps the most significant contribution to the discord between Greek Orthodox and the American Protestants could be found in the reasons behind American missionary efforts in first place. The Puritan ancestors of these American missionaries believed that God had bestowed upon them special grace, much like the Israelites – a “favored nation” status of sorts. During the late nineteenth century, the concept of the supremacy of American Christianity was revitalized. Social thought of mainstream American Protestants of this time stressed their desire to not only maintain, but to propagate a homogenous, evangelical Protestant Christianity around the world. The General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance for the United States and author of the popular book "Our Country," Josiah Strong, articulated the sentiments of many Americans in his unwavering commitment to American Evangelical Protestant Anglo-Saxon superiority. In his book, *The New Era or The Coming Kingdom*, Strong ascribes Anglo-Saxons as possessing a “genius for living” as characterized by their securing the “largest liberty”, the “greatest progress”, the “most general intelligence and prosperity”... “sagacious judgment and this nice power of adjustment.”⁷ To be an American Protestant Christian was surely a blessing in itself with eschatological overtones:

This race is pre-eminently fitted, and therefore chosen of God, to prepare the way for the full coming of his kingdom in the earth.... We have also seen that America is ultimately to be the seat of the Anglo-Saxon’s power, the centre of his influence. Surely, to be a Christian and an Anglo-Saxon and an American in this generation is to stand on the very mountain-top of privilege. We are, it seems to me, even more favored than those who are to follow us.⁸

It is somewhat ironic that even though the Protestant Reformation was the catalyst for separating one of the two major branches of Christendom into its innumerable divisions – the Protestant Reformation *itself* had now become the proof of the intellectual superiority of the culture that began it:

⁷ Josiah Strong, *The New Era or The Coming Kingdom* (New York 1893). pg. 59-60.

The other great idea of which the Anglo-Saxon is the exponent is that of a pure spiritual Christianity. It is no accident that the great reformation of the sixteenth century originated among a Teutonic, rather than a Latin people.⁹

Religious Nationalism

Clearly, the gospel of American religion had become one of “religious nationalism” – an assigning of spiritual value to the aspirations and ideals of the nation. The “Greek” Church mindset of the time was also a religious nationalism. But the two manifestations - Greek and American - could not exhibit any more polarity than during the middle to late nineteenth century. American religious nationalism was concerned with the external advancement of the American Way of Life throughout the world, to “exercise the commanding influence in the world’s future.”¹⁰ To the contrary, four hundred years of foreign domination in Greece had made Greek religious nationalism focused on internal preservation. Loyalty and preservation had become “religious” values for the Greeks:

Every town and hamlet has its church or churches, and many a mountain top its saint’s chapel and sometimes its monastery. Practically all Greeks are Eastern Orthodox, and the Roman propaganda and Protestant proselytism has made scarcely any impression. The Greeks love their Church, and love to celebrate her festivals, and the parish priest is a man of much influence in his village. In fact patriotism and Orthodoxy are inseparably bound together in the heart of the Greek – the former, I fear, having the great emphasis.¹¹

It was abundantly clear that oppression had resulted in the secularization of religious life in Greece. More Greeks certainly needed to participate more in the liturgical-sacramental life of the Church, and rely less on patriotism and loyalty.

Education

As the Church was endeavoring to bring her people to a greater religious rather than secular focus, forces from outside were attempting, however unsuccessfully, to remove the

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York, 1885) [Online] Available http://longman.awl.com/nash/primarysource_20_1.html.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 11.

spiritual children from their Mother Church, rather than assist the established Church in educating her people. Education had always been important to the Greeks, even with the limited resources from which they emerged as an independent nation. Since 1837 they had been struggling to gradually improve their public school system, which was free to all Greeks. The Bible, the Catechism and Church History was always a prominent and required part of their curriculum.¹² But they were still desperately in need of educated individuals to lead these schools at every level. Even the village parish priest was often semi-literate, and only slightly more educated than many of his parishioners. Several missionary organizations, especially from the Episcopal Church, responded to this need. J. P. Xenides, a Protestant clergyman, secretary of the Greek Relief Committee and affiliated with Anatolia College and Theological Seminary published a book under auspices of the Inter-church World Movement reflecting that organization's emphasis on Christian charity and global unity. His report stated:

