

In Memoriam Prokopis Papaloizou, 1907-2002

Peter Loizos

The text which follows this Introduction is a footnote to a footnote to Cypriot colonial history. The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote about his perceptions of the early days of the 1789 French Revolution

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.” But in later life he became a conservative.

In an earlier article, (Loizos, 1985) following an idea in the conclusion to Georghallides’ *Cyprus and the Governorship of Sir Ronald Storrs* I suggested that during the British colonial period, Cyprus emerged from being an Ottoman backwater, to a kind of feverish modernity; from being a place where sons followed in their fathers’ footsteps, and respected their authority, to being a place full of rebellious young men challenging all kinds of authorities. Greek nationalists challenged the authority of British rule. The Communist Party challenged ruling class leadership and the authority of the Church. In Cyprus, arguably, the French Revolution of 1789 did not reach Cyprus until the Oktovriana, 1931 or – if we prefer 1955 as the watershed date – even later. That is one difference between the political legacy of being an Ottoman province, and a French or Austrian province. British rule, with its various modernisations, was secure for 50 years before the first modernist Cypriot rebellion took place. Cyprus was a “late developer” in comparison with, say Corsica, which had had republican revolutions **before** 1789.

This brief Commentary catches the flavour of one tiny act of rebellion, and suggests how quickly the Church moved to the counter attack. At the time, 1930, both Governor Storrs and the Greek Consul, Kyrou were, for rather different reasons, apprehensive about the growing interest in communism on the island. As will be clear in a moment, the Church was also following the activities of the handful of fledgling communists with an interest which was to prove unhealthy for some of them.

Our story goes like this: The Greek-Cypriot poet who wrote under the name Tefkros Anthias had published several volumes of verse in quick succession. The second volume’s title poem was ‘Holy Satan, have mercy on me’ and although its intentions are debateable, it is hardly surprising that it caused a stir. And Anthias

was already seen as an important figure in leftwing circles. The third volume, 'The Second Coming,' published early in 1931, was even bolder. And it rapidly drew criticisms from the Church.

To give a sense of what Anthias was saying, here is the title poem of the second collection, in my own translation, with some help from Zenon Stavrinides:

Holy Satan, have mercy on me.

Have mercy, Holy Satan, this evening
And listen if you will to my gut's rumble
Its clarinets, hornpipes – my innards' drumrolls are festive.
Nightmarish memories circle me round
Laughing, my haggish dreams enclose me.

Once, I was a human being
Then I became a beast from those dreadful days
Yes, some animal with its feet hobbled
Which cannot browse on the field
Nor can he throw his master off
Because his feet are hobbled fast.

My hellish life oppresses me
Stifling my every moaning cry,
But I am waiting for that which when it comes
Into the light with great joy will let me breathe my last,
If I see just one new dawn, one shining day.

For every tear that's fallen from my eye
Will become fire to burn the thing which crushes me.
The blue night will be dancing
Starlight will debauch the scene.
Holy Satan, now that God has grown old
Let you lead me, let you be my guide.

I do not propose to risk an interpretation of what is implied here. There is room for debate, and my first attempts were at variance with what the poet himself told his daughter Prof. Floya Anthias, about intentions and meaning. However, whatever the intentions, and whatever would come across in Greek to a Greek reader, there would have been nothing here to reassure nervous churchmen.

One young schoolteacher, Prokopis Papaloizou, from Argaki village, had become an early member of KKK, the Communist Party of Cyprus, having been impressed by things he had read in newspapers from Greece, as well as hearing speeches from Vatiliotis suggesting that Christ's teachings and Marx's teachings

had much in common, only Marx – focused on the here-and-now – would do more for the poor in the difficult days of the Depression, which had already affected the working class. Prokopis had seen poor men on their knees pleading with moneylenders not to foreclose. For the rest of his life he remembered the coldness with which the moneylender turned his face away in denial of the plea for mercy.

Having himself literary aspirations, Prokopis took up his pen and under the pen-name, Petros Athonas, wrote a spirited ‘Open Letter’ in *Laiki Dynamis*. The original letter is dated Nicosia, 17 February 1930, but that date may have been a misprint for 1931. The tone was challenging, confident, and full of ideas about art, and the irrelevance of the traditional Church. Another young teacher, Patapios Christodoulides apparently did something similar.

