

## Two Contemporary Forms of Cosmopolitan Engagement of the Monks of Athos with World Society (6,000 words)

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### The life of a monk

A life of a monk is divided by two initiation rituals, the *koura* and the *Angelic Scheme*, marking three stages in his life: as a tested novice, an ordinary monk, and a perfect monk. Accordingly, rituals such as confession and practices of faith, such as fasting aim to change the inner self of each individual member of the community in reaching the state of ‘apatheia’. This inner journey takes also place in geographic terms: traditionally a novice has to first go through the tough period of the Desert where he is tested under the supervision of his teacher, then moves to a monastic community to learn monastic life as an ordinary monk, and if he is spiritually capable enough he becomes a ‘departurer’, as he moves alone in isolation in a hut in the forest to practice the perfect ‘hesychasm’ in God.

This traditional journey of a monk’s life is parallel with the historical progress of monastic life in Athos. In the beginning, the peninsula was occupied by isolated hermits or small groups of monks organized in ‘*lavres*’, small communities of two or three monks living like according to the early monastic model of the Egyptian Desert, while in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century the *coenobitic* mode of life was introduced with the foundation of the first monasteries. More importantly, the history of each Athonian Family, like the family of Joseph the Vatopaidian who is the spiritual leader of Vatopaidi nowadays, follows a similar root. Joseph’s journey started from Cyprus, he then moved with eight of his disciples to the Desert of Karyes in Athos, while his group doubled its number in the monastery of Koutloumousiou and later in the Skete of St Anna from where they had to leave because of an internal conflict with the

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families that were already living there. Finally, Joseph and his family ended up in the monastery of Vatopaidi in 1987 to revitalize its spiritual, as well as economic life.

The personal life of a monk reflects the social life of his community. It is through this immediate connection of each individual monk to the living history of his respective community that he makes the community, rather than the community the monk in a Durkheimian ideal sense. But at the same time, the sacred unity of the community is based on the inner order of each individual monk, through which each individual monk finds the space for self-expression, in becoming the active voice of his community in the world outside the borders of his monastery.

In investigating the relationship of the monk to the world as a whole, this paper will briefly examine the historical relationship of the monks of Athos with the capitol of the Empire of the time, Constantinople, in relation to the birth of monastic life and the foundation of Mount Athos as a ‘holy’ Republic of monks ideally separated from the profanity of our world.

## **I. A Childhood Dream**

Historically, it is impossible to trace the foundation of the first monastery in Athos, because while the archives say that most monasteries were founded between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries there is archaeological evidence of the opposite. The oldest letter to an Athonian monastery goes back to 883 in which the Emperor Vasillios A resolves a dispute over the land surrounding the town of Ierissos between the locals and the monastery of Kolovos (Papachrysanthou, 1992, 139-57). The dominant monk Kolovos also claimed the rights of the whole Athonian peninsula to the protest of other Athonian communities. The Emperor in his letter addresses a single authority of Athos, and thus, it is evidence for the existence of organized monastic life before the foundation of the first official monastery in 963 (Ibid).

The Athonian tradition says that the founder of the Republic was in fact the first Christianised Emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine, and hence, it conveniently connects the birth of the Republic with the beginning of removal of

power from Rome to the newly founded city of Constantinople, or Istanbul, as it is known nowadays. But as historians underline, Constantine had never founded any monasteries in Athos, or even in Constantinople (Ibid, p.32).

So, why does the Athonian tradition speak of organized monastic life five hundred years before the official foundation of a monastery? Is tradition simply a form of idealist nostalgia of an imagined 'lost' past, or is there in fact a connection between history and tradition? In answering the above questions we will need to briefly look at the birth of communal life in Athos as the result of the dream of two childhood friends: the Emperor Nicephoros Fokas and the charismatic monk St Athanasios.