Thus missionaries went to Greece, soon after independence was established, and opened schools, published text-books and other literatures, and were welcomed everywhere. The Hill School for girls, founded by Dr. Hill, sent out by the Protestant Episcopal Church, continues to the present day to be held in highest esteem as an educational center. Religious instruction is given by representatives of the Greek Church. But other missionaries along with the work of education and enlightenment started controversies by discussing points of difference between Protestants and Orthodox, and a bitter opposition was aroused which prejudiced the people against the missionaries, except those of the Protestant Episcopal Church, who never attempted to make proselytes.¹³

The Episcopal missionaries were to gain a reputation among the Greeks for being trustworthy, ministers of Christ's Gospel of diakonia, or "service" especially through their schools – rather than of a gospel of proselytism. Other groups distributed books or gave out copies of the Holy Scriptures either in the original text or in modern Greek translation. At first these efforts were very much appreciated, but when the missionaries began to reveal ulterior motives by trying to effect conversions and by distributing together with the Scriptures

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ J. P. Xenides, *The Greeks In America* (New York, 1922), 63.

additional volumes offensive to Orthodox sentiments, this brought them into friction with Church hierarchy, and aroused the distrust of the people:

The Greek, however much inspired by curiosity to attend the preaching of a foreigner and a Protestant, keeps away, being suspicious, first, of the motive and second, of the sincerity of the preacher. Even if he attends Sunday after Sunday, and hears nothing uttered that is not in perfect accordance with the moral teachings of the fathers of his own church, he wonders why men are sent thousands of miles, from America to Greece, and supported by foreign money to preach to them, if the real object is not to proselyte. "Our own priests," said an intelligent Greek to me one day, "are supposed to look after our morals; why are these missionaries here, but for some special and secret purpose?"¹⁴

The issue was not lack of religious tolerance, for all religions were everywhere allowed in Greece at that time, as long as it did not actively interfere with the national church. This was especially reasonable when one considered her historic struggles. The line drawn in the sand was the Greek nation's law against proselytism, but it was an ethical line as well. "For American Protestants to try to proselytize the Eastern Orthodox Christians ...is not only an almost impossible task, but also totally wrong and unchristian."¹⁵ American missionaries were now outwardly pursuing a policy that was predatory to Orthodox Christianity. Tuckerman, a Protestant himself, suggested a retort for the Greek to help the misguided missionary see the reality of the situation:

"We are both Christians! Being one in essential faith, what right have you to proclaim as *errors* the forms and ceremonies wherewith we worship the Saviour because your forms and ceremonies, and certain principles which they illustrate do not happen to be ours? We, at least have one point in our favor which you cannot adduce – we are united, eighty millions of us in one profession of faith; you are divided among yourselves, each with a banner of his own, and ever engaged in polemical warfare."¹⁶

The Story of Jonas King

This misguided zeal of the missionaries in Greece was no more effectively illustrated than by the career of one Jonas King, a "sturdy Puritan" congregationalist. He was born in Massachusetts, educated at Williams College, where he was converted in a revival, and attended Andover Seminary prior to beginning his missionary work in Asia Minor in 1822. He married a

¹⁴ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 218.

¹⁵ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 122.

Greek woman and became the first missionary in the new capital of Athens in 1831. After 10 years, the mission to Greece of the American Board had a staff of four clergymen and their families, who spent most of their time publishing and distributing evangelical tracts. They established a mission school there, but King would not obey, as the Episcopalians did, the law requiring that religious education for children could only be taught by a certified Orthodox theologian. The school was eventually abandoned. The American Board in 1845 decided that “our duty, therefore, is painfully clear. Dr. King will remain alone at Athens, our only missionary among the Greeks.” King discusses these unusual Greeks in a letter to the American Board:

“Whatever the causes may be – and they are doubtless various – the Greek mind, just now, is strangely inaccessible to the missionary who would preach to them the gospel. With rare exceptions, *they will not hear*; the number of conversions has been exceedingly small...”¹⁷

