The Journey to Mount Athos: Two Paths to Heaven

Abstract

This paper offers an insight into the spiritual and historical reproduction of two brotherhoods in two neighbouring monasteries of Mount Athos. The paper follows a two-year fieldwork investigation on the isolated Orthodox Republic of only-male monks. It highlights the importance of movement in relation to spiritual reproduction and the political economy of the monasteries. The comparison represents a contrasting, and indeed competing views on monastic life, which further underlines the heterogeneity of ways of living, personal motivations, and aims on the Mount, as well as evolving traditions of the monasteries. In this way, the paper connects the personal transformation of novices to monks to the paradox of monastic life as manifested by the monks' strive to disconnect and escape from the material world to Heaven.

Keywords

Avaton

Tonsures

Virgin Way of Life

Charisma

Spiritual Family

Zealots

The Land of the Virgin

The Christian Orthodox monastic republic of Athos is an isolated peninsula situated in Chalkidiki, northern Greece. Athos has the appearance of a disfigured finger pointing towards the south. It is covered by a wild green forest that leads to the rocky mountain that rises impressively 2,033 metres high above the north Aegean Sea. The thick forest, with torrents that flow through deep ravines and streams, and the tempestuous sea surrounding the peninsula, function as natural border between Athos and the secular world, which, particularly in the winter, is almost impossible to cross. At the southern parts of the peninsula, there are no asphalt roads, water supply systems, or electrical wires; only rocky paths. The northern parts are more developed with roads and modern infrastructure built in and around the secular village of Karyes, which is the administrative capital of the republic situated at the centre of the peninsula.

The thousand-years-old rule of the *Avaton*, meaning "No Pass", prohibits all females, women and cattle, from entering the peninsula. The rule was based on a tradition that describes Mary's and St John's rescue from a shipwreck on their way to meet Lazarus, at the site where today the monastery of Iviron stands. Since then, the Republic has also been known as the "Garden of *Theotokos*", referring to the "Mother of God", and allegedly, no woman has crossed into this holy territory ever since. The *Avaton* morally supports the separation of monastic from secular life in the moral terms of its "spiritual life" ("*pneumatiki zoe"*), in sharp opposition to the "materialist world" ("*illistikos (cosmopolitan) kosmos"*) outside Athos: a world of sin, conflict, self-interest, and constant change. By

contrast, Mary's "Virgin Garden", including the twenty monasteries, is thought to be unchanged for a thousand years [from personal communication with monks].

The life inside the monasteries is organized into the *coenobitic* (communal) way of life, which was first introduced in the Royal monastery of *Meghisti Lavra* by St. Athanasius the Athonite (920-1003AC). He was financially and politically supported by the City of Constantinople (Paganopoulos 2009: 363-4). In the golden days of the Palaeologus Dynasty (1259-1453), the republic counted tens of thousands‟ of monks, and more than 200 royal monasteries, which were funded with donations, land endorsements, gold, and other gifts, offered by secular traders, emperors, kings, princes, and sultans from all over the Christian world (Papachrysanthou 1992: 226-32, Mikrayannanitos 1999: 204, among others). The monks associate their communal rules with the "natural order‟ (*physiki takseis*) of the landscape. They see themselves living in total harmony with the natural environment, as a "symbiosis" [personal communication with monks]. Accordingly, the cyclical year follows the annual liturgical and agrarian calendars. It is divided in winter and summer solstices with sunset always marking the beginning of each day as in Byzantine times. In the winter, when the sun sets as early as 15:00, the monks spend more time inside their cells or in the church praying. By contrast, in the summer, when the days are warmer and longer, they spend more time working outside in the fields for the coming winter. The liturgical calendar starts on the first day of January, and consists of four long periods of abstinence that culminate to twelve great feasts. Each week is further divided in fasting and non-fasting ("oily") days. The monks do not consume any meat because they considered it to be morally equivalent to desire. Instead, they

only eat Mary's gifts from the fields: tomatoes, figs, cucumbers, olives, green peppers, nuts; they also produce wine, *tsipouro* (similar to ouzo), candles, and honey among other products, which they export to the secular market. Fish is on the dinner table every Sunday after mass.

The double realm of monastic life is based on the natural succession of night and day. The night is dedicated to the cultivation of the spiritual self through private and collective practices of faith, while the day is dedicated to the material body (work and rest) and to taking care of the needs of the monastery. The two set of activities are further contextualized within a double hierarchy, an informal spiritual hierarchy, which exists parallel to other more institutionalised forms of rank (Sarris 2000: 8-9). The internal organization of the monastery includes night activities organized on the basis of the spiritual hierarchy led by the priest-monks, while daily activities are organized by the Council of Elders ("*Gerontia"*) with administrative and organizational duties, as well as other financial and legal matters regarding the monastery as an Orthodox institution (Alpentzos 2002: 14-15). At the top of the triangle is the ultimate authority of the Abbot, who supersedes both spiritual and administrative hierarchies, being the "spiritual father" (*pneumatikos pateras*) to all the monks.

