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Being and Becoming a Monk on Mount Athos: An Ontological Approach to Relational Monastic Personhood in the “Garden of the Virgin Mary” as a Rite of Passage

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0008>

Received August 20, 2019; accepted January 06, 2020

Abstract: This paper brings together ethnography as practice research, and theology as experiential theory, towards an ontological interdisciplinary understanding of relational personhood on Mount Athos. The first part of the paper consists of ethnographic data gathered from the field, approaching monastic life as a rite of passage to heaven, and using the anthropological discourse of the “sacred” to represent and interpret this passage in sociological and moral terms. The second part of the essay expands on this empirical material by following the two “fundamental” elements of personhood, Freedom and Otherness, in the respective Christological discourses of Zizioulas and Yannaras. The aim of the second part is to ontologically expand on the experience of relational personhood by approaching theology as a kind of practice [“theo” as “I-see-God” via practices of faith] that takes us to deeper levels of understanding of being and becoming, in relation both to the invisible God and the visible, material World. In this context, the focus of the paper gradually moves from the Athonian landscape, informed by the energies of God that run through it, to Athonian personhood as defined by the personal and ontological relation of each monk to the landscape, which includes themselves, in an ontologically relational manner. As I argue, this relational ontology extends from the grace received in everyday practices by all the monks to the charismatic personalities, whose individual agency and freedom from nature enabled them to change Athonian history and become emblems of the contemporary ideals of monastic life as a dialectical symbiosis within God and nature.

Keywords: Mount Athos; Tonsure; Virginity; Monastic Persona; Theosis; Symbiosis; Self-Revelation; Energies; Kenosis; charis and charisma

1 Introduction

1.1 Crossing the *Avaton*

In spite of the great transformations of the Athonian landscape in the 20th century, the monks of the monastic republic of Mount Athos describe the forest to visitors as “untouched” by time and change, calling

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it a “virgin forest” [“*partheno dasos*”].¹ The “virginity” of the forest is informed and protected by the ancient rule of *Avaton* [“No Trespass”] which prohibits women and cattle from crossing the border and entering the geographically isolated peninsula. The rule enhances the omnipotent presence of Mary, the “owner” [“*Kititorissa*”] of the Garden.² Furthermore, despite legal reservations within the EU *acquits communautaire* framework, the *Avaton* is legally “justified exclusively on grounds of spiritual and religious nature” that guarantee the “special status” and autonomy of the twenty surviving monasteries on Athos (as per Article 105 of the Greek Constitution of 1926, ratified in 1979 by UNESCO and the EU).³ It follows that since the prohibition of the landscape excludes biological (material) reproduction by forbidding the presence of all females, the monks have to find alternative means of reproduction. In this context, the relationship of each monk to the “Garden of the Virgin” [“*o kipos tis parthenou*”] or “Garden of the Mother of God” [“*o kipos tis Theotokou*”]⁴ is an ontological matter of identity. The omnipotent presence of Mary stands morally opposed to what the monks see as the materialist way of life outside Athos, an ever-changing way of life they consciously left behind. This idealism gives to the monks a great responsibility: to protect the sacred landscape by following a sustainable (“symbiotic” and/or “economic”) way of life, by demonstrating non-excessive behaviour towards the landscape and in their everyday lives⁵. Their economic behaviour should extend to how they treat their fellow brothers, as well as, themselves.

The paper investigates this relationship through the “symbiotic” way of being and becoming a monk within this particular natural environment that gives to visitors the impression that the monks, all dressed alike in black with long beards and passive facial expression, *naturally* belong to it. It starts with the hypothesis that the *Avaton* is the geographical and symbolic point of reference for would-be monks in crossing the boundary between secular and monastic life in the process of becoming a monk.⁶ It follows this

1 Historically, the landscape has changed several times in the past for a variety of causes, including the burning issue of deforestation and uncontrolled logging, increasing pollution, new infrastructure to accommodate religious tourism, as well as the great fire of 2004 (Eleseos and Papagiannis, *Natural environment and monasticism*, 51-54).

2 During my trips to Athos, I had the opportunity to hear several stories telling how Mary protected Her “Garden” from the presence of other women and cattle. On my very first day in the monastery, the young priest-deacon “*vemataris*” [“step-man”, i.e. sacristan] showed the guests the icon of the “Lady Counter-Voice” [*Antiphonitra*, 15th century], one of the eight miraculous icons of Mary kept in Vatopaidi. The story goes that Mary warned the Serbian princess Placida to stay out of Athos, when the latter broke the *Avaton* [personal communication with *vemataris* 22/9/2002]. Although it is well-known that the prohibition of females predates the foundation of the republic, historically, the establishment of *Avaton* goes back to a dispute between the monastery of Kolovos and other neighbouring monasteries over rented land to farmers dated 885-887AC Ierissos (Papachrysanthou, *Athonian Monasticism*, 127-9, and 139-57, and Paganopoulos, “Materializations of Faith on Mount Athos”, 122-133).

3 See *Official Journal of the European Union* L 291, 19/11/1979 P. 0186; Source: UNESCO/CLT/WHC <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/45411979H/AFI/DCL/04> and <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/454> [Last visit 30/12/2019]. In 1999, UNESCO interrupted the “world heritage” structural fund to Athos, because of the EU principle of *acquits communautaire* over women’s right of access. See Swiebel and Rojo reports 2003; Anna Karamanou and European Chairperson of the Committee of Women’s Rights and Equal Opportunities report in July 2003. See also *Official Journal* 2004/C 58 E/023, written question P-0556/03 by Maria Izquierdo Rojo (PSE) February 2003; and 318 E, 13/11/2001, p. 0252, written question P-1954/01 by Gianni Vattimo (PSE) on the “violation of the principle of equality of access to Mount Athos”. See also Corrigendum to Directive 2004/58/EC issued on 29 April 2004, amending Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 and repealing Directives 64/221/EEC, 68/360/EEC, 72/194/EEC, 73/148/EEC, 75/34/EEC, 75/35/EEC, 90/364/EEC, 90/365/EEC and 93/96/EEC (*Official Journal of the European Union* L 158 of 30 April 2004), and L 229/38 EN *Official Journal of the European Union* 29.6.2004 ‘RIGHT OF EXIT AND ENTRY to all Union citizens’, CHAPTER II: Article 4).

4 As in Golitzin, *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain*, Part II.

5 Makarios, “The Monk and Nature in Orthodox Tradition”, 41-49, and Paganopoulos, “The Concept of Athonian Economy in the monastery of Vatopaidi”, 363-369.

6 As in Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 37-42, Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Ross, “Diversities of Divine Presence”, 100, and Paganopoulos, “Materializations of Faith on Mount Athos”, 123-4, among others. Specifically, Durkheim’s definition of ascetic life as a “sacred” way of living goes as such: “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 crowning logical step of this asceticism, since the only means of escaping profane life fully and finally is escaping life altogether” (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 37).

process as a process of naturalization of the monastic identity, by mapping the journey of young would-be monks from the “worldly world” [“*kosmikos kosmos*”] to the internal hierarchies of the monasteries. In doing so, it looks at the process of naturalization as the “ontological state or *theosis*, the possibility of a participation of the divine in the real”.⁷ It examines this process in terms of being and becoming a monk through a “*symbiosis*” within and against the Athonian landscape, focusing on *askesis*⁸, by which I will be referring to formal and informal mechanisms and body techniques performed in everyday life. The paper contextualizes this ethnographic overview in complementary relation to contemporary theological debates over personhood and *theosis* in both Trinitarian theology (Palamas, Lossky) and Christology (Yannaras, Zizioulas), especially within the context of the wider turn to subjectivity in both Humanities and Theology.

The central ethnographic focus of the paper is the monastery of Vatopaidi⁹. This is mainly for historical reasons. Since its revival into a *coenobitic* community in 1990 by the Family of Josephaeoi, Vatopaidi has been the dominant Greek institution on Athos in which the practice of Jesus Prayer flourished, along with its economy and population¹⁰. Yet, the historical significance of Vatopaidi goes even further back to the 14th century Hesychast movement of monks, led by the legendary St Gregorius Palamas [1296-1359AC]. He associated praying with the power of giving and receiving natural and/or divine “grace” [“*charis*”, the root of the word “charismatic”] as the manifestation of God’s “energy” [“*energeia*”] that runs throughout “nature” [“*physis*”]. These are all key terms, which I have translated from Greek and use throughout the paper, along with their interpretations gathered from the field and/or in reference to written sources on monastic life on Athos.

2 Worldly and Divine Wisdoms

One April morning of 2003, three male academic researchers (one sociologist from China and two from the US) visited Vatopaidi for a research on contemporary monastic life on Athos. Although I was always welcomed in all monasteries and settlements during my two-year journeys to Athos and Thessaloniki, possibly because I was born male and baptized as Greek Orthodox, the non-Orthodox researchers were not exactly welcomed as they were not identified as Orthodox Christians. Following lunch that day, Vatopaidi’s Abbot gave an angry speech in the refectory *in Greek* (a language, which the three researchers did not speak or understand for that matter). In his speech, he attacked the Humanist researchers and their emphasis on Man, rather than Christ:

These communist atheists [sic] believe that the centre of our lives should be Man and not God. Sociology is such a disgraceful so-called science. Christ was the first monk. His disciples were all illiterate and imperfect. But they were saved because they imitated him by exercising obedience [“*kanontas Ypakoe*”]. For what do you need universities? Why do you need to study theology, for example, when you will do your best if you follow the steps of Christ? [...] The only true university is the desert, the *sketes* and huts where monks are reborn. These are the universities of life [...] All these social systems are meaningless. They cannot describe true life. Here, life is esoteric, based on a thousand-year-old tradition. [All these years] We have kept the same program and the same spiritual means of achieving it.¹¹

⁷ Tănase, “Ontology of personhood and divine energy – a Palamite corrective”, 186. The term “*theosis*” refers to the experiential process of “becoming like/in the image of God”. A loose translation in English would be “deification”, or “divinization” and/or “divination” (Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 12-13).

⁸ The term translates as “exercise” and denotes both the training of novices and the *ascetic* way of living after they become monks.

⁹ Most of the material from Vatopaidi derives from witnessing the rite of tonsure back in the springtime of 2003, followed by discussions I had with my French supervising priest-monk at work (for the simple reason that we worked together, and so, he effortlessly became my so-called “informant”, or more accurately, practical teacher). However, I also include extracts from public speeches of the Cypriot Abbot and short selected extracts from additional discussions I had with monks of various backgrounds (a young Russian educated deacon, an Albanian young sacristan, two monks of the neighbouring monastery of Esfigmenou, and an elderly uneducated Greek monk whom I met in a settlement by sheer coincidence). In addition to this, I also use material taken from the monks’ own publications both in print and online, which form their vocation in the world today, along with further socio-historical sources on the history of Athonian monasticism.

¹⁰ Paganopoulos, “The Concept of Athonian Economy in the monastery of Vatopaidi”, 363-378.

¹¹ Transcript from Vatopaidi 29/4/03.

In his speech, the Abbot highlighted the vanity of anthropocentric knowledge. He contrasted the anthropocentric focus of academia to the life of Christ, “the first monk” as the Vatopaidians often said in my discussions with them. One of Vatopaidi’s priest-monks later explained that the Abbot had first arrived from Cyprus in the 1970s as a 16-year old, in the “companionship” [*synodeia*] of the “charismatic” [*charismatikos*] Joseph the Vatopaidian [1921-2009]. According to him¹², the Abbot had never studied in a “worldly” [*kosmiko*] institution. This was because his own “spiritual father” [*pneumatikos pateras*], the legendary Joseph the Hesychast [1897/8-1959], discouraged all his disciples from graduating from a cosmopolitan university as he thought that studying is “time-consuming”¹³. The denouncement of the intellect dates back to the opposition between “worldly” and “divine wisdom”, made by St Gregorius Palamas, who became a monk of Vatopaidi in 1316 AC under the supervision and teachings of the influential Father Nikodemos¹⁴. Strezova attributed the separation of “worldly” from “Divine” types of knowledge to the dialectic between a neo-platonic intellectual Humanism against the rising of a Christocentric “Hesychast anthropology” rooted back to Desert Fathers, such as Macarius and Gregory.¹⁵ Against the anthropocentric thoughts of philosophy or anthropology, “theology reveals the truth of the person who is not an anthropological category, but the event of divine-human existence of man, a mode of liturgical existence which man receives it through Baptism in the Church”¹⁶.

Instead of secular higher education, the Abbot in the above speech referred to the “desert” as “The only true university [...] where monks are *reborn*”. In traditional texts, the term “desert” [*erimos*] metaphorically refers to “the land of desolation, the haunt of wild beasts alone; all nature there is hostile to man, subject to Satan”¹⁷. When young neophytes first arrive to Athos, they live in small groups, called “companionships” [*synodeies*] to a travelling charismatic elder. The groups may travel in various settlements inside and outside Athos before settling in a *skete* [monastic villages] or a hut in the Athonian “desert” [*erimos*]. The term symbolically refers to the ancient roots of asceticism deriving from the deserts of Palestine and Egypt between the 2nd and 4th centuries, and institutionalized on Athos by the 10th century.¹⁸ The monks use these isolated settlements, situated at the harsh, central and southern areas of the peninsula, hanging over cliffs or hidden in the forest, as training grounds for novices. In these harsh environments, novices go through a training period called “testing”, or “ordeal” [*dokimasia*] under the strict supervision of an elder. This can last from six months up to three years, depending on each novice’s progress. After they complete their ordeals, the novices then move to a monastery to settle for another period that can last from six months to a year. Those who manage to successfully join the community during this period, pass the threshold between secular and monastic life with the rite of tonsure during which the whole brotherhood celebrates and welcomes the rebirth of their newly renamed brothers into the community.

¹² Transcript from discussion with supervising priest-monk in Vatopaidi, 3/5/03.

¹³ Despite this animosity towards worldly education, I did meet more than a few academically educated monks. Naturally, they found it difficult to balance between their personal ambition and the Abbot’s reservations. Nevertheless, they had to be obedient to him according to the hierarchical rules of the monastery. For instance, a well-educated Russian deacon told me one day when we were working together in the kitchen: “Our Father [the Abbot] does not want us to graduate, so that we are all equal. There are no cliques here; because we are all children of the Abbot who is the Father to us all [...] I have to be obedient to his [the Abbot’s] wish” [Informal discussion with Russian deacon, Vatopaidi, 14/8/03]. He had to drop his postgraduate degree in Theology in Athens, as part of what the Abbot considered a necessary self-sacrifice in the process of becoming a monk. Furthermore, the collective rejection of worldly degrees is also a practical matter of equality and egalitarianism. If the Abbot encouraged the novices to graduate, he would then divide the brotherhood into those with university degrees and those without. From this perspective, the abandonment of secular education is seen as a collective matter of self-sacrifice in the greater cathartic process of leaving the “worldly self” [*kosmikos eautos*] behind, consisting of fragmented emotional memories and ties to biological parents, career ambitions, and so on. It is worth noting here that after talking to a number of young novices in a number of settlements across Athos, and despite their different personal motivations, many saw their decision to join a monastery as a means of emancipating themselves from a superfluous and vain individualistic way of secular life.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *St Gregorius Palamas*, 57-61, and Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 21.

¹⁵ Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 11.

¹⁶ Tănase, “Ontology of personhood and divine energy – a Palamite corrective”, 167, citing Panagopoulos, “Ὀντολογία καὶ θεολογία τοῦ προσώπου”, 63-79.

¹⁷ Papachrysanthou, *Athonian Monasticism*, 59, and in Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 11.

¹⁸ Papachrysanthou, *Athonian Monasticism*, and Paganopoulos, *Cosmopolitanism and Anthropology*.

3 The Rite of Tonsure

The completion of the training period of a novice culminates with his “tonsure” [*koura*]. On a sunny Saturday back in 29th March 2003, while staying in Vatopaidi, I had the privilege to witness the tonsures of two neophytes. The tonsures took place four days after the double celebration of the monastery on March 25th, (celebrating the “Annunciation of the Mother of God” and the Greek Revolution of 1821 against the Ottoman Empire). In a discussion I had with a priest-monk the morning before the tonsures began, he made a metaphor between personal rebirth and the renewal of the natural environment in springtime, as if the tonsures were a natural part of the landscape, one that includes the monastery.¹⁹ Furthermore, the setting for the tonsures, the recently painted in bright white monastery reflecting on the sunny day and flourishing natural environment, all gave a collective feeling of renewal, one that signified natural rebirth as a means of returning to nature. The ultimate aim of each novice’s ordeal is to erase his individual desires and personal memories of his Fallen secular past, through the catharsis of private *askesis* and collective rites during his training period. Only then, his Father-Abbot allows him to declare publicly the death of his old “worldly self” [*kosmikos eautos*]. During the rite, the novices ordained that day were symbolically undressed in their underwear in front of the whole brotherhood, wearing only a white garment. By publicly denouncing their worldly past to the Abbot and the congregation as dead three times, they were then symbolically stripped off all their possessions they carried with them into the monastery from the world outside Athos, both material (according to the rule of absolute poverty) and immaterial (cleansed through systematic confession). Following their symbolic death, they were then reborn with a new name taken from the records with monastic names, one that represents a particular skill. For example, someone with a talent in music may take the name “Roman” from the influential composer monk Roman the Melodist [late 5th cent.].

In this way, the ritual culminates and symbolizes the completion of the cleansing ordeals that precede the rite of tonsure aim. These aim to replace personal memories, and emotional attachments of the past, with the detached, “Sterile”, Pure Love of Mary and Christ. This passionless and a-sexual Platonic form of intimate connection to God, ideally undercuts all blood connections and emotional ties outside the monastery that could impede a monk’s spiritual progress on the ladder of monastic life. In another public address in the refectory, in honour to the ‘Nativity of Mary’, the Abbot explained to the congregation:

The Love of Mary is Incomplete, Expressionless, and Disdainful. Just like herself, her Love is Sterile. Despite this, she gave flesh to the Holy Spirit. In the same way, we ask her to *empty out Hearts from the Passions* that torture us, and to fulfil our sterile souls with the Holy Spirit. Just like she brought the Holy Spirit in Nature [*physis*], in the same way the faithful must follow their true nature.²⁰

After exiting the rite, the neophytes symbolically sealed the replacement of their biological births with the collective, spiritual rebirth amongst brothers, paving the way for an impersonal type of “spiritual kinship” beyond blood connections.²¹ The Vatopaidians have a saying: “If you die before you die, you will not die when you die”. They also call their private cells “tombs”, as if they are waiting for their death, or even, living a life eagerly anticipating the afterlife. They wear black garments symbolizing their constant lament.