In sharp contrast to what people tend to think of monks, as immovable isolated figures fasting on mountains for years until they depart this world, the historical truth is that monks as well as traders were the two categories of people who were constantly travelling across the Empire for their own respective reasons. In the time of St Athanasios there were two kinds of monks: on the one hand, the 'departurers' who were traditionalist in their attitude to monastic life living in isolation in groups of two or three, or even indeed by themselves. On the other, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Athanasios brought in Athos a great number of young monks from all over the Orthodox world, who were called 'monks of the big cities'. The archive researcher Papachrysanthou observes that the monks of the mountains were suspicious of the new comers from the big city, because of the latter's relationship to the Emperor's circle (Ibid, p.147).

Athanasios was a monk-traveller who never stopped moving from Egypt to Crete, to Minor Asia and the northeast. Most importantly, he was also the best friend of Nicephoros Fokas, the future Emperor. In one of their early trips to Crete they had a dream: to found a monastery in Athos, in order to spend the late years of their lives together, Athanasios as the director of the monastery, and Fokas as its sponsor. In another trip at Kimina in Minor Asia, they further developed their plan as Fokas asked Athanasios how much money would he need to rebuild a monastery in Athos, since there were a great number of abandoned settlements (Ibid, p.200-11). Athanasios returned in his Athonian cell to pray, and by 963 Fokas had sent his trusted monk

Methodios to supervise the monks, and work with Athanasios on building the monastery of Meghisti Lavra, meaning the monastery of 'Great Fire', which was actually the name for the communities that pre-existed in Athos before the arrival of Athanasios. Fokas by sending Methodios to supervise Athanasios throws another light in his relationship to his best friend, since it is rather a calculated political act of distrust.

In the years that followed Meghisti Lavra became the richest and most politically influential monastery of Athos. More and more foundations of monasteries with the economic support of the Emperors of the time followed Lavra's example. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the number of monasteries was over 300, but the bloody and destructive Crusades interrupted this development leaving the monasteries deserted. It was during these three centuries that the life of Athos flourished always with the support of, and at times dependence on, the Emperor.

Athos became the spiritual heart of Byzantium, and more and more traders and rich men started getting involved in its life. Already by 943, three rich traders from Andrianoupolis expressed their willingness to rebuild the community of Vatopaidi into a monastery, and their dream with the help of Athanasios, became reality forty years later. During this period, Athanasios' reputation was increasing all over the vast Empire as his charisma made him particularly popular among the young men of the time.

It was during Fokas' reign (963-969) that the first non-Greek speaking monks arrived in the peninsula from Georgia, the family of Ivires. For a while they had lived close to Athanasios in order to learn the *coenobitic* mode of life that Athanasios was introducing in the peninsula for the first time. After they got trained in communal life they were allowed to rebuild a number of monasteries, as the numbers of young monks sharply increased. This golden period of Athos was the direct result of the ever-increasing number of young monks coming in from all over the Orthodox world bringing with them donations, land, animals, presents, and even ships in connecting the peninsula with the outside world (Ibid, 226-32). There was even an Italian Latin monastery of Amalfi until it was closed as a result of the Crusaders (Priest-monk Nicephoros Papayannatos, 1999, p.50). Since Athanasios' time the Republic has been

defined as a multi-national Orthodox environment, and nowadays there are monks from at least sixty different modern nations living in Athos from literally all over the world.

We can sum up the above historical material through the connection of the foundation of the Republic to the Emperor and Constantinople: first, charismatic monks used to be (and still are) travellers, while their charisma derives from their ability to communicate with the young people of the big cities, who in turn would follow them in Athos. Second, the birth of the Republic itself would have been impossible without the economic and political support of the Emperor and his circle, while in turn the Emperor also needed the support of the spiritually powerful monks to legitimise his authority over the vast land of the Byzantine Empire and impose necessary order. It is also obvious that economic disputes over land between monks of different families, as well as locals, had to be resolved with the intervention of the Emperor, and therefore, the economic and structural autonomy of each monastery was in fact heavily dependent on, and guaranteed by the Emperor, who is traditionally visualized as the first Christian Emperor Constantine, the founder of Constantinople. Third, the historical connection of Athos to Constantinople is symbolized by the ideal friendship of an Emperor Fokas and the saint monk Athanasios in their dream to live together. The politics behind their initiative have been long mystified by this childhood dream.