Monastic Life as a Rite of Passage

The Rite of Tonsure

> For the first time, he [the neophyte] comes out of the purely profane world, where he has passed his childhood, and enters into the circle of sacred things [...] he is born again in a new form. Appropriate ceremonies are held to bring about the death and the rebirth, which are taken not merely in a symbolic sense but literally [...] The two worlds are conceived of not only as separate but also as hostile and jealous rivals [...] From thence comes monasticism, which artificially organizes a milieu that is apart from, outside of, and closed to the natural milieu where ordinary men live a secular life and that tends almost to be its antagonist. From thence as well comes mystic asceticism, which seeks to uproot all that may remain of man‟s attachment to the world. Finally, from thence comes all [sic] forms of religious suicide, the crowing logical step of this asceticism, since the only means of escaping profane life fully and finally is escaping life altogether (Durkheim 1995: 37)

The separation of the "spiritual" and "material" realms on Athos takes place by degree, echoing Durkheim's classic definition of monastic life as a "sacred" one [1912]. In "escaping life altogether", Athonian life offers a lifelong rite of passage to heaven, as portrayed by ancient texts, such as St Climacus‟ *Ladder to Paradise,* written in the 7th century. The monks see communal life as a way to cleanse and liberate the self from "worldly passions‟ (*kosmika pathoi*), which are thought to be carried into the pure space of the monastery from the polluting secular world. The first stage of the catharsis from the passions of the flesh usually takes place in a "desert" ("*erimos",* referring to isolated settlements) through a testing period ("*dokimasia*" meaning ordeal) under harsh conditions and constant supervision. After a period of six months to a

year, the second part of the ordeal takes place in the monastery under the supervision of the Abbot. In the context of the moral separation of monastic from secular life, the ordeal is the transitory process that takes place in harsh conditions, through techniques of the body that aim to reform body and soul. After a period of one to three years, depending on the novice's progress, the Abbot decides if and when the novice is ready to join the brotherhood. The successful completion of the ordeal is celebrated with the rite of tonsure (*koura*).

According to the *Paschalion* ("Book of Easter") ordinations take place on the weekend before, or the week after, the beginning of the Great Lent (*Sarakosti*, meaning "forty days"), which is the strict period of abstinence preceding the Resurrection of Christ. The bright weather and the blue skies of spring time, with all its smells and early dawns, give a feeling of rebirth and renewal. The time of the ordinations naturalized the rite as a kind of rebirth through nature. The rite consists of a formal conversation between the Abbot, the priest, and the novice, based on a written series of questions and answers, which declare and confirm his new status as a monk and obedience to the monastic hierarchy. The novice is dressed in white underclothing and white socks, looking slightly embarrassed for being "undressed" as he is placed in the centre of the *Catholicon* (main church), the most sacred space of the monastery. According to the monks, the white colour signifies innocent weakness, which, as I was told, symbolizes the innocence of the new-born child. The novice first prostrates towards the four points of the horizon, as a public acknowledgment of his new "spiritual family" ("*pneumatiki oikogeneia"*), first, towards the priest-monk holding the Holy

Cross, which denotes monastic life as self-sacrifice in imitation to Christ the "first monk"; second, towards the icon of the Virgin Mary portrayed as the *Vematarissa* (loosely meaning "Marching Woman") who guides him to take the first step of monastic life; third, towards the icon of the *Annunciation of the Virgin Mary* to which the monasteries are dedicated, his new home; and finally, the novice kneels before the Abbot, the father figure to the community, who returned the gesture with his blessing. Then the priest crosses the novice's forehead, ears, nose, and chest, three times, using the sanctified, perfumed *Myron*.

During the rite, the old "worldly self" ("*kosmikos eautos"*) is declared dead, for a new monk is thought to be spiritually reborn. Bloch and Parry (1982) associated ritual death to fertility and reproduction, as the means of reversing natural time (and in La Fontaine 1985: 15, and Loizos and Heady 1999: 11). The ordination of novices plays on the theme of dying *now*, illustrating Leach's classic concept of "sacred time" as the enactment of time played in reverse, during which death is converted into birth (Leach cited in Gell 2001: 32, and in Harris 1991: 152). The social death of the "worldly" persona of the would-be monk further reaffirms his aspirations toward the afterlife (as also in La Fontaine 1985: 15, and Bloch and Parry 1982). The monks have a saying: "If you die before you die, you will not die when you die". In respect to this, Mantzaridis wrote that in monasteries "humans are not born. They only die. And the life of the monasteries is a preparation for death. But preparing for death, just like death itself, is something full of life" (1990:211). Accordingly, a monk"s cell in the monastery is thought to be his "tomb". During the rite, the Abbot blesses and gives the novice a black

dress, called *rassa*, a black cylindrical hat (*kalymmafki*), and a black, leathered belt to remind him of the death of flesh [personal communication with priest-monks]. In this way the novice, cleansed from his secular past, is reborn with a new name, clothing, and a new set of duties (as also in La Fontaine 1985: 16), publicly confirming his new position, as a *rassophoros* (meaning a person who "carries the black *rassa*".

The public declaration of the death of the "worldly self" cuminates with the act of tonsure. The priest cuts a lock of hair from the kneeling novice. Then the Abbot loudly announces the new name of the new-born monk three times, to the enthusiastic responses of the congregation who collectively repeat the name three times in one voice. The new name given to the novice has a particular value and meaning. For instance, in a common name was Romanos, referring to St. Romanos the Melodist, a remarkable composer of Byzantine music of the 14th century. Nowadays, the name is given to those novices known for their beautiful voice and musical talent. Many are happy to join the monasteries' world-famous choir, often describing their decision to become monks as a way to liberate themselves from "worldly" expectation, in order to happily follow their true vocation.

But not everyone in the church looks happy. One of the novices' biological father and uncle, who came to witness the transformation of their son into a monk, both looked upset. They were standing in a dark corner of the church. The father, who had a desperate look in his eyes, cried. It could have been for happiness; it could have been for loss. During and after the rite his son did not even turn once to look

back at him. He was dead. Instead, the white-dressed novice disappeared among the black cassocks of his new brotherhood, like a dissolving light, to be the first to receive the Holy Communion. In the refectory, he sat next to their new father, the Abbot, with his new "spiritual family". His biological father sat separately with the rest of the visitors near the entrance.