Dr. King was particularly adept at using his letters home to stimulate continued interest in his ministry, financially and otherwise, despite its lack of significant numbers of conversions over many decades. He frequently referred to himself alongside Biblical greats, “...like the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I may die, ‘not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off.’”¹⁸ A Greek newspaper once printed an imaginary conversation between a well known American missionary and a Greek convert: “Doctor, I have just seen, in an American journal, a statement from you to the effect that you had converted a large number of Greeks to the Protestant Episcopal faith. How is this? I always thought that I was your only convert.” Missionary. – “You are quite correct, but don’t you see that unless I made such representations I could not get money from the society at home for our great work.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 213.

¹⁷ Jonas King, “Greece: - Letter from Mr. King.” *The Missionary Herald* 54.4 (April, 1858), 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Quoted by Charles K. Tuckerman, *The Greeks of To-Day* (New York & London, 1886), 218.

Dr. King soon adopted a policy of open confrontation with the Orthodox Church. He was originally charged in the newspapers with attempting to convert an Orthodox woman to Protestantism. He published a letter in the same paper soon thereafter, which was less a defense of his practices, and more an outward condemnation of many of the teachings of the Orthodox Church. He subsequently published a 220 page book called “The Defence of Jonas King,” which once again was not a defense of Jonas King at all, but a condemnation of 1800 years of Orthodox Christian tenets, such as the ever-virginity of Mary, the concept of the incarnation, icons in the Church, the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion, and the honoring of Saints. Charles K. Tuckerman had been Minister Resident of the United States at Athens during King’s ministry in Greece, and knew Dr. King personally:

But he who knew Dr. King and his peculiar temperament and iron will, which was intolerant and dogmatic, can understand how aggravating to the public mind it was to have a foreigner persistently preaching down, as it were, the established faith with expressions or intimations which, to the ears of his auditors, seemed sacrilegious.²⁰

Ultimately King was charged in the civil courts that he had “designedly entered into opposition against the dogmas and canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church.” a charge which was later confirmed by the Areopagus, or Higher Court of Appeal – “on the ground that, although the Constitution of Greece sanctions the liberty of speech and tolerate the worship of foreign religions, it does not allow the condemnation of the principles, customs, doctrines and ordinances of the religion dominant in Greece.”

I have brought up this case of Dr. King, now forgotten by many people at home, but which, at the time, created intense excitement and led to much diplomatic flourish, because of the unfortunate consequences to which it gave birth. and it must be added, for I have it from his own lips – to *convert* the Greek Orthodox Christians to his own religious views.²¹

King was sentenced to fifteen days in jail and banishment from Greece. The Holy Synod met in council in Constantinople and declared the excommunication of Jonas King on August 27, 1845.

²⁰ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 216.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The encyclical was to be read throughout the Orthodox world. He was declared by the synod to be “a false apostle,” “a man exercised in the highest degree in hypocrisy, a real imposter and deceiver,” and “a vessel of Satan” who was anathemized by the Greek Orthodox Church.²²

The Annual Report that year featured Dr. King’s description of himself as a successor to Saint Paul imprisoned in Athens: “But now, in this enlightened age, a successor of Paul, preaching the same Gospel, is sentenced to imprisonment and banishment.”²³ Although King spent only a few hours in jail and was never banished from Athens, the “letter from prison” which he only dated there, in which he thanked the Lord Jesus that he was “counted worthy to suffer shame for His name”²⁴ was widely published in America. Mr. Tuckerman describes quite a different situation from the one which the readers of King’s letters to the American Board might have visualized after reading his dramatic epistle from prison:

Out of deference to Dr. King’s nationality and personally good character, the sentence was not executed. The fifteen days’ imprisonment consisted in walking Dr. King into one of the doors of the prison and out of another door. He succeeded, I believe, in dating, but not in writing, a letter from his “prison,” and was comfortably housed elsewhere during the remainder of the term. Neither was the sentence of exile carried out. Dr. King continued to reside at Athens as a foreign missionary, with occasional absences, until his death in May, 1869, and although he was always treated with the respect to which his calling and irreproachable conduct entitled him, he failed to win the confidence of the people around him, or to have any marked influence as a religious teacher. Nothing evinced this more than the small number of Greeks who attended his funeral. Although he dwelt among them for forty years, spoke their language, and was personally acquainted with almost every person of position in Athens, not a dozen Greeks were present, a circumstance the more significant, because they are exceedingly punctilious in paying due honors to the dead.²⁵