¹⁹ The name of the first Royal monastery on Athos is that of *Meghisti Lavra*, meaning the “Greatest Passageway”, founded by St. Athanasius the Athonite [920-1003/4AC] with the financial and political support of his childhood friend, Emperor Nikeforos Fokas [r. 963-969AC] (Paganopoulos, *Cosmopolitanism and Anthropology*). Along with revitalizing the political and economic connections of the monastery to the City (Constantinople), St Athanasius also introduced St Basil’s *coenobitic* way of life in 963AD. In this context, the Athonian term “*lavra*”, which literary means the “narrow alley” or passageway” (Kazhdan, *The Orthodox Dictionary of Byzantium*), symbolically points to the hard path the monks chose to follow by joining a monastery. Following their choice, they had to follow “the steps of Christ” by personally sacrificing their worldly self, in order to accept and become a mirror of the *imago Dei* of the Crucifixion -just like Christ, the “first monk”.

²⁰ Transcript from the speech of the Abbot in the refectory of Vatopaidi on the ‘Nativity of Mary’, 22/9/03.

²¹ On spiritual kinship amongst nuns, see Iossifides, “Sisters in Christ: Metaphors of Kinship among Greek Nuns” [thesis] and “Sisters in Christ: Metaphors of Kinship among Greek Nuns”, 135-155.

Mantzarides wrote that in Athonian 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.”²² Following this symbolic death, their rebirth takes place as each novice publicly accepts his new monastic name and identity²³. Accordingly, the general aspiration for ascendance to heaven depends on each novice’s self-sacrifice, an ontological suicide seeing as “acceptance”²⁴ of being dead as a means of becoming a monk in the steps of the Resurrected Christ, the “first monk”.

In the words of Archimandrite Aemilianos, the “experience” of Transfiguration through the rite of tonsure is both an ontological and a sociological acceptance that allows an inner and external metamorphosis, respectively²⁵. On Athos, the actual process of transformation from an eponymous individual to an anonymous monk takes place in terms of movement, *on the way* from the “worldly world” to the holy grounds of a monastery through the personal journeys of the novices into Athos. This geographic group movement is external to the internal spiritual ascendance of the would-be monks, which begins as a personal catharsis and rejection of the past for the acceptance of a new future. As discussed above, the journey continues even after a group settles in a monastery, through their symbiosis with the natural environment and the *coenobitic* (communal) way of living. Practices of prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer, confession, fasting, and sleeping deprivation offer a path to achieve personal transformation as in a strive against the old self. This transformation takes place in terms of *kenosis* [literary translated from Greek as “emptying”] of the novices from their secular pasts, their “passions” [*pathoi*] and “thoughts” [*logismoi*] they carried with them into the monastery. The monks follow the steps of Christ, the “first monk” who had “emptied Himself” from “His Glory” to become the humble servant, a *deacon* to humanity.²⁶

4 Prayer and Natural Order

Hold on a minute, you go a long way. After all, you academics can’t get a thing right. *Here* we pray. Outside there is too much noise, you can’t hear your thoughts. Here, is a peaceful place for prayer. Only here you can pray. I pray for my parents, for my family, and for me, the sinner [...] God spoke to six hundred thousand people in the desert of Sinai, but no one could hear His voice. Not a living soul, except Moses. Only Moses could hear the voice of God because he had a clean soul.²⁷

²² Mantzarides, “The Biological Non-Continuity of Monastic Life”. 211.

²³ Death and rebirth are central themes in the anthropology focusing on transgressive rites of passages. From a classic anthropological perspective, the respective patterns of the rite of tonsure fits well into the three-staged schema of “rites of passage”: separation, *liminality*, and aggregation (Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, La Fontaine, *Initiation*, et al). The first stage of separation is the taking of the neophyte from his group (“companionship”) and placing him on central stage in the middle of the *Catholicon* (main church) in front of, and separated from, the brotherhood. This public exposure and symbolic nakedness intensified the confrontation between the individual would-be monk and the rest of the brotherhood in an embarrassing and humbling way. Turner described this momentary exposure as becoming “structurally invisible”, or being out-of-structure. This is as the state of *liminality*, referring to a limbo state in which the neophyte or “passenger” is placed “in betwixt and between” all fixed points of classification, by being temporarily apart from all existing social structures (*The Forest of Symbols*, 93-111). The final state of aggregation celebrates the return of the newly reborn member to his new “Family”, the community. In anthropological terms, tonsures are initiation rituals, carrying “certain symbolic themes, such as an enactment of death and rebirth. [...] These are found in rituals which are not normally referred to as initiation [...] oaths and affirmations are also commonly found in initiation rituals [...] concerned with legitimacy, reaffirming the divisions and hierarchies that are indispensable to a system of authority” (La Fontaine, *Initiation*, 15, 17). The ordination’s theme of dying *now*, for instance, illustrates Leach’s classic concept of “sacred time” as reversal time, during which death is converted into birth (Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, cited by Gell in *The Anthropology of Time*, 32, and Harris, “Time and Difference in Anthropological Writing”, 152). Bloch and Parry’s collection of essays, *Death and the regeneration of Life*, looked further into the association of ritual deaths to fertility and reproduction, as the means of reversing, and thus, creating the illusion of controlling natural time (and in La Fontaine, *Initiation*, 15-17, and Loizos and Heady, *Conceiving Persons*, 11).

²⁴ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*.

²⁵ Aemilianos, *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain*, 194-215.

²⁶ As in Philippians 2:7 cited in McClain, “Doctrine of the Kenosis in the Philippian 2:5-8”, 8; and Musick, “Kenosis”.

²⁷ From a discussion with two anglers of the rival neighbouring monastery of Esfigmenou, on a Friday afternoon [4/4/2003]. My question: “Which is after all the aim of a monk?”

Central in each of the three spiritual stages of monastic life (novice, monk, elder) is the practice of ceaseless prayer that defines monastic life as a whole. Generally, there are two ways of praying: in private (in the cell and at work) and collectively (during the liturgy in the church and at the refectory). The main practice is the Jesus Prayer, referring to the repetition of the words “Lord Jesus Christ Have Mercy on me A Sinner” (or its variations²⁸). According to the priest-monk who supervised me in Vatopaidi, there are three ways of *how* to recite the prayer, each corresponding to the three ascending stages of monastic life. Throughout their training period in the desert, the novices must repeat the words of the prayer with the mouth in such a way that their supervising elder can hear them reciting at all times. After they progress and receive the *Angelic Schema*, they must repeat the words with their minds. Finally, as years go by, the elder monks “switch off” their intentional thinking, as it is generally believed that each monk joins the heartbeat of the entire brotherhood as a whole into one unified and organic Body.²⁹ In a public speech in the refectory, the Abbot of Vatopaidi metaphorically compared the community to a human body. He argued that if a bodily organ fails, then the entire body would malfunction and die: “If a vein is blocked [...] then the body gets a heart attack”. In another speech, the Abbot compared each monk to an “anomalous stone”, which “has to be perfected” by learning how to smooth it through obedience and humility.³⁰ Hence, through the experience of the monastery’s social life, timetable, prayer and collective rites, rules and prohibitions, and so on, each member of the community joins in the organic whole of the monastery’s collective body, that is, *his* respective community.

From the very beginning of my staying in Vatopaidi, my supervising priest-monk was keen to highlight that it was “very important” to repeat the words of the prayer while I was working, or when I was eating in the refectory, and even in my sleep. He explained that the repetition of the words while mechanically getting on with my daily tasks would keep my mind “concentrated to God” at all times³¹. In turn, this would protect me from my passions that I carried into the monastery from the “worldly world”. After many months of working hard and praying in the monastery of Vatopaidi, I have had the privilege to experience the first stage of self-transformation. One morning, completely unexpectedly and unintentionally, I started crying. I could not hold my tears, but without being unhappy or upset. *It* felt as if those tears were crystal-clear, *running* through me, while *I* felt elevated to a higher understanding of life, a more *distant*, without passions or even feelings, but *neutral, passionless love*, in the prototype of the relationship between Christ and the Virgin Mary.³² Over time, I came to realise that by “passions” my supervising priest-monk referred to all

²⁸ Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 16.

²⁹ Notes from two discussions with my supervising priest-monk 25 /2 & 29/2/2002.

³⁰ “Our monastery is like a human body, or a living tree. We all have to be obedient to our elders because they are our roots and brains. We all work together for the Heart of this monastery [...] if a vein is blocked and stops working then the body gets a heart attack. The same happens with our monastery. Everyone has a given task. If one fails it because of laziness, or because of any other reason, then the whole body will collapse, in the same way if the liver fails then the heart stops, and then you die” [Abbot’s public speech in Vatopaidi’s Refectory, 3/4/03]. In another instance, there was a private issue between a group of deacons and their elder. They both went to the Abbot to sort the problem out. The Abbot decided to address the entire brotherhood in the refectory over the matter: “I had enough of monks ringing my bell every five minutes, complaining about the slightest incident. You are all brothers, you should realize this, and work together. Moreover, you should listen to others and to your elders. We never stop offering our daily service to the Elders [*deaconema*], and we never abandon it; and we never begin to talk with other monks and wasting our time arguing or laughing like idiots. If a monk gives only 20 percent of his focus from the 50 [percent] that he can give, he then loses the divine *charis*. If he is sloppy, he destroys the chain of order in our monastery. Nothing can be done. Because we are like a human body. If a vein stops working, then the body will get a heart attack. Anger is like the anomalous stone, which when it mingles with the other perfectly round stones it causes disorder to all of them. In the end, it falls out, excluded and miserable. The stone is rough. But that’s the problem. It has to be perfected; you have to learn how to smooth it, to learn obedience and humility. The most important thing is to learn to listen and understand the others. This is true humility” [Abbot’s public speech in Vatopaidi’s Refectory, 12/8/03].

³¹ As also in Dorobantu, “Contemporary practices of monasticism on Mount Athos and their immediate focus on the experience of God”, 7.