## **II. Athonian Economy**

A further aspect of Athanasios' activities in Athos was his introduction of *coenobitic* life, which has become the traditional mode of monastic life in Athos, and which is based on the rules of obedience to the elders and absolute material personal poverty. With the foundation of the first monasteries and the increasing economic involvement of the 'cosmopolitans' in Athos, as the monks often call Emperors and traders, each community was organized according to its economic power, and the notion of 'economy' was first introduced in the Athonian tradition.

The word 'economy' in Athos is as old as the Republic itself. In fact, it originates back to the foundation of the first monastery in Athos. The Emperor's decision to sponsor the first monastery in the Athos peninsula brought to the surface the first historical conflict over 'matters of Faith': on the one side, the hermits that lived isolated in the peninsula before, and on the other, the reformers led by Athanasios who wanted to organize and establish an institutionalised form of monasticism, the *coenobitic*, or communal type of monastic life. The isolated old hermits argued that this type of communal life was a characteristic of the Latin Church and that the Greek monastic model should preserve its tradition for a life in the Desert as far away as possible from the institutions and materiality of the world (Archimandrite Lev Gillet, 1987, p. 65).

The tradition has it that St Athanasios who supported communal life suffered many set backs in building the Great Lavra, to the point of quitting and leaving Athos for good. But the legend says, the day he took the road to walk out of the peninsula, the Virgin Mary appeared to him in a white light, and ordered him to return to the monastery, as Mary herself promised that she will be the one who will build the monastery: 'From now on you shall call me "Ekodomissa"! ' she ordered, meaning the monastery's 'builder'.

The monastic complex was finally completed in the year 1004 and its *coenobitic* life guided by St Athanasios became an example to the other newly founded monasteries. For once more, through the miraculous apparition of Mary to Athanasios the political interests of the Byzantine Emperor were secured and his power was blessed over the large Empire as legitimate.

In honour of the foundation of the first monastery in Athos, the monks of Meghisti Lavra produced an icon of Mary that was named *Ecodomissa*, 'Builder'. The icon depicts Mary sitting in a central position surrounded by twelve historical figures of the time, including St Athanasios and the Emperor, who helped with the foundation of the monastery. In symbolic terms, the icon brings in mind the image of *The Last Supper* with Jesus sitting in the middle of his twelve disciples. In the icon of Mary, she holds little Jesus in a protective way, as the icon demonstrates her power over the

Emperors, charismatic monks, and hard-working officials, who worked toward the establishment of the Athonite Republic.

But in a strange twist of destiny, a few months after the monastery of Meghisti Lavra was completed in 1004, a terrible accident occurred: the newly built dome of the *Catholicon* (main church of the monastery) collapsed on St Athanasios, and he was buried alive under its fallen walls. So contradictory and complex is the tradition of Athos that a monk who is declared to be a 'Saint' by the Christian authorities, in fact, died in a freak accident. There is a strong possibility that the hermits of the time might have interpreted the accident as God's punishment to St Athanasios, because of the latter's insistence on communal life and the institutionalisation of monasticism under the Byzantine Empire. The accident also contradicts the apparition of Mary to Athanasios in which she introduced herself as the monastery's 'builder', since the Church fell apart on him. In other words, the reality itself questions the apparition of Athanasios, the buried and dead, but at the same time, 'Saint' man.

But in time there was a second apparition of Mary, this time to the then newly elected Abbot of the monastery in which she introduces herself as the 'stewardess', or 'directress' of the monastery (Huber, 1968, *plate 19*), in Greek the 'economist' (*economos*) of the monastery. The term refers to the way of 'taking care of the house' (Hart, 2000, p.5), the 'economy' of the monastery in other words. Mary, who is the owner of the Garden of Athos, reassures the monks that they do not have to worry about their future, since she will take care of them and the fortunes of their monastery.