Although King was rejected by the Greeks, he did much to prepare the way for the Greeks to be rejected in America when they emigrated. Anti-Greek sentiments were already being sown back in America, as King was now being considered to be a martyr, and the Greeks and their Church were now considered to be the persecutors of America’s new apostle:

²² Jonas King, “Greece: - Letters from Mr. King.” *The Missionary Herald* 41.12 (December, 1845), 415.

²³ King, *The Missionary Herald* 48.10 (October, 1852), 296.

²⁴ King, *The Missionary Herald* 48.6 (June, 1852), 179.

²⁵ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 215.

Of course, in the eyes of his countrymen at home, Dr. King became a religious martyr from the moment that the account of his “persecution” in Greece reached the United States. Like a second St. Paul had he not suffered “imprisonment for righteousness’ sake,” and been banished like a common felon for preaching God’s Word? The crown of martyrdom was borne by Dr. King with complacent satisfaction and he became the recipient of much epistolary sympathy and of material aid from his friends at home. The course adopted by Dr. King was not calculated to encourage missionary work at Athens, and to-day one of the chief difficulties in the way of its advancement is the bitter prejudice which exists in the popular mind, caused by the mistaken zeal and intolerance of some of the early workers in the missionary field.²⁶

Missionary outreach had become a major preoccupation with American Christians during the nineteenth century, and missionary journals, magazines and newspapers abounded. The missionaries relied entirely on financial contributions from their “constituency” at home. Sympathies were more easily pricked and pocketbooks more easily opened when the portrayal of the harsh circumstances with which the missionary was dealing in order to spread the Gospel was vividly illustrated, especially including the seamy side of the strange culture in which he was entrenched:

I believe the missionaries to be earnest workers in the field, and have no doubt that the “Annual Reports” which they furnish to the societies at home are calculated to inspire confidence in the work of foreign evangelization in Greece...If I may venture a step further, I would express the opinion that if certain missionaries in various quarters of the world would put less coloring into the reports which they furnish to their societies at home, and be more willing to substitute naked facts for illusory statements, the friends of missions would be better able to judge of the condition, the real condition, of the work for which they so cheerfully and liberally subscribe.²⁷

Early on, the Episcopal Church had abandoned its practices of trying to convert Greek Orthodox Christians in Greece, and instead was instrumental in the establishment and administration of much-needed schools. A trust had been established. The memory of these schools, and especially the demeanor of Episcopalian missionary activity in Greece, was carried with the Greek immigrant into America:

I believe that some of our societies at home are beginning to hold the opinion that it is better, at least in Christian countries, to abandon all attempts, open or covert, to proselyte, and to direct their missionaries to confine their labors exclusively to the mental and moral education of such as will hear them, letting tenets, forms, doctrines and usages quite alone. If this principle had been adopted when the foreign missionary labor was initiated in Greece, the influence of the missionary would not be as colorless as it to-day is. But to attempt to proselyte a people, or even an

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 211, 223.

infinitesimal portion of them, from the worship of their fathers, sanctified to them by the influences of the ages, is worse than futile. I say worse than futile, because “the attempt and not the deed, undoes” the missionary, in the eye of the people about him, and by exciting their suspicion, ridicule or hatred, lessens or annihilates his influence for good.²⁸

Greek Migration to America

The promise of a better economic life began to bring the first trickle of Greek immigrants to American shores. Many of the Greeks among whom the missionaries worked were of the merchant class and the promulgation of the “American Way” by the missionaries inspired in them a longing for a more promising future through increased economic opportunities. Rev. Americus Fuller, President of the Congregational College at Marsovan describes these emissaries of the “American Way”:

Centuries of Christian civilization and culture were behind them born and nurtured in the lap of Christian house....Permeated and engrained with the standards of American civilization and carefully and fully trained in all the varied knowledge that the most advanced collegiate education of the day could impart, they were of the best types of Christian manhood which the church of that day could offer.²⁹

Three distinct periods of immigration were observed. Beginning about 1860, they came by the tens for about ten years, then by twenties for the next ten years. Between 1848 and 1885, only 748 Greeks had entered American ports, an average of only 20 per year. During the next ten years they began to come by the hundreds, and soon by ever increasing thousands, virtually all of whom were male. The married men simply could not afford to bring their families for a number of years. The statistics show a significant trend of increasing immigrants beginning in 1891, correlating to a great industrial depression in Greece brought about in part from a lack of diversity in industry, significant changes in government, and by a failure of the currant industry, an important crop. With hard times at home, the Greek came “because he could get more money in America;” and “once started, this movement, like the familiar chain letter, could not be

²⁸ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 211-212.

²⁹ Americus Fuller, “Missionary Educators,” *The Missionary Herald* (October, 1903), 441.

checked, but grew by its own multiplication. Each Greek in America became the nucleus of a rapidly increasing group of his kin and neighbors.”³⁰

Although many had been farmers, the urban ghettos offered a more familiar pattern of the close-knit social life which the Greek had experienced in the homeland. By 1913 there were nearly a quarter of a million Greek immigrants, 95% of whom were male. Little by little those who were married began to send back or go back for their wives and families. Unmarried girls as well, began coming more and more with their brothers or parents. In that same year Thomas Burgess, of the American Branch Committee of the Anglican Church published “Greeks in America – An Account of their Coming, Progress, Customs, Living and Aspirations” intended for students of the “immigration problem.”³¹ Burgess felt a necessity that each particular ethnic group should be “studied separately with care, and portrayed separately with completeness.” He gives a balanced sketch of the Greeks to whom he referred as “an important, intelligent, and little appreciated part of our population,”³² an attitude which the Greeks in America were to find to be the exception. Overall, the Greeks were themselves to become the exception to many general complaints which American natives made about its new immigrants. Self-reliance was one example where the Greeks stood apart from other ethnic groups:

As has been the case everywhere else, so in Lowell the Greeks, however poor and wretched, have always taken care of themselves or each other. They are too proud to accept charity. During all the twenty years, except in one instance, the city of Lowell has never paid a cent to help a Greek individual or family, nor to bury a Greek. The one instance was when a Greek Protestant “missionary” went to the overseer of the poor and got some money ostensibly for his brother’s family, all of whom were working at the time!³³

And as to the issue of morality, of which blanket statements were being made against all foreigners, Burgess stated that the newly emigrated Greek man:

³⁰ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 16-19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 53.

“never heard of in Greece that terrible laxness in divorce law, that rank looseness among the “leaders of society,” that daily scandal-mongering of newspapers, which things are the crying shame of this *free* land of ours. The Greeks are not corrupting us; we are corrupting them. Nay, rather in Greece the relation of the sexes is almost puritanical. Holy matrimony is a sacrament and a responsibility the most sacred and binding, children the best of blessings, – the family there is still treated as the foundation of society...God grant that the family life may fast increase among the Greeks in America.³⁴

Greek enclaves began to be established in many of the major cities of the United States – Chicago, New York, Lowell, and Boston being the earliest. The sense of urgency with which the American missionary had taken the gospel of religious nationalism throughout the world was now becoming a most pressing issue on its own shores. Most distressing to the preservation of an American Christian way of life was the “immigration problem.” Moreover, the desire of immigrants to retain their ethnic identity and language rather than to be assimilated into the great “melting pot” of America was of concern to the Anglo-Saxon “natives.” These sentiments were best described by Josiah Strong in his popular book, “The New Era”:

If the foreigners were scattered among the native population, our language would be a necessity to them, and they would soon become acquainted and assimilated; but segregated they simply live the old country life on our soil. They are like unmastered food. Mastication is a process of *separating*, without which digestion is a slow and painful process. Not only different languages but also different ideas and habits of life combine to make the evangelization of these peoples more difficult. Their presence has very noticeably and lamentably lowered the standard of Sabbath observance and impaired habits of sobriety in the cities.³⁵

