



Spring Forward!

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Sunday, March 30th was Cyprus's moment to 'Spring Forward' into daylight savings time. Personally, I think this daylight savings business is an invention of the devil. I've never understood what is meant by 'spring forward' and 'fall back'. I always seem to get them back-to-front and on occasion my temporal dyslexia has embarrassed. Apart from Nancy, who has all this well in hand, I now have a whole bevy of friends who call me up on the Saturday evening before the change to remind me how to 'spring' or 'fall'.

Is this all a paradigm for how we manage our world?

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These are interesting times in Cyprus. Heavens! This is just an interesting island altogether, filled with good people trapped in their country's historically tangled skein.

It boasts a history that goes back eleven thousand years or more. Its myriad stone-age settlements are being excavated slowly and carefully. But since people sailed the Mediterranean, this gem of an island has been a magnet. Fairly recent genetic research conducted by the UN investigating an endemic hereditary blood disease, for instance, has revealed close affinity between Cyprus and Lebanon, where the same disease is also endemic. It has demonstrated an ancient Phoenician link that is even now more than just skin deep. Furthermore, natives of Cyprus, be they called 'Turk' or 'Greek', show the same genetic profile while showing no genetic affinity with the folk of either mainland Turkey or mainland Greece. In the current political atmosphere, this scientific finding has produced serious embarrassment among some Cypriots.

But there's more in the mix. The pharaonic Egyptians came here as did Assyria and even ancient Persia well before the Greeks showed up in Byzantine guise, melded into the local population and left both their striking monuments and their language. Even the Arab Umayyad empire had its day in Cyprus before the island broke up into a confused conglomeration of small city-states.

In 1191 English Crusaders under their warrior king, Richard the Lion Hearted, sort of conquered the island by accident. Landing in Cyprus, Richard had only intended to refresh his troops and lay in stores before proceeding on to his fateful rendezvous with Saladin in Palestine, but he found himself suddenly in charge as city after city recognized his sovereignty. Unabashedly gay though he was, it was in the port city of Limassol that he married Berengaria of Navarre. The union, not surprisingly, was fruitless. (Fall back?)

In any case, short of cash, Richard soon sold the whole shebang to the Knights Templar who, in turn, sold it on to the Lusignans, erstwhile Latin kings of Jerusalem. For over three hundred years it passed from one Roman Catholic European hand to another, the last of whom were the Venetians. Under the Roman Catholics the Greek Orthodox were treated harshly and that has left a bitter legacy that crops up in odd places. The Ottoman Turks (Muslims) eventually conquered island in 1571, and pressure on the Greek Orthodox was somewhat relieved. Roman Catholics, however, found themselves in bad odor, and many tacitly became Muslim to preserve the favored status they enjoyed under Latin rule. Then, three hundred years later (1878), Cyprus again reverted *de facto* to the English (who were by that time arch-Protestants). In 1923, Cyprus officially became a British Crown Colony.

Given all this to-and-fro-ing, it is quite surprising that Cyprus doesn't have the shape of a ping-pong ball instead of a right fist with its index finger pointing at ancient Antioch (modern day Antakia) where the 'Followers of the Way' were first called 'Christian'.

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For much of its modern history Cyprus was an impoverished backwater. The British used it but did not really develop it. As ethno-racial nationalisms became the European vogue (and bred, among others, the curious anomaly of Zionism), Cypriots also came to divide themselves on ethno-religious lines. The 'Turkified' population (largely erstwhile Roman Catholics but now Muslims) and the 'Hellenized' population (mainly staunch Greek Orthodox) increasingly found themselves pitted against each other. It was one of those ridiculous polarizations that western imperialism has typically and rather cynically nurtured, exploited and exacerbated in order to use a country and its people for its profit and strategic aims. (The current example of this, of course, is the way American policy has manipulated SunnÓ-Shi'Ó sensitivities in Iraq since the days of Bush the Elder but now finds itself holding a raging tiger by the tail.)

As the old imperialist system crumbled to be replaced by the new, and as Cyprus won its independence from Britain in 1960, the ethno-religious factor quickly came to the fore with vicious and sad repercussions. After a rocky fourteen years spent trying to cobble together a government for the newly independent state, in 1974 an abortive Greek-led coup aiming to unite the island with Greece failed and, with Henry Kissinger's blessing, the Republic of Turkey invaded and occupied the northern third of the island. Since then an uneasy truce under UN supervision has pertained, both sides assiduously applying themselves to cultivating an ever more thriving tourist trade.

But the island has been divided. Without international recognition since Turkey installed it, the puppet government in northern Cyprus has presided over a stagnant economy. Meanwhile the internationally recognized government in the south has had to manage boom times kick-started by Lebanon's misfortune. The 1970s and 1980s saw a massive influx of refugee capital in flight from a disintegrating Beirut that was being devastated by civil war. Prosperity begun, other sources of investment capital followed. Efforts to reunite the island, however, have consistently failed. In spite of this, Cyprus officially entered into the European Union in May 2004.

Which way that has caused the island to ‘spring’ or ‘fall’ is still being debated. But following recent elections in the south that swept a left-of-center government into power with a strong mandate for the island’s reunification, a new initiative has been launched to heal the island’s old wounds. God willing, this will actually be a ‘spring forward’.

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Why this historical exercise? Well ... some have asked about this island’s woes and they deserve an exposition. But what I really want to show is that history matters.

These are days when Christianity and Islam are being set up as the main protagonists for global conflict. We hear a lot about how the two cannot coexist, and how their ‘clash’ is inevitable. But that is ludicrous! If the division of Cyprus is about religion, then it is very subtle indeed. And I think the same can be said for many other conflicts.

We bring into conflict all sorts of historical baggage and not a little garbage. Its driving forces are not religious. The conflict over Tibet is not a religious issue; it is driven by ethnic and political aspirations in which Buddhism is simply one symbol among many that now trouble the increasingly precarious Chinese empire. The tension in Nepal is not a Hindu thing; deep social and cultural forces drive it. Even the war in Afghanistan seems to have more to do with the poppy these days than with religion. For its part, the conflict over Iraq quickly degenerated into a struggle between criminal chaos and law-and-order, the main losses being the country’s centuries-old social cohesion and its creative role in Arab culture.

So too the struggle to reconcile Cyprus is not so much a Muslim-Christian thing as it is an effort to lay aside the complex of bitterness engendered by still unassimilated historical factors, many of them external in origin.

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In a sense that is a relief. And, with any luck, Cyprus may yet become a paradigm in a day when positive paradigms are in short supply.

If, as seems entirely feasible (which is not *necessarily* to say likely), the leaders of Cyprus north-and-south are able to sort through the tangled skein of their intertwined histories, comb out the snarling junk that foreigners have chucked into the mix of the yarn, and propose a way for twining it all into a ball that can be knitted into the garb of a unified country, then something rather wonderful shall have been achieved.

It shall have been demonstrated that Muslims and Christians who are intimately related, ethnically kin and culturally homogeneous can blend their interests together and come out with dignity and poise. These are the elements of a prayer we who live on this lovely island pray with some fervor. And the current leadership on both sides seems to be guided and working toward that end. Springing forward requires focused attention and sustained effort, and will also involve some pain. But it shall have been worth it ... not just for Cyprus but also for the world at large.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.