³² This personal experience echoes similar experiences of Joseph the Vatopaidian [1921-2009], the elder who led Vatopaidi into the *coenobitic* way of life in 1990. In his memoirs, Joseph wrote of his experience of the pure prayer as a means of self-reflection: “I suddenly felt filled with love for Christ, a love that gradually grew to a point where I was unable to keep praying. I could only cry silently, seeing my sinfulness in a way I cannot express. This state lasted for about two hours, after which I slowly came back to the previous state and I was wondering what had just happened.” (Joseph the Vatopaidian cited in Dorobantu, “Contemporary practices of monasticism on Mount Athos and their immediate focus on the experience of God”, 11).

those memories, images, temptations, anxieties, egoism, and other negative states of mind that the monks call “*logismoi*” [literary meaning “thoughts”, but also relates to “*logiko*”/ a specific “logic”, i.e. rationality]. For this reason, the elder monks are also known as “*neptikoi*”, meaning “cleansers”, because they use the prayer on a hourly basis to wash themselves from thoughts and temptations, “watchers” because they keep themselves pure, and/or “guardians of the Heart” because it is through praying that they “facilitate the return of the intellect to the heart” as theorized by the early Desert Fathers³³. Accordingly, in practice, each type of prayer has a certain use and value (i.e. protective, helping to focus on labour, cathartic) associated with a specific space. For example, the monks use the “cleansing prayer” [“*neptiki prosefhi*”] privately in their cells following the confession of their sins to their elder as a means of restoring their inner order. On the other hand, they use the Jesus Prayer in manual labour to protect their minds from thoughts, personal grudges or negative memories that could disrupt their daily rhythm, by keeping focused on a specific activity. In the kitchen, they continue praying while eating, asking for forgiveness for having to eat. This constantly reminds them of their incomplete human nature, limited to their material bodies, which depend on food for their material survival.

In its entirety, the practice of prayer defines a monk in terms of *saving energy* (see below). The Vatopaidians directly associate praying and “obedience” [“*Ypakoe*”] with social harmony and humility, that is, with the economic presentation of the self in the community. In the collective context of monastic life, emotional thoughts and personal anxieties are manifestations of each one’s ego. They could dangerously disrupt one’s personal progress (ascendance following acceptance) while also undermine the unity of the brotherhood. Paradoxically, obedience and submission both to the elders and to the rules and schedule of the monastery paves the way to emancipation from the burdens of the monks’ abandoned cosmopolitan selves and the “passions” they carry with them into the monastery. On the other hand, the practical value of obedience is not only a matter of holding on to the dominant moral order and social hierarchy. Above all, it is a matter of *becoming* a monk in the first place *in close relation* to the close community, i.e. the “Family”³⁴. Therefore, the *act of praying* as a praxis [“*askesis*”] offers the *economic* means to each monk towards the materialization of the ideal of “virginity” as “virgin (way of) life” [“*parthena zoe*”]:

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*, ‘the Elder’s will’], and within the love of the Church, gradually

³³ Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, 59. Historically, the practice of ceaseless prayer derives from the early Desert Fathers following a type of hermetic life known today as “Sinaitic spirituality” (Krausmuller, “The Rise of Hesychasm”, 103-104, Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas*, 30-32, Gillet, 31-38, Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 31-32, 85-86, and 109, and Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 11-13). Ancient texts tell us how they moved the centre of human intelligence from the Mind to the Heart. “The heart is master and king of the whole bodily organism and when grace takes possession of the pasture-land of the heart, it rules over all its members and all its thoughts; for it is in the heart that the intelligence dwells, and there dwell all the soul’s thoughts; it finds all its good in the heart. That is why *grace* penetrates all the members of the body” [in Greek “grace” is “*charis*” –the root of the term “charismatic” (St Macarius of Egypt, 589AC, cited in Gouillard, *Pettite Philocalie*, XV: 20, and Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas*, 29). Famous scholar John Romanides exclaims: “According to this tradition, the noetic faculty is liberated by the power of the Holy Spirit from the influences of both the body and the discursive intellect and engages uninterruptedly and ceaselessly with prayer alone. The fascinating thing about this state of actual prayer, as described very clearly by Palamas, is that, although the physical and intellectual faculties no longer exercise any influence whatsoever on the noetic faculty, they are themselves, however, dominated by the noetic faculty’s unceasing prayer in such fashion that they are spiritually cleansed and inspired and at the same time may engage in their normal activities.” (Romanides, “Notes on the Palamite Controversy”).

³⁴ Athonian Families are informal units of monks spread across Athos and the Orthodox world. Either a Family takes its name from its founder, or from the place, he originated. A number of Families can share the same Monastery and/or monastic settlement, which is a condition that can sometimes cause frictions (See Paganopoulos, “The Land of the Virgin”). Sidiropoulos distinguishes four main types of group formations: first, Family groups formed between Monasteries that share the same charismatic Father. A second type of formation has to do more with the movement of the Families in the peninsula based on the evolution of the traveling companionships on the way to a final destination (i.e. a Monastery). A third formation is of monks coming from the same country, or sharing the same ethnicity. A fourth formation consists of groups such as the hermits and the zealots practice alternative forms of monastic life (Sidiropoulos, *References in Anthropogeography*, 102).

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 [here, on earth].³⁵

Mary Douglas, following Marcel Mauss and his famous essay on the “techniques of the body” [1935/6], 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”.³⁶ This is represented on Athos by the strict dress code, as monks and visitors alike have to be fully dressed at all times in order not to insult the “virgin” landscape. Other rules prescribe that black *rassa* should cover the praying monastic body at all times, and the face hidden under a long beard that make the monks almost indistinguishable from each other. Since the ideal of a virgin way of life defines the conduct of each monk according to the social order of *his* community. Accordingly, the process of naturalization depends on the distinction between “the physical body” as the “microcosm of society [...] polarized conceptually against the social body” following Durkheim’s concept of a double consciousness of a moral and social order.³⁷ This self-sacrificial logic strongly relates to Durkheim’s definition of the “sacred” as a kind of a collective consciousness, one that morally binds and stands above our trivial personal needs and self-interests. As Durkheim had once declared: “If there is such a thing as morality, it must necessarily link man to goals that go beyond the circle of individual interests.”³⁸

The correlation between the moralized and naturalized way of social life reveals the in-depth significance of the a-priori prohibition of *Avaton* in the *process of naturalization of and through experience* of the ritualistic way of living. As in Douglas’s classic study of purity and pollution³⁹, the above naturalization of the monastic world in terms of “*physis*” [“nature”] and “*para-physis*” [“the “un-natural”] extends to moralized types of behaviour regarding the everyday conduct and contact in our respective communities. These become naturalized views of the world. For example, my supervising priest-monk in Vatopaidi thought that “sex before marriage is against the nature of things [“*para physin*”]. There is no logic in confusion; there is no meaning in it [...] what Adam and Eve did was irrational [“*para-logo*”], out of the logical order of things [“*logiki takseis*”]. By contrast, he urged to return to our “true nature”, the “natural” state before the Fall. This suggests that the Athonian dialect defines “nature” [“*physis*”] within this historically specific Biblical logic. Vice versa, sin is an act “against-nature” [“*para physin*”], that is, against God’s “logical order of things”, and inevitably, the root of disorder and cause of our Fall. Here, morality transgresses materiality, often demonstrated as a physical illness of the body.

Soul and Body (Greek phrase “*psehe kai somati*”) are inter-connected. If someone looks and feels ill, the illness is actually rooted in his dark Heart. It is not an illness of the skin. It is something that tortures him deep inside, and this is biologically reflected on his body [...] his soul is sick [...] He needs to return to God. You see a healthy man. You can recognize him by his healthy face, his bright smile, his clean Heart.⁴⁰

In the words of my supervising priest-monk, the illness of the body reflects the disorder of the soul, as the two complement each other. Within the hierarchical setting of the community, monastic life reveals its sober face. The concept of “illness” is by itself used for filtrating and controlling the daily conduct of the monks in terms of obedience. When a monk breaks the rules, his elder will use the process of confession, as well as, fasting and prayer to bring him back in order, *and* restore the greater social order of the monastery, thought to be a “natural” part of the landscape itself via the omnipotent presence of Mary. Hence, in the rationality of some monks, the state of “illness” is not simply a biological matter, but a matter of presenting the self in the community -in a Durkheimian sense, of representing the self to God. Accordingly, self-presentation “naturally”

³⁵ Ephraim, *Experience of Holy Athonite Fathers*, 56, my translation from Greek.

³⁶ Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 69, citing Mauss, “Techniques of the Body”, 77-96.

³⁷ Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 77, 87.

³⁸ Durkheim, *On Morality and Society*, 65.

³⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

⁴⁰ Extract from discussion with supervising priest-monk, Vatopaidi, 6/10/02.

demands regulated faces and bodies⁴¹. By contrast, a disobedient monk looks guilty of something. His worried face and anxious movements reveal the illness of his soul. The restoration of both the inner order of each monk *in relation* to the social order of the monastery and the natural order of the geographically and historically specific landscape, reveal how practices of faith, such as prayer and confession interconnect the internal (spiritual) and external (material) realms in daily practice.⁴²

5 Energies

The Love of Mary is not motherlove. As discussed above in relation to human passions, Love is not interested or emotionally attached. Rather, it is indifferent and detached, without any personal intention or attachment, ethereal rather than material, freely expressed as natural energy, without being imposed or enforced by any material agency. Mary's Love simply exists. It is paradoxical that this expressionless love is crystal-clear, and yet, untraceable at the same time. In many respects, it is alienated, emptied of "passions" ["*pathoi*"] pointing towards the monastic ideal of being and becoming passionless ["*apatheis*"]. By contrast, the Orthodox monks see any emotional attachments to our parents, lovers, or even, children, deceitful and stale, because of the unbalanced predicament of emotional ties, fulfilled with passions (temptations), negative emotions (guilt), and memories (nostalgia) that disrupt, if not entrap, the spiritual progress of a "confused" monk (and not only). The priest-monk often used the word "confused" ["*mperdemeno*"] to refer to those who fall for the wicked tricks of the Devil by not being sure about their way of life. This uncertainty disrupts the natural flow of God's energies. Yet, "Energies are everywhere in nature. They *are* nature ["*physis*"]. Here, we live in a symbiosis [...] Life outside Athos is un-natural ["*para-physin*"].⁴³ The symbiotic life within

⁴¹ In classic social anthropology, Goffman's study of *Asylums* in terms of institutionalizing normal behaviour over mental illness, Douglas's analysis of morality and taboo in *Purity and Danger*, and Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* are some of the works that extensively discussed the condition of "madness" and/or "illness" as a matter of social order. How ill bodies fall out of order by not behaving according to social rules and institutionalized habits, or in a comprehensive way to existing norms. Furthermore, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* Vol. 2 specifically focused on the institutionalization of the Body as evolved from the ideal of the Olympian naked body, exhibiting "beauty" as shameless perfection, to the ascetic and hidden, shameful bodies of the monastic Christianity.

⁴² This turn to subjectivity saw a number of interdisciplinary approaches to insanity and modern demonology, whose authors explored the interface between psychology and theology. For example, Jean-Claude Larchet's *Mental Disorders and Spiritual Healing*, and more recently, Muse's *When Hearts Become Flame*, both rediscovered ancient ascetic means of the Desert Fathers that offer relief from somatic problems and demonic or spiritual insanity. These methods include self-imposed "detachment from this world" in terms of solitude and poverty, or a more cosmopolitan engagement with the world in terms of humility and charity. Gothóni (*Psychology of Religion*, 132-143) and Markides ("The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy", 152-165) reflected upon the healing aspects of their respective pilgrimages to Athos in an autobiographical manner as "personal journeys of Discovery" in Markides's words. In both practical and ontological sense, there has also been a rising interest in the Jesus Prayer as a contemporary breathing technique of relaxation and meditation (as in Johnson's *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, Trader's *Aaron's Beck Cognitive Therapy*, and Rossi's *Becoming a Healing Presence*, among others). Panagiotidou ("Religious healing and the Asclepius Cult: a case of placebo effects", 79-91) further investigated the placebo effect as a religious and social phenomenon. All these interdisciplinary approaches to psychosomatic symptoms and mental illness reflect the wider turn of the market of faith to "spirituality" (Heelas and Woodhead, *Why Religion is giving way to Spirituality*, and Paganopoulos, "Materializations of Faith on Mount Athos", 122-133).

⁴³ Extract from discussion with priest-monk in Vatopaidi, 5/4/2003. "Yesterday, I went for a walk in the thick forest and got lost. By coincidence, I found an old semi-deserted house, almost falling apart, but still standing in the middle of a small opening in the woods. I sat on a rock, tired and thirsty. I was thinking how to get back to the monastery when an old monk, dressed in humbling dirty black *rassa*, appeared out of nowhere in front of me –like in a vision. I smiled and eagerly asked him for some water. "I am thirsty", I begged. He looked at me smiling, almost as if he was entertaining himself with my predicament and replied "But all this time you have been sitting on top of a spring!" I then realized that the rock I was sitting on was actually covering a small well beneath me. The water was fresh and I felt anew. I then learned that the old monk was from Vatopaidi and his task was to take care of the *Skete* [note: settlement] of St Dimitrios, renovated at the time. On Athos, knowledge is in front of you. Energy surrounds and encapsulates you, if you let it be within you. In order to feel or see it [note: "*theo*" meaning "seeing God"], it is necessary to shut the logical mind, the thoughts and worries that each one of us brings into this virgin landscape on his arrival from outside the Athonian border." [Notes from my Diary, Vatopaidi, 20/4/2003].

and against God's energies should not be confused with the standard moralized understanding of ethics in terms of "good" and "evil", or following their Durkheimian adaptation as collective and individualistic, respectively. Rather, "symbiosis" within Nature refers to the relational ontology of the monastic persona to the Divine through God's energies via the act of praying.

The concept of "energies", as used within this specific anthropogeographical context, derives from the *Hesychast* ["Silencers"] movement of Athonian monks of the 14th century led by the Vatopaidian monk St Gregorius Palamas [1296-1359AC]. Palamas specifically associated the practice of praying as a means of reaching these natural energies to receive "divine grace" ["*theia charis*"]. Prayer aims to "facilitate the return of the intellect to the heart", rather than to a rationalized state of mind.⁴⁴ For Palamas, the rational mind is incapable of reaching the essence of God (apophatic theology), but the practice of praying offers the bodily means to be "united to God in energy" ["*en Christo*"].⁴⁵ Accordingly, the Hesychasts' aim was to "witness the Light of the Mount Tabor", referring to the luminous, "uncreated", and "divine light of the Incarnate Word" witnessed by the disciples during the Transfiguration of Jesus, and in another instance, during the Apostle Paul's miraculous conversion to Christianity.⁴⁶ On the basis of a neo-Platonic separation of "worldly" from "divine knowledge", Palamas created a "theory", called *Palamism*, that distinguished the inaccessible "essence" ["*Ousia*"] of God (as in apophatic theology), from the physical manifestations of God's "energies" ["*energeies*"] in union with the natural world⁴⁷:

The Divine hyper-essence ["*Yper/ousiotita*"] of God is without a plural. Yet, the divine and uncreated *charis* and energy of God is divided without being divided -just like the sunbeam gives warmth, and light, and life, and increases, and transfers to the eyes of *those who see* its brightness [paragraph 68]. [...] Theologians, most significantly Great Basil, refer to the uncreated energy of God that is divided without being divided, in plural. Since the divine and god-making brightness and *charis* is not essence ["*ousia*"], but the energy of God, that is why it does not only appear in a chronological order, but in multiple morphs/forms, *depending on one's specific circumstances*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, 59; Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 23; and Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 20.

⁴⁵ Palamas cited by Tănase, "Ontology of personhood and divine energy –a Palamite corrective", 170, and in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 39, and Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, 60; and Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 33-4, among others. Here, I refer to the Light of Tabor that Moses saw on Mount Sinai, which, within the Judeo-Christian logic, became a rite of passage of the soul. Gregory of Nyssa writes of this inner journey: "What is the significance of the entrance of Moses into the cloud and his vision of God? As the mind, moving forward by ever more concentration, comes to understand true knowledge of realities, as it draws closer to contemplation, the more it sees that the divine nature is invisible. Leaving behind all appearances, not only of the senses but of what the intellect sees in thought, *it turns always more to the interior world*, until by the effort of mind it penetrates even to the Invisible and the Unknowable and there it sees God [...] he sees God in the darkness, that is to say, he understands that the divinity is that which transcends all knowledge and escapes the grasp of mind. 'Moses entered into the darkness where God was', the Scripture says. What God? 'He who makes darkness his retreat' as David says (Ps. 17:12)" (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 163-4; PG 44, 376 C-377 B, cited in Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 42-3).

⁴⁷ See Anonymous, *St Gregorius Palamas*, 57-61, and Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 21. In Greek, the verb "*theo*" is literary translated as "I-see-god". Historically, the distinction of the hypostasis of God from God's "works" derives from the Palamite controversy that took place in the 14th century between the Hesychast movement of Athonian monks led by Palamas, and a Greek monk known as Barlaam of Calabria, a graduate of the apophatic school of Pseudo-Dionysius. In his letters to the Pope, Palamas called the Hesychasts "navel-gazers" and "navel-souls" ["*omphalo-psychic*"] and their practices as "monstrosities and absurd doctrines that a man with intelligence or even little sense cannot lower himself to describe, products of erroneous belief and rash imagination" (Barlaam's Letter V to Ignatius, cited in Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 89). This theological conflict was part of the greater rivalry between Rome and Constantinople, which has since defined "Eastern" Christianity as "mystical", in opposition to rationalized "Western" types of Christianity (as in Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, 61). Vice versa, *Palamism* affirmed Orthodox tradition as set against "Western nominalism" (Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 88; and Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, 60, citing Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*).

⁴⁸ Palamas, *150 φυσικά, θεολογικά, ηθικά και πρακτικά κεφάλαια*, paragraph 69. In *Filiokalia*, Volume 4, <https://religious.gr/γρηγόριος-ο-παλαμάς-άγιος/150-φυσικά,-θεολογικά,-ηθικά-και-πρακτικά-κεφάλαια> [Last Visit 28/10/2019], *my translation and emphasis from Greek*.

Tănase argued that the Palamite distinction of the “works/energies” of God from the unknowable “essence” of God, Christianized the Aristotelian logic of the distinction between *physis*/thesis and *nomos*/Law⁴⁹. According to Aristotle, it is *movement* that defines the process of “becoming”: “[...] all categories can be viewed under the aspect of ‘becoming’, namely, the transition (‘motion’) from potency to actuality, from *dynamics* to *energeia*. Aristotle says that Divinity itself is an actual pure *energeia* with no potentiality and no relation: pure self-activating, moving unmoving/ still, pure thought of itself or thinking of a thinking [*noeseos noesis*]”⁵⁰. In this sense, Tănase argued, “the essence constitutes the principle of natural movement of energy, and energy is the finality of this movement, and these mean that this essential energy has an ontology in a distinct manner from the essence”⁵¹. Here, Tănase echoes Palamas: “If God did not have energies, He would be without action [*drasi*] and thus, no essence [*ousia*]” as there would be no need to exist, because existence manifests itself via energies”⁵². Monastic life is a re-union with God via the energies of nature, a matter of practice: “The God whose essence is ontologically distinct from created being is unknowable to thought, which is inherently linked to created being; but such a God is known through *participation* and union with God’s energies”⁵³.

