



# Double IDENTITY

Who is a Greek? Greek Americans tackle the challenges of defining and preserving ethnic identity in a melting pot society. **Penelope Karageorge** reports on Hellenism's future in America.

**G**reek America's best, most committed thinkers have read the coffee cups and concluded that America's sons and daughters of Hellas could be an endangered ethnicity. Is the Greek American soul in jeopardy? Are Greek Americans becoming merely purveyors of souvlaki and *syr-taki* at church festivals, with Socrates and the Greek language put on the back burner? Could Greek Americans, who have achieved the highest education level of any ethnic group, be in danger of being sucked into the mainstream of American society, assimilated beyond recognition, the victims of their own success and upward mobility?

That's the consensus of members of the Greek American brain trust who held forth at the 4th Annual Conference on "The Fu-

ture of Hellenism in America" at Columbia University. The American Hellenic Institute Foundation, the first full-fledged think tank devoted exclusively to the study of the critical issues confronting the Greek American community, sponsored the conference. Nick Larigakis, AHI Executive Director, organized the conference with the goal of "galvanizing Greek-Americans."

In a stimulating two-day event that began with a tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's priceless collection of ancient Greek antiquities, moved on to a day of fascinating speakers including Dr. Helen Evans, who almost single-handedly put "Byzantium" back on the map with her blockbuster museum shows, as well as Eleni Gage, who majored in Greek folklore at

Harvard and went on to write *North of Ithaca*, describing restoring the family home in the "horio," one was moved to ask: what's the bedrock of Greek American identity? Does it require reading Plato and Aristotle, speaking Greek, knowledge of Greek art and baklava as well as ancient myths, frequent trips back to the Greek village, being Greek Orthodox, all or none of the above?

Perhaps it's "cultural karma," as defined by Ambassador Loucas Tsilas, director of the Onassis Benefit Foundation.

"Culture is not just a set of behavior patterns, how we drink, how we dance, but something infinitely more complex and multifaceted. It's the impact of our past culture on our present and future destiny."

"We need to raise awareness to perpetuate our history and our story," said conference-goers Katherine Bouloukis and Stacy Nicholas, who are attempting to establish a Greek American museum in New York. "I wonder if our upward mobility is one of the reasons we don't want to pause and look back to support this cause."

Despite "prognosis negative," some original ideas emerged from the conference, including lawyer Charles Kapidakis's discussion of a charter school in Brooklyn where youngsters learn Greek language and culture, and lawyer Nick Karamelas's description of a new institute to teach the ABCs of political involvement and action to Greek Americans.

"In the future, perhaps we can get together and start solving problems, not just talking about them," Andonios Neroulis, president of the New York Chapter of AHI said, referring to the shoring up of an eroding Greek American sensibility.

"Of course there will always be a Greek American community, but there will only be a remnant of what we have today," said keynote speaker Charles C. Moskos.

Moskos threw down the gauntlet, honing in on what he called the "changing face of Greek America." Although 1.2 million Americans identified themselves as Greek in the 2000 census, the great waves of Greek immigration are over. "Since 1980, Greeks are entering this country at the rate of 1,000 to 1,200 a year," Moskos said. Furthermore, Greek Americans have small families, and intermarriage has become the norm rather than the exception. In the last twenty-five years, about two-thirds of all church marriages are with non-Orthodox. "And for those who marry outside the church, ninety-nine percent marry non-Greeks."

After graduating from Princeton with honors, Moskos received his Ph.D. at the University of California in Los Angeles. He has been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a Rockefeller Humanities Fellow. Now Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Northwestern University, he is the author of one of the

seminal works on Greek Americans, *Greek-Americans, Struggle and Success*. Moskos, who has made "Greekness" a lifelong study, is married to a German wife who "speaks better Greek than myself and rolls phyllo dough by hand." His first-hand experience as well as studies have demonstrated to him that philhellenes can be powerful "Greeks."

"Every fourth year I teach a course in Greek American studies," Moskos said. "Ten students maybe are Greek Americans and the sixty others are everything under the sun. I think the focus has to be on this vital core of people with Greek ethnic ancestry, but also on non-Greeks as well. In order to keep a Greek American identity, you have to go along two different paths. One's sacred, one's secular, one's religious, one's ethnic and they overlap."

Moskos sees more "Americans" becoming Greek Orthodox, rather than Orthodox leaving the fold, with the church following a pattern emerging in Great Britain. "I've been told by the religion editor of the *Economist*

abroad? Why not spend a year in Greece before going on to career or graduate school? Instead of scholarships, money should be given for overseas study trips to Greece, Greeks meeting Greeks."

One could argue that "Greekness" and Greek Orthodoxy do not go hand in glove, but the church does loom large in growing up Greek American. It's where ethnicity was reinforced along with spirituality, where Byzantine icons looked "right" even if American friends might ask: "Can't they draw?", where weddings, celebrations, and dances in the church hall underscored being "Greek."

Archbishop Demetrios, a conference guest, offered his advice to the crowd, drawing a healthy round of applause. "Let's do Hellenism." But is "doing Hellenism" that easy? Is it a natural thing like "the old days" or something that must be cultivated?

The Rev. Eugene N. Pappas, provided one of the darker views. "The Greek is passing through a notorious vale," Father Pappas said. "We are dissipating, disappearing, as



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that the largest growing religion in the United Kingdom is Greek Orthodoxy," Moskos said. "It's interesting that most of the books on theology are written by converts. In the seminary in 2003, out of 34 seminarians in Brookline, only eight were Greek American. So I think that is the wave of the future."