Tonsure is thus both a rite of separation and aggregation, of rejection and acceptance. As a rite of separation, it marks the successful completion of the first stage of the greater passage to heaven, which is based on the public denouncement of the biological family and rejection of all secular ties. This follows the example of Christ who refused to recognize his mother on his way to the Cross (Matthew 12: par. 47-99). On Athos, this rejection is directly associated with the prohibition of the monks' mothers in the peninsula, according to the rule of the *Avaton*. Their public denouncement during the rite as explored in Bloch‟s and Guggenheim‟s article on Catholic baptism (1981), in which they argued that: "baptism is a ritual denying the woman's ability to produce socially acceptable children", as it determines the social status of the child. Accordingly, social rebirths legitimize differences of class and gender which constitute the discourse of power of religious ideology in which the godfather replaces the biological parents of the neophyte (1981: 380, 385).

Tonsure is also a rite of aggregation, as the brotherhood collectively welcomes the new member in the community. It is a form of a public "acceptance" in Rappaport's terms (1999:119-123), with a double significance, on the one hand, marking the personal acceptance of the young monk who decides to follow monastic life, and on the other, the public acceptance of his membership by the

community. Accordingly, he anticipates a new life being reborn as a "virgin", in imitation to the body of Christ. On a collective level, the ordination celebrates communal life as a whole, while anticipating the forthcoming Easter, which is the greatest day of the Orthodox calendar. The moral obligation to the community, the self-sacrifice of the novice and oath of obedience to the central authority of the Abbot that the novice takes during his ordination, will become the central motivation in his daily conduct, by "reaffirming the divisions and hierarchies that are indispensable to a system of authority" (as in La Fontaine 1985: 17).

Accordingly, after many years of monastic experience, the monk is ordained for a second time, receiving the *Angelic Schema* ("Angelic Patent"), as he is thought to have transformed into an "angel on earth" [following Matthew 19:10-12, 22:30, and Corinthians 7]. The final aggregation can only be found in Paradise, where the ladder of monastic life leads in union with Christ ("*en'Christo"*). This final "departure" to heaven ("*anahorisis"*, the root to the word "anchorite") is celebrated with a third rite of passage, the funeral of the monk.

A "Virgin" Way of Life

In everyday life, each monk aims to imitate the image of God ("*kath' eikona kai kath' omoiosin"*), whose embodiment on earth is visualised in the ideal *imago dei* of the Virgin Christ (*imago Dei*). In this sense, the image of "Christ" becomes an archetype of the monastic self. Jung writes that Christ exemplifies the prototype monastic persona, virtue of self-sacrifice, struggle, justice, and being "as good as perfect … the perfect man who is crucified" (Jung 1968: 69). This, in juxtaposition with Christ shadow, the "Antichrist", who possesses "an emotional

nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality" *(Ibid:* 8-11). Such nature can be associated to demonic behaviour, uncontrolled sexuality, neurosis, greed, and deception. The monks call these symptoms "passions" (*pathoi*), associated with emotional and sexual urges that they carry in their memory from their secular past and world into the sacred space of the monastery.

In this context, the monastery is a *liminal* space, set in between life and death, earth and heaven, in which each monk can purify and liberate himself from his secular past in his preparation for the afterlife. This path of purification takes place through practices of faith, private and collective forms of prayer, and other cathartic practices such as confession and the Holy Communion. There are also other collective techniques of the body, such as fasting, working, and sleeping deprivation, which aim to cultivate the moral (i.e. "spiritual") persona of each monk (as in Mauss 1985: 17-20). Over time, such practices (both liturgical and daily tasks) become "habitudes" (as in Mauss 2006: 80), meaning that underneath their private or collective performance lays a connection of each monk to a Durkheimian holy whole: the sacred community with its naturalized rules, practices, timetables, and hierarchy. In the words of the monks, their monastery is "a living human body" of which each member of the brotherhood is an active part: "If a vein is blocked and stops working then the body gets a heart-attack" [personal communication with monks].

Douglas (1996/1970) in her revision of Mauss's famous essay on the "techniques of the body" (Mauss 2006/1936: 77-95) argued that "there can be no such thing as natural behaviour [...] Nothing is more essentially transmitted by a social

process of learning than sexual behaviour, and this of course is closely related to morality" (Douglas 1996: 69). This is represented on Athos by the strict dress code, as the monks and visitors have to be fully dressed at all times in order not to insult the virgin landscape. Other rules prescribe that the monastic body is covered in the black *rassa* and hidden under a long beard that make the monks almost indistinguishable from each other. This "virgin way of life" ("*parthena zoe"*) defines the conduct of each monk according to the social order of the community. This echoes Douglas's distinction between "the physical body", as a moralized and naturalized "microcosm of society", which is "polarized conceptually against the social body" following Durkheim's concept of a double consciousness of a moral and social order (1996: 77, 87). For the deeply moralist Durkheim: "If there is such a thing as morality, it must necessarily link man to goals that go beyond the circle of individual interests" (1973: 65). The communal life of Athos exemplifies this moral belief in social solidarity, as "virgin life" is organized according to the needs of the community in direct relation to each monk's spiritual upbringing.

> "The enlightened mind is the person who struggles without passions [*apatheia*], in order to achieve a life of an angel on earth. The virginity of a monk is not only external, as some think. Above all, it is internal, a matter of the heart. The obedient subordinate, with his acceptance and deed of service [*thelima*, "Elder's will"], and within the love of the Church, gradually comes to cleanse his heart, which is the right path toward a virgin life. The monk who leads a virgin life tastes the life of the angels" (Archimandrite Ephraim, abbot of Vatopaidi, 2001: 56, my translation from Greek)

Therefore, “virginity“ is not a sexual condition, as many monks are not sexual virgins, and some, even have children outside Athos. Instead, it refers to a collective state of mind and body, which manifests itself in terms of social order. In this context, the value of virginity is culturally constructed and used to morally enhance the physical separation of Athos from *a* “world“ out there. It naturalizes the way of life in each monastery by locating it in the landscape and the cosmos, as a projection of the body of Mary, simultaneously the virgin and the providing mother who protects each monk from external threats, *particularly* from the presence of profane women. Thus, Mary projects the masculine ideal of womanhood, seen as the “bearer of group identity”, used in “the process of demarcation of group boundaries“, and “as an agency of self-defence against encroachment *from the outside* or as a result of conquest” (Goddard 1987: 171173). Yet, the daily experience of this way of life is not only “spiritual”, but also “historically and culturally specific“ (as in Caplan 1987: 19).