Burgess counters this generalization by his specific opinion of Greeks and their language:

Much has been thoughtlessly said and written against the Greek keeping up his language and his interest in his native country and his “merely formal” religion. “Such things prevent his becoming a good American!” Yet Greek, Greece, and the Orthodox Church are and have been down the centuries ever since St. Paul’s time, the three sources of all that is lofty in Greek character.³⁶

And Burgess comments specifically to the issue of preserving Greek language, culture and religion with regards to the education of Greek children in America:

If we try to cut off the Greek child from these, what have our schools to offer in return? Nay rather, if you wish him to become a good and useful American citizen, allow him every incentive to that refining culture in the sublimest of languages and literatures, which our people sadly need; that unswerving patriotism which so many of our boys have ceased to feel; that holy religion

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.74-75.

³⁵ Strong, *New Era*, 191.

³⁶ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 77.

which, whatever its seeming formalism, is at least a reminder of the presence of the Christ whom the majority of Americans have forgotten.³⁷

Strong dedicated a large portion of “The New Era” to addressing the problem of retaining a pure

American Christian culture amidst the morally and intellectually inferior foreign influence:

I bring no sweeping accusation against foreigners. Many of those who come to us – perhaps more than we commonly suppose – are Christian in fact as well as in name, while not a few have rendered eminent service to religion, morals, literature, and political reform. Still we are compelled to recognize facts, and the facts are that a majority of immigrants believe either in a perverted and superstitious form of Christianity or in none at all. A great majority were peasants, whose lives, in many instances, have been subjected to spoliation and wrong, and who have learned, therefore, to associate law with tyranny, and conceive of freedom as freedom from law, or, in one word, license. We must not wonder, therefore, that the foreign element produces far more than its due proportion of criminals...³⁸

Years later, Strong’s writings continued to reflect society’s prevailing sentiments of the inferior intelligence and moral shortcomings of the immigrants:

We do not forget our indebtedness to the immigrants. They have borne the brunt of the toil and hardship in subduing the continent and in developing its resources...But we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the foreign population, as a whole, is depressing our average intelligence and morality in the direction of the dead-line of ignorance and vice.³⁹

Home Missions

In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church had been well established. For the first twenty years of the presence of Greeks and other Orthodox Christians in America, the Church was unfortunately almost completely ineffective in providing spiritual leadership. In addition, the transient pattern of Greeks frequently returning to the homeland made the establishment of normal patterns of Church life more difficult. Until the First World War, there were more Protestants working among the Greek immigrants than there were priests of the Orthodox Church. The attempts of the immigrant Greeks to establish an Orthodox Christian presence in their own communities necessitated overcoming many significant hurdles, perhaps the most significant of which was the lack of trained clergy. An additional complication was that because

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁹ Josiah Strong *The Twentieth Century City* (New York 1898), 97-98.

the Patriarch of Russia had already established an American presence in the northwest, it was against canon law for a bishop to be sent from Greece or Constantinople to work among the Greek Orthodox in America. Greek nationalism ran too high to accept non-Greek clergy, even if canon law required it.

The American Protestant missionary had unknowingly set up the confrontation between the Greek immigrant and the American way of life. The missionaries, while on the mission fields, had provided the Americans at home with an unsympathetic picture of the peoples among whom they had worked. The images sent home relating to Greece had been of superstition and of people possessing minds that were according to the letters of Jonas King, “strangely inaccessible to the missionary who would preach to them the gospel.”

