



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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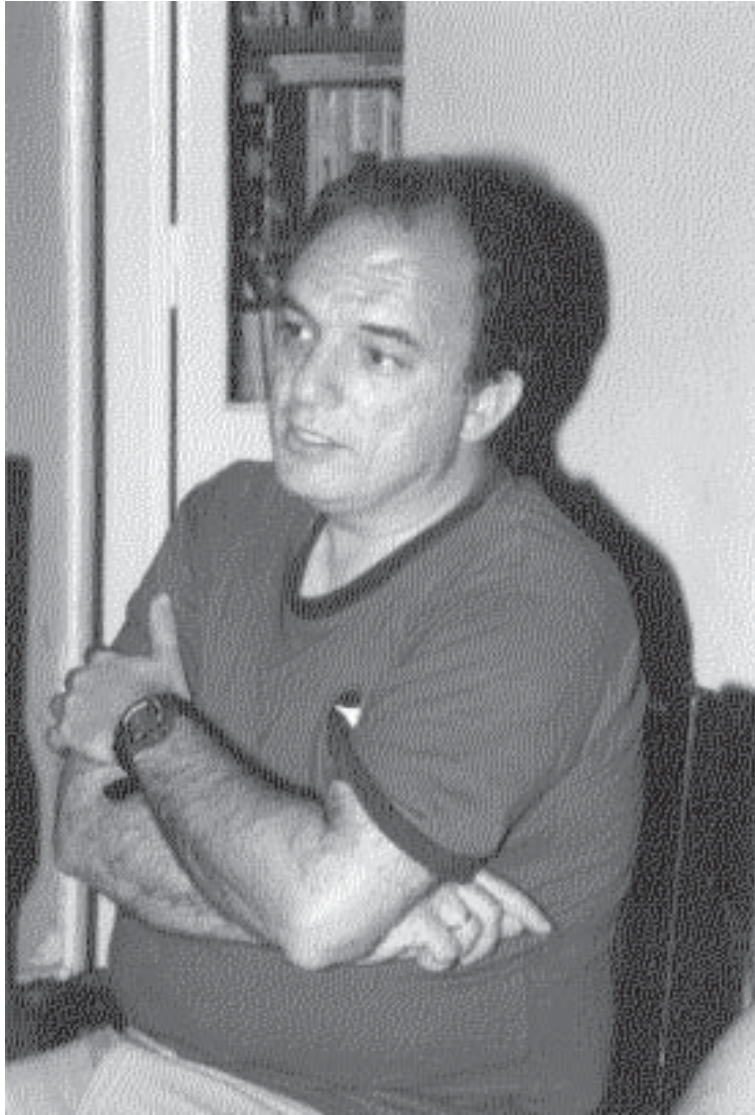
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Nicholas Karellos

The Stone in the Blender: Orthodox Greece and Contemporary Europe

An Interview with Nicholas Karellos

We are very pleased to introduce our readers to Nicholas Karellos, our invaluable Greek correspondent for Road to Emmaus. With his wife Marita, Nicholas runs a book and pilgrimage service in Athens, making Orthodox books available worldwide in English, French, German, Russian, Serbian, Estonian and Albanian. He spends much time assisting pilgrims, visitors and new immigrants, and is acutely aware of European secular and religious trends and their effect on modern Greece. This interview was taped in Athens in June of 2001, and in light of the tragic September events in the U.S. is both provocative and timely. In the first of a two-part interview Nicholas speaks of the events that have shaped Greek Orthodoxy in this century; his country's close ties to the Orthodox Balkans and Kosovo, the changes accompanying Greek membership in the European Union, the calendar controversy and contemporary church life. In the Spring 2002 issue he will reflect on his own missionary efforts, the great spiritual wealth that still exists in Greece, and his experience in working with Greek and Western Orthodox pilgrims.

Road to Emmaus: Nicholas, can you tell us about your background? Were you Orthodox from birth?

Nicholas: I wasn't raised in a very religious family although I was baptized as a child, like almost everyone in Greece. My background, however, is very international and I think that God has taken advantage of this to use me for what I am doing now. My father was Greek Orthodox from Alexandria, Egypt. He was raised in a multinational community – his friends were British, Italian, Arabic and Armenian. He studied in a French Catholic high school and worked for a French airline. So from my early childhood, guests to our home could include Buddhist colleagues from Thailand, Christians from Bombay, or French co-workers. We also had the opportunity to travel and I was very interested in different people and cultures, different ways of thinking, different religions. That is how I met my wife Marita, who is Finnish. She was a believing Lutheran and the one who first interested me in Christ, in reading the Bible. Although I'd never been actively Orthodox, I sensed that Orthodoxy had more to offer than simple Protestantism, so after my wife helped me move towards a real spiritual life, I began to influence her towards Orthodoxy. After

seven years of marriage she became Orthodox.

With that experience and background we felt that our role was to become involved with missions, with foreigners, but not in the typical way of leaving the country to convert people in Asia or Africa. We both knew that there was a lot of need in Europe and the United States, and that although people turn to Greece when they are trying to discover Orthodoxy, there was not much information for them here in other languages. This is what we see as our role, to help through providing literature or personal contact. The person at our door can be anyone – an African convert who is making his first trip to Greece, an Albanian refugee, a European who is living in Athens and needs spiritual support, an American pilgrim who comes to visit holy places, or assistance for someone who wants to open an Orthodox bookstore in northern Sweden.

RtE: How about the Greeks? Do they come to you also?

Nicholas: For many Greeks belief is somehow part of their private life. Orthodoxy is so connected with family and the country's history that even now many people can hardly conceive of someone who is not Greek becoming Orthodox. Foreigners are either tourists, or wives or husbands of Greeks. If they marry a Greek, then they become part of the family and are no longer considered foreigners.

RtE: Can you tell us a little of what Greece has been through both spiritually and politically in this century, and how the Church has been influenced by it? Not everyone knows how devastating the past hundred years have been.

Nicholas: What you ask is very important, because I don't feel that western Europeans and especially Americans can imagine what the situation has been in Greece or the Balkans. Unfortunately, even the Greeks hardly remember. We don't live forever and we focus on the present. Most of us don't even remember the near past, and we don't see how it has affected the present and will affect the future.

The situation is that we were under Islamic occupation for over five centuries, which is very important and something that no European or American can understand. Just as only those who have lived under communism fully understand what it means to have been deprived of political and religious freedom under that system.

The other big change is that the Balkans and Greece, in my opinion, have always been one multinational country. The common Orthodox belief was what was important. During the Byzantine or even Ottoman times it wasn't so important whether a person spoke Slavic or Bulgarian or Greek. As long as he was Orthodox, he was a Roman/Byzantine citizen. After the First World War, when countries began developing individual national identities, it was the

first time for thousands of years that we had to face the problem of "this bit is now Serbia, and this is Bulgaria..." Of course, these kinds of squabbles also happened during Byzantium, but not to the extent of wanting "ethnically pure" areas. What's happening now in Yugoslavia is an extension of this problem.

There have been many exchanges of population besides the huge one from Turkey to Greece in 1922*. There were smaller exchanges when the Greeks in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria had to return to Greece, and the Slavs and Bulgarians were "repatriated" to Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. This happened from 1917 to 1922. From the Greek side, they often just had to pick up their things and go.

RtE: What was the motivation?

Nicholas: The forming of ethnic countries in the Balkans and where the exact borders would be was planned to a certain extent by the superpowers of those times, the Germans/Austrians, the English, the Russians and the French, and later by the U.S. with various economic lobbies and interests behind them.

