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A Passion for Life: Hellenism at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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What Is Hellenism?

In 327, BC a Greek army under Alexander the Great marched through what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northwest India. The army was followed by scores of scientists, artists, scholars, and engineers, who built many new cities, into which Greek settlers came to find a new home. During the centuries that followed, those settlers established a strong Greek cultural tradition, which survived for several centuries.

The degree of Hellenization of those remote areas is now well known, thanks to exciting archaeological discoveries in Afghanistan and Pakistan, whereas both Greek and Indian literary traditions preserve stories about the Greek presence in northwestern India: we learn about the "thousand cities of Bactria" and the "valiant Yavanas" and Indian tradition records in its scriptures the adventures of the Greek kings of Bactria, especially Menander. To all these should be added such elements as the use of the Greek language as the "lingua franca", the assimilation of Greek gods to local divinities, the adoption of Greek science by local peoples, and the Greek elements on the Buddhist art in Gandhara, in northwest India and Pakistan (in fact, Gandharan art is credited with the invention of the Buddha image, for which the strong Greek tradition seems to have played an important role).

Almost two and a half thousand years later, high up in the mountains of central Asia, scattered villages of a mysterious and fascinating people betray an unusual ethnic and cultural phenomenon. In the mountainous and remote district of Chitral are the Kalash valleys – the home of the *Kafir-Kalash* or 'Wearers of the Black Robe', a tribe numbering more than 3000 people. The Kalash claim to be descendants of Alexander's Greek settlers.

They have fair skin and Mediterranean facial features, and their social customs preserve many Greek elements, from dances to furniture. Their religion preserves many pagan elements, totally foreign to the Muslim religion that surrounds them, from ritual sacrifices of animals to their gods, who betray a Greek origin. Not to mention that their language preserves numerous elements of Greek vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

The character of this people, as shown by their stories, myths, and everyday life, betray a mentality and a philosophy of life that is deeply Hellenic, a mentality and a philosophy of life that you will find in Greek communities scattered around the globe: more than seven million Greeks are now dispersed all around the world. What these people have in common, whether they are descendants of ancient settlers in the heart of Asia or modern immigrants in North America, is a system of ideas and a way of life, what we call Hellenism.

What are the major themes that define Hellenism?

Central to Hellenism is the idea of humanity. "Man is the measure of all things", said the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras and these lines echo through thousands of years of Hellenic culture. The Universe is brought down to the human scale; the colossal and the titanic sacrificed for the accessible and the moderate. Since the beginning of Greek culture poets, writers, philosophers, artists, intellectuals, scientists, sought to define the basic elements of our existence, to understand what makes us human and what the major elements of our humanity are. Self-knowledge became one of the highest values of Hellenic civilization, as it is only through examining and discovering ourselves, that we can realize our strengths and weaknesses, establish the priorities that are really important to our lives and try to fulfill those priorities.

In the heart of Hellenic humanism lies the dual character of our nature. We are made of two conflicting elements, reason and feeling, logic and passion – what Nietzsche called Apollonian and Dionysiac. This is our nature and we can not live without one or the other. Hellenism wants to bring balance and harmony between the two, in a way that dark and wild passions are not being suppressed, but masterfully tamed and wisely guided by reason.

Tragedy is an integral part of Hellenism, too. Life in Greece has always been and in many places still is hard: the rugged and rocky landscape has always made survival difficult – forcing the Greeks away from their land, making them sailors, travelers, merchants, emigrants. Poverty has always been hard in Greece. The geopolitical location of Greece, on the other hand, at a crossroads between three continents, brought the onslaught of countless invaders and endless centuries of harsh

foreign occupations. Hellenism has been deeply affected by the unending struggles, the pain and the agony of death.

In fact, Hellenism never quite dissociates itself from the idea of death. But what is important, is that, although death is acknowledged and respected, it is not a source of fear or intimidation. The Hellenic view of death is not passive, but active. In the Greek system of ideas, death is a challenge that has to be met, a formidable adversary that each one of us, both individually and collectively, as part of a group, has to fight against and defeat. The acceptance of death, as a certainty of our existence does not lead to resignation, but to a persistent and stubborn struggle to overcome it.