By 1910 the Congregational Church alone had sixteen men working in home missions among the Greeks. The Northern Baptist Convention, Salvation Army and the Presbyterian Church had active Greek work in a number of cities, taking a number of forms. Initially, the immigrant was met at Ellis Island by a Protestant missionary worker who spoke Greek. The new arrival was given a copy of the scriptures in Greek. Storefront type mission centers were established with services conducted in Greek. These efforts were “to” and “for” the Greeks, but not “with” the Greeks, in much the same tone as the missionary rendered at the beginning of the development in any new foreign land. This made the immigrant Greek the recipient of Protestant charity rather than a participant in American church life:

Some Protestant Church publications have created the impression that the wants of the immigrants in this country are being ministered to, and that the churches are caring for these people. The Protestant churches are doing no such thing; and the full realization of this should be brought home to those members, who, in the sincere belief that they are aiding in bettering home conditions, are annually contributing to a work the results of which are to be found only on paper. Instead of exerting an influence to break down the barriers of racial antipathy, the Protestant churches have usually adopted either an attitude of superiority toward the recent immigrants or one of indifference, and have built up a caste distinction.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Leroy Hodges “The Church and The Immigrants: A Record of Failure and The Remedy” *The Missionary Review of the World*, (March 1909), 169.

The Methodists had missions in Lowell, Mass., where Sunday and weekday services were carried on and both Presbyterians and Baptists conducted work for Greeks in New York City for a time “but no lasting results were achieved.”⁴¹ Leroy Hodges, former Commissioner of Immigration of the Southern Commercial Congress was told by an Orthodox immigrant that his people “have a church of their own, and priests of their own...so how can it be supposed that they will call on the teachers of a religious faith which they have always been taught is antagonistic to the faith of their forefathers?” Another issue that Hodges discovered was a condescending attitude towards the immigrants:

Special work which has been attempted by the Protestant churches has failed through an absence of an intelligent appreciation of the needs of the people. The immigrants are treated as if they were a very inferior people; and the churches acting under their assumption of superiority send their workers among the immigrants and often attempt to make “Christians” of them by teachings hardly advanced enough to be offered to the youngest children in the Sunday-schools⁴²

To be a “true American” during this time was to have become a member of the “new Israel” of God. One of the noble purposes of the individual churches was to strengthen and support the cause of America - the covenanted nation. Ecclesiology had never been a strong Protestant emphasis, so the attempt to Protestantize the new immigrants was not an attempt to strengthen the “Church” but a desire to mold American society itself in a distinctively Anglo-Saxon Christian way. Although the concept of the “American Way of Life” itself was vague, the means to bring it about for many Protestant Evangelicals was very specific – limited to a narrow and finite set of criteria by which one could be judged as a participant in this ideal, and an equally narrow method for bringing about such a change in mindset for others:

When the leaders of the Protestant crusade confronted those who resisted what seem to them obviously to be the true and right way, they were ready to use social pressure and moral coercion. It is interesting to observe that when they were focusing on their central spiritual and theological tasks, the Protestants’ commitment to religious freedom was most genuinely displayed. They

⁴¹ Xenides, *The Greeks*, 134.

⁴² Hodges, *Church and Immigrants*, 169-170.

sincerely wanted to win as many as they could to the faith which meant so much to them.
...Groups which did not share their basic premises could become only too painfully aware of it.⁴³

As had been the case in Greece, similar patterns of misunderstanding and opposition against the faith of Orthodox Christians continued. Evangelical zeal seemed to ignore that individuals who already professed Christianity, in name and in practice, were being proselytized to fit the predetermined criteria of appropriate American religious participation:

Instances there have been when some well meaning Protestant churches have tried to proselytize the Orthodox Greeks; but the methods they employed and the display they made over their baptism (!) of one convert so embittered the Greeks that they despised and still despise the name Protestant even more than they did in Greece.⁴⁴

There was evidence of one notable exception to the blanket distrust of “Protestants” by Greeks of those who worked among them in America. In the Lowell-Boston area, there was apparently an immigrant Greek Protestant who, despite his desire to convert the Orthodox Greeks to Protestantism, worked as a good Samaritan and did much good in many ways. “If you want to see a good pastor and a true shepherd of his people go to that Protestant, Mr. Vaitsis,” said several Greeks⁴⁵ Mr. Vaitsis’ legacy of kindness was referred to in more than one source:

There is, however, one Lowell Greek, one of the five or six Protestant “missionaries” in America connected with the Congregationalists, a sweet-souled man, who, though he rarely makes a convert, has nevertheless made himself respected and beloved by his deeds of real charity in visiting the sick and suffering of his countrymen.⁴⁶

As the Greeks were attempting to establish their own Orthodox Churches, it was their neighbors from the Episcopal Churches who came forward to offer their buildings, sanctuaries, schools and camps as a gesture of genuine friendship rather than as a means to convert them to the Episcopal faith:

The Protestant Episcopalians are against any Protestant work among the Greeks. They are very friendly and ever ready to help the Greeks to help themselves. They loan them churches, chapels and halls, and bishops, clergymen and laymen are sympathetic and helpful.⁴⁷

⁴³ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America - Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York 1984), 50.