Also, in the last century, I would say that there has almost never been a normal government in these countries. Either they were communist or ultra-nationalists – a fascist government. So, all of these decisions were made by non-Orthodox or non-representative governments, passed to the Balkans by their "allies," or rather, their overseers.

In any event, after World Wars I and II the superpowers simply passed their own decisions on the governing of the Balkans through their representatives or as part of international treaties. For example, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria took much of their direction from Russia, while the Bulgarians and Romanians were on Hitler's side. Turkey has been the favored child of the British and Americans because of its geographical closeness to Russia, and Italians always considered Albania among their interests.

Of course in every country there were always some who were ready to follow

*Ed. Note: The Exchange of Populations: After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, which had aligned itself with Germany during World War I, the new Turkish Republic under Kemal Ataturk, although sizably reduced in territory, was granted official recognition. Large parcels of land in Asia Minor that had been inhabited by Greeks for over 4,000 years were put under Greek control. The Greeks, however, did not have the resources to defend their new borders against the surrounding Turks, and the situation deteriorated into bloodshed and excesses on both sides. Finally, by the terms of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 the entire Moslem population of 400,000 was expatriated from Greece to Turkey and over a million Greek Orthodox, many of whom spoke only Turkish and whose forbearers had lived in Asia Minor since before the time of Christ, were moved en masse to Greece, increasing the Greek population by twenty percent overnight. Although the patriarch and the local Orthodox community of 100,000 were allowed to stay in Constantinople and on two small islands at the mouth of the Dardanelles, this exchange of populations wiped out the two-thousand-year-old Christian culture in Asia Minor.

orders and commit atrocities, unlike the majority of decent people. For instance Bulgaria has suffered much from nationalism and has often been aggressive towards Greece because it nourished the hope of getting a port on the Aegean, while with the Serbs things were surprisingly more peaceful.

RtE: So in essence you feel that Greece and the Balkans have a common heritage?

Nicholas: In my opinion, yes. To tell you the truth, even today when I travel in Bulgaria or Yugoslavia, if I forget that I've crossed the border, it seems strange that these people are speaking another language. Of course, there are national characteristics of architecture and so on, but when I go into a monastery in Serbia or Bulgaria, it is as if I am watching a film that's been dubbed. (laughter)

Nowadays, many people in Greece are trying to highlight this common heritage: we are all Orthodox and we were all under Islamic oppression for five hundred years. I get angry sometimes at the lack of understanding of this. In America your neighbor can be Jewish or African, or even belong to a strange religion; there is tolerance towards everyone and everything. Because you haven't felt the burden of this Islamic mentality for centuries and heard stories from your mother and grandmothers, you cannot begin to understand what we've been through. Now the European Union is trying to adopt the American standard, that it doesn't matter what nationality you are, what language you speak, what religion you are, it simply isn't supposed to matter. This is an astonishing ignorance of the real effect of history on people.

RtE: Yes, except for Native- and Afro-Americans, we lack the historical memory of living under social oppression. Immigrants like the Irish and Chinese suffered severe social prejudices, but it didn't last for five hundred years.

Nicholas: Over the NATO bombing, I'm very upset. I can't blame the American people because they don't understand – the U.S. is a multi-cultural country. However, I would not have expected western Europe to openly support the establishment of a Moslem country in Europe. For five hundred years the Moslems have been our oppressors and now the media presents them as oppressed minorities. For five centuries it was completely the opposite. Now, Greeks feel that NATO is even cooperating with terrorist and fundamentalist groups in order to push economic and political interests in the Balkans.

RtE: Can you us give an example?

Nicholas: The Albanian KLA, for instance, is a known drug and gun smuggling terrorist group trafficking drugs to many countries, including Switzerland and Sweden, where it is said that 90% of the drug smuggling is controlled by the

KLA mafia. According to the U.S. State Department, the KLA was characterized as a terrorist group some years ago. Then, all of sudden, the KLA became "representatives" of a nation, negotiating at the same table with Milosevic, who, whether we liked it or not, was an official leader of a U.N. country. It is shocking to see how almost overnight an infamous terrorist group, and one which had been supported with troops and money from fundamentalist Muslims like Bin Laden of Afghanistan, was being presented as recognized negotiators and allies of NATO.

RtE: That's very sobering, but don't you agree that there has been oppression on the part of the Serbs, and that Kosovo Moslem communities were hurt in the historical backlash?

Nicholas: Of course there has been oppression. I visit Serbia and Bosnia and I am very much in touch with the people there, but I am also very concerned about how things have been misrepresented and twisted by the western mass media. First of all, there have been atrocities on both sides, but you also have a situation in which an ethnic group is living in a country as a minority. It is obviously in a less favorable condition than the general population. This is natural and it happens even in Sweden and France. I would even say that the Yugoslavian Albanians have more human rights than many other minorities in western Europe. But how many Americans and Europeans know that the war in Bosnia started when a Muslim attacked an Orthodox wedding party – bride, groom, and guests – as they were leaving the church? Eight people were killed.

I try to be as objective as I can, and once when I was flying from Budapest I sat beside a Finnish U.N. officer who was very neutral. I asked him how the Serbian war started and he told me the same thing – that eight people from a wedding party were killed as they left an Orthodox church in 1992. Also, in Croatia there are whole areas that have been populated by Serbs for decades. They were oppressed and were asking for their rights, protesting in the same way Albanians were protesting in Serbia, but no one paid them any attention. In 1995 I went to Serbia again and met a Hungarian traveler to Croatia who told me that for hundreds of kilometers he had seen long lines of refugee Serbs, with cows, with horses and carts, with cars, all walking for days because they had been forced to evacuate their homes in Croatia according to these international agreements. A few days later I saw the first of them arriving in Serbia, who were given huge metal storage sheds to live in. There were about 300,000 or 400,000 people. The media hardly noticed.

Or even worse: last December (2000) Time magazine published a photo of the ruined city of Vucovar, which had been previously inhabited by Serbs. The Serbs did not want to be separated from their homeland [when Yugoslavia

was divided in 1991] so they declared themselves the autonomous Republic of Krajina. The Croations did not want to give up the territory, so they blew up the Orthodox church and bombed the area to force the Serbs out. In 1992 I was an eyewitness of the total destruction of the church, the hospital and the city, and I saw the remaining Serbs living among the ruins like ghosts. The truth was so twisted that when Time published this photo of the city ruins, they captioned it, “Croations returning to normal life after the destruction of their city by the Serbs.” That is the kind of gross distortion and misinformation that was fed to the American people.

RtE: Was Serbia pushing out Croations in the same way?

Nicholas: There were almost no Croations in Serbia. Since the Yugoslavian union of these countries it was basically only Serbs who were living as minorities in Croatia, in the Republic of Macedonia, in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Slovenia. Of course there were mixed marriages, but there were almost no Croatian communities. That is why Milosevic protested that you cannot split Yugoslavia unless you guarantee the human rights of the Serbs living in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia.

RtE: Can you explain what happened in Kosovo?

Nicholas: I won't say that the Albanians weren't living there before. It is their homeland too – perhaps they've been there even longer than the Serbs if we consider Albanians to be descendents of the Illyrians – but this area has never been ethnically “clean.” Serbs were there as well from the first moment they were established in the Balkans. Actually, the Serbs consider Kosovo the heart of their country as the many ancient monasteries prove. The number of Albanians was much smaller in the past, but they have grown to a vast majority because they were favored by the Turks as Muslims while the Serbs were oppressed. Also, because the average Muslim family had many more children than the average Christian family, they flooded over the Albanian borders. Consequently their numbers grew to 90% of the population in Kosovo. In time they began oppressing not only the Serbs but all the minorities, and this was what made Milosevic withdraw their autonomy in 1988.