The implication of the second apparition was the confirmation of the new form of institutionalised monastic life and the birth of the monasteries in the peninsula. Because of the second apparition, the icon of 'Ecdomissa' was re-named to 'Economissa' restoring the Divine order of the monastery that was distorted with Athanasios' accident. In a way, the apparition of Mary gives a separate life to the newly founded monastic institution of Meghisti Lavra, since She becomes the voice of this Institution. It is through these apparitions that the monastery has gained life, becoming alive in the Durkheimian sense of 'organic' unity as a living independent organism, since the building had a voice, the owner's virgin voice.

Mary's apparition guarantees to the monks their material survival, while encouraging communal life in which the division of labour is an integral part of the formation of the social life of a monastery, and understood in opposition to hermitic life of isolation. In turn, the monks responsible for the economic situation of their monastery as an institution and its reputation in the world are obliged to the monastery's prosperity.

### III. Economy Today

In the monastery of Vatopaidi, where I did most of my fieldwork, one of my daily jobs was to cleaning used candles from the burned wax on their surface with a knife, in order to be re-used at the liturgies. It was a difficult recycling job to do, especially after cutting a hundred candles out of used wax, and because of my clumsiness I often cut more wax off the candle than what was necessary. Priest-monk E. who was supervising me often advised me to be patient and cut the used candles properly, because it is a matter of 'economy', which is the 'natural order of God's creation'. In learning to handle my hands in terms of 'economy' of movement, I would then be able to learn about the 'economy' of the self.

'Economy' as a moral value has to do with controlling the order of the inner self. The practice of the Jesus prayer is central in learning the value of economy of thoughts that can lead to temptation or negativity. On a first level the fruits of economy, which are obedience and humility, must be reached through fasting and constant loud prayer. The aim is in achieving 'economy' of passions during long periods of sincere confession. With the realization of sins, the monk moves to the second level of 'economy', from the body to the mind, reaching the state of *apatheia*, meaning 'without passions'.

This mental state is revealed in terms of the representation of the self of a monk to his respective community in everyday life. *Apatheia* can be seen on the monks' emotionless but kind face and their mild behaviour. For instance, the training of a novice can last up to three years, and it is during this period that the latter has to demonstrate 'economy' in his daily behaviour, in order to become a monk. If a novice



demonstrates in public appropriate ‘economy’ in behaviour and thoughts to his respective master, only then the elder can trust and allow him any contact with his new family of brothers, and even in later years, with visitors from the outside world.

It is through the ‘heartbeat of the Jesus Prayer’ that the monks achieve ‘economy’ of thoughts and passions leading a peaceful life. The Jesus prayer itself, which is the most ancient Christian practice dated back to the early hermits of the Desert in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AC, aims exactly to achieving economy of thoughts. The monk never stops repeating the prayer ‘even in his sleep’ and this is a practical way to keep the mind away from the past, from memories of the families they have left behind, or from the material pleasures they once enjoyed. These thoughts according to the monks of Vatopaidi are negative and put the self ‘out of order’.

‘Economy’ is a state of inner order in being impassive, which supports a social system similar at least on its social surface to Dumont’s ideal of ‘equality and hierarchy’ in the Hindu system of caste (1972, p.306) based on the monastic values of obedience to the elders, virginity, material poverty, humility, and silence. ‘Economy’, therefore, can be defined in opposition to negative overwhelming emotions of anger, last, and guilt, or any other form of anti-social behaviour. In the Abbot’s words:

Arrogance and overwhelming self-confidence are the main characteristics of the Devil. The man who wants to get rid of these demonic energies from inside him has to imitate Jesus, who is calm and humble in heart. In essence, calmness and humility are the characteristics of the Holy Spirit... it is the sadness of the Heart that comes out of spiritual causes bringing sweetness, virtue (in Greek is “*charis*” for *charismatic*), and happiness (in Greek “*chara*”). Calmness and humility offer peace to the man who takes his path peacefully. If the time comes that he has to get angry, this anger comes only from the lips, not the Heart. In other words, it is not a passion. On the contrary, it is on straight line with the (Biblical) advice “be angry but do not sin”. (Abbot Ephraim of Vatopaidi, 2001, p.p.100-104, my translation)