Moskos argues that Greek Americans should get a much-needed identity shot in the arm by strengthening ties with Greece. "I think we have to bolster Greek American connections with Greece or Cyprus. The big thing today is junior year abroad. For Greek Americans as well as non-Greeks, why not go to Greece for the junior year abroad? That's something that should be strongly emphasized. Likewise, why not a fifth year

has been the case with other urban cultures. Where have all the flowers gone? The main identity is through the church, the family name, and events. We gather the clan at weddings, baptisms, funerals, at Christmas and Easter. Fewer Greeks speak Greek. One can be loyal to one's ethnic roots if you can't speak Greek. It's a problem when they return to the *patritha* and are regarded as second-class Greeks. Discrimination is among Greeks, Greek to Greek. He's not like us. Some 'greenhorns' were once ostracized by Greek Americans. The problem of the church is not linguistics. We're entering a new cycle of intermarriage. The statistics are staggering. More than seventy-five percent of marriages are not Greek to Greek."



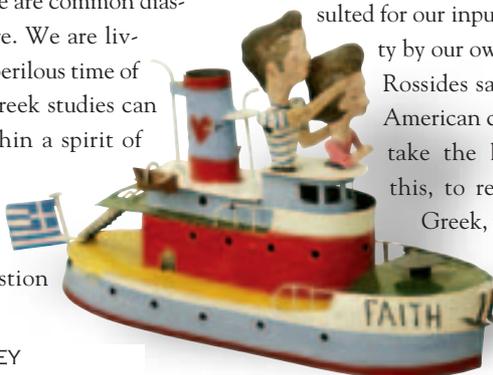
Professor Christos Ioannides, Director of the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Queens College, City University of New York, presented his first-hand, close-up view. Ioannides, deeply immersed in Greek Americana on a day-to-day basis, pointed out the tremendous changes that have taken place in Queens College and Astoria, once the largest Greek community outside of Greece.

“Of the estimated 1,500 students of Greek origin studying at Queens College, the majority is American-born. By and large, Greek study programs lack students of Greek origin. Few students take Greek language and Greek literature curriculums. This leads to the critical and emotional question of the future of the Greek language in America,” Ioannides said.

According to scholar Ioannides, “There’s what I call the research deficit in Greek American studies. We need to encourage research on the changing dynamics of the Greek American community. There is no reliable data even on how Greeks vote.”

Like Moskos, Ioannides believes Greek Americans must reach out. “We also have to adjust to the ethnic diversity of universities, especially by introducing new cross-cultural courses. We should link with other ethnic study programs since there are common diaspora experiences we share. We are living in a challenging and perilous time of globalization. Modern Greek studies can and should advance within a spirit of enlightened Hellenism.”

Along with the need for more modern Greek study programs, the question



of “visibility” was raised. How do Greek Americans make themselves known, not only to others, but to themselves, those future generations who will carry the baton?

Journalist John Metaxas, newsman and anchor for WCBS News Radio, pointed out the problems of covering “Greek” stories, which are a “hard sell” in the mainstream press. “If Greek organizations want to engage the media, they have to make their pitches engaging for the American public. It can be accomplished, with some smart thinking.” But he suggested a bold new approach. “Technology allows more coverage. The internet is a great democratizer.” Metaxas has set up his own web site, JohnMetaxas.com, with links to Greek newspapers.

Greek America’s “Renaissance man,” Gene Rossides, the one-time All-American football player, a graduate of Columbia and Columbia Law School, former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department, author of numerous books, takes visibility and influence as a challenge that Greek Americans can meet. His idea, if implemented, could give Greek Americans a genuine power-base.

Rossides suggested that Greek Americans should organize in small groups to approach and influence Congressmen and representatives on issues of interest to Greek Americans. Through letter-writing, emails, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings, the legislature and the executive branch as well would be aware of Greek American activists and their concerns.

“The future of the community is at risk, because we are not fully engaged on foreign policy issues regarding U.S. relations with Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. We are not consulted for our input as a community by our own government,” Rossides said. “The Greek American community must take the lead to change this, to reverse the anti-Greek, pro Turkey policy of the executive branch.

It’s unfortunate that we’re placed in this position. The amount of money Turkey pays to its agencies of influence have further obscured the issues. The media have shown little interest in what they consider secondary issues,” he said.

“The challenge is for the Greek American community to become an integral part of the foreign policy process in the interest of the U.S. It means the opportunity to present our views. It does not mean that the views will necessarily be accepted, but it does mean that the views will be seen. How do we get to be a part of the process? There’s no magic. It does require some work and some brain power. The challenge is to become active on a daily basis with the center of power: Congress; the Executive branch; the media; the intellectual community and think tanks. Foreign policy is implemented by the interplay of these four centers of power,” Rossides added.

Ambassador Tsilas best expressed the “why” of keeping Greek American identity viable, this amalgam of ancient roots that manifest themselves in a living language, of intellectual and emotional ties and a unique ethnicity.

“There are a handful of cultures that transcend time and geography, and I think that Greece is one of the most important cultures. When I speak of culture, I do not speak of souvlaki and *syrtaki*. No. When we speak about culture, it’s something infinitely more than that. I could name some of the elements of Hellenic culture. Togetherness in multiplicity. Striving for excellence. The quest for beauty and truth in science and art,” Tsilas said. “Wherever we go, we are seen as people who are promoting something that is a part of everyone’s philosophy, an integral part of everyone’s political life. Who are we and who are the others? Do not forget that when we speak about our heritage, we speak of something that is timeless, that is universal, that is a part and parcel of the life of everyone who lives on the earth. Let us accept the responsibility in propagating something that is important to all of humanity.”