There was a similar agitation in Bosnia with the Muslims, although they were not oppressing the Serbs as they have the same Slavic blood. The Muslims in Bosnia were only 45% of the population, but they were given their independence even though the Serbs were the majority population there. This shows that it isn't a question of human rights of minorities or majorities, but the will of NATO, America, and Germany to establish their interests in these areas.

The Albanians of Kosovo were the last people to become Christian in the Balkans. They were also isolated – even at that time they didn't have good rela-

tions with the other Albanians who were closer to Italy and to Greece, who had a more international mentality. The Albanians in Kosovo were also the first to become Muslim, to cooperate with the Turkish oppressors, and for over five hundred years the Kosovo Serbs suffered discrimination from the Moslems.

My point is that Kosovo was never an exclusively Albanian homeland. It is also the historical homeland of the Serbs. Illyria was the name of the Roman/Byzantine province that included Albania and northern Greece, and the signs of Illyrian civilization are mostly on the Albanian coasts. This is an important point if we consider the claims of present day Kosovo Albanians to be descendants of the Illyrians, which some ethnologists doubt. Nevertheless, the Slavs have lived in that area since the sixth century. If we use the mentality “I was here first,” then half of the European nations should go back to the steppes of Russia and Siberia, leaving only the Vikings, the Romans, the Celts and the Greeks to claim the European continent.

The Albanians in Kosovo were so intent on creating a separate state that, besides the Serbs, several thousand Muslim gypsies as well as Turkish-speaking Catholics had to flee as refugees. They are now selling their houses and properties to the Albanians for a pittance as they know they will never be able to return to Kosovo with the blessings of NATO. Also, many people may not realize it, but since the peacekeeping forces arrived in Kosovo in June of 1999, over one hundred Orthodox buildings and sites, including churches, chapels, and cemeteries have been blown up or otherwise destroyed by fundamentalist-nationalist Albanian groups. This was reported by Serbian Archbishop Artemije of Raska and Prizen to Keston News Service last week.

RtE: Such a lot of suffering for everyone. Your explanations are quite clear, but can we go back a century now? When did the Turks actually leave Serbia, Albania, and Greece? I know that in the 1822 Greek War of Independence, Athens, much of southern Greece and some of the islands were freed, but when was the Ottoman occupation completely over?

Nicholas: Different parts of Serbia were freed at different times from the Turks – Montenegro is a separate entity because of this, although they belong to the same ethnic group. For Thessalonica and Epirus, it was around the First World War. The last of modern Greece to be liberated was the Dodecanese in 1948, when Rhodes, Patmos, and Kalymnos were freed from the Italians.

So until ninety years ago, northern Greece was still occupied by the Turks. Then we were attacked by the Bulgarians who collaborated with the Germans in both World Wars. After World War I we actually gained back some land – the Turkish coast including Smyrna and Thrace – but in 1922 the Greek army moved further into Turkey to free Constantinople, with the tacit support of England, France and Germany. At first the European powers wanted

to split Turkey, perhaps because they thought it was too large to remain as it was, but then they changed their plans. Possibly, they didn't like Greece gaining so much territory and controlling the entrance to the Black Sea; in any case, they suddenly stopped supporting the advancing Greeks whom they had previously encouraged, and when the Turks retaliated with the help of those same powers, we were forced to retreat.

Turkish retaliation was normal – after all, we were marching on Constantinople. What wasn't normal was the complete destruction of Smyrna, a Christian Greek city that had existed on the coast of Turkey for three thousand years. Tens of thousands of people were massacred and most of the buildings destroyed. The Western fleet was in the port at Smyrna when it was devastated and thousands of Greeks swam out to try to board the ships to save their lives. There were witnesses of British and Italian officers cutting off the hands of refugees who were trying to climb aboard. At the very end the Western fleet pretended to help, so that they couldn't be openly accused, but I've heard many stories of them refusing to take on passengers, simply watching while women and children on the dock were hunted down by Turks with knives.

RtE: Yes, the devastation of Smyrna was one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century and not many people outside Greece even remember it. How many centuries had Greeks lived on the territory of what is now Turkey and before was Byzantium and Greek Asia Minor?

Nicholas: Almost forty centuries. Actually, I believe that a large number of Turks are not really Turks – they are people who became Turkish over the past few hundred years.

They say that there are three to four hundred thousand Greeks in Turkey who became Moslem at the time of the 1922 Exchange of Populations to save their lives. Of course, they couldn't speak Greek, they had been acculturated into the Ottoman Empire, but they were Orthodox Greeks nonetheless. At this point, the consciousness of being Greek is only in the back of their minds, and because three generations have passed they are much less likely to assert that Greek identity. If they were free to express themselves and wanted to, they could be a very good bridge between Greece and Turkey.

RtE: But life still didn't settle down after the devastation of Smyrna and the exchange of populations, did it? During and after World War II, Greece had a traumatic period of occupation and destruction.

Nicholas: Yes. Greece was occupied first by the Italians in 1940 who attacked through Albania. The Italians were much better armed, but their army pretty much collapsed and then the Germans invaded. We were able to hold the line against the Germans for about a month – and some historians say it materially

helped the Allies. It was a very hard time for Greece. There was great poverty and in Athens thousands of people died of hunger and hundreds of villages were burned. Afterwards we weren't able to recover from World War II like the rest of the world, but immediately plunged into a civil war, which was an extension of the Greek resistance against the Germans. Some of these resistance groups had communist backing – remember that the Soviet Union was on the Allied side – and when the Germans retreated, these communist-backed groups tried to take control of Greece.

It is historically clear that Soviet countries sponsored these groups, and that their headquarters were in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Albania (who had already become communist). They wanted Greece as part of the Iron Curtain. The resulting civil war was another four or five years of devastation and there were no winners. Whether you cooperated with the communists or the free Greeks, your life and village were endangered by guerilla groups from the other side. Both the nationalists and the communists committed atrocities, but most atrocities were on the communist side, which thought that if you weren't for them, you were against them.

RtE: You know, one of the problems in Russia is that we often see right wing, fascist nationalist groups who have very mixed motives. They call themselves Orthodox monarchists, but all the while they have their own agenda. It gives a terrible name to the memory of the royal family, not to mention the Church. Some of them, of course, are simple people who think they are upholding the memory of Tsarist Russia, but many of us feel there are others using them. Although sensible, rational people also believe in these things, the misuse of monarchy and Orthodoxy as slogans has caused great confusion in Russia and Serbia.

Nicholas: Yes, it is exactly the same in Greece. The fascists have used Orthodoxy and the monarchy as a flag for people to follow. They have a motto in Greece: "Country, Religion and Family." This is their platform, and when people think of this they think of fascism. Many have rejected any patriotism because of it.

RtE: Is that also a reason why church attendance has dropped?

Nicholas: There are leftists who use that as a reason, but I believe a more realistic motive is that the Greeks have become consumers. They are trying hard to adopt a Western life-style. I have read that we are the closest to America in our rate of consumption of all the European countries; we have the fattest people, consume more food, and buy many things we simply don't need.

RtE: So after the civil war ended in 1948 or 49...?

Nicholas: There was a mass movement to the cities as people left their villages to seek security in the towns, away from the guerillas. Another reason for the sudden growth of our cities was the industrial revolution, which came late for us.

RtE: So the fifties was a time in which the Greeks were slowly getting back on their feet after five hundred years under the Turks and a decade of war?

