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TITLE OF PAPER:

The Double *Economy* of two monasteries of Mount Athos: Contemporary issues and moral dilemmas

In the monasteries of the autonomous monastic Republic of Mount Athos, the term '*economy*' means the 'law (*nomos*) of the house (*ecos*)'. The term is as old as the rule of the *Avaton* (meaning 'no pass'), the thousand year old prohibition of all females from the peninsula, which separates monastic from secular life. The *economy* of the Athonian monasteries has internal and external aspects: Internal exchanges take place in the night through a set of private and collective practices associated to spiritual activities regarding the cultivation of the self in terms of *apatheia* (meaning 'no passions'). Such activities take place within an informal and spiritual hierarchical system, that equally emphasizes both on the detachment of each monk from his materialist and sexual desires, and from the emotional ties that he carries into the monastery from his secular past, in order to liberate him from such 'passions'. On the other hand, external activities refer to the daily work that needs to be done regarding the financial survival, legal status, and vocation of the Monastery as a contemporary institution in the Orthodox world. The two realms are conceived separately: the spiritual hierarchy is headed by the priest-monks with liturgical duties in the night and working tasks in the day regarding the running of the community from inside, while the administrative hierarchy is headed by the Elders, who are responsible for administrative, financial, and legal matters of the monastery. However, as I shall show, in everyday practice, the spiritual and material realms are complementary to each other. Their interdependence becomes evident by looking at the impact of recent changes in monastic life, namely, the importation of new technologies such as the Internet that undermine the *Avaton*, the impact of the increasing religious tourism that burdens the daily timetable of the monks, the exploitation of the forest for logging and exporting wood, the exploitation of Athonian tradition by selling copies of 'miraculous' items through the Internet and a network of shops and churches from Greece to the US, the consequences of accepting funding from the EU, the issue of monastic properties outside Athos (*metochia*) and taxation, and the political involvement of the monasteries in Greek public life regarding 'matters of faith', all reveal the increasing tension between the spiritual conduct of each monk inside the monasteries, in contrast to the external conduct of the monastic institutions outside Athos, which largely contradicts their 'virgin' way of life and communal values inside. The paper will briefly investigate these tensions between internal (informal) and external (formal) aspects of monastic *economy*, by comparing the economic organization of two rival monasteries, in order to highlight the contradictions and moral dilemmas rising from their conduct within the neo-liberal market and contemporary politics of faith.

Key Words in Athonite dialect: *economy, virginity, Avaton, apatheia, tamata, metochia, kosmikos, Old Calendar*

1. Introduction: ‘Virginity’ and ‘Economy’

This section begins by introducing us to the concepts of ‘virginity’ and ‘economy’ on Mount Athos, highlighting their antithetical but complementary role in miracle regarding the Virgin Mary, whose miraculous rescue at the shores of the isolated peninsula made Athos her “Garden”. This tradition supports the rule of *Avaton*, the prohibition of females and cattle on the peninsula (first introduced in the 9th century over land disputes, Paganopoulos 2006) which morally separates monastic from “worldly” life outside Athos (*kosmiki zoe*). The monks describe the communal life inside the monasteries as “spiritualist” (“*pneumatiki*”), egalitarian, and “unchanged for a thousand years”, in opposition to the secular “materialist world” (“*elestikos cosmos*”, where the word “cosmopolitan” is rooted) of self-interest and rapid change outside Athos. In this context, Mount Athos illustrated Durkheim’s definition of monastic life as an ‘escape’ from the profane and secular world (1995: 37). Interestingly, the Christian monks’ separation supports both Durkheim’s and Weber’s evaluation of the concept of ‘community’ as higher of that of individualist interest as their notions of the ‘sacred’, the ‘internal’, the ‘private’, and ‘tradition’, are all identical in a sense that they refer specifically to *religious ties*, which are utilized by a set of customs, rules, and symbols into a unified moral system, the ‘sacred’ in Durkheim’s terms, and/or a ‘traditional economy’ in Weber’s terms, in opposition to an external ‘world’ of amorality, self-interest, and antagonism. This separation is symbolized by the *Avaton*, which illustrates how it is ‘important to separate them from the impersonal, profit-oriented relations of capitalist production’ (Goddard 1996: 185-6) in order to retain their purity untouched: ‘The code is represented as an agency of self-defence against encroachment *from the outside* or as a result of conquest’ (*Ibid*: 171, *my emphasis*). This separation has two levels: first in terms of protecting the purity of the land from external threats, and second, in working the pure to support the self-sufficiency and autonomy inside.