Yannaras refers to *kenosis* as the ascetic process of “emptying” the mask of the “Fallen” persona from its human properties (i.e. the “passions”), in order to *reveal* the “personal otherness” of/in personhood, that is, the “God hidden *outside* of His nature”⁵⁴. This kind of “*eros*” in Yannaras terms is passionless and detached from material needs and desires, in the same way the monks aim to be and become “*apatheis*” [demonstrating no/ being “without passions”]. The monks and Yannaras call the unwilling and unintentional appearance of crystal tears as “happy crying” that signifies the completion of the first stage of monastic life, materialized through this “erotic relation and communion”⁵⁵. The liquid of the tear is an example of a materialization of energy. As discussed elsewhere, liquid manifestations of energies also appear on miraculous icons and relics⁵⁶. The tear is a sudden and unintentional experience, without a rationalizing explanation. Eventually, the process of *kenosis* leads to the charismatic state of “insane holiness”⁵⁷. Vice versa, “nature exists only as the content of the person.”⁵⁸ Conversely, “God’s work *outside* Himself”, by which Yannaras refers to “the ability of the divine personal existence to ec-sits, to sit-outside-itself”, echoing both Heidegger’s definition of ec-stasis as “non-hiding appearing”⁵⁹, and Durkheim’s definition of the collective force of the “sacred” [1912] as external and alien to individual being. The detached faces of the monks in a state of *apatheia* collectively reveal a paradoxical freedom from personal will, fake and incomplete, a worn-out worldly mask. This kind of transgression is not as that poorly soul, Barlaam, had thought during his lifelong struggle against Palamas and the Hesychasts, or equally, an ecstatic experience as comprehended by social anthropologists of the past. Rather, it is only achievable by following a strict and sober path of prayer and *askesis* as the practical tools for emptying the ego and self, that is, overcoming the paradoxical strive of monastic life in order to transcend “the world of the flesh” that defines its material existence in the first place.⁶⁰ The combination of labour with prayer further enhances the reunification of body and mind, which must be held concentrated to God at all times through the repetition of its words.

49 Tănase, “Ontology of personhood and divine energy – a Palamite corrective”, 173.

50 Ibid., 174, footnote 28.

51 Tănase, “Ontology of personhood and divine energy – a Palamite corrective”, 178.

52 Anonymous, *St Gregorius Palamas*, 64.

53 Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 359, *my emphasis*.

54 Tănase, “Otherness and Apophaticism”, 258.

55 Ibid.

56 See Paganopoulos, “Materializations of Faith on Mount Athos”, on the reproduction and worldwide distribution of the *Holy Moiré* from the Girdle of the Mother of God kept in Vatopaidi, 122-133.

57 Tănase, “Otherness and Apophaticism”, 261.

58 Ibid., 171.

59 Ibid., 260.

60 As in Loizos and Papataxiarchis, *Contested Identities*, 16-17.

According to Yannaras, along with the cleansing process of *kenosis*, the second important element in *revealing* the ec-static Otherness is “*perichoresis*” (meaning “interpenetration”)⁶¹. This term refers to “that mode of existence that transcends the ontic individuality of numbers without abolishing the hypostatic otherness of persons [...] and this mode of communion’s existence we call it inclusion/interpenetration. Without abolishing the unity of nature, personal otherness is revealed into ec-stasis’s reference of God outside of His nature, into the calling to communion and relationship which Personal God addressed it to personal man.”⁶² Yannaras’s modernist turn towards a “Personal God” addressing the personal man,⁶³ forms an apophatic relational ontology of the “ecclesial persona”, Yannaras moves away from the apophaticism regarding the existence of God towards the apophaticism of the person. As Yannaras explains: “By apophaticism of the person I understand that I am starting from the belief that my existence and knowledge that I accomplish (the way in which I exist and the *manner* in which I know) are complex facts of *relationship*, and the relationship is not limited to the intellectual determination but is fact of integral existence.”⁶⁴

In this context, the *Imago Dei* of Christ, the “first monk” in the monastic dialect, offers the ideal corporate personality “in Christ” [*en Christo*]. Accordingly, the reception of the Eucharist is not an intellectual activity or a matter of free choice. Rather, the act is an ontological acceptance, a repeated rite of passage. Through this way of living, the monks experience the connection of the energies of nature to and through personhood, as the self-striving state of being and becoming in (the image of) Christ. This process of self-revelation is specifically set within and against the material world, in reference to both the Athonian landscape and the material constraints monastic body. The effort to break away from such material bounds explains their personal strive to overcome the great paradox of monastic life, the monks’ emancipation from the “world of flesh”⁶⁵. Here, the face of Christ becomes the face of each monk, a self-revelation of the true hypostatic and complete face [*prosopon*] behind the mask [*prosopion*] bounded in flesh. Self-sacrifice is both a personal motive and a collective effort to emancipate the material self from its materiality into an ascending state of impersonal being and becoming, reaching the state of “*charis*” [“grace”].

6 Charisma

Yannaras’s theoretical turn from the energies to the ecclesiastical persona is part of a wider interdisciplinary turn towards subjectivity and self-reflection in 20th century academia. The evolution of theology towards individual agency is also evident in the writings of Zizioulas, who, however, took a more radical soteriological approach to Christology. Zizioulas contextualized the Christian persona in relation to the collective context of the Eucharist and the communion with God -as does Yannaras with his notion of the “ecclesial” persona. However, by identifying personhood with the *hypostasis* of the “corporeal” Body of Christ, one that *is* and *becomes* during the rite of the Eucharist, Zizioulas moved the emphasis on nature (“energies”) towards the experiential “life in Christ” [*en Christo zoe*].

For John Zizioulas *theosis* is not about participating in the “energies” of God but in the *hypostasis* of Christ. While the notion of “energies” is useful and necessary in understanding a more general relationship between God and creation,

⁶¹ Tănase, “Otherness and Apophaticism”, 258. Stamatović further developed the etymology of the word from its Greek root meaning “to go around, circle around”/ “being encircled or enclosed”, “movement around something on the outside” / “movement inside or within something” (Stamatović, “The Meaning of *Perichoresis*”, 306-8). Accordingly, the theological use of the term as “being in” has both static (surround) and transformative (movement and change) connotations. Here I use the term following the Patristic texts in which it is understood as a “perfect mutual permeation or interpenetration ‘without any merging or mixing’” (Ibid., 314).

⁶² Tănase, “Otherness and Apophaticism”, 257-8.

⁶³ Tănase, “Otherness and Apophaticism”, 258.

⁶⁴ Heelas and Woodhead, *Why Religion is giving way to Spirituality*, and Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 9.

⁶⁵ Loizos and Papataxiarchis, *Contested Identities*, 16.

salvation *in* Christ, i.e. deification, can only be expressed in terms of the category of *hypostasis*, or “person” –or so says Zizioulas.⁶⁶

It is important to highlight that Zizioulas does not reduce his definition of deification as a process of self-individuation during the Eucharist in simple moral, symbolic, or structural terms (as in anthropology of religion since the time of Durkheim’s definition of the “sacred” in terms of the “Church” [1912]⁶⁷). Instead, he theologially expanded towards theorizing the experience of salvation as a personalized revelation, not simply a symbol of the Church, or a collective and moral “sacred” rite of the Eucharist, but as the actual body that *is* (revealed) and *becomes* (transgressed) during the offering of the Eucharist. The process of becoming constitutes a “new birth” manifested as the “essence of Baptism” in Zizioulas terms. It is an ontological necessity to experience this emancipation from nature, the “freedom vis-à-vis his own nature”, in order to acquire “an identity not dependent on the qualities of nature but freely raising nature to a hypostatic existence identical with that which emerges from the Father-Son relationship”.⁶⁸ In this manner, Zizioulas focused on the problematic emancipation of being from the natural and material constrains that condition it in the first place. Central in this *pneumatological* approach, was the symbolic metamorphosis in the Incarnation as a Revelation of the hidden face/ three *hypostases* of God taking place during the Eucharist. Zizioulas develops an ontology of personhood through a personalized Christology based on the archetypal Christ, whose true nature whose true nature as the Holy Spirit reveals the divine-human hypostases during the eschatological event of Incarnation.⁶⁹ It is a specific mode of being and becoming into something *Other*, the Revelation of the hidden Face of God (“Transfiguration”) in all of us, waiting to be incarnated, fulfilled, and return to its true, holy, and complete nature, the ontological state of *theosis*.

Both Zizioulas and Yannaras associate the “divine will” with manifestations of “grace”⁷⁰. In Greek, the word “grace” translates as “*charis*” [“happiness” (enthusiasm)]. The term is common in both sociology of religion and the Weberian concept of “charisma”, as well as, in reference to the Athonian title given to important elder monks known as “charismatic” [“*charismatikos*”]. In the anthropogeography of Athos, the title “charismatic” refers to those elders who travel outside Athos to attract and gather new “companionships” [“*synodeies*”] of would-be monks.⁷¹ On the one hand, through their journeys inside and outside Athos, they contribute to the material reproduction of the monasteries, which, in the absence of biological ways of reproduction, depends on their movement and their magnetism that attracts young would-be candidates to monasticism. On the other, the young men bring with them updated worldly knowledge and skills from the cosmopolitan world, including computer technologies and the latest hardware, which are necessary in retaining the economy and reproducing the vocation of each monastery. This instigates further changes in the life of the monasteries, such as technological, economic, institutional, political, and above all, practical adjustments, in relation to the material world, separately to the internal, anti-economic, spiritual life.⁷² In this way, the monasteries keep both their respective economies and demographies healthy over time.