Nicholas: Yes, and many of them moved to the U.S., to Australia, Germany and to Belgium. The economy here was ruined and there were no jobs. Since then we have had a continuous string of unstable governments in turmoil. In 1967 there was a rightist military coup, which Greeks believe was backed by the United States and particularly Henry Kissinger. The American government supported the army junta's rule and it survived for seven years. At the same time, the U.S. was also supporting the Turkish government, including the 1980 military dictatorship of General Evren. They continue to support Turkey today although it is one of the least democratic countries of the world, with constant violations of the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities and almost complete intolerance of political opposition.

The invasion of Cyprus by the Turks in June 1974 was provoked by the Greek junta with their failed military coup in Cyprus. Although the U.S. is extremely sensitive about Kosovo, Bosnia, Kuwait etc., it remains silent and indifferent to the problem of human rights in Cyprus where Turkish troops have occupied over one-third of the territory for the past twenty-six years. The entire Greek population was forced to flee to the south and almost every Orthodox church, many of them over a thousand years old, was desecrated. Not one country has recognized the Turkish occupation as legitimate, but neither do they pressure the Turks to pull out.

For this reason Greek public opinion is very suspicious of American and NATO policy. We are aware that what happens in the world is often quite different than the way the western governments and mass media present it. To understand the Greek Church, you have to realize that it is still a state church, and that contemporary politics and problems cannot be divorced from our spiritual and personal lives. We don't put things into different compartments, "here is my spiritual life, while this is what is happening to my country, and this bit over here is my family life." For us it is all connected. Greece is Orthodox and the invasion of Cyprus was a direct blow to Orthodoxy, not just a political problem.

RtE: Yes, I know that the Cypriot invasion and partitioning is a sore wound for Greeks and Cypriots. Also, many people may not know that the monarchy, which had been forced into exile during the army junta, was finally voted out

by the Greeks in 1974 in favor of a democratic government. Do you think that there have been spiritual effects from the loss of the Greek monarchy?

Nicholas: The Greek monarchy instituted after the 1822 War of Independence was not a reestablishment of Byzantium. The Greek kings of the 19th and 20th centuries were imposed by outside European powers and the monarchy was unpopular with most Greeks because of this. The first 19th century kings were simply members of other royal European families. Later, with continual intermarriage, European rulers were still close relatives and often influenced Greek policy. Our first king, Otto, was Bavarian and he was assisted by Bavarian "consultants" who devastated Greece, particularly the Orthodox Church. On the other hand, as the years went by our kings were nationalized as Greeks and some of those ex-foreigner kings came to respect this country. In some cases they were pious Orthodox Christians.

Nevertheless, the Greek monarchy too often promoted the interests of foreign countries. Unfortunately, the 1967 junta and our many democratic governments of Greece have since followed this same practice and made decisions that were wrong for Greece.

Among Greeks, at least in the past, those who belong to leftist parties were usually anti-Christian and anti-royalist, while those who belong to the rightist parties seemed to be more traditional and pro-royalist. As I said before, there are many exceptions to this now. Today there are many Greek politicians who are unbelievers and are even aggressive towards the Church. They openly pedal foreign interests, and many times legislate against the will of the Greek people. This is something that a king wouldn't have dared to do because he would have been risking his throne, but in our "republic" politicians and governments do whatever they like and use their "election by the people" as an excuse.

RtE: Now, through all of this political turmoil, what was going on inside the Church? Greece changed, of course, to the Julian Calendar in 1924. Although it was of great concern to the Russian and Serbian churches and to the Greek old calendarists, how great of an impact did it have on everyday church life?

Nicholas: It was a big problem in Greece. The change caused much turmoil because it was forced by the government. Political decisions were often ordered from abroad and somehow they forced the hierarchy of the Church to make the change.

RtE: Why was it forced and who forced it?

Nicholas: Well, economics. It was inconvenient having two dates and trading on the world market. Many people also believe that it was a step towards a premature union with Rome and religious ecumenism. I don't know about

this, but there was a synod that rejected the new calendar at first. They were in consultation with the king of Greece to have two calendars, as Russia and Serbia do, civil and ecclesiastical, when suddenly, almost overnight, they were forced to go completely new calendar. I know that most of the bishops were not happy with this and we don't know what kind of pressure was put on them – perhaps being deposed or exiled – but only a few went into schism. The problem was placed on the table from powers who were not part of the Church. Who would have thought of changing the calendar here?

RtE: And the result of that was schism in the Greek Church?

Nicholas: Yes. We have a schism now which is almost seventy years old. At the time of the change one hierarch, the Bishop of Florina, refused to accept the new calendar and later a few others followed. He was even imprisoned. There were also many lay people and priests who refused to follow the new calendar and were badly persecuted. As soon as there were several dissenting bishops, they formed their own synod and began ordaining old calendar priests, but afterwards splintered into smaller factions. People say that some of these bishops used the calendar issue as a reason to separate and form their own synods, but the fact remains that many lay-people and priests felt that the calendar change was not right.

RtE: Are many Orthodox here concerned about the calendar issue now? Obviously the old calendarists are, but what about the great majority of Greeks who are under the new calendar?

Nicholas: To those who are not very devout, there is no problem, but some others who are seeing the “signs of the times,” think that going back to our roots – and that includes the old calendar – might be a solution. Also, the average old calendar believer is more pious than the new calendarists, although those who stayed with the old calendar were sometimes fanatic, rejecting everyone else and not even recognizing our baptisms. Many old calendarists are not like this, however, and simply say, “We are traditional and we don't want to be new calendar.” It is such a confused question that we don't even know which of the old calendarists still have legitimate apostolic succession. There are at least eight branches now. Eight holy synods and at least five archbishops of Greece.

RtE: What percent of the Orthodox population is old calendar?

Nicholas: There is no sure census. Most of today's old calendarists were baptized as children and registered with the official new calendar church. The old calendarists claim they are half a million, while more realistic statistics say their number is in the tens of thousands.

RtE: Are there any attempts to work things out?

Nicholas: The new calendarists are very positive to the old calendar believers (except towards some ultra-fanatics), and if the Greek Church ever did decide to change back to the old calendar, I think almost everyone would be positive about it. But on the old calendar side, I don't see many signs of reconciliation. On the one hand they are right to be afraid of ecumenism, but they are over-sensitive. It is not yet the time to be so staunch because we haven't yet been asked to embrace heresies. I'm afraid that the old calendar bishops sometimes keep the tension, fear, and suspicion to a high pitch on purpose. If they say, “It's OK, it's not so important,” they will certainly lose people. The Archbishop of Athens has unofficially approached some of the more moderate old calendar groups with the possibility of having two calendars in the Greek Church, but in my opinion, if this is to be a solution, they will have to decide what to do with the old calendar bishops. If they are accepted as equals, as part of the synod of Greece, this might work.

However, the signs of the times give more and more warnings to the old calendarists, as well as to many new calendar believers, to be wary of ecumenism. Because of that I don't think that old calendarists will ever accept unification with the official church. I can't blame them on one hand, but on the other hand I'm angry at them because they are now causing schisms in Orthodox churches that already face major problems in Georgia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Kenya. The headquarters of those schisms, unfortunately, are in Greece.

Another sad thing is that the old calendarist churches do not cooperate with one another. For instance I know that in Kenya there are already two old calendarist churches at least, founded by Greek old calendarist missionaries and both claiming to be the true church!

RtE: Besides the calendar question, in what other ways has Orthodoxy changed in Greece in the last century? We've already mentioned the huge physical panorama of civic events – in one century Greece went from being under the Turks into the calendar schism, two world wars, and a civil war, deposed the king and moved towards secularization.