⁴⁴ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 154.

⁴⁵ Xenides, *The Greeks*, 134.

⁴⁶ Burgess, *Greeks in America*, 154.

⁴⁷ Xenides, *Greeks in America*, 134.

This attitude of brotherly service in the truest sense did much to endear the Protestant Episcopal Church to the Greek immigrants, as it had years earlier in Greece. Although the intention was not to do so, many Greeks did ultimately convert to the Episcopal Church, especially when no Orthodox Churches had been established in proximity to them:

One of the oldest and most prominent leaders who avails himself of every opportunity to attack Protestants, especially missionaries, told me he did not attend any Greek church, but usually went to some Protestant Episcopal Church, “because” he said “the Protestant Episcopal Church does not attempt to proselytize the Greeks.”⁴⁸

One final factor which no doubt propelled attempts to convert the newly immigrated Greek Orthodox Christians to Protestant Christian denominations was that of simple competition – competition itself being fundamental in the human condition. In many Evangelical Protestant circles, increasing the number of new members in the local church was the primary criterion by which the effectiveness of its witness was measured. This didn’t necessarily mean that competition for another church’s members served the cause of Christ, however:

What I mean to say is that the work of proselytism in all countries is very unproductive, and interferes with that wider and deeper sphere of usefulness, the teaching of religion pure and simple – the duties between man and an man – and the obligations of man to his Creator.⁴⁹

As to the issue of competition in religion, eighteenth and nineteenth century observers of religious life agreed that competition detracts from the ultimate purpose of the religious group. Martin Marty, Associate Editor of *The Christian Century* and Church History professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School observes that:

“Purposeless activity in one part of the religious organism may render absurd the rest of the organism. Conflict can serve as the stimulus ...Necessity to compete or stave off conflict may reduce witness and service.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁹ Tuckerman, *Greeks of To-Day*, 212.

⁵⁰ Martin E. Marty, “The Nature and Consequences of Social Conflict for Religious Groups,” Epilogue in *Religion and Social Conflict*, eds. Robert Lee and Martin Marty (New York 1964), 189.

And even Strong, who desired to inculcate the entire world with the Anglo-Saxon brand of Christianity believing that the Anglo-Saxon was the only exponent of a “pure spiritual Christianity” – believed that competition against other Christians was ultimately bigotry:

This competitive struggle to live of course intensifies sectarianism. Many become devoted to the church, not because it is Christ’s church, but because it is their church. They may hate some other church of Christ quite as heartily as they love their own...They lay the flattering unction to their soul that they are uncommonly pious, when as a matter of fact they are simply bigoted.⁵¹

Conclusion

The American Protestant missionaries who had worked among the Greeks in Greece contributed to the climate into which the Greeks subsequently immigrated. Letters home to missionary journals which related exaggerated and one-sided difficulties had pre-disposed American culture to be distrustful of immigrants in general, and Greeks specifically. An attitude of Anglo-Saxon Protestant superiority coupled with some degree of misinformation influenced many Americans towards an incorrect belief that Greek Orthodox Christianity, with a nearly 2000 year history, was a “perverted and superstitious form of Christianity.” Even now, nearing the end of the twentieth century, it is still very difficult for many evangelical Protestant Christians to see Orthodox Christians – the second largest body of Christians in the world – as true “brothers and sisters in Christ.” Those American individuals and groups who supported the immigrant Greeks and their historic Orthodox Christianity helped create bonds of Christian unity which have continued in subsequent generations.

⁵¹ Strong, *New Era*, 299.

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