

The elders of Mount Athos and the discourse of charisma in modern Greece

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Abstract

This paper considers the emergence of Mount Athos' monk elders in Greek society in recent decades until the current economic crisis. Their social influence has grown over these decades, especially after some of them were recognized as charismatic and *gerontismos* (elderism) became one of the most important forms of religious discourse in contemporary Greek society. These elders were presented as a kind of cultural resistance in the service of an alternative economy of desire. This analysis suggests that they have ultimately worked in the service of a series of individual or collective fantasies of power and pleasure within Greek society. The theoretical tools informing this analysis are the product of a dialog between symbolic anthropology and Lacanian theory.

Keywords

Religion, charisma, Mount Athos, asceticism, Lacanian theory, social anthropology

Introduction

In the vocabulary of the Eastern Christian Church, the term *gerontas* (elder) does not specifically denote a monk. An elder is a monk who serves as a spiritual guide for other monks, who are *ypotaktikoi* (subordinates) to him. A monk's designation as an elder is not dependent on his age, and therefore even a young monk can be an elder—in other words, a spiritual guide.

Until the 1970s, the category of *gerontas* was largely absent from both social and religious life in Greece. Over the last forty years, however, the elders—in particular the elders

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of Mount Athos—have become central to Greek religious practice. Narratives concerning them have been widely disseminated in Greek society. In this way, *gerontismos* (elderism) has become one of the most important forms of religious practice in Greek society over the past three decades. Its rise was associated with a new cultural discourse. In this article, I will follow the Lacanian concept of fundamental fantasy by analyzing how this cultural discourse of Mount Athos' elders is related to the social and political life of modern Greek society.

The rise of charisma in modern Greece

The aforementioned absence of the elders from Greek society was not a physical one; the monks have in fact been present in Mount Athos for almost one thousand years.¹ Rather, their absence was symbolic, manifested in their exclusion from dominant religious discourse in Greece.

In the period immediately after the end of the Second World War, this dominant religious discourse was that of brotherhoods of lay theologians. Their aim was “the teaching of the Gospel of Christ, according to the Orthodox interpretation, to all classes of the Greek people” (Constantelos, 1959: 2). From the start of the Cold War until the fall of the military junta in Greece (1974), the religious discourse of these brotherhoods was dominant, as they were used by political powers as an ideological mechanism against the atheistic aspirations of Communism (Yannaras, 1987). The relationship of these brotherhoods with traditional monasticism was characterized by mutual suspicion and in many cases outright hostility.

Indicative of the marginal position that monasticism held at that time, an issue of the magazine *Nea Estia* was published to commemorate the millennium of Mount Athos in 1963. Its discourse was folkloric, with Mount Athos presented as a place rich in Byzantine churches and antiques. There was no reference to elders as the cornerstone of religious life, apart from one article by elder Gabriel (1963: 63–66), the abbot of the Monastery of Dionysiou, which made brief mention of contemporary monks and their lifestyles.

However, in the 1950s a group of young urban intellectuals associated with the scholar and painter Fotis Kontoglou began producing a new kind of religious discourse, mainly through the release of *Kivotos* (Ark) magazine, that denounced the *allogrioni* (alienation) both of the Orthodox Church and of Greek society due to the influences of *Dysi* (the West). Around the same time, elder Theoklitos of Dionysiou—a monk of Mount Athos who was also a member of the *Kivotos* group—and elder Athanasios of Iviron tried to have Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain recognized as a saint.² In 1955, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized Nicodemus as a saint, and elder Theoklitos (1959) published a book about him in order to make his life known to a wider audience.

The recognition of Nicodemus as a saint had a symbolic meaning, since Nicodemus's writings were fiercely critical of the Orthodox Church's secularization. His criticism, updated by the team of *Kivotos*, had an influence on the layman religious brotherhoods such as *Zoi*; they gradually declined in both prestige and popularity, as they were blamed for embodying this alienation. By the late 1960s, many of their members had turned toward monasticism, particularly that of Mount Athos, and they set out to reconceptualize the elders of Mount Athos as symbols of cultural resistance against the alienation inspired by *Dysi*. At the same time, a group formed of layman scholars (Stelios Ramfos, Christos Yannaras, Kostis Moskov, Kostas Zouraris, and Dionysis Savvopoulos) participated in the production of this discourse against *Dysi*. Their movement became known as

Neorthodoxia (New Orthodoxy) (Roudometof, 2011). Ramfos modified his view in his later writings.

The rise of the elders was associated with a new discourse, the key term of which was *charis* (grace). For example, elder Vasilios Gontikakis (1976: 26, my translation), writing about the life of a true monk, says that “a true monk isn’t someone superhuman, who creates a sense of strangeness and staggering, but someone deeply human, humble, bringing peace [...] he becomes a communicant of the *charis* (grace) of the Holy Spirit; he rests himself and becomes a resting source for other people.”