Nicholas: There are some people who believe that the Turkish occupation preserved our Orthodox tradition. Many Orthodox people kept the tradition as faithfully as they could. Of course, during those five hundred years there was some persecution (more often social pressure) but the Greeks felt that Orthodoxy was something important, something worth hanging onto, and they got this from their mothers and grandmothers. Also, we know from history that Orthodoxy flourishes through persecution and through its martyrs and saints.

Of course there was also great illiteracy here during the Ottoman occupation. In Europe this was the era in which printing was developed and they undertook a lot of publishing, but it wasn't so in our case as we didn't have a free press under the Turks. Most church books, like the *Philokalia*, had to be printed in Venice.

Nevertheless, our people sensed what was really Orthodox – not with logic, but with the heart. Many people also feel that the Ottoman Empire kept the Greeks from becoming Uniate, as the Catholics were continually proselytizing. As soon as the Greek state was freed from the Turks, we also had an influx of German and western missionaries coming to “convert” us and teach us “how to study the Bible.” Of course, studying the Bible is very useful, but they were trying to base religion on rational logic, and that is not our way.

When you think of it, studying the Bible in this completely rational way is the reason for all of the heresies. You say, “Ah, what is the hidden meaning of this or that passage?” “Doesn't it mean something else?” You make yourself an absolute or “original” interpreter of the word of God, whereas during the Ottoman Empire the Orthodox received their belief through Church tradition passed on by their families.

RtE: Yes. European Christian theologians who write from this overly rational bias frequently seem to talk themselves out of a belief in the basic tenets of Christianity. Some no longer accept the Virgin Birth or the literal resurrection of the Lord. There is very little that they hold onto that is Christian except for moral precepts that can just as easily be held by non-Christians.

Nicholas: Yes, and you know, interestingly, during those five hundred years of Ottoman occupation, I don't believe that any heresies surfaced in Greece. During Byzantium, of course, there were problems, and after the Turks, when the Protestant missionaries invaded Greece a kind of puritanism surfaced that is not Orthodox. When the Bavarians came as advisors to King Otto they closed many monasteries which had not only been left alone during Turkish times but often had economic privileges.

RtE: From what I remember, he and his Bavarian advisors didn't understand eastern monasticism, it was foreign to them, and they confiscated huge amounts of Church property. They made a rule of closing any monastery with five or less monks or nuns and enforced it with bloodshed and desecration. Even the monasteries that were left open had agricultural land confiscated and for many of them it was a financial disaster. Most of the monasteries that we see now in ruins were not from the Turks or the Germans in World War II, but from the time of the free Greek state after independence.

Nicholas: Yes, and also after some years of independence, there were Greeks

who were influenced by western Christianity. They formed several brotherhoods such as *Zoe* and *Sotir*, which have been useful in a way, but are somewhat wrong from an Orthodox perspective.

On one hand, they were right that the time had come when Greece again had a free press and could print the Bible and patristic books, but on the other hand, many of those who were the most outspoken in encouraging this were influenced by western Christianity and used its patterns of thought and education.

RtE: Do you see a marked division now between people who are trying to hold onto their Orthodox traditions and practices and others who want to go the way of western Europe?

Nicholas: We have to remember that the Bible says that there is a “strait and narrow gate” and those who are really Orthodox know this. You might be Orthodox without being Christian, or you might be Christian without being Orthodox. Just being one of them doesn't help. Since the narrow gate is only appealing to a small number of people, maybe ten or fifteen percent of the Greeks are both. I see students that come here to study from Russia, from Estonia, from Eastern Europe or the West, and who expect to find a holy Orthodox country but are disappointed. Also, for reasons that I don't understand, Greeks from mainland Greece are often much less religious than those who came from Asia Minor during the 1922 Exchange of Populations. I know people from Asia Minor who say, “even the Turks showed more respect for our beliefs than some Greeks.” Perhaps it's the struggle for survival, and this desire to be European – but some Greeks have a real inferiority complex, and they see Orthodoxy as part of their “inferior” culture. This is a big problem for eastern people, particularly in ex-communist countries.

RtE: When they join forces with western Europe they feel like a little brother.

Nicholas: Exactly. It's stupid trying to become Belgian or British when you are not. You will never become Belgian or British. Instead you should look to see what you really are, what you really have. What you have is very important, and now in Greece I believe people are seeing this. There is a movement of people back to Orthodoxy.

RtE: So you see this movement, or at least these ten or fifteen percent of the pious in Greece, as the hope for the future of the Greek Church?

Nicholas: I would say that the hope of the Church is not obvious anymore. I was not speaking of an organized group when I called it a movement; it is more like individuals going in the same direction. It will be the work of the Holy

Spirit. You know, there were Orthodox who were candidates in the Communist party in our last election, and there are people on the conservative right who are completely against Orthodoxy. After this last decade of the “new order,” the left or right scheme doesn’t work anymore. You find communists who are Orthodox and right-wing party members who are atheists. I think what has really happened is that people are completely disappointed by the materialism we have tried to adopt from the West.

RtE: Why?

Nicholas: Materialism is sick. It is a madness. It forces you to work day and night to consume. You work long hours for years to buy a house and then realize you have lost very important things in life, simply for a house.

RtE: Are many people seeing this?

Nicholas: More than before. Others do not see it, but they know something is wrong, like someone who has a disease but doesn’t know what it is. I think that in the West it is even harder. I see people suffering in Europe, but they don’t know what to blame. They often have nothing healthy to compare their lives to.

Like communism, capitalism is a complete exploitation of human beings for profit, for money, for glory, for fame. So people are trying to find a solution in Greece and many of them are finding it through Orthodox tradition. They are becoming Orthodox again, from a different point of view. They are reading books, praying, meeting good spiritual fathers, making friends with other Orthodox. There are many people coming back to church. They desperately need someone to take them by the hand and show them what the Church really is. At this point, I don’t know if we are succeeding.

RtE: In my travels through Greece I have found many little monasteries and individuals who are willing to help. But people who are searching, particularly foreigners, often don’t know where to go or who to ask.

Nicholas: Monasteries are very important. If you want to have a revival in your country the first thing to do is to build a monastery. I can see that this is a problem for people from other countries who lack a rich monastic tradition. For foreigners in Greece who are interested in Orthodoxy, the monasteries are what they miss the most when they go back to their own countries.

But even if you have no monasteries, if you are really searching God will lead you, as He led me, and my wife who wasn’t even Orthodox. The Holy Spirit can manifest where He chooses. He knows who is seeking and who has the heart to follow Christ, and the Holy Spirit is what we need, of course. On the other hand, this doesn’t mean that we can be inactive.

I am particularly concerned about the young people. When a young person who is a drug addict, or an alcoholic, or is just tired of his life comes to church for the first time, there has to be someone there to take him by the hand, to show him a different way of life, to take him to a monastery. It can be a good priest, or a helpful layman, we are all the Church. In the past few years I’ve seen more of these young people coming out of curiosity, and I’m very anxious that they receive the help they are looking for. We have to have something positive to offer. We can’t live by rejecting communism, rejecting capitalism, rejecting NATO, rejecting the European Union, you have to have something to suggest.

Some of them appear very worldly but are actually quite pious. I met one young man on Athos with a shaved head and an earring and I said, “Nice architecture,” because I thought that was what he would appreciate. He said, “The architecture is nothing. It’s this inner feeling, how you approach God that is important.” I didn’t expect this from him. If these young people will be used in the Church in the right way, we will have a revival. Often, those coming now not only have unusual outward appearances, but they have professions like singing or acting. In the past that would have been impossible, but now there are actors visiting monasteries, and even becoming monks and nuns. They will be like lamps, because our modern young people need a modern approach.