On the other hand, the term ‘economy’, meaning the ‘law of the house’ was first introduced with the coenobitic rule of St Basil in the in 10th century in the first Royal monastery of Meghisti Lavra, by St Athanasius the Athonite, the spiritual founder of the Republic, with funding from his childhood friend the Emperor Phokas (Paganopoulos 2006). Tradition states that at the time when St Athanasius was considering to abandoning Athos, because of the protests of the hermits who had lived there before who saw his connections to the

‘cosmopolitan’ capital Constantinople with suspicion (Papachrysanthou 1992:147, Gillet 1987: 65), Mary appeared to him introducing herself as the ‘builder’ (*ecodomos*) of Meghisti Lavra, and encouraging him to complete his work. After Athanasius’s accidental death in 1004 in Meghisti Lavra, Mary re-appeared to the first Abbot of Meghisti Lavra, introducing herself as the ‘economos’, meaning the ‘stewardess’ of the monastery. Following the apparitions, the role of *economos* was established with a double duty shared by the priest-monks, involving as double responsibility: to organize the cleaning and preparation of the church and chapels for the night liturgies, and to paying the lay workers in the evening for their daily work in the monastery.

In Greek, the term ‘*economia*’ is translated as the ‘law’ (*nomos*) of the ‘house’ (*ecos*) referring both to the internal organization of communal life, and the external vocation of each monastery in the Orthodox world. Accordingly, the monks’ activities are divided into ‘inside the wall activities regarding several people who arrive as potential monks, pilgrims, or visitors, researchers, traders’, and ‘outside the wall activities of the monasteries regarding the missionary work inside and beyond the Greek state’ (Alpentzos 2002: 14-15). Internal activities have to do with the traditional self-sustainability and independence of each monastery (theologically supported by the apparitions of Mary as *economos*), while external activities, referring to the financial, political, and military support to the Royal monasteries, offered by powerful “cosmopolitans” (meaning ‘world [*cosmos*] citizens [*politis*]’), such as Emperors, traders, European Kings, and Ottoman Sultans (Papachrysanthou 1992: 226-32), have been historically described as ‘reciprocal’ (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991: 16). This double economic engagement of the monasteries illustrates Weber’s concept of the ‘economic impulse’ of ‘traditional brotherhoods’ which morally distinguishes an internal and an external aspect of economy (Weber 2003: 356, and Paganopoulos 2009).

But the recent changes in monastic life, such as the rise of religious tourism that affects the monks’ daily program, the importation of new technologies such as the internet by some monasteries that undermined the separation of Athos from the “world”, the over-logging and overuse of natural resources, legal issues regarding the funding the monasteries receive from the EU and the compromises they might have to make, and the active involvement of the monasteries in Greek public life both in financial and political ways which have led to several scandals, all challenge the ideal separation of monastic from secular life, rather revealing the direct connection of the monasteries to the same “materialist world” they morally and

practically denounce in their daily lives. Inevitably, the recent changes on the Holy Mount have divided Athos in terms of how the monks should re-adjust their life according to the changes taking place outside Athos, or in the extreme view by rejecting all change, and thus, dogmatically following the ‘sacred tradition’ (*iera paradosis*). Such contemporary issues reveal the increasing tension between the internal life and external conduct of the monasteries on two levels: first, against the concept of ‘a world’ out there that is threatening to enter and destroy their eternal tradition; and second, the monasteries themselves, which are contesting the same tradition, while serving their current political and financial interests in the same ‘world’ (*cosmos*) they reject.

I chose to do my fieldwork in two neighbouring but rival monasteries, Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou, because they represent the two extreme poles in how the monks deal with the recent changes on Athos: on the one hand, the Vatopaidians call the monks of Esfigmenou the ‘fundamentalists’ of Mount Athos, because of their ultra-Orthodox life and political activism outside Athos, while the monks of Esfigmenou call their neighbours ‘traitors’ to their ‘true faith’, because of the Vatopaidians engagement with Europe, and their financial and political involvement in Greece. Central in the dispute are “matters of faith”, such as an economic dispute over the land of St Gregorius Palamas who became a monk in Vatopaidi in 1315, but also the abbot of Esfigmenou 20 years later, to political issues such as the adoption of the ‘new’ Gregorian calendar by monasteries such as Vatopaidi, and the transformation of the monastery (according to the monks of Esfigmenou) into a ‘hotel’. The paper will be discussing these issues in relation both to the internal regimes of the two rival monasteries and their external conduct (as in Loizos 1994: 76).