In contrast to the general perception of monasticism as static and unchanging, monastic life is formed *on the way* to a monastery. As discussed above, in the absence of women, the monks replace biological with spiritual forms of reproduction that depend on the movement of charismatic monks who travel outside Athos to attract and recruit new members. There are two ways of entering Athos to become a monk: either individually, or with a group (a “*companionships*”, in Greek “*synodeies”*) of young men usually arriving from the same geographic area, who “accompany” a charismatic elder (“*charismatikos monahos”)* until they settle in a monastery (*see* also Sidiropoulos 2000: 145-155).

Each family takes its name either from the charismatic monk though to be its founding "spiritual father", or from the geographic area where he had spent his early years as a young novice, or lived as an old hermit. When the charismatic monk reaches a certain age, he departs to a hermitage for the remainder of his life, while his disciples take his place by becoming the "spiritual fathers" to new "*companionships*". In this way, they "spiritually" multiply the members of the family, while also expanding its tradition to more monastic settlements inside and outside Athos. The charismatic monk also appoints the first Abbot of a renovated monastery, who usually is a trusted disciple. Subsequent Abbots are elected by the entire brotherhood.

Athonian families are "spiritually" reproduced on the basis of the archetypal relation between father and son, echoing the relationship of God to Jesus. This takes on different forms depending on the context it is adopted: between elder (*gerontas*) and deacon (*diakos*), teacher and disciple, abbot and monk, or monk and visitor. Significantly, the father-son relation is based on the submission of the younger to the elders. As part of becoming a monk, the novices and younger monks first have to serve their elders as deacons. During this period, they are called *epotactikoi*, meaning "under order/submission" until the death of their "spiritual father", which then allows them to travel and attract their own deacons. Thus, the spiritual relationships carry the collective characteristic of "an ongoing open-ended flow of spiritual life" (as in du Boulay 1984: 545). This is instigated by the movement of travelling monks from Athos to the secular world, and back into Athos with more recruits. This network forms the basis in the process of the spiritual reproduction of the brotherhoods. In this way, charismatic monks open

the path to younger would-be monks towards salvation that takes place according to, on the one hand, the spiritual tradition and collective history of the family, both formed and taught on the way to a monastery, and on the other, the history and tradition of the monastic institution in which the new monks are incorporated. This process takes place through the experience of travelling, which fuses each monk's personal history within the collective experiences of the brotherhood and history of the monastery.

Therefore, the movement of monks becomes vital in the economic development of the monasteries -as shown in a number of researches on Christian monasticism. In her study of Orthodox monastic life of Romanian nuns, Forbess interpreted the concept of "charisma" as the ability to travel in order "to mobilise resources outside the convent" (2005: 152). Elsewhere, Iossifides highlighted the importance of contact of nuns with the cosmopolitan world, as a means to develop a knowledge of the world beyond their convent walls, by showing how spiritual relationships are not limited in the convent but expand outside. In this context, Iossifides pointed to the impact of the increase of religious tourism in monasteries, in terms of their economic transformation within the "capitalist global economy" in her words (1991: 136-7). These activities, unbounded by the constraints of the secluded life inside the monasteries, reveal the entrepreneurial calling of charismatic nuns and monks, vital for the prosperity of the monastic institutions.

The *Family of Josephaeoi* in Vatopaidi

Most of the monks of the monastery of Vatopaidi belong to the Family of *Josephaeoi*, whose founder was Joseph the Hesychast (1898-1959), also known as the "Cave Dweller". According to testimonies of his disciples, Joseph's *charis* had a "supernatural" quality (as also in Weber 1968: 19). He often received "information" from God, anticipating future events. He could watch over his disciples at all times, even though he was not physically near them (Filotheitis 2008: 244-252). He earned his title because he revived the spiritual tradition of *Hesychasm* ("silence") based on the practice of Jesus Prayer, the repetition of the words "Lord Jesus Have Mercy on me, the Sinner" as the means of controlling the emotions, thoughts, dreams, and desires of the body. The practice dates back to the 14th century *Hesychast* movement of monks led by St. Gregorios Palamas, who was ordained as a monk in Vatopaidi in 1315, and later became the abbot of the neighbouring rival monastery of Esfigmenou in 1336. In his *typiko* ("formalities", the book with the rules of daily conduct and liturgical timetables) written in 1938, Joseph the Hesychast also re-introduced the *coenobitic* (communal) way of life, based on the values of obedience, virginity, and poverty. In practice, he emphasized "economy" ("*oikonomia*") in the training of novices, because they were deemed to be too soft to follow the hardships of hermetic life (Joseph the Vatopaidian 2002: 33, Filotheitis 2008: 350-352, and Paganopoulos 2009: 366-369).