In the words of the Abbot ‘economy’ is associated with charisma. It is not only a state of mind, but also a standard of presenting the self in the community. Anger is not a sin, but rather necessary in matters of obedience of the novices to the elders. In this moral system the value of economy is in learning to control the personal emotions, rather than eliminate them. This is central to the daily life and conduct of

the monks, as well as, to their relationship with the material world, and in particular to nature and technology. Through the value of 'economy' the monks of Vatopaidi learn to distance themselves both from their personal past and from the material temptations of the present, such as technology, which they use in connecting their monastery economically to the world.

Vatopaidi is the richest monastery in Athos with the reputation of being the most modernized. Its young brotherhood is engaged with the world through the Internet of the computer rooms on the top floor of the monastery, selling cds, dvds, videos, copies of miraculous icons, and so on to Orthodox Churches around the world and from there to the houses of pilgrims. Many monks report a number of miracles regarding these items as the monastery has formed a kind of 'cultural economy' as defined by Ray and Sayer: the term 'culture' springs out from inside the self, while the term 'economy' is 'social, aesthetic, and geohistorically-specific' (1999, p.6). Donors to the monastery include the Prince of Wales, while its lands expand all over Europe. According to its monks, they remain faithful to the 'traditional' *coenobitic* life of Athanasios based on personal poverty, since they themselves obey the rule of owning no property. Obedience and economy of thoughts and passions lie at the heart of the social organization of the daily life of the monastery, as the inner order of each monk is directly connected to the social order, including the prosperity of his monastery.

It is the younger generations of Vatopaidian monks who came to the peninsula in the 1990s bringing with them a new way of life from the outside world who have revived an otherwise declining way of life, monasticism (Sidiropoulos, 2000, p.p.154-5). The young monks are more highly educated than the older generation with degrees in law, marketing, economics, medicine, and theology (Mantzaridis, 2005, p.2). They have also experienced the competitive nature of the free market and responded in positive ways to the opportunities opening for the monastery as a religious institution in the world.

In *Economies of Signs and Space*, Lash and Urry argue that the new economic and 'symbolic' processes of the market affect the social life of the institutions and the way people conduct themselves (1994, p.108). In Vatopaidi, the younger generation

of monks has introduced a practical and productive way of working together as a community based on the co-operation of monks from different ranks within a spirit of communication, instead of age-related domination of one monk over another. In their daily lives the monks are working on horizontal systems of mobilization, communication, and co-operation, which are very similar to the Internet's horizontal systems of mobilization of users from around the world. In these systems of spiritual re-production marketed on videos and cd-roms, the monks have to co-operate with each other and with secular people from the outside the monastery, in order to transmit their Faith from its roots, that is, from the 'sacred' source of *their* community to the 'profane' world in Durkheim's terms (1965, p.p.52-3). In this context, the 'sacred' becomes a commodity reproduced through the spiritual blessing of common items, such as the copies of miraculous icons, into thousands of miraculous products, which are produced within the community, and distributed through a 'meta-network' of 'individuals, activities and locales around the world' (Castells, 1996, p.508), forming an 'economy of qualities' (Callon, Meadel, Rabeharisoa, 2005) since it is based on 'the collaboration between supply and demand in a way that enables consumers to participate actively in the qualification of products' (Ibid, p.45). The success of such a product depends on rumours. The monks have a number of stories of women who could not bear children but after holding miraculous products of the monastery, such as copies of miraculous icons, or common items 'blessed' by a 'sacred' relic, they miraculously became pregnant.

In these apparitions, Mary often sits on the bed of the woman *inside* her private bedroom, *breaking into* the private world of the pilgrim. Other miracles include miraculous healings, warnings for accidents, and even exorcisms. Mary's forgiving nature and protective ever-presence reveals itself in moments of personal tragedy offering re-assurance and restoring the health and order of the mind of the pilgrim. In turn, the personal life of a pilgrim becomes public, as the revelations and apparitions of Mary publicly celebrate the Faith of the believer. In a Durkheimian sense, such materializations of Faith celebrate the whole Orthodox community itself.