The text of the letter now follows in Zenon Stavrinides’ translation:
(He found at least one passage of the letter “irredeemably obscure”)

**Open Letter
To His Beatitude the Archbishop and other Bishops**

“Your Beatitude, Most Reverend Fathers,

For the past two or three weeks you are upset by a certain work of the Cypriot poet Tefkros Anthias. The cause of your agitation: that Anthias in his work pokes sarcastic fun at divine providence and he kills God in people’s consciousness.

First of all, Art has nothing to [do] with Church politics, especially as your action resembles the efforts which political leaders make to prevent any reduction in the numbers of their supporters. Art is a social phenomenon which mirrors the pulse of society as it develops. No organisation, whether religious, political or social, has the ability or right to impose orthodoxy on the thought of writers and artists. Art is everywhere free.

And something else. Let us suppose that you do have the power to destroy the work of Anthias, who had the tragic fortune to express freely an opinion which is in the nature of a common secret – do you think you have justification for doing so? If you do so, it means that you are scared that people’s religious beliefs will be shaken by reading the book. However, if they are shaken, it means that they are not firmly founded, either because the people who espouse this religion have never penetrated its meaning, or else because its ideology no longer serves society. If this is how matters stand, why don’t you take steps to provide these beliefs with proper support and thank Anthias for pointing things out for you?

Anthias gives expression to contemporary anxieties, he cries out that divine providence is dead. Under similar psychological states the simplest peasants find its silence suspect. It is an intellectual anxiety, a conviction which springs from contemporary social reality. Can you argue in support of a contrary position? Do it then. Suspicions are not to be attacked, but they have to be cleared up, and people who experience concerns are not to be thrown out in the streets, but they have to be reassured and calmed down. After all, we are not living in the time of Byzantium when the Church supported its position by the use of eunuchs and the practice of excommunication. The religious sentiment of a people does not risk destruction by a work of Art; Art does not destroy well founded convictions, it only creates emotion.

In his work Anthias represents the anxious religious pulse of the age. He does not attack the Christian religion considered as a set of theoretical teachings, as a religious ideology, but only the particular form and essence of God, in the sorry state they have fallen into. This is the sentiment that pervades his work. This is evident in his verses:

Even if this crowd judges you to be alive
Don't think for a moment that it understands your existence
Behind your grotesque, fantastical countenance
It knows that some merchant moves satanically
Holding the scale in his hands
Selling his sweat.
So in speaking to you the crowd speaks to its merchant
And in condemning you, condemns him.

For this reason you are wrong in acting against Anthias in an anti-Christian way. All your actions simply bear testimony to the degree of your erratic behaviour towards the spiritual movement at an age when the freedom of thought and will have taken on the character of a symbolic standard. And every gesture of the kind you make does not [sic; but possibly the word 'not' is typed in error, ZS] appear to show religious fanaticism and professional zeal. Your zeal might have received praise if it were directed to some social benefit, if it aimed at alleviating social misery.

Can you approach sincerely and warmly poverty, humiliation, pain, and work to restore a heart that has been broken by despair; to cleanse souls soiled with a death-wish and the mud of bitterness; to do a good act which will enable 60-year old people experience the meaning of their life, to pull them back from superstition and religious bigotry to the brightly lit palaces of the true essence of religion? Can you give a piece of land to an unemployed man for whom one moment of life takes the endless duration of eternity, and to cleanse the dark condition of those who are neither alive, nor dead? Do it then. This is the true ideology of he who chose to ascend the steep

mountain of pain. This is precisely the deeper meaning of the essence for which Anthias struggles in a different way, a contemporary way. Listen to him when he says:

Father when you came home in the evening
You sat tired, sweating
In front of your home's poor fireplace
And every one of your sighs was poison for us,
An eternal slave of your field, of the factory,
Of worry, of the need for bread. Poor clown
Why can't I forget even for a moment
Your secret sadness as you looked at us in church amid the crowd
And bid to us a tearful goodbye?

And now tell me, Your Beatitude and Most Reverend Clergy, who is more truly Christian – you in your cheerful demeanour and calm life or Anthias in his much more human poetic mood? And tell me again please which one has good cause to take the side of the humble and the humiliated? You who always experienced the pleasures of satisfied appetite, who never got strayed outside the framework of comfortable life, who looked at Christian mass in books like obstinate high school pupils, or Anthias who was seized by the whirlwind of life, was thrown down the staircase of humility and came to know Man, the most secret corners of want, the consequences of humiliation, and lived through every aspect of the Christian world-view in its highest intensity? And considering all this, is the poet's mental state not human, entirely human, when he expresses himself in the following way?