The economic and spiritual revival of the monasteries in the 20th century, took place within the wider constitutional context of returning the twenty surviving monasteries of Athos to the *coenobitic* (communal) way

⁶⁶ Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 358.

⁶⁷ “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere them.” (Durkheim, *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 29).

⁶⁸ Zizioulas, “On Being and Person”, 43, and in Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 369.

⁶⁹ Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 363-371.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 366, footnote 2.

⁷¹ Sidiropoulos, *References in Anthropogeography*, 102, and Ephraim Philotheitis, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast Speleotis*, 244-252.

⁷² Tanasyuk and Avgerou, “ICT and religious tradition: the case of Mount Athos”, and Paganopoulos, “The Concept of Athonian Economy in the monastery of Vatopaidi”, 363-378, and “Materializations of Faith”, 122-133.

of life following the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border of 1912.⁷³ The last of the twenty surviving monasteries of Athos to change from *idiorhythmic* to *coenobitic* was the monastery of Vatopaidi in 1990, under the “spiritual guidance” [(“*pneumatiki kathodigisi*”)] of Joseph the Vatopaidian [1921-2009], who was a disciple of the legendary Joseph the Hesychast (“Silencer”), also known as Speleotis (“Cave Dweller”) [1897-1959]. According to Joseph the Hesychast’s biographies written and published by his disciples, including Elder Ephraim of Katounakia (2003), Joseph the Vatopaidian (2003), and Ephraim Philotheitis (2008), the title “Cave Dweller” refers to Joseph’s zealot (ascetic) way of living in caves, under the harshest weather conditions and bodily deprivations. In addition to this, Joseph also gained the title “Hesychast”, because he revived the 14th century Hesychast life by returning to Greek versions of the Jesus Prayer.⁷⁴ According to testimonies of his disciples published in books, pamphlets, and online, Joseph’s *charis* had a “supernatural” quality (as in Weber’s definition of “charisma”)⁷⁵. For instance, Ephraim writes that Joseph often received “information” from God and anticipated future events. He could even watch over his disciples at all times, even though he was not physically near them.⁷⁶ Such miraculous stories and visions spread in social media and continue to attract young men towards monastic life as an alternative, back-to-nature-, sustainable way of living. Following his death in 1959, Joseph the Hesychast’s *charis* did not cease to exist, but his disciples continued building the legend of “Joseph the Hesychast”. In the last three decades, the introduction of new technologies and new means of communication by the younger generations of monks, rapidly amplified Joseph’s *charis* in the Orthodox world and beyond.

Above all, Joseph re-invented monastic life in the 20th century by re-introducing the value of “economy” [*oikonomia*], literary meaning “the Law of the House”] in various aspects of the daily everyday life.⁷⁷

⁷³ The *coenobitic* (communal) way of life refers to a communal type of life based on Poverty (i.e. no property) according to the monastery’s total income and expenditures (Malavakis, *Βυζαντινολογιο-Λεξικό Εκκλησιαστικών και Θρησκευτικών όρων*, 78-79, and Vergotis, *Λεξικόν Λειτουργικών και Τελετουργικών Όρων*, 126). In the 15th century, under the heavy taxation of the monasteries by the Ottoman Empire, the surviving monasteries changed from *coenobitic* to the *idiorhythmic* way of life, based on private property, which would allow them to “protect” treasures from the Ottoman taxmen (Speake *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, 71-82). Following the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border of 1912, Article 85 of the new *Charter of Mount Athos of 1926* encouraged the twenty surviving monasteries to return to St Basil’s *coenobitic* way of life, but forbid them from ever changing back to the *idiorhythmic*, as part of reviving the “sacred tradition” (“*iera paradoseis*”) of Athos. See also Makarios of Simonopetra, “The Light of the Holy Mountain”; Sidiropoulos, *References in Anthropogeography*; Joseph the Vatopaidian [1921-2009], *The Charismatic Subordinate Elder Ephraim Katounakiotis*; and Ephraim Philotheitis, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast Speleotis*, among others.

⁷⁴ However, it is worth noting here that following the inclusion of Athos in the Greek border of 1912, this spiritual revival supported the systematic expulsion of non-Greek monks, mostly of Russian, Bulgarian and Romanian origins, accused for being “heretics” and “communists” [discussion with Russian novice in the monastery of Esfigmenou]. A number of scholars have shown how these expulsions were politically motivated as part of the rise of Greek nationalism in the peninsula (Sherrard, *The Mountain of Silence*, 26; Sidiropoulos, *References in Anthropogeography*, 106-107; Paganopoulos, “The Concept of Athonian Economy in the monastery of Vatopaidi”, 371-373; Speake, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, 138, 148-9, and 157-194; and Dorobantu, “Hesychasm, the Jesus Prayer and the contemporary spiritual revival of Mount Athos”, 16-20).

⁷⁵ Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 19.

⁷⁶ Ephraim, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast Speleotis*, 244-252.

⁷⁷ For instance, a member of the companionship of Joseph the Vatopaidian, who had arrived to Vatopaidi in 1986 and changed it to *coenobitic* in 1990, told me in a discussion: “When I was seventeen and a half years old I met *geronta* [“elder”] Joseph (the Vatopaidian) during my military service in Cyprus together with T and G. After we completed our national service, we decided to join him. T even brought his brother with him. Joseph’s charisma had magnetized us. I have four brothers and we all went to the same Christian school. “That’s where I met him (Joseph) for the first time. I was sixteen-year-old. I was studying at an ecclesiastical lyceum in Cyprus with my four brothers. I was magnetized by his energy. But Joseph insisted that I had to finish my military service first, before I could join him. When I was seventeen and a half, during my military service, I met him again together with Fathers T and G. We decided to follow him into Athos after completing our national service. T even brought his brother with him because we were magnetized by his *charis*. So, we went to the desert of Kapsala, near Karyes, where we lived six of us, and one monk from Brazil, for more than six months [...] After that, we moved to the monastery of Koutloumousiou and became novices. I must have been about 19 years old. I have four brothers, and a sister who also became a nun in Cyprus in a monastery founded by our beloved grandfather Joseph the Vatopaidian. After high school, I felt alienated from my friends. I was and I wasn’t there, my (secular) life did not have a meaning, an aim. I realized that without the *charis* of Jesus I would never have an aim in my life. That is what monastic life gives: it gives you an aim to come closer to God. And that is why I decided to become a monk.” Extracts from interviews with secretary-priest of Vatopaidi [20/5/03], who was a member of the second Companionship of Joseph the Vatopaidian that arrived to Vatopaidi in 1986/7 [Extracts from interviews taken 05/05/03 and 20/5/03]

This included the training of the novices in respect to their individual capabilities and obedience to their elders.⁷⁸ Instead of aiming to eliminate the “passions” of his disciples, the key feature of the Hesychast’s teaching was the introduction of “economy of passions”. In this way, the Hesychast practically promoted a measured (i.e. “economic”) attitude towards the novices, especially for who could not follow the zealot path due to their urban upbringing.⁷⁹ In this way, his charismatic authority contributed to the general rise of interest and relevance of monastic living to the youth of every generation. The revival of spiritual life preceded a steady demographical revival in the monastery’s population, mainly by Cypriot and Greek monks. According to Sidiropoulos, in 1990 the number of Vatopaidian monks was 48 monks.⁸⁰ Two years later, a wave of monks arrived in two companionships from Greek Cyprus increased its population to 73 monks. More importantly, the majority of the new comers were young and well educated, as out of the 73 monks, 16 aged between 20 and 35 and 18 around 40 years-old.⁸¹ According to my fieldwork notes, three more waves of monks followed in 1996, 2000, and 2002, with the majority of the young recruits from Thessaloniki and Cyprus. By 2003, at the time of my fieldwork, more than 90 monks lived in Vatopaidi, and about 40 in its settlements, and nowadays, the number of Vatopaidians has reached to almost 130 monks.⁸² In response to the increasing number of monks, the Vatopaidians had to change their Internal Regulations to accommodate the needs of the brotherhood. On June 30th 1995, the Abbot increased the number of Elder seats in their council from six to eight (change of articles 12, 13, and 15 from Vatopaidi’s “Internal Regulation”). In 2000, in response to the third wave, the Abbot had to increase the seats of the Elders’ council to nine to accommodate the increasing population and greater number of guests who regularly visit the monastery.⁸³

In his turn towards an ontology of the charismatic personalities, Zizioulas was deeply sceptical regarding the material impact of the “economy of the Spirit” because “it implies an involvement in history, which diminishes the eschatological role of the Spirit”.⁸⁴ By contrast, the sociology of Christianity, as developed by Weber’s comparative method, and/or Mauss in evolutionary terms⁸⁵, had socio-historical implications. As Feuchtwang and Wang argued, charismatic individuals are those personalities who are able to reflect upon and bring change to history and society.⁸⁶ Following Weber’s definition of “charisma” as the anti-economic, irrational, “supernatural” force, or “insane holiness” in Yannaras’s terms above, I would add that on Athos the “*charis*” of the Holy Spirit carries a kind of radical, anti-structural and anti-economic ambiguity. This ambiguity places charismatic elders in a *liminal* position in-between two worlds, the spiritual and eternal world inside the monasteries, the present moment of experiencing monastic life, against the materialist and historical world surrounding the monasteries, that of the personal secular past of each monk and the future of world history. Within this Weberian framework, the disciples of charismatic personalities further institutionalize and bureaucratize their elder’s charisma into an office. On the other hand, via the use of the latest social media the *charis* of the elder becomes amplified into vocation of the monastery in the Orthodox world. As above, following the materialist dialectics of Aristotle, the energy of this charismatic force is in

78 Ephraim, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast Speleotis*, 350.

79 Joseph the Vatopaidian explains: The introduction of the spirit of ‘economy’ in our era is not breaking the rules rejecting our Father’s Canon. Rather, it is the result of the decline of the physical powers of today’s man [...] I, and my brothers of the same age, were able to keep the pains of monastic life [*filoponia*, meaning “friend of pain”] without intentional effort, but with patience. However, our disciples were unable to follow, and that was not because they betrayed their will. Although they had the will to try towards zealot life, they had to compromise because of their physical weaknesses. (Joseph the Vatopaidian, *The Charismatic Subordinate Elder Ephraim Katounakiotis*, 33).