But this "spiritual" return to *coenobitic* life was accompanied by rapid demographic changes that took place after the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border in 1912. The paradoxical status of Athos, thought to be both within and

outside Greece, was enhanced by the double ambiguity about the twenty monasteries' political and economic autonomy, guaranteed by the Greek Constitution of 1925-7. This autonomy raises two questions: first, in respect to the ambiguous status of non-Greek monks; and second, in respect to the ambiguous economic and political relation of each monastic institution to the Greek state and the EU. These two issues are illustrated by the history of Vatopaidi and one of its dependant *sketes* (monastic village), the Skete of St. Andrew, or "Russian *Serrai",* as it is also known. In the 19th century, the Skete was one of the places dominated by Russian monks, who, in 1909, formed the movement of the "Glorifiers of the Name". They claimed that only the name of "Jesus" in the Jesus Prayer contains the essence of God. Following protests from Greek monks to the (Greek) "Ecumenical Patriarchate" in Istanbul, the Tsar repatriated a thousand Russian monks in two waves (in 1912 and 1915), accusing them of heresy. However, underneath the theological conflict between the Greek *Holy Committee* and the "Glorifiers of the Name", there was a general anxiety of Greek monks about the increasing numbers of Russian monks. In 1903, the number of Russians [3,496] was greater than the Greeks [3,276] (Sidiropoulos 2000: 106-107). A third wave of Russian and Bulgarian monks called themselves *Celliotes*, because they lived isolated in cells spread on the Mount. They were also deported from Athos during the Greek Civil War (1946-9) accused for allegedly being "communists" because of their ethnicity [from personal communication with monks of Esfigmenou].

Following these expulsions, and the increasing disconnection of the peninsula from Eastern European countries, the number of monks continued to decrease

from 6,345 in 1913 to 2,878 in 1943, and to its lowest recorded number of 1,145 monks in 1971 (Mantzaridis 1980:191). In the same year, the last remaining Russian monk died in the "Russian *Serrai*". The Vatopaidian Skete was left abandoned for many years, until 1992. One of the disciples of Joseph the Hesychast, Joseph the Vatopaidian (1921-2009), requested from the Holy Committee to move there a "*companionship*" of fifteen monks from his native Cyprus. The Skete was "Russian" by name only, as it became the home of about thirty young monks, in their majority from Greek Cyprus. At the site of the Skete, the Vatopaidians rebuilt the new Athoniada School, with funding from the EU. The School was originally situated near Vatopaidi. It was built in 1749, producing a series of teachers of the Greek Orthodox tradition, such as the "Great Teacher of the Nation" Eugenius Voulgaris, the influential Patriarch of Alexandria Cyprianos Cyprios, the Greek national hero Regas Ferraios, and St. Kosmas the Aetolian. After being moved to the "Russian Serrai", it became a centre of Greek Cypriot nationalism.

Nevertheless, in the context of the greater demographic changes on Athos, the claim for "spirituality" becomes the hegemonic means of an emergent Greek tradition. Central to the Greek Cypriot nationalist narrative is the figure of the Virgin Mary, symbolizing the monks' "affinal relationship with the Divine" (as in Iossifides 1991:150, and cited in Bryant 2002:515). Both the island of Cyprus and Vatopaidi are closely associated with the Virgin Mary. In her comparative study of how Greek and Turkish Cypriots construct their pasts, Bryant suggested that while the Turkish Cypriots emphasize the importance of "blood" to understand their past, their Greek counterparts emphasize the Hellenic "spirit" as part of the

Greek nationalist narrative based on ideals of the purity of spirit and soul (2002: 511, 521). The revival of Vatopaidi and its settlements illustrate this as the Greek nationalist nostalgia of a "spiritual" return to an imagined, golden Byzantium.

Joseph the Vatopaidian's Network: Moral Dilemmas

Joseph the Vatopaidian (1/7/1921 - 1/7/2009) was a disciple in the "*companionship*" of Joseph the Hesychast. He was ordained into a monk in the New Skete in 1953. During his life, he often travelled to his native Cyprus to gather more "*companionships*" to bring into Athos. In this way, he first revived the monastery of Koutloumousiou in 1980, before moving with his second "*companionship*" of fifteen monks to Vatopaidi in 1986. A member of Joseph's "*companionship*" at the time told me that when they first arrived to Vatopaidi they found the monastery in ruins. The monks would not pray together, prepare their meals, or take care of the monastery. "They didn't even bother to go to Sunday Mass" [discussion with Vatopaidian priest-monk 3/10/02]. In imitation of his father Joseph the Hesychast, Joseph the Vatopaidian revived the internal, "spiritual" life of Vatopaidi, as well as its external network with his native Cyprus. On the one hand, he organized the monastery's economic and social structure according to the rules of Joseph the Hesychast, and appointed a new Abot. His personal journey into Athos also opened a path from the monastery of *Timios Stavros* ("Honoured Cross") situated in his native Greek Cyprus, to the Athonian villages of the New Skete, the House of *Evangelismos*, and the "deserts" of *Koutanakia* and *Kapsala*, among other settlements, where more "*companionships*" of young novices trained before they were ordained in

Vatopaidi as new monks. After he renovated Vatopaidi's political economy in 1990, he settled in an isolated hut in the forest, in order to "depart" in peace, while his disciples continued travelling to Cyprus to gather more "*companionships*" and multiply the population of the monastery. Furthermore, they expanded the tradition of the family of the *Josephaeoi* in the US (the monastery of St. Antonius, Arizona), England (the monastery of the Forerunner in Sussex), and bought new *metochia* (Vatopaidian properties) in Greece and Cyprus.