2. The Vatopaidian model of ‘Economy’

I will be focusing on “economy” in three levels: first as an “economy of passions” in building a “Christian moral person” (Mauss 1985: 19) according to traditional values and practices; second, as the means of conduct inside the monastery, in achieving a “meaningful connection between something inside oneself and the world outside” (as in Hart 2005: 13); and third, I investigate the turbulent relationship of the monastery of Vatopaidi to the Greek state, regarding its financial and political involvement to the secular world, in other words, Vatopaidi’s “economy” as a religious institution. Internal and external activities are organized

according to two distinctive hierarchies, “an informal spiritual hierarchy which exists parallel to other more institutionalised forms of rank” (Sarris 2000: 8-9). The “informal” or “spiritual” hierarchical system is based on the relationship between Father and Son, echoing the relationship of God to Jesus. It takes a number of different forms depending on the context it is adopted, such as between Elder and deacon, or priest and visitor, forming a kind of “spiritual kinship” (Iossifides 1991), on the basis of various forms of “spiritual” exchanges that take place *inside* the monasteries, through practices of faith, which aim to develop each monk’s “inner world” (“*esoterikos cosmos*”). Iossifides, looking at the life of convents, has pointed to the impact of the increase of religious tourism in Orthodox monasteries (1991:136), in order to highlight the transformation of the economy of the monasteries from agricultural, associated to the ‘local economy’, to a ‘capitalist global economy’. For Iossifides, the ‘spiritual kinship’ and traditions of the nuns depend on the material world outside the monasteries, as ‘the nuns have contact with and knowledge of the world beyond their convent walls (Ibid: 137).

Accordingly, the “formal” or “administrative” hierarchy has to do with the vocation of the monastery as a whole, referring to the set of exchanges taking place between the monastery as a religious institution of the Orthodox world and “cosmopolitan” institutions *outside* Athos. The “administrative” or “formal” hierarchy is peaked by the abbot and the Council of Elders (*Gerontia*) who distribute the annual tasks according to each monk’s “cosmopolitan” background, education, and skills. The aims of this latter system are collective, organized in the impersonal terms of ranking: Abbot, priest-monks, priest-deacons, ordinary monks, novices, as it has financial and political ends, constituting the vocation of each monastery in the Orthodox world. The two hierarchical systems function on a double timetable, that is coordinated according to private and collective prayer in the night following the Canonical Hours, and rest and work during the day according to “worldly” hours.

Double Organization of time and human activity
a) Administrative / spiritual Hierarchy
b) Liturgical/ worldly time
c) Liturgical/ administrative tasks
d) Separation of visitors’ area from monastic cells

Imports: Rapid rise of religious tourism and impact on everyday life (internal economy)

Exports: Sacred products, such as the miraculous ribbons of the Virgin Mary (Paganopoulos 2007) produced at the sacred ground floor of the monastery, packaged by the visitors at the middle floor, and exported from the computer rooms at the top floor through the internet and a network of churches and shops that expands from the US to Russia (external economy).

Division of space: 3 floors

Sacred Products: Outwards the “world”

Top: Abbot’s Office, Council of Elders, Secretary, recording Studio, Workshops	↑
Middle: guest-house (in between sacred world of ground floor/ profane world of top floor)	
Lower: sacred ground (church, chapels, refectory, vineyard, oven, wine/oil storage, phiale)	↓

Visitors, monks: Inwards the sacred self

Finally, I will also briefly look into the issue of the Vatopaidian *metochia* and scandal involving members of the Greek government, journalists, lawyers, and other agents regarding secret exchanges that illegally took place between the monks and the Greek state, against the protests of local councils.



Women breaking the *Avaton* in protest for the stolen land, January 2008



Women protesting over 4,500 square kilometres of disputed land, Thessalonica Court, Pictures taken from Greek newspaper *Eleutherotypia* 15/1/2008

3. Esfigmenou’s Embargo Economy

Esfigmenou is under embargo since February 2003, because of the brotherhood’s political activism and ultra-orthodox views the divide Athos. Since 1971, in protest for the adoption of the ‘new’ Gregorian calendar by some monasteries, such as Vatopaidi, Esfigmenou raised a

black flag on the monastery's highest tower calling for 'Orthodoxy Or Death', refused to participate in the *Holy Committee*, the central Athonian authority with administrative powers situated in the village of Karyes, and to commemorate the 'Ecumenical (Greek) Patriarch of Constantinople' in their prayers. Furthermore, the new zealots have also been engaged in political activities and protests in Greece, Russia, and the US among other places. In response to their protests the Holy Committee and the Patriarchate refused to recognize the abbots and brotherhood living in the monastery since the 1970s, and have cut all means of communication with them.