From this perspective the economic aspect of selling 'holy' products is of less importance than the actual mythological value of the source, the monastery with its miracles. The stories of contemporary miracles have kept their oral form. They are

occult modern stories that can be heard on isolated religious radio stations, or private TV channels, or viewed in the Internet, through which the pilgrims talk about them as material evidence of the immaterial divine presence of Mary among them. The expansion of such miraculous stories reveals a network of communication of pilgrims from around the world centralized around the monastery, where the Holy Girdle is kept in a sacred space hidden away from the so-called 'material modern world'.

But in direct contrast with Vatopaidi, the neighbouring monastery of Esfigmenou, only five kilometres away, has a totally different understanding of monastic life. According to the *Sacred Council* of Mount Athos, the central authority of Athos consisting of representatives from all the monasteries with the exception of Esfigmenou, the monastery of Esfigmenou is 'occupied' by zealot 'Old-Calendarist' monks (public announcement, February 2003), who represent the 'traditionalists' of our time. The 'Old Calendarist' Church is a sect of the Orthodox Church that is not recognized as 'Orthodox' by the mainstream authorities and the Patriarch of Constantinople. The members of the 'Old Calendarist' movement do not accept the change of the old Byzantine Julian calendar to the modern Gregorian calendar. In what they interpret as the 'evil global conspiracy', the Pope wants to unify the world under his power and eliminate their 'authentic Orthodoxy'. The other monasteries of Athos have also joined this conspiracy.

In supporting their claims of 'true Orthodoxy' and 'authentic monasticism' the monks of Esfigmenou actively have 'disengaged', in their words, from the 'material world'. The monks do not accept any presents or money from pilgrims or donators, because they believe to the contemporary interpretation of the number of the Beast in John's *Revelation* as equal to the barcode number on all products. In fact, this idea of a coming End with the rise of the industrial world and in connection to the number Six-Six-Six was first 'prophesised' by the American Anglican Mary Stuart Relfe in the nineteenth century and was brought to Athos by zealot travelling monks (Moustakis 1983, and Kirtatas 1994).

The monastery's social structure as well as strong nationalist political position in the world is too complicated to analyse in this paper, but what unifies the separate monasteries as a single community is their everyday life. Esfigmenou is the only

monastery without electricity, running water, or even a decent window. Instead it has lots of rats and at times no food. The monks reject all ‘material’ gifts from the outside world as a present of ‘evil’. But it is exactly this ideal ‘disconnection’ from the world that has made their monastery the most famous of Athos (or infamous for the same reason). By many visitors it is indeed recognized as the last surviving place of ‘authentic monastic life’, and their rejection of technology as well as racist views, are well advertised by the Greek media, and not only by them. It is a characteristic example that if you ‘search’ in *Google* for Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou, the so-called ‘modernizers’ has just about 500 entries, while the so-called ‘fundamentalists’ have almost as many (400).

The monks of Esfigmenou have a series of modern legends, such as the two priests who wanted to pray for the Pope and were mummified, as well as prophecies such as the coming End of the world when a huge wave will cover the whole peninsula and only 33 metres will stay uncovered (33 being symbolically associated to the years of Jesus as the mount is 2033 m. high) so that 65 brothers of Esfigmenou “the most righteous ones” may survive. In opposition to Bloch’s thoughtful conclusion that ritual language sounds meaningless being the formal vehicle of traditional authority (1989, p.p.19-45), the language of both oral and written apocalyptic prophecies is informal, poignant and simple for people to understand; it is the language of everyday life. In fact there are different *sub-genres* of religious writing: there is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Holy Fathers, the biographies of Saints, Hymnography, psalmody, and even Hagiography. Prophecy is indeed the less formal of all, which can be included in all kinds of texts from John’s *Revelation* in the Bible to the contemporary oral prophecies in Athos such as the above.