In the last two decades, Vatopaidi has rapidly developed into the most influential institution of Athos, with its population increasing from 53 in 1986, to 48 monks in 1990, and to 73 in 1992 (Mantzaridis 1997: 172, and Alpentzos 2002: 232-5) including sixteen monks aged between 20 and 35, and eighteen monks around 40 years-old (Sidiropoulos 2000:155). A third wave of young monks followed in 1996, and a fourth in 2000. At the time of my fieldwork in 2003, more than 90 monks lived in Vatopaidi, and about 40 in its settlements. Nowadays, it numbers up to 130 monks. According to a number of statistical researches (such as Mantzaridis 2005: 2, and Sidiropoulos 2000: 154-5). Vatopaidi's rapid development was based on an influx of young and well-educated monks, who brought with them their knowledge and skills from the secular world. From the thirteen novices I met during my visits to the monastery between 2002 and 2004, eleven of them had studied in an institution of higher education in Greece, Cyprus, and Romania, but none of them had managed to graduate. Their skills were used for the community, *not* for their own personal interest. On this moral basis, many monks that I met in the field had higher education, but not a degree

to show for it. The young monks introduced electricity, sanitation, and running water. They also renovated the *archontariki* ("guest-house") into a luxurious environment with an elevator, restored the chapels and buildings of the monastery and settlements, imported heavy machinery, and introduced computer technology, among other rapid changes. Furthermore, they restored the treasures of their monastery, such as the eight miraculous icons of the Virgin Mary and other holy items and relics, working in co-operation with the Greek Archaeological Service, and the "Computer Vision and Image Processing Group", Department of Informatics of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The project was funded by the "European Heritage Laboratories Action" [1999].

With this revival of the internal economy of the monastery, the young Vatopaidians also opened up to the secular world, participating in a number of charities and conferences in Europe and the US over sustainable living, the environment and global warming. They also founded their own publication company and publish their own magazine (*Pemptousia*). Through this network, they sell copies of miraculous icons, books with the life and teachings of spiritual fathers, and products such as honey, wine, candles and rosaries, distributed via a network of churches and religious shops worldwide (Paganopoulos 2007: 127-132). A pilgrim consumer can buy such "holy" products from commercial sites such as the "Monastery Products Online" at www.monasteryproducts.org, or even virtually visit the *catholicon* (church) of Vatopaidi to light a candle at www.ouranoupoli.com/athos. On July 1st 2009, on the day of his birthday, Joseph the Vatopaidian died in his isolated cell in the forest. The deacons who found him say that he began smiling after his death. They even took pictures of the "smiling" corpse, and posted on Facebook.

However, this enthusiastic engagement with the virtual world of the internet, as well as other economic activities, undermines the ideal separation of Athos from the secular world, while raising moral dilemmas regarding the exploitation of the land, the sharp rise of religious tourism and its impact on monastic life, and the importation of new technologies, such as heavy machinery and electric generators. In this context, the monks Eleseos and Papaghiannis identified as the main ecological problem the desertification of the land, a consequence of the exploitation of the forest by extensive logging (1994: 51-4). They also observed that the introduction of telecommunications, water pipes, machines, and electrical generators into the peninsula "threaten the calmness, form and function of the environment […] The pollution of the space from concrete and liquid waste could be out of control" (*Ibid*: 43, my translation from Greek).

On the other hand, there are also concerns about the external conduct of the monasteries, as EU funding represents another problem in relation to the rule of the *Avaton*, the prohibition of females from the peninsula (Paganopoulos 2007: 123-126). For the monks, the prohibition is a matter of tradition and identity, as the rule highlights their disconnection from the secular world. But while most monasteries continue receiving funding, they protested against discussions that took place in 2002 and 2003 about the constitutional rights of women to enter all European sites, since all European citizens pay their taxes to their government and to the EU, which then funds the Athonian monasteries. The problem is not resolved. Women are still not allowed to enter, despite the funding that most monasteries continue to receive.

Despite the *Avaton,* only in the 20th century there have been at least six recorded trespasses by women: in 1948, rebel women of the "Democratic Army" looked for a shelter from the civil war. In 1954, in two incidences a woman journalist and a Byzantine historian illegally entered for research purposes. In 1969, five tourists, and in 1989 a German couple, also entered for a swim. In January 9th 2008, six women led by the MP Amanatidou-Pashalidou of the left-wing political party SYRIZA, climbed over the fence in front of the Greek media in protest against the claims of four monasteries over land and estates in mainland Greece (*metochia*, monastic properties outside Athos). These were donated to the monasteries by the Ottoman government as endorsements, but they have been in dispute since the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border of 1912. The latter case reopened in 2008 over a wave of unproved revelations in the Greek media about financial and legal irregularities in several exchanges of land and properties between Vatopaidi and Greek officials.

In response to the crisis, in December 2008 the Holy Committee of Athos and the Patriarch Vartholomeos asked the Abbot to resign from his post. However, the Abbot strategically resigned only from his administrative authority as the head of the Council of Elders, but continued to act over his "spiritual duties" to the brotherhood (*pneumatika kathikonta*), thus, essentially remaining the father of the community. Here, we see a practical adjustment of the structural separation of administrative from spiritual relationships, tasks, times, spaces, and hierarchies, used to strategically retain the Abbot's authority against the Greek state.

The unproven case shows that Athos is a sacred place that is paradoxically both *liminal* and contested at the same time: a uniquely Christian Orthodox, international Potlatch, geographically situated on a cross-road between three continents, functioning as a sacred bridge that offers a number of paths from earth to heaven. It is a "free gift" to Orthodox pilgrims from all over the world, offering personal salvation from a profane world of self-interest and economic insecurity (*see* also Parry 1986: 466-469, on the direct association of capitalism to the Christian notion of a "free gift"). The political and financial tensions between the Greek state and Vatopaidi show how "although under capitalism, sexuality and the economy *appear* to have become separate from each other, yet the links between them are innumerable, and both spheres remain significant in the production and reproduction of social reality" (as in Padgug 1979: 16, cited in Caplan 1987: 19). On Athos, these links morally undermine the tradition of virginity while raising ethical questions in respect to the conduct of some monasteries outside Athos, as well as, rise of religious tourism, desertification of the forest, and the political and financial involvement of "cosmopolitan" institutions in the life of the monasteries.