80 Sidiropoulos, *References in Anthropogeography*, 155.

81 Ibid.

82 According to the latest interview of the Abbot of Vatopaidi to *The National Herald* [October 2, 2018]. <https://www.thenationalherald.com/215474/elder-ephraim-abbot-of-vatopaidi-monastery-of-mt-athos-visits-tnh/> [Last Visit 18/02/2019].

83 From personal communication with Vatopaidi’s secretary [5/5/03, 20/5/03, and 6/8/03]. I wish to thank Vatopaidi’s secretary for kindly offering me a copy and a revised copy of the “Internal Regulation” of the monastery.

84 Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 381.

85 Mauss, “A Category of the Human Mind: the notion of person; the notion of self.”, 1-25.

86 Feuchtwang, and Wang, *Grassroots Charisma*.

movement. On the one hand, the personal movement and ontological transformation of a young man into a monk, and on the other, the collective movement of groups of monks which contribute to the monasteries' historical demographic health and economic status.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to reflect briefly on the gap between social sciences and theology by focusing on my own idiosyncratic effort to fuse past anthropological interpretations of ritual, based on my ethnographic material from Athos, with theological reflections on ontology and practice. The contrasting definitions of shared terms between theology and anthropology commonly used but understood in completely different ways and contexts between anthropologists and theologians, such as, the “sacred”, “nature”, “*charis*” and “charisma”, reveal a seemingly unbridgeable gap between social and hesychast anthropologies. As already argued, this gap goes back to Palamas’s distinction between worldly and divine types of knowledge. In this tradition, in his public speeches above the Abbot of Vatopaidi highlighted the confrontation of these institutions: the Christ-centric monastic institution against the anthropocentric academic institution. Yet, the material of this paper shows that the interdisciplinary approach to deification offers an empirical perspective on the *practice of theology*, within the specific anthropogeographical and historical context of Vatopaidi, as a means of bridging the gap between religious experience and anthropological theory. In this respect, the wider turn to subjectivity in the Humanities⁸⁷ and rise of theological interest in the spirituality of the self⁸⁸ are affinal to the renewed Christological emphasis on relational ontology in terms of social personhood and individual agency (as in current readings of Zizioulas and Yannaras). Vice versa, the theological approach to anthropology contributes to the expansion of the ethnographic “field” beyond the separation of “dogmatic” (theory) from “transcendental” (experiential) types of Christianity, as for example, in the “anthropology of Christianity”.⁸⁹

By bringing together anthropology and theology in this complementary manner, I wished to expand further the “field” beyond the material and physical limits of history and society of Athos, beyond “Christianity” itself as an abrupt anthropological category of knowledge. Instead, I tried to offer an introduction to the relational ontology of the monastic persona, i.e. a becoming in relation to experiencing the landscape through practices of the self. In doing so, I looked at the rite of tonsure and private prayer as processes of naturalization in relation to the prohibition of *Avaton*. Bloch and Guggenheim saw the institution of Christianity as an ideological apparatus through which men control women’s bodies by denouncing women’s agency and biological birth. In making their point, they focused on Catholic baptism, “thought to cleanse the child from original sin [...] Baptism is a ritual denying the woman’s ability to produce socially acceptable children”.⁹⁰ In their view, the rite legitimizes the ideological domination of certain groups in terms of gender or class, resulting to “the common humiliation of mothers.”⁹¹ Arguably then, the rule of *Avaton* demonstrates the institutionalized domination of men over women in non-negotiable, a priori terms, i.e. the “sacred tradition”. The latter, religiously supports the apparatus, collectively expressed by the masculine ideal of motherhood in the image of Virgin Mary, whose purity is identical to the *impossibility of being both virgin and mother*. By approaching this paradox in relation to the specific geographic location of Mount Athos and the prohibition of *Avaton*, the paper associated the ontology of monastic personhood with the process of naturalization of the monastic identity.

⁸⁷ In social anthropology this refers to the general effort to expand the conception and interaction with the “multi-sited field”, beyond what George Marcus called the classic “Malinowskian *mise-en-scene*” (Marcus, *Annual review of Anthropology*, 263-277).

⁸⁸ Heelas and Woodhead, *Why Religion is giving way to Spirituality*.

⁸⁹ Cannell, “The Christianity of Anthropology”, and *The Anthropology of Christianity*; Hann and Hermann, *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*; and Robbins, “Transcendence and the Anthropology of Christianity”, and “The Anthropology of Christianity”.

⁹⁰ Bloch and Guggenheim, “Compadrazgo, Baptism and the Symbolism of a Second Birth”, 379, 380.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

It is worth noting here that I have borrowed the term “naturalization” from the Frankfurt School of Religious Studies. One of the most prominent members of the group, Ernst Bloch, made the point that “The ideology of late capitalism contains a special element of the class-conditioned alienation of man from himself”.⁹² Paradoxically, Bloch offered as a remedy to inhuman alienation, the aspiration of an afterlife. He returned to Marx’s passage regarding the “resurrection of nature” from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*, in which Marx looked at the process of naturalization as a dialectic synthesis between “naturalization of man, humanization of ‘nature’”:

Naturalization of man -that would mean his incorporation into the community [...] free from alienation [...] Humanization of nature -that would mean the opening-up of the cosmos still closed to itself, to be our Home: the Home once expressed in the mythical fantasy, in the new heaven and new earth.⁹³

Here, then, we are facing the paradox that the “opium” [sic] of the masses actually functions as an antidote to modern alienation. Stivers insisted that modern “man” [sic] has not lost his devotion or faith, but rather, remains unconscious of it.⁹⁴ From this point of view, monastic life and its practices of faith are tools used to awaken our consciousness through *the relation of the human to the divine being*. The material of this paper showed that this awakening takes place as a kind of strive within and against the material body and the landscape, a material *praxis* set within and against the limits of the material world that contains the Spirit. This takes place through cleansing practices of faith, both daily “techniques of the self” in the Maussian sense *habitus*, and in the long term “technologies of the self” in the Foucaultian sense of ascetic institutionalization. In this materialist context, the *imago dei* of God that supplements the Father figure, “confirms the authority of the ruling class”.⁹⁵ Accordingly, the docility of the naturalized process and state of “virginity” (being and becoming) only conforms to the authority of the ruling class. Yet, the material showed that behind the paradoxical acceptance of self-sacrifice, there is a conscious act of abandoning the deception of the ego, in order to willingly become docile *and* free from material existence. This specific paradoxical logic reflects upon the greater paradox of ascetic life, as a *liminal* way of life set in a limbo, in-between earth and heaven.

For Bauman, the rapid increase in choices in our consumer society is the cause of our ontological insecurity and collective anxieties about who we are and where we go to.⁹⁶ The sharp rise of interest in monastic life amongst young men confirms this turn to spirituality as a means of searching for a single identity in a confused world.⁹⁷ In the context of this paper, the undivided three hypostases of God is/are seen to be integral to our Humanity -in the same way the Spirit is integral to Flesh, and vice versa, the Flesh contains the Spirit. This hidden double nature of Humanity is paradoxically situated (“being”) both within and outside our human nature, and revealed (“becoming”) as a personal Incarnation, a process of individuation through Transfiguration. This process unmasks the true and complete face of God/ Humanity/ Spirit by being and becoming the persons *we were originally meant to be* before the Fall (as in the Jungian process of “individuation”⁹⁸). In this logic, monastic life is the personal strive to return to the ideal state of *complete* existence, free from the shallow illusions of our imperfect and fragmented “worldly selves”. It offers the end means to discard the worn-out masks of our befallen world, in order to break free and rediscover our material unity in God, through and beyond our Fallen Nature.

⁹² Bloch, “Marx and the End of Alienation”, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁴ Stivers, *Evil in Modern Myth and Ritual*, 8.

⁹⁵ Fromm, “The Dogma of Christ”, 65.

⁹⁶ Bauman, “Postmodern Religion?”, 68.

⁹⁷ Markides, *The Mountain of Silence: The Search for Orthodox Spirituality*, 2002; and *Inner River: A Pilgrimages to the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, 2012.

⁹⁸ Jung refers to “individuation” as the process of self-realization through which one becomes “an in-dividual, that is, a separate indivisible unity or ‘whole’.” (Jung, *CW Vol.9 Part I*, 275). Self-realization is an unconscious process that surfaces in conscious moments of transcendental interactions, through which “every living thing becomes what it was destined to become from the beginning.” Furthermore, individuation “can be realized only through a *relation* to a partner ... of the opposite sex” (*CW Vol.11*, 87, and *CW Vol.11*, 22), the masculine ideal of motherhood projected on Mary in our case.

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