Nowadays, prophecy is one of the most commercial religious commodities in the market. Prophecies sell and they sell a lot, as it is the most publicized religious *genre*. The monks of Esfigmenou may reject technology by attacking an imagined ‘Western’ world, but in fact their oral prophecies have been renewed through the use of technology: the prophecies of Esfigmenou come out in books, booklets, cd-roms, cds, tapes and videos, produced and distributed in the nearby village of Ierissos. The monks do not bring any technology in the ‘sacred’ space of their monastery. But on

the other hand, they are willingly using technology when they are out of the borders of their 'pure' community.

Many young boys of the cities are fascinated by such magical texts. The success of prophecies comes in their flexible and enigmatic language that leaves them open to various interpretations depending on the social, economical and political circumstances of the time they are written, told, or revived. This openness to interpretation gives prophecy the power to address different groups of people at the same time. These prophecies can be heard on local radio stations, alternative TV channels, read in the Internet, and most importantly spread among the members of St Vasillios and ELKIS, the two politicised religious organizations of the far right in Greece. In their 'disconnection' from the 'cosmopolitan' world, and as the published announcement of the Sacred Council confirms the monks of Esfigmenou have "certainly a cosmic character" (Karyes, February 2003, p.35, my translation) in their approach to monastic life. In fact both monasteries engage with the world in their own way, the first in economic terms that extend to its spiritual life of an 'economy of passions', the second in ideological terms that interpret faith as political struggle rather than economy.

## **Conclusion**

The way each monastery engages with world society differs from one community to the other according to the particular way each community conceptualises its 'tradition', in opposition to both the material world and the other monasteries of Athos. But I argue that this engagement with the world remains on the surface from the personal point of view of the monks, and this can explain the evident contradictions in the social life of the two communities: in Vatopaidi, at times, cranes and mobile phones interrupt the silent Jesus prayer of the monks, while in Esfigmenou the group of Greek monks famous for their ultra-nationalist views are in fact only a minority of a monastery that constitutes of seventeen ethnic group of zealots speaking in their own language and confessing only to the leader of their group. Both the 'traditionalist' and the 'modernized' forms of monastic life are based indeed on 'ideological assertions' in Bloch's and Guggenheim's terms (1981, p.p.376-86), but

despite the changes on the social surface, the ancient buildings remain there, immovable for a thousand years as the material proof of tradition itself. And it is through their respective traditions that each individual monk realizes his identity as a personal integral position in the world as a whole, through his community and the practices of faith, prophecies and miracles that take place in such a strange land, as each individual monk makes ‘meaningful connection between something inside oneself and the world outside’ (Hart, 2005, p.13)

Many writers, such as Vertovec and Cohen have repeatedly underlined how the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ has negative connotations, as it is often associated with political and economic (often imagined) world elites ‘conceived largely as a matter of consumption’ (2002, p.7). At the same time, Sassen also writes that ‘elites think of themselves as cosmopolitan, as transcending any locality’ (1998, p. xxxi). Despite the conflict between the monks of Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou over ‘matters of faith’, as they often repeat, they both contrast the Athonian world with the markets and pleasure of the world outside Athos, which they also characterize as ‘cosmopolitan’ in a negative way. But, as my historical ethnography has shown, since the very beginning of communal monastic life the monks have been ‘cosmopolites’ engaging with the world in their travels and through miracles, prophecies, and holy relics. The Republic of Athos has demonstrated great political power not only in Byzantine times, but also later during the peaceful Ottoman years, and recently with its central role in the formation of a Modern Greek Orthodox identity. Therefore, the monks are not disconnected from the world as they ideally represent themselves to visitors and pilgrims, or as they represented in the historical writings of Foucault, in which monastic life is simply induced to ‘techniques of the self’ conveniently described in terms of ‘self-accusation, struggle against temptation, renunciation’ (1992, p.63). Instead the monks being passive as they are often presented, the material shows that they never stop initiating political, social, and economic changes in the Orthodox world, as the keepers of an imagined sacred Byzantine identity allegedly ‘unchanged’ for over a thousand years.

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