Lord God! I looked for you in the tree, in the fire
In the enormous rock, in the river bed
In the dark forests, the light of the Evening Star
The large expanse of the sea
The chiselled marble, the painted wall
On the altar, in the Holy of the Holies, the endless sky
But alas, I never found you anywhere!

Instead of trying to condemn people who seek to pull man back from the deep darkness of superstition and dogmatism, to build in him healthy emotional foundations and make him love life on earth, you could try something else. Our religious system has gone stale after so many centuries of paralysis and lack of fresh air, and so it cannot serve the advancement of society, its collective surge towards a higher meaning of life. It has stayed entrenched in pathological fanaticism and has died, since everything that does not evolve – whether a political, a social or religious system – dies.

Society is no longer informed with the humane spirit of Jesus – the most enlightened figure among the founders of religions – in an age in which

beggars and tramps are considered to be so precious in the emotional plane. We may recall Bernard Shaw's words: Society depends on fear. As for religion, it lives off society without offering any service in return.

This is what you have achieved, Reverend Fathers, during your centuries-long service to the Christian religion. You have eliminated the power of the most socially beneficial ideology that has ever appeared in the form of religion. You thickened the darkness engulfing the crowd and exploited its religiosity – which is a phenomenon constituted of psychological elements such as fear in the face of mystery, the worship of mystery, the need to explain it, and man's wish to live permanently. You have maintained alive dogmatic beliefs and legends – all those flashy devices which all religions employ in order to overwhelm the crowd.

Nevertheless the present social situation will not permit you to sacrifice the essential nature of religion to dead dogmas, which are elements constituted of mystical tendencies of men in periods of intellectual obscurantism. The essence of religion springs from people's mental world and is directed at this world. The emotional world of post-war people has changed. It embraces elements which are nervous, anxious, alert. It seeks effective action, enlightened action, truth and the meaning of life, and is indifferent to other thing[s]. Gone is the time when it was thought that truth was not a suitable food for every stomach. Even if people felt certain that strong light blinds the eyes it strikes on, they deem it preferable that one generation may be blinded than that a succession of generations should swim in oceans of darkness.

This is then the kind of post-war man, troubled and deeply Christian man, which Anthias seeks to express. And your actions against him do the Church no credit, especially after the Lambeth Conference in which European churchmen – those eternal protestants – sought to impose on the state birth control in accordance with people's financial condition for the benefit of the whole society. In times such as these you should not regurgitate various terms such as "virtue, morality, our forefathers, holy fathers", terms which never had any content and which were launched by short-sighted moral bigots. Moreover in times in which the energies and activities of other clerics have acquired torrential force, do not confine yourselves to an unintelligible journal, annual visits to villages and gestures of excommunication.

Nicosia, 17 February 1930

PETROS ATHONAS"

The Church took a year to respond, but when it did, it acted decisively. It called Anthias, Papaloizou and the Karpassiot teacher, Patapios Christodoulides to a

hearing to explain themselves. Anthias declined to attend, wrote a letter to the Bishop of Paphos instead, and was later excommunicated but for his poetry. Papaloizou and Christodoulides attended, and were persuaded – almost certainly by threats of excommunication and loss of their employment as teachers – to withdraw their defence of Anthias, and apologise to the Church. They were required to sign formal statements to this effect. These were immediately published by the Church in its Gazette, *Apostolos Varnabas* 7 May 1931, pp. 289-295.

Prokopis Papaloizou felt deeply humiliated by what he had now done. He was by nature somewhat unsure of himself, but he felt he had let Anthias down, as well as his newly found ideals as a communist. He was already in hot water for personal matters with one of his close relatives in Argaki: His sister Maria had died of post-partum infection, and her husband blamed Prokopis for having first brought a younger doctor he had preferred, instead of the older doctor his brother-in-law had wanted. Without modern antibiotics, it is doubtful if Maria could have been saved in any case. But hard words had been said to Prokopis suggesting he was to blame for his sister's death. It was characteristic of him that he took these words to heart. In his shoes I would certainly have done the same.