The young people are not fooled so easily and they are not the ones who are attracted to New Age groups. It is usually people in their 40’s and 50’s. The young people know straightaway when something is fake and are very suspicious. They are wise enough to understand false idealism, but if they have a spiritual father to show them, “This is Christianity,” and they understand that he is genuine, they will follow it.

RtE: What are other problems that Greek Orthodox people face today?

Nicholas: The basic problem here is not a lack of information or literature, but the practice of Orthodoxy because, as I said, our lives have become focused on materialism. We are consumers and we have forgotten the Orthodox way of living, of feeling Orthodoxy in one’s heart. If we are not doing what we are supposed to do, we certainly cannot convince anyone else to.

I think we are at the point where Orthodoxy can and should play a very important role. There is almost no idealism left in the world today. Even with communism, if people were dedicated to the Party, they were living for something beyond themselves. But I don’t know of any country that has an idealism like that now. People have become animals who work and eat until they die. So, Orthodoxy must revive, especially in Greece. I wouldn’t expect an Orthodox revival in the U.S., but in Greece, God Himself expects it. I worry about our future when I remember that, in the Old Testament, whenever the

Jewish people forgot their role they paid for it. Maybe this is one of the reasons why all Orthodox nations are facing problems. But on the other hand those sorrows are purifying them.

RtE: A few years ago you and I talked about the differences I saw as an outsider between Greek and Russian spirituality. In Russia sanctity comes from humility, the sense of distance between God's transcendence and infinite mercy and compassion, and our own lowliness. Of course, in Russia people also feel close to God and there are many miracles, but in Greece, the first thing that I noticed was that the Greeks are devout in such a familiar way that you almost expect them to set an extra place at dinner for their favorite saint. It seems that almost everyone has had dreams of saints that have come true or has someone in their family who has had a saint appear to them. Even Greeks who go to church infrequently sometimes hear voices telling them to go to confession, or to Holy Communion, and to take their children. For the devout Greek, heaven is part and parcel of your daily life.

Nicholas: Isn't it like that in Russia too?

RtE: In Russia there is less of an expectation that you will have such familiar contact with the saints. Of course, people do feel very close to the otherworld, but otherworldly experiences are approached with caution, as people are afraid of delusion. There is more of a sense of reverent distance between the average Christian and the otherworld.

Nicholas: Like in the Old Testament?

RtE: Perhaps that's a good parallel. There's an awe and trembling in Russia that leads to real holiness, while in Greece it is more of a family feeling, like the saints being like a favorite uncle or aunt.

I have a theory that the reason the Greek occupation, and in Russia, the communists, couldn't destroy the Church was that there were generations and generations of Christians – one thousand years in Russia and two thousand in Greece – of Orthodox ancestors who received the sacraments, and that that sacramental experience is somehow in the souls of the people of these nations. It can't be wiped out.

Nicholas: This is true. Even a prostitute here has her patron saint. There are things that everyone respects, like icons, even if they aren't believers. They respect it in the sense that they wouldn't dare to do something irreverent to it. This might be real respect, or it might be fear. In either case it is something from their own background. Another example is that until this century in Greece we never celebrated birthdays. The important thing was the names-day, and even Greeks who did not go to church celebrated them. You cannot

completely remove these traditions. Of course, now there are many Lutheran converts and other Protestants in Greece, and even heresies like those taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses who completely reject our beliefs.

RtE: What do you think attracts Greeks to those groups?

Nicholas: If there is no one to show you what Orthodoxy is, you will make up your own idea of Christianity. People see the Orthodox showing respect to saints or icons, but many live lives that are far from being Christian. They misunderstand this and blame Orthodoxy for something that is not Orthodoxy at all.

RtE: And yet, even for those who are not living a Christian life, that icon in the corner, the family heirloom, may someday awaken them.

Nicholas: Of course. I am sad when I see that this tradition is reduced to an icon on the wall, but even that can lead to something. It's the small pinch of salt that might prevent total corruption in the home.

RtE: Speaking of tradition, I'd like to go back to something that has always puzzled me as a foreigner. It's very understandable that Greek Orthodox Christians want to defend Orthodox dogma and practice and keep it secure from the influence of other Christian denominations, but the recrimination sometimes sounds very bitter. Christians in the West often wonder why Greeks hold onto events like the sack of Constantinople and the attempts at forced union with the Catholics eight hundred years ago? Although no one should forget their history, why do the Greeks refuse to even acknowledge Catholic apologies? I'm not talking about premature reunion here, but about recognizing that each generation is different and that accepting even a partial apology is not a surrender.

Nicholas: When someone apologizes, he recompenses the injustice, but we don't feel that there are many signs of change beyond verbal apologies. For us, the problems with the Catholics, for example, are not isolated in the past – they continue into the present. From the sack of Constantinople to the 13th century monks of Zographou Monastery on Mt. Athos, who refused to become Catholic and were burnt alive in the monastery tower, through the centuries of Venetian and Italian occupation, we have had the same problems with the Uniates that are now surfacing in eastern Europe and Ukraine.

Of course people should have religious freedom, and if an individual or even a whole parish wants to become Catholic, that is perfectly normal. What is not right is that the Catholic Uniates outwardly imitate Orthodoxy in their services, vestments, icons, and even their married priests. For us this is a trick to confuse simple Orthodox people into becoming Catholic.

For example, a Russian woman from the Uniate area of the Ukraine recently told me that the Orthodox Church she and her mother have attended their entire lives became Uniate a few years ago. The parish was Uniate before 1917, but after the Russian Revolution it was forced to become part of the Moscow Patriarchate [the Bolsheviks wanted to control the churches without Vatican interference.] The parish was taken over by the Uniates again in the 1990's. This transfer of church property is one thing if the church was originally built by the Catholics, but the real problem was that this woman's mother was not only shown documents proving that the parish had been Uniate before 1917, but was assured that nothing would change. This simple woman had not studied church history and didn't understand the dogmatic differences. Her daughter explained the differences in belief to her and they ended up searching for another parish. However, many people don't know, and if they don't see things outwardly change, they just continue along, assuming that everything is fine.

Even in Greece we have this problem. The Uniate churches here do not add the filioque to the Nicene Creed. Thus, they are in submission to Rome, but repeat Orthodox doctrine at every liturgy. I do not know if people attending these churches are even aware that there are differences. To me, this says that the Roman Catholic Church is not paying much attention to dogmatic beliefs as long as the Pope is commemorated. These churches look completely Orthodox, and this isn't honest.

If the Roman Catholic Church wants unity with the Orthodox as they say, why don't they urge the Uniate churches in Greece, Slovakia, Ukraine and elsewhere to either return to the Orthodox Church or to move fully into Catholicism? Also, there also hasn't been any real movement towards solving dogmatic differences on the doctrines of the immaculate conception, papal infallibility, and the filioque, even though the Catholics use the Orthodox formula of the Creed in Greece.

RtE: Do you currently have difficulties with Protestant groups as well?

Nicholas: As I said a moment ago, we also have had Protestant influence and proselytizing here since Greece was freed from the Turks, but until recently not many Greeks were drawn to the rationalistic northern European approach. Now we have Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups who are teaching real heresy and leading people into apostasy.

More importantly, the Orthodox Church, unlike some churches in the Protestant world, is not a club or an association that accepts members simply because they want to join, regardless of their doctrinal beliefs. The Church must remain as pure as clear water; however, the will of the Orthodox to keep their Living Water as clean as possible can be misinterpreted by western

Christian as fanaticism.