This struggle gives another perspective on life. The deep experience of pain and death has stirred up in Hellenism an unquenchable thirst for joy and life, beauty and harmony. Life is to be enjoyed and celebrated, because it

is not eternal and should not be taken for granted. The celebration of life becomes the defeat of death. Hellenism seeks life when death is the only certainty; it hungers for spiritual creation in a harsh material environment; and seeks peace and justice in a world torn by violence and injustice.

The celebration of life takes on the form of creation, the birth of things that transcend the limits of our finite existence, of things that will still be alive when our lives will have ended, of

of ambition. These are the unavoidable side-effects of the strength and stamina needed for survival. Greek culture is at the same time hard and soft, cruel and tender; but always passionate and always fiery. Passion is the key-word for understanding Hellenic humanism. A civilized passion for life, guided by the light of rational thought but always respectful of the dark side.

What does it have to do with us?

All this is very interesting, you might say, but what does it have to do

this. Life in the last century has changed more than it had changed in thousands of years. Technology has progressed so rapidly, especially in the last forty years, that our day-to-day living is radically different from that of the previous generation. But at the same time, we live in an era where false cultural values, hidden behind a glamorous and dazzling façade, are presented as real. Today more than ever, the emerging "virtual" world levels the differences between real and fictional, between the human and the machine. Technology is rapidly taking over our lives; it is becoming the ultimate purpose and goal. It is sad that we are increasingly forgetting that technology is nothing more than a tool, a medium that is supposed to make us happy.

We are losing perspective here. Don't get me wrong; technology is wonderful; it can solve so many problems and make our lives so much easier. But at the same time, focusing on technology as opposed to humanity leads to insecurities and fears, as it distracts us from learning about ourselves. We are so dazzled by technology that we tend to make it the measure of all things. The mistake is not in developing technology. The mistake lies in replacing humanity with technology. Humanity and technology should go hand in hand, they should develop at the same pace. But the fast growth of

technology has left humanity lagging behind, not being able to catch up with this progress. And this in no way means that technological progress should slow down; it is humanity that needs to develop and grow, so that it will not be upstaged by technology.

And growing means understanding. Understanding who we are, understanding the world in which we live and the processes that created us and this world. Going back to our roots, not in order to turn the clock around, but to find the strength and the intelligence to continue; it is necessary for this understanding. Regaining touch with spiritual, the emotional and the passionate, the distinction between good and bad, and the distinction between real and "virtual".

Hellenic Studies

How do we go about achieving this? The answer lies to a large degree with our colleges and universities, as it is here that students' critical thinking and understanding of life develop. Universities are not just schools where a student can receive a certificate that will allow him or her to get a job. As the very name indicates, universities offer universal knowledge, knowledge about



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things constant, permanent—even eternal. The celebration of life takes on the form of a continuous battle against non-existence and oblivion, a struggle that is fought in many battlefields, from art, philosophy, science, and nature to the simple offering of love and compassion to those around us. The underlying idea is always the same: the creative human spirit defeats death, light defeats darkness, order defeats chaos, and clarity defeats confusion. The brightness of the rational mind has always worked miracles in Greece and outside Greece. By understanding and comprehending why life is the way it is, by understanding and comprehending the basic laws of nature, Hellenism has helped people to cope with the agony of death.

Not escaping the dual character of life, Hellenism has also negative sides. Pain and hardships can cause bitterness; defiance for authority; pride, sometimes to the point of arrogance; friction and individualism to the point

with us? Why should we trouble our minds with all these thoughts? After all, we have everything we could possibly want. We live in our big cities, drive our cars, enjoy all sorts of amenities that make our lives easy, from television to cellular telephones. We get up in the morning, go to work, come home, enjoy the luxury of having dinner with our friends and family, watch a good show on TV, and then go to bed, and the cycle starts all over again the following day. And all this is good and fine, but the question is, is this what life is really all about? How many of us take the time to sit back and think, really think about Life? How can we be happy if we do not know who we are, what we want out of life and how we could achieve it? Life is huge, immense, gigantic, far more infinite than any of our everyday problems and worries. We have to open our eyes and our souls to it, so that when our lives end, we will not regret living.

And today more than ever, we need some guidance about how to achieve