Prokopis decided to leave the island, which he must have done shortly before the Oktovriana and he spent most of the rest of his life in London. He came to the notice of the British official Hart-Davis, who reported – on 2 October 1935 – to a Minister for the Colonies, Fletcher-Cook, that he was the leader of a group of communists who met in Soho.

“Communism is gradually gaining ground among them. There is an active cell at 52 Berwick Street, housed at a café belonging to Christophoros Christodoulides. Their leader at present is one Prokopios Papaloizou from Argaki [known as Petros Athonas]. He is educated, he studies at the British Museum, and writes for the Athens-based communist publication ‘To Mellon’. The cell has about thirty active workers, and perhaps a hundred followers who are not active” [Ta Nea [London] 14 May 1987, page 6].

Both Prokopis and Ezekias Papaioannou gave me identical versions of a humorous anecdote which illustrates how far he was in fact from being the dedicated revolutionary of Hart-Davis' Memorandum:

The two men had been sharing a room. They were both penniless and hadn't eaten for several days. Papaioannou [showing the leadership skills for which he would become famous] suggested Prokopis go out and bring back some milk, as British milkman left bottles of milk early in the morning outside their customers' houses. (They still do!) Prokopis went out, saw milk but was afraid to take it,

fearing the consequences as a young foreigner if caught. He returned to the room and told Papaioannou he couldn't find any milk! Papaioannou expressed disbelief and disappointment. He went out and soon returned with a number of milk bottles, which he divided equally between them. He went on to fight in Spain and become General Secretary of AKEL, while Prokopis remained virtually unknown.

Prokopis spent the rest of his life in London, mostly as a private-schoolteacher, except for some war service in Egypt in the RAF, a period as a night-time telephonist, and two brief holidays in Cyprus – the first in 1968. He left or drifted away from the Communist Party after the 1939 Moscow trials of Old Bolsheviks. He said about this:

“I joined the Party because I believed all men were equal, and I left when Pravda started writing about Stalin as if he was God. And I couldn't believe that all these old comrades on trial had truly betrayed the revolution.”

During the 1968 youth rebellions in Paris, one of the slogans on a wall of the Sorbonne said “Please leave the French Communist Party as clean on your departure as you would like to have found it when you joined.” And how very perceptive of the youthful rebels, for when it came to taking sides, the Parti Communiste français (PCF) decided to side with the French State, and leave the rebels to dry out. The PCF would not be the last Communist Party to do such a U-turn.

To have joined a Communist Party during a World Depression as a young man, in the 1920s was to show some imagination and empathy. To have left it in the late 1930s was to show an equally admirable kind of good sense.

I wish the last vignette of Prokopis Papaloizou in public life to be entirely positive. In the 1980s, he had become friendly with an Argaki man called Sophronis Michaelides, a self-educated left-wing farmer, who taught himself both Russian and English so he could read their literatures. He had developed a rare cancer of the spine, and was dying a slow death in hospital in Bloomsbury. During this period poetry poured out of him. Prokopis visited him often, and they had long conversations on many matters. They made an agreement that whoever died first, the other one would speak a eulogy at his funeral, and would read Palamas' poem 'The Grave' to the mourners. In the event, Sophronis died first from his incurable condition. Prokopis spoke at his funeral in North London, which was well attended by his family, by other Argaki villagers, and family friends. Prokopis used all the skills he had learned in a lifetime of school teaching to talk with great clarity and warmth about his dead friend – his love of literature,

his progressive political ideas, his bright mind, his decency, and his courage in the face of death. People listened with great attention. This is the way I prefer to remember him – exercising his pastoral and oratorical skills in fulfilling a promise undertaken to a dying man he had befriended. He proved better in this role than as a youthful and hesitant revolutionary.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Zenon Stavrinides for having sent me items he came across about Prokopis Papaloizou, and for translating his letter. I believe I have George Georghallides to thank for the Apostolos Varnavas item. Thanks also to Andis Panayiotou for sending me some translations of Anthias' poems, and to Floya Anthia for discussing her father with me and checking my text. Thanks to Andreas Panayiotou for encouraging me to reflect on Prokopis' letter. Thanks to Nikos Philippou for searching the Archbishop newspaper archives for 1930 and 1931. None are responsible for any errors or emphases in this text.