I'll give you the best example I can. Suppose the Orthodox Church is like the spirit in the red wine: the blood of Christ. Then, even if we accept that the Catholic Church has wine and spirit too and their mysteries are valid, still it is another kind of wine – say white wine. Definitely different than red wine. Now what people think ecumenism is, is to pour the red and white wine into the same cup for the sake of unification. Would you or anyone else like to drink a mixture of red and white wine? I don't think so. Should we add then some Protestant... beer to the cup? This is what ecumenism is in my opinion: an undrinkable cup. And this is because the West, as in most things, pays more attention to the external. They speak of "our common cup for all Christians" because they focus on the cup and not in what is in it. The cup seems externally common, but what about the content? It is even better to stick with white wine – as a Roman Catholic – or beer, as a Protestant, than to have such an unpalatable mixture.

RtE: What is the relationship between the church and the state now in Greece, and do you think it is healthy?

Nicholas: It is not healthy. It has never been healthy. There has been a very close relationship between the church and the government. The government determined the calendar issue in the '20's. The government used the Church, as I said before, and in some cases the opposite, the Church would threaten the government, that if it didn't do certain things the Church would withdraw its support and the government would almost certainly collapse. On the other hand, politicians may wear a mask of traditional Orthodoxy, but underneath there is often a stench.

RtE: Don't you think the problems are similar to those that existed between the church and state in Byzantium?

Nicholas: In Byzantium there might have been the same closeness, but things were clearer. The emperor was good or bad, religious or irreligious; you only had to deal with one person. If he was good, it was all right; if he wasn't, you knew who the enemy was. Of course there were always background influences, advisors and so on, but in general things were clearer. Now we don't know who is ruling. Who is ruling the world? Is it the president of the United States? Is it the European Union? Is it a secret government or some strange religion, or the Jewish economic lobby?

RtE: Would you like to see a separation between church and state like they have in America? Many Greeks I've spoken to seem to fear that this would lead to a diminishing of Orthodoxy in Greece.

Nicholas: It depends on how this is done. If the government accepts Orthodoxy as an important part of our social life, and respects the feeling of the common people because they are Orthodox, it may work. But if the motive of the government is separation in order to pass laws and make decisions that would turn out to be detrimental to the Church, it's not right. With this specific government, I'm afraid their motives for pushing for separation of church and state are not so innocent. There are many people who would like to see us rid of the influence of Orthodoxy. With all the talk of globalization, global government, global religion, Greece is a thorn in the side of the European Union. Everyone is being blended into a whole, but Greece and its Orthodoxy is the stone in the blender. The international powers are trying to use our present government to soften that stone.

I am not afraid of open war between the Church and government, but of corruption of the Church from within. These forces could infiltrate the Church and leave great destruction as they pass.

RtE: Can you give us an example?

Nicholas: Yes, there is a billionaire in Greece who controls half of the Greek press and the press has great influence on the government. In fact people say that this publisher is the behind-the-scenes prime minister of Greece. But he has also involved himself in the Church. For instance, the civil administrator of Mount Athos is part of his team. Also, someone from his group now controls the programming of the radio station of the Church of Greece. So, more and more parts of the Church are being handed over to private influences, who are exactly the same people who are influencing the government.

RtE: Interesting. How do you think the European Union has affected Greece and Greek Orthodoxy?

Nicholas: I think that the European Union in itself is something very evil, maybe even one of the signs of the last times.

RtE: Why do you think it is evil?

Nicholas: Almost everyone in Europe feels anxious except for the bureaucrats and those with economic interests. People have never been so insecure. There are huge amounts of unemployed people, and poverty that hasn't been for decades. Riches are being handed to a few large families. Companies closing one after another. Small companies being taken over by large corporations. Soon, we realize there will be fifteen or twenty large companies who control everything. Now they are raising the age for people to get their pension to 65. You will have to work until you are 65, and people are frightened and insecure. Even a dictator would have some kind of ideal behind him, but in the EU you

don't know who is controlling you. You don't know whom to address. It's not like being under a classical dictator like Stalin or Mussolini. It's faceless and we don't know who is making the laws anymore. The deputies of the EU can only advise, they cannot make decisions, and it is in some center other than the European Parliament that the final decision is being made. Policies are made in Brussels, of course, but no one really knows how it works, and for the common person it is very difficult to find out.

I think that the problems the Greeks are facing are the same that the Germans and the French are facing. We are all wondering what is going on. But as the Orthodox Church has begun to spread throughout western Europe, it must stand out so that people can see, "No, we don't have to become robots, or allow ourselves to be blended up together." Orthodoxy has to stand up and say, "Here I am." It is not a political party that has to do tricks to attract people. We only have to be what we are supposed to be.

I have been to Holland and western Europe. In countries that are not Catholic things are even worse. It's not normal to live without meaning, as so many people do. If your only goal is to buy a new sofa or a new car, this isn't natural, but if the Orthodox are up to the standards they should be, although the general situation is very bad, we have much to offer as Christians.

Of course almost every generation must have felt, "We are now in the last times," but this technological revolution and globalization is something that has never happened before. The world has reached its edges. Orthodox people have to speak out to protect their tradition or they will vanish. They will be absorbed and disappear. We cannot be lukewarm, we must be either cold or hot.

RtE: Do you feel that the Church of Greece is holding onto traditional practices?

Nicholas: Traditions are being kept, and Christodoulos, the new Archbishop of Athens, has tried to reestablish some small details of tradition that are positive, such as how the choirs should sing in church, and allowing believers to participate more in the services by singing in certain places with the choir. He's putting more emphasis on education about simple things, teaching people the meaning of the rituals, and so on. For example, how do you behave during a baptism? What is a wedding? I've gone to some weddings here and left with a sense of disgust. Instead of focusing on the sacrament, on Christ and the blessing, the bride and families make a show out of it. The archbishop is trying to clean this up. For now I see some good coming out of the leadership, although we will have to see where it leads. If the work to renew the Church and educate the people goes forward, new people will continue to come, but if it stops they will leave again, which to me is very dangerous. If they aren't

fed, they will give up.

RtE: You know, in reading 20th century travel accounts of Greece, church services are often portrayed as it being the women and children who are in the church while the men are standing in the courtyard smoking. I've sometimes seen this myself. Do you think it's generally true?

Nicholas: It's true. Although – and what I am going to say may sound strange to women – it is not the quantity that makes a difference. You may see one hundred women in the church and thirty men, but each of those thirty men knows very well why he there, while for many of the women it's a social occasion, they meet friends, many even chat through the services. Probably the percentage of really devout people is about the same between men and women. If you want to test this for yourself, watch how the women go to Holy Communion in Greece and then the men, and you will see. Of course the old people go to church in every religion, they are preparing for another life, but I see people making that choice much earlier, not waiting until three or four years before they die.

RtE: Earlier you mentioned the lay Orthodox brotherhoods, Zoe and Sotir. How did they start and what did they contribute to Greek Orthodoxy?

Nicholas: They appeared at a time when Greece had already been free for a century and that older tradition was slipping away. During the '30's and '40's the majority of people had become literate but they were not yet used to reading the Bible. The brotherhoods were actually inspired by Protestant models. They wanted to organize educational programs, to teach people about Orthodoxy, to organize youth camps and do prison work. They tried to bring an awareness to the parishes that people should start reading the Bible in modern Greek, that they needed to study spiritual books like the Philokalia and the Church Fathers, and that they had to have a spiritual life outside the church. Although their intent was good and bore some fruit, perhaps the way they went about it wasn't the best. Orthodoxy by its very nature is quite free, but they were a little like the Salvation Army, somewhat militant.

They adopted a mentality which is rather Protestant, a kind of evangelical puritanism. You must comb your hair like this, you must wear these clothes, you shouldn't behave like this and this. They usually only made friends with other people in the brotherhoods. You could point out a member of one of these societies miles away. It's like in China where people have such similar looks and behavior. These codes of behavior and ways of acting are not part of the Orthodox spirit. Even in Orthodox monasteries there is a basic freedom of personality, which they did not encourage.