The New Zealots of Esfigmenou

> "In Orthodoxy the "two worlds" remain separate yet connected, but unequal and asymmetric, for while the laity by a positive effort can transcend the limitations of their flaws through fasting and piety [...] the monastics have chosen the "elevated" path, and an increasing involvement in the "world of

> the flesh" must be negatively evaluated" (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991:16-17)

Inevitably, the way of dealing with contemporary issues regarding the relationship and connection of the monasteries to cosmopolitan institutions divides the republic in terms of how the monks should re-adjust their lives. As already discussed, the young Vatopaidians enthusiastically continue to grasp the opportunities that the world offers, funding and technology to name a few. But their engagement with the "worldly world" is seen by other monks, such as the monks of the neighbouring Esfigmenou, as a betrayal of "true faith‟ ("*alithini pistis"*) and "sacred tradition" ("*iera paradoseis")*. This is generally expressed as a "matter of faith‟ ("*thema pisteos"*). In some monasteries, as in Vatopaidi, the monks use a double way of counting time, following both the "old", Julian calendar ("*palaio imerologio"*), for the liturgical life of the monastery that takes place in the night according to the canonical hours of the Divine Liturgy, and the "new calendar" ("*neo imerologio"*) for the "worldly hours" of the day ("*kosmikes ores"*) for their external dealings with the "cosmos", including guests, visitors, and "cosmopolitan centres‟ ("*kosmika kentra"*) outside Athos. But for other monasteries, such as the neighbouring Esfigmenou, the "old calendar‟ is as much a matter of identity and tradition, as well as a flaming political matter. The issue goes back to the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border, as in 1923-4 the Greek King and the Patriarchate ordered the monasteries to replace the Julian calendar with the Gregorian calendar. Initially, all the monasteries protested against this change, because they feared that it would affect their way of life. They collectively ceased to commemorate the

"Ecumenical" Patriarch in their prayers according to their vows, with the exception of the monks of Vatopaidi, who adopted the "new" calendar without protest. By 1926-7, the rest of the monasteries also compromised, with the exception of Esfigmenou, whose monks since then continued using only the Julian calendar. Thus, from the very beginning of the issue, the neighbouring Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou represented the two extreme poles regarding the change of the calendar.

Visible from afar in the sea, hanging from the tower, blown by the wind like a loose red and black tongue with a human skull drawn on it, Esfigmenou's infamous black banner calls for "ORTHODOXY OR DEATH". At the harbour, outside the monastery's high walls lay a pile of high-tech rubbish: broken computers, TV sets, radios, and mobile phones. They were brought by visitors as gifts to the monks, but were rejected, because their barcodes are marked by the number of the Beast 6-6-6. In a symbolic act of denial, they threw them out of their highest tower. The broken gifts remain on the shore as a testament to the monastery's uncompromising beliefs and way of life. Its gate rarely opens. It remains shut, just like the heart of the monks to the world outside its medieval walls. According to the monks, it will only open at the Second Coming. The black flag was raised in 1973 in protest to the then Patriarch Athenagoras's effort to reunite the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in the spirit of the greater international project called *Ecumenism*. Athenagoras dared to lift the curses ("*anathemas*") against the Pope, which were first made at the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople in 1054. For Esfigmenou, *Ecumenism* threatens the purity of their "true faith" in a polluted world of contact:

technological, sexual, commercial, cultural, and most importantly, religious contact with the non-Orthodox Other: "*Ecumenism*, precisely, represents the theory that there is no true faith" [personal communication with monk of Esfigmenou]. In the 1970s, the monks ceased to commemorate the "Ecumenical Patriarch" of Istanbul in their prayers, but more importantly, stopped sending a representative to the central authority of the *Holy Committee* of Mount Athos, thus, cutting all communication with the other monasteries.

For them, this "betrayal" is a sign of the end of time, expressed in various prophecies about an imminent end, which identify the Pope with the Antichrist, as prophesized by St. John‟s *Apocalypse* (Paganopoulos 2007: 128). The Esfigmenites and their followers accuse the family of Josephaioi of receiving the "Devil‟s money" from cosmopolitan "Papic" centres and other "Masonic centres" such as the Royal family of England and the EU. They highlight the commercial interest of Vatopaidi willing to negotiate the rule of *Avaton* that would result in making Athos a "hotel" like the rest of Chalkidiki, a highly touristic place. They also accuse them of importing a "Latin" type of monasticism, based on frequent confession and Holy Communion [from personal communication with priest-monk of Esfigmenou]. Unlike the Vatopaidians who confess and receive the Holy Communion every fortnight, the monks in Esfigmenou receive the Holy Communion only once every two weeks, and rarely confess. The monks of Esfigmenou consider the Vatopaidian emphasis on "spirituality" and obedience as a Westernized way to deceiving young monks in imitation to Catholic monasticism. For this reason, while most of the Vatopaidians were ordained at the young age of 25 years old, in Esfigmenou

tonsures are forbidden for men who are younger than 35 years old. This reflects on Esfigmenou's population, dominated by middle-aged and older men. Furthermore, while most of the Vatopaidians arrived in "*companionships*" from Cyprus, most monks of Esfigmenou arrived individually, and from all over the world, attracted by the reputation of the monastery as the "last tower of zealots". Then monastery's strict zealot life offers them the means for personal redemption from a past life of sin [from personal communication with monks]. Therefore, while the monks of Vatopaidi are graduates from religious schools in Greece, Athos and Cyprus, and of younger age, the monks of Esfigmenou are in their majority social outcasts who arrived in the monastery to find personal redemption in the zealot way of life. Accordingly, the different motivations for joining each institution reflects on their respective social organizations. Unlike the highly organized environment of Vatopaidi, centralized around the absolute power of its Abbot and dominated by Greek Cypriots, Esfigmenou is a segregated community, divided by seventeen groups of monks and visitors alike, in terms of their ethnicity. Furthermore, the Abbot's authority is significantly diminished, as each group functions according to its own rules, language, timetables, and customs, following the instructions of a priest-monk.