Arrest of monk of Esfigmenou, from <http://www.esfigmenou.com> (27/5/2009)

But ironically, the longer and harder the embargo lasts the more the reputation of the monastery increases as the 'last tower of zealots'. Despite Esfigmenou's rejection of the technology, money and other 'products of the devil' there are more than 500 sites in the internet in reference to its political situation. In this way, the reputation of the monastery is its basic financial resource: the longer the embargo lasts the more famous the brotherhood becomes, the more visitors jump the border in the night, in order not to be seen by police, and walk ten kilometres to reach Esfigmenou and help the isolated monks by giving them donations, petrol, medicine, and food.

Conclusion: The Vatopaidians endorse the opportunities the new technologies offer, while at the same time, lead a strictly ordered way of life that emphasizes on the separation of 'spiritual' from administrative duties. In daily life they demonstrate the values of 'obedience, virginity, and poverty' (Vatopaidian priest-monk 29/9/02). Their presentation of themselves in the community is based on the 'economy of passions', such as anger, jealousy, pride, and so on, which is understood as the personal attitude of each individual towards a non-excessive and non-wasteful life, in the sense of Weber's analysis of early Christian asceticism in the "spirit of capitalism" (1905), where he understood the spirit of capitalism to be in the ascetic morality of not being excessive (Paganopoulos 2009: 366-369). The aim is to achieve

apatheia (meaning to be ‘without passions’), as a way to detach from the material surroundings.

By contrast, the monks of Esfigmenou demonstrate a passionate way of life, which emphasizes public manifestations of faith such as exorcisms, as spectacles that reveal the struggle of monastic life. The Esfigmenites do not confess and receive the Holy Communion as frequently as the Vatopaidians, following a rather semi-hermetic and stricter way of life. Furthermore, they do not accept monks younger than the age of 35, as they believe in experience and catharsis, rather than in the youth as the educational character of Vatopaidian life revealed to me. The emphasis on different aspects of monastic life is illustrated by their contrasting attitude towards the central values of *filoponia* (meaning to be ‘a friend of pain’): while for the Vatopaidians it is the *means* in achieving salvation, for the monks of Esfigmenou it is the *ends*. The comparison shows that tradition, including both its interpretation and the ways of organizing and performing practices of faith on a daily basis, is a ‘pliable entity, inevitably subject to interpretation and contestation and a vehicle for claims and counter-claims regarding power and authority’ (Goddard 2000: 7). In this context, the claim for “sacred tradition” (*iera paradoseis*) becomes a matter of contestation towards an emergent hegemonic position, which encloses the historical, political, economic changes, and conflicts, that still take place on Athos between the rival and neighbouring monasteries of Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou.

Herzfeld defined ‘cultural intimacy’ as: ‘the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that one considered a source of embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (1997:3). He illustrated the concept by juxtaposing two antithetical, but also complementary, conceptions of Greek identity: first, as ‘*Hellenes*’, a reference to the European idealism of ancient Greece (*see also Tzanelli 2008:129-141*), and second, as ‘*Romii*’, a reference to the Greco-Christians of the Ottoman years (Herzfeld 1997:14-16). This ambiguity is echoed by the marginal status of Mount Athos, reflecting by its paradoxical position, within and against the Greek state, the inability of the Greek state to define its relationship to Mount Athos in clear financial and political terms. This paradox becomes is illustrated by the controversial involvement of the monasteries in Greek public life, especially in light of the recent economic scandal following the collapse of the Greek economy. For many Greeks, their relationship to the monasteries is certainly not ‘reciprocal’, but rather patronizing -by a Republic that is not even Greek. Others see the Republic as an

opportunity for Greece to attract foreign investment by increasing international religious tourism. In this context, it is the Greek state that has yet to clarify its ambiguous and self-contradictory position towards the Republic: how to retain the 'Byzantine spirit' of Hellenism, and at the same time get rid of an 'Ottoman burden' to the national economy.

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