We are different personalities; we have different ways of expressing ourselves.

Like I said before, you might see a young man with a shaved head and earring, but very pious, while you may also see someone wearing a long skirt like the Amish in America. We are not to judge either of them. We are not to say, "He looks modern, she looks dedicated." All of us, from different backgrounds, with different clothes and music, become one in the Church through the sacraments and the liturgy, through Christ. Members of these brotherhoods should have focused on that unity and on the teachings of the Church, but instead they instituted something that looked like the German reformed churches, something that was completely foreign to our Orthodox way of life.

But I think that they are dying out. They do not attract many people. The young people in those brotherhoods today are almost exclusively children of people who already belong. I don't blame the parents though, because our society's morals have become very loose and perhaps they hope that this will protect their children. From what I have seen though, taking them to such brotherhoods doesn't have such a positive influence anymore.

RtE: In what other directions do you think the Church should move? Of course the fundamental thing is always changing people's hearts.

Nicholas: People's hearts are up to God and themselves, their own free will, but I would like to see the doors opened to lay people so that they could do more. In Athens, at least, the parishes are inactive, or if they are active it is only the priest and a small team. You can't go in and say, "OK, here I am, I want to go and help the parish do work in prisons, or in the hospital, or adopt a mission in Africa." Of course it is difficult in a big city. How can you build a parish when you don't know who your neighbor is?

I would also like to see the Church become people's home and help meet their social and economic needs in a Christian way. I have my own theory that the non-Orthodox will be judged for what they do, but that we will be judged for what we didn't do. The Lord said, "I was in prison and you didn't visit me, I was a stranger and you didn't take me in, I was ill and you didn't care for me." It is in these things that Christ is very strict towards the Christian.

RtE: Why is it that lay-people haven't been involved in Greece? This is very surprising for us because in the West there is a lot of encouragement for people to become involved in church activities and charitable outreach.

Nicholas: Because for centuries church life has been focused exclusively on the services. There was rarely any other organized activity. The church was where you went for services, for feasts, but that was all.

RtE: Was that because that was all that was allowed during the five hundred years of Turkish occupation, and then afterwards Greece was too war-torn and

poor to support other activities?

Nicholas: Yes, all of that. For us during the Turkish occupation the most important thing was to go secretly and take Holy Communion somewhere, to have your child baptized in the attic of a house. Keeping your faith and perhaps even pretending to be Muslim, keeping your icons hidden, etc. Also, Orthodox faith focuses on spiritual life and the sacraments, rather than being saved by doing things. A perfect belief is the combination of both, but because of the reasons you stated we ended up being inactive. The Orthodox brotherhoods were formed because some people thought that there had to be something more socially-oriented, but as I said, they weren't completely successful. As a result we have a hardening of the arteries in Greece, there is a spiritual cholesterol in our blood that is killing us.

RtE: What is this spiritual cholesterol?

Nicholas: First of all, a love of money – we will sell anything for gold, and secondly because we are mass consumers. Then, a lack of interest in what is happening next door because we are very much absorbed in our own lives and work. Another problem is this idea of some people that anything from the West is wonderful. If it is from London or Paris it is chic, important, sophisticated – it must be right. This is false, of course. It is not the buildings and shops that make a government. We are continually told, “Greece is becoming like Europe, we are becoming Europeans.” It is being hammered into us, but when you look at the things that are happening in Europe – like the spread of Mad Cow disease because of mass production, I say, “I’m sorry, I don’t want to be like Europe. “

RtE: So what is your hope for Greece?

Nicholas: I don’t know. I have to leave things up to God. I don’t know what will happen.

RtE: Are Greek people themselves seeing these things?

Nicholas: Yes, they are upset and are beginning to realize that decisions have been made that have nothing to do with them. Life would go on the same even without elections. Maybe you can’t see it, but for us Bush and Gore were completely the same. If there were no president in the United States it would be the same. If you had five presidents in the United States, it would be the same. Nothing changes. It all continues as it is going. That is why there is a feeling here that there is nothing to fight for. The river flows on and it takes you like a dead piece of wood, floating to the sea.

RtE: But Greeks are such individualists. I can’t imagine they would let that go on.

Nicholas: “Fortunately,” in this case, the Greeks are very wild and aggressive, the black sheep of the European Union. As I said, we are the stone in the blender. I don’t know if we will be able to break the blender, but in time they might decide to throw the stone out.

In Finland, where my wife is from, people are completely absorbed by this system. Everything – driving licenses, buying gasoline, getting your wages – everything is done through electronic cards. So this means that if the government wants to control people they can do it better than the most corrupt Soviet government ever did. They know what supermarket you go to, what you eat, where you buy gasoline, where you went on vacation, what work you do, how much you earn. At least in Greece we are still protesting. To other western Europeans we might look naïve, oversensitive or even silly, but this may save us some day.

RtE: What do you think Orthodox Greece has to offer to western converts? What can we learn from you?

Nicholas: What you can learn, or what you should learn? Many times I’ve seen students or pilgrims come to Greece and be disappointed to find that it is a country just like anywhere else. They don’t see Orthodoxy as obviously as they expect in the streets, in the buses, in the banks, because this is a western country. However, as soon as they go back to their own country they start missing Greece for the things that were more hidden. All of my friends who studied here and then went back to pursue their professions, write back saying, “I miss the monasteries.” I think monastic life is number one. Especially in countries like Estonia or Slovakia or the Czech Republic where there are almost no monasteries. People need to come and spend a few days or weeks in monasteries, particularly on Mount Athos.

RtE: What is the state of monasticism now? In the fifties and sixties, there were predictions that monasticism on Mount Athos would die out, but there seems to have been a great upsurge since then.

Nicholas: Yes, it is very positive compared to a few decades ago. The quality of the monastics nowadays is also different. There are many new small monasteries around and you can tell there is a great difference between those that started fifty years ago and those that began in the last twenty. One difference is in the people who are becoming monastics; they are often well educated, sometimes even doctors and highly trained professionals in various fields. Although a person’s education or past success is not what is important in monasticism,

there are professional people entering now who have more to offer. In the '40's, '50's or '60's someone may have entered a monastery because it was an alternative that presented itself if they didn't have an opportunity to marry, or perhaps it was the family's will to send a child there – they had made a vow to dedicate the child to a monastery if he lived through a critical disease, or maybe they simply couldn't support him. Sometimes a priest would encourage a person to become monastic, whether or not he had the necessary personal qualities to be successful.

RtE: Do you feel that the spiritual quality of monastic life has grown with the numbers?

Nicholas: Yes, there has been a deepening, but there is also a troubling modernism that is creeping in, even on Mount Athos. For example, a few decades ago they would walk everywhere as a way of life. Physical asceticism was important. But now they have roads, cars, farm machines, computers... I can't say that this is all bad, but they have left something behind in adopting these things. Also, pilgrims to Mount Athos have become lazy. They take the bus or a boat and then hire a taxi or jeep. For over a thousand years those traditional footpaths have been used, but now they are becoming overgrown – they are closing, and most of this has happened over the past decade.

Nevertheless, there are so many shrines here, so many monasteries, so many wonderworking icons and good spiritual fathers. When you come to Greece as a pilgrim you aren't making a short trip to a church or a monastery, you are entering another world. If you stay in modern Greece like a tourist you will never see it. I say this so that people won't be disappointed by the outward appearances. What Greece really offers is a chance to run towards heaven, to get in touch with God and His Kingdom. ✝

...To be continued in the next issue, Spring 2002