

Tradition, What Tradition?

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Outsiders could be forgiven for witnessing a ‘curious tradition’ which is inflicted on the public of Cyprus before and during the Easter festivities, of which an integral part of the Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies involves the lighting of the bonfire (λαμπρατζιά); a ritual which symbolises the burning of Judas for his betrayal of Jesus Christ to the Romans. (Interestingly, the Greek Orthodox Synod has made several attempts at banning this tradition; the reason – it was considered an insult to Judaism).¹ And what of our capacity to forgive and forget? But more of that later.

Meanwhile, in many parts of the island, and in particular in the Famagusta region, this ‘tradition’ has evolved into an event with remarkable and quite extraordinary dimensions. The responsibility for managing and coordinating the activities that lead up to the lighting of the bonfire has long since been deferred to the teenage population of the rural districts in the area. Consequently, we are witnessing a situation where anarchy seems to be the order of the day.

Indeed, in a neighbouring village a young underage youth who had been transporting kindling on his scooter a few nights before, was knocked down and killed by another motorist who failed to see either him or his friend, due to the fact that the boys’ vehicles had no lights.

Feelings of disbelief and outrage are experienced at the authorities’ conspicuous absence, while scenes of unbridled adolescent mischief unfold in the various villages. For several days preceding the lighting of the bonfire (an event which is usually carried out under the auspices of the mayor during Mass on the Saturday before Easter Sunday) these youngsters are busily collecting anything that will burn and adding it to the thermopile. Following this, an inter-village competition ensues, whereby the gangs attempt to outdo one another. This is achieved by trying to produce the tallest structure in the region.

A twenty-four hour vigil later begins in case exogenous forces invade the village in order to ignite the bonfire prematurely, thereby dampening the spirit of the local youth. Members of this cohort are at an age that prohibits the driving of a vehicle of any sort, but it would appear that this is neither a disadvantage nor a barrier to their mobility, as they wantonly drive their four- and two-wheeled vehicles in and around the area, ferrying their colleagues to and from the scene. During these encroachments there is usually a fracas, involving verbal and physical exchanges, including the use of home-made explosives that would impress the average

terrorist. And all of this transpires between midnight and dawn.

Meanwhile the police authorities seem totally helpless, or perhaps inept would be a more accurate description, unable to control the events that unfold. And who can blame them, following the barrage of verbal abuse, threatening and, at times, violent behaviour of these adolescents. What chance then does the local citizenry have of either tackling this antisocial behaviour single-handedly, or even to leave the security of their homes so as to run a simple errand? How is it possible in a democratic society, for innocent people to live in fear and trepidation during a part of the year which is purported to be a religious time of mourning and respect?

Just as 'Nero fiddled while Rome burned' (no pun intended), our 'lords and masters' were sitting on their hands, while anarchy was raging among the populace. Anyone with even a modicum of vision would be concerned about how events such as this are likely to develop if they are allowed to persist without any attempt at addressing them.

How easy and effortless it is to point the finger of blame on the youth of today, without considering our culpability in this, and other events of a similar nature. We languidly blame our ills on society, conveniently obfuscating the fact that we are the elements that constitute society, and by our (in)actions tacitly condone the behaviour of the youth of Cyprus.

Easter is after all, a religious festival.

However, our religious leaders are also in-absentia, within the confines of their ivory towers, and cocooned from the realities on the ground. What are these leaders doing to bring the youth closer to the values and beliefs that religion espouses? Perhaps if the village cleric had made even a small effort to engage with the boys, not just now, but long before the situation had escalated out of hand, he may initially have seen the realities personally while also affording himself the opportunity to touch the souls of these young people. While the church service could be heard on the external loudspeaker system (another moot point), the much anticipated bonfire-lighting ceremony was executed by the Mayor, who had, up to that moment also been conspicuous by his absence.

Am I exaggerating by implying that we are witnessing the demise of community? I think not. We sit idly by in the misguided hope that someone else will put their head above the pulpit, or even more worryingly, relying on our elected officials to find the 'Holy Grail'. Meanwhile, it is business as usual as we proceed to fortify our homes at every opportunity, naively believing that we will be buttressed from the events transpiring outside. A 'couch philosophy' mentality has been

embedded into our psyche. In the comfort of our living rooms, cup of coffee in hand, we busily brainstorm over-simplistic solutions to the issues with which we are faced, while we rant incessantly about the 'others' and how 'they' are to blame for all of society's woes before zapping the TV in search of the next hedonistic experience.

Meanwhile, we still persist, nay insist, with the blessings of both the state and the church that this tradition of the annual bonfire, masquerading as a religious ritual, be allowed to continue. Local residents are tacitly expected to endure the haranguing and loutish behaviour, while within those hallowed walls the congregation is oblivious to the loud explosions echoing in the night; explosions made all the more cogent by the addition of small gas canisters to the pyrotechnic masterpiece raging around them.

By now Judas has been burnt to a cinder, and yet if we took the time for holistic reflection, in order to find answers, we would first be searching for the relevant questions. One that comes to mind is "would Jesus have punished Judas for his actions or would he have forgiven him?"

And yet we fail to see the irony – a nation that prides itself on being god-fearing and highly religious, and yet does not possess the ability to forgive.

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1. ΣΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ, 13 April 2008 ['Simerini' – Greek-language daily published by the Dias Group].