Zealot monasticism is based on a semi-hermetic way of life that goes back to the deserts in Egypt and Palestine. In imitation of the early hermits, it encourages a strict way of life, including sleep deprivation, *xyrofagia* ("eating dry food"), absolute poverty and isolation. Most zealots live in autonomous cells, shared between two to three monks who are led by an elder. They are generally spread everywhere on Athos, some live isolated in monasteries and "deserts". I even met an old zealot left in Vatopaidi, an 80 year-old monk who had lived there before

the arrival of Joseph and his family in 1987. Significantly, both Joseph the Hesychast and Joseph the Vatopaidian were also zealots. In other words, zealot life is a personal choice for a stricter way of life. However, the new zealot monks of Esfigmenou differ both in terms of interpreting its aims, and in terms of the politicisation of zealot-ism in direct opposition to the mainstream Greek Orthodox Church. They represent the values of the international ultra-Orthodox sect of the "Old Calendarist Church" as a movement for authenticity.

This fundamentalist ideology is publicly manifested by the struggle and "martyrdom", in the words of the monks of Esfigmenou, against the Athonian authorities. In response to their political activism inside and outside Athos, the Holy Committee and the Patriarchate issued three eviction notices to the brotherhood in 1974, 1979, and in February 2003. In the latest notice, the Holy Committee did not recognize the status of the monks in Esfigmenou, calling them "occupiers", who break the "harmony" on Athos, because of their extremist beliefs and their connections to secular, far-right, religious groups in Greece (ultra-Orthodox organizations such as St. Basil and ELKIS). Against their claims for the opposite, the Holy Committee accuses the zealots that they keep an ultra-cosmopolitan agenda by politicizing monastic life as such (Eviction Notice 2003: 5-18).

Since 2003, the year my fieldwork took place amongst the zealots, the authorities issued an embargo which has cut all connections to the monastery, including buses, boats, and footpaths. The monastery is guarded by Greek policemen wearing EU badges. They have also cut the supply of food, petrol, medicine, and visitors, an embargo that is still ongoing. Still, despite the zealous rejection of

new technologies as supposedly marked by the barcode of the Beast, the zealots fully use the internet to make their voices heard in the world whilst they are "under siege" [www.esfigmenou.com is the monastery's official site, but there are more than 500 sites in reference to the movement. Similar to Vatopaidians, they also publish their own magazine, entitled *Voanerges,* with articles in five languages (Greek, Serbian, Russian, Romanian, and English). The magazine is distributed through a network of "Old Calendarist" churches, shops, and institutions all over the Orthodox world. In this way, the monastery's reputation becomes the central motivation for someone to join this particular monastery. In 1986, Esfigmenou numbered 38 monks (Mantzaridis 1997: 172), but at the time of my fieldwork in 2002, I counted about 130 monks. Nowadays, the number of monks remains the same, but the monastery is populated by more than100 activists. Ironically, this rapid increase in the number of monks and activists shows that the longer the embargo lasts, the greater the world-wide reputation of Esfigmenou becomes, and consequently, the more visitors and potential monks will find their way into the monastery through the "secret" path from the forest.

Conclusion

Monastic life on Athos offers a rite of passage to the afterlife, via a journey to one of its twenty monasteries. This cathartic journey is both personal and collective. It takes place on the basis of the rule of the *Avaton*, the prohibition of women and cattle from the peninsula, which separates its pure way of life from the changing and sinful cosmopolitan life outside Athos. Accordingly, the *Avaton* functions as both a physical and a mental border that each man has to cross on his

striving towards this ideal of virginity through the sacred life of each monastery, including its rules and prohibitions, timetables and internal hierarchy. It makes the peninsula a sacred place, offering a life-long pilgrimage to *liminal* groups of would-be monks formed *on the way to a monastery*.

One of this essay's aims was to highlight the importance of movement in the reproduction of the population of the brotherhoods, in order to show how the personal history, motivations, and experience of transformation of the monks are fused within, as well as actively forming each institution's ongoing changing tradition. Further, I also wished to briefly discuss the impact of the younger generation of monks on Athonian life, particularly regarding contemporary issues, such as the nationalization and reputation of the monasteries, their problematic relation to the Greek state, the introduction and uses of new technologies, the rise of religious tourism, and political disputes over the "old" calendar and EU funding, all of which undermine the tradition of virginity, as well as the geographic isolation of the peninsula.

In this context, the essay mapped two different ways of entering into the "virgin life" of the Mount. First, in groups of monks called "*companionships*" in respect to the majority of monks of Vatopaidi, or individually as a form of personal catharsis, in respect to the majority of monks of Esfigmenou. The two types of movement correspond to a different set of collective motivations, contrasting ways of travelling, paths, antagonistic ideologies, financial competition, as well as a variety of beliefs, aims, interpretations, practices, timetables, and ways of conduct associated to each monastic institution. The comparison of the contrasting environments between Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou, in relation to their

financial and political rivalry over "matters of faith" ("*themata pisteos"*), illustrated how a sacred source (i.e. a shrine, an icon, a monastery, or the entire peninsula) is contested between rival groups, as also previously discussed in respect to Christian pilgrimages (Sallnow 1981: 163-182, and Bax 1983: 167-177, 1990: 63-75). In this context, monasteries are not static, a-historical, and homogeneous environments, but arenas in which the collective concept of *a* "sacred tradition" (*iera paradoseis*) is both contested and evolving through everyday life. In this dynamic strive, what is thought to be inside (communal life) is outside (the monastic institution), and vice versa, what is thought to be outside (the world) is inside (the self): it is through the fusion of the two material bodies in which "spiritual" life gains meaning and history is made: in the grey area in-between the ideal and the real; thought and expression; the sacred and the profane. It shows *how we willingly become an unwilling part of history*.

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