However, in the elders’ discourse the term of *charis*, in the sense of the meaning just described, was gradually usurped by the term *charisma*, denoting an extraordinary power to see inside souls (discerning charisma), predict the future (prophetic charisma), and heal illnesses (healing charisma).³ The book *The Elder Silouan the Athonite* by elder Sophrony (Sakharov, 1991) played a critical role in establishing the dominance of the concept of *charisma*. It was not the first book to focus on a contemporary elder; however, it was the first that connected a contemporary elder of Mount Athos with the category of *charisma*.

The elder Silouan (1866–1938), the subject of Sophrony’s book, was a Russian who became a monk at St Panteleimon, the Russian monastery of Mount Athos, in 1892. Elder Sophrony met him at the monastery a few years before his death in 1938. In the book, Sophrony describes how Silouan received a visit from grace. This grace would later leave him, only for it to return and endure in his later life.⁴ Due to this grace, Silouan was gifted with extraordinary powers, and the book describes numerous “cases where sick and suffering people were helped by his prayers, as well as of astounding instances of his intuition and clairvoyance” (Sakharov, 1991: 255).

The book was written in Russian and released in 1948 in France, where Sophrony had since moved, before finally arriving in England in 1958. The publication of the book in Greek in 1973 introduced Greek readers to a new vocabulary, which the elders of Mount Athos tried to integrate into their religious practice. Some elders began to speak of the charisma of other elders and the visit of grace to them. Key among these narrators were elder Paisios, elder Porphyrios, and the spiritual sons of elder Joseph the Hesychast.

Thus, through the efforts of several little-known monks at the margins of Greek society, the elders of Mount Athos came to the center of religious life, and their words started to gain wider influence within Greek society. The representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy embraced this emergence. In the history of Christianity, there are many cases in which the ecclesiastical authority has reinforced the recognition of some persons as saints and then tried to use this recognition to maximize its own material and symbolic capital.⁵ During the first half of the twentieth century, the recognition of saints by the Ecumenical Patriarchate experienced a period of stagnation. Since the 1950s, when Nicodemus of Mount Athos was acknowledged as a saint, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has recognized a number of elders as saints, notably elder Silouan (d. 1938) in 1987, elder Porphyrios (d. 1991) in 2013, and elder Paisios (d. 1994) in 2015.

However, in addition to the representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who have embraced and contributed to the strengthening of elderism, there are also theologians or bishops who have chosen to criticize the phenomenon. The main argument of this critique is that it feeds on a narcissistic syndrome and so constitutes a distortion of the Church’s truth. In particular, Stavros Yangazoglou (2009: 622; my translation) writes that “the former intellectual totalitarianism of discipline and manipulation by Christian brotherhoods has

given its place to the objective validity of the advice of an ‘elder,’ resulting in ‘eroding the perception of the Church.’”

Fieldwork in Mount Athos

This article is based on both archival and ethnographic data derived from my fieldwork in Mount Athos. The initial fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2010 and consisted chiefly of a prolonged stay in a coenobitic monastery.⁶ But this was not my first visit to Mount Athos; I had visited it many years ago in the late 1980s, when I was a student. At that time, I had gone with a friend, who had begun a correspondence with an elder during his studies in theology and frequently visited Mount Athos to meet with him. When, my friend finished his studies, he became a monk after one trial year as a novice.

When I decided after many years to focus on elders as an area of study and do my fieldwork in Mount Athos, I reached out to the brotherhood of which my old friend had become a member and asked to be accepted as a guest. From the first day of my participation in the brotherhood’s life onward, I tried to obey its rules. I woke up two hours after midnight and went to the temple in order to attend the rituals until the early hours of the morning. I participated as an assistant in a series of *diakonimata* (works) in the kitchen or in the temple, and I ate only the communal food in the refectory with the other monks, even during the fasting periods. In this way, I received my first glimpse of life in Mount Athos, which was quite charming. Essentially, this was not an image of life in Mount Athos, but an image of life in a coenobitic brotherhood there.

During the period following my departure from Mount Athos, while I was writing my thesis, I felt a kind of “uneasiness in culture” and decided to go back to Mount Athos. I asked the Ministry of Education, where I work as teacher, to allow me to teach at Athonias Academy, a high school located in Karyes, Mount Athos. My application was accepted by the Ministry of Education and approved by the Holy Community of Mount Athos, so I lived in Mount Athos for two more years. My experiences during these years enriched my observational data and helped me to situate the elders within a critical analytical context, as well as forcing me to reconsider my first impression (*imago*) of Mount Athos as an isolated place with *zontanous nekrous* (living dead), as many elders of Mount Athos had described it to me.

While my observations during my first stay came from my participation in the life of a brotherhood, now they came from the administrative center of Mount Athos. Gradually, the idyllic image that I had formed for Mount Athos through my isolated life in brotherhood started to disintegrate and another picture took its position.

Mount Athos, one of the three peninsulas of the Chalcidice region in Northern Greece, is inhabited exclusively by men. Officially known as the Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain within the Greek Republic, it is an autonomous polity under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.⁷ The image of Mount Athos as an isolated idyll is a charming representation, but one that is far removed from reality. According to the Pilgrims Office, about 2500 pilgrims were visiting Mount Athos annually by 1960. In the 1960s, the number never exceeded ten thousand. From the 1970s onward however, the influx of pilgrims to Mount Athos gradually increased. In the mid-1990s, approximately 55,000 pilgrims visited Mount Athos each year, and in recent years, this number has increased significantly to more than one hundred thousand (Sidiropoulos, 2000: 90).

Until a few years ago, the majority of pilgrims were Greeks. However, recent social and economic changes in Russia have led to an increase in the number of Russian pilgrims, who have occasionally outnumbered their Greek counterparts. Russian travel agencies have started offering holiday packages to Northern Greece that include a visit to Mount Athos. They obtain permission for these visits from particular elders in exchange for donations to their monasteries.

This increasing number of pilgrims in Mount Athos is related to the general growth of tourism, the opening of roads, and the pilgrims' use of cars and modern technology. Maps of Mount Athos still provide information about the paths between the monasteries that were used by pilgrims in centuries gone by. Today, their place has been taken by roads and cars, which challenge representations of Mount Athos as a "different" place. Referring to the arrival of roads and vehicular traffic, one old monk who had lived in Athos since the 1960s suggested that "the place had been canceled."

However, many visitors to Mount Athos do not just stay for a night, attend a service, and worship the various icons and relics; they also seek out the elders in their cottages or monasteries in order to talk with them, "take a blessing," or even confess their *logismous* (thoughts) and ask the elders for advice. On one occasion, while I was waiting at the Thessaloniki bus station for a bus to Chalkidiki, I overheard a young man tell his friend that he was going to see his elder. On another occasion, I observed a group of pilgrims traveling by boat from Ouranoupolis to Mount Athos and overhead one of them tell the others, "If you go to Mount Athos and don't confess to an elder, you might as well not have gone."

Elders of Mount Athos are the abbots of coenobitic monasteries. There are twenty ruling coenobitic monasteries on Athos, with each occupying their own territories; together they comprise the whole peninsula. Each monastery is an independent economic unit. The care of its property (investments, land in Mount Athos, real estate outside Mount Athos, etc.) is entrusted by the Constitutional Charter of Mount Athos (1924) to the hands of the monastic brotherhood living in the monastery (Choukas, 1935: 152). The elders and a small minority of leading monks manage the monastery's property. The large majority of inferior monks are mainly preoccupied with manual labor: the care of the church, the refectory, and the guestroom; the cultivation of the gardens and vineyards; the gathering of the olives; and so on.

However, besides these twenty monasteries there are about two hundred and fifty *spitia* or *kellia* (peasant cottages). They are scattered around the peninsula of Mount Athos. Many of them are not isolated, but instead concentrated in some areas in formations that resemble small villages. These monastic villages are called *skites*, such as the *skiti* of Agia Anna or the *skiti* of St Panteleimon. The monks responsible for these *spitia* also recognized as elders. Thus, the monks who are institutionally entitled *elders* in Mount Athos number approximately two hundred and fifty to three hundred.

The *spitia* are subordinated to the ruling monasteries. Since no one other than the twenty monasteries may possess property in Mount Athos, elders of *spitia* rent them from the monastery to which they are attached. These elders may live alone or with a small team of up to five monks, for whom they act as spiritual guides. While the constitution of Mount Athos does not permit the monks of a coenobitic monastery to possess private property, the elders living in the cottages have the right to make their own money by selling their home-made products: icons, frankincense, wine, small wooden crosses, etc.

During the early years of the Christian ascetic life in the fourth and fifth century AD, many ascetics of Syria and Palestine became major figures in late antiquity (Brown, 1971). In the same way, some contemporary elders of Mount Athos have become more prominent in the religious and social life in modern Greece, especially since they have begun to be recognized as charismatic. In addition to their small circle of subordinates, these elders are also surrounded by pilgrims who seek them out for guidance or confession. These pilgrims visit Mount Athos in order to meet their elders, having talked with them by phone and read about them in books and online. During their stay in Mount Athos they take care to educate the less-informed visitors about the elders, contributing in this way to the latter's recognition as charismatic elders. As pointed out by Marios Begzos (1993: 85; my translation), "it has become fashionable for the monks to abandon their silence and giving speeches in public, to make statements, manifestos, etc."

Elder Paisios is the most well-known contemporary charismatic elder; not a single day went by in Mount Athos that someone did not mention him. From the 1970s until his death in 1994, his cottage in the forest near Karyes was a magnet for pilgrims. They went to hear him speak, to receive his blessing, and to ask his advice. His story is the most popular of the elder narratives transmitted by word of mouth among pilgrims. The narratives about elder Paisios tell of his charismatic ability to predict the future or heal people. In recent years, these tales have been recorded in various books, many of which have been translated into Russian and other languages, leading to an influx of visitors from Russia, Ukraine, and Romania.⁸

In one of these tales, elder Paisios is described talking with a group of pilgrims who had visited him. Around sunset, the elder stopped talking and gave them *eylogia* (permission) to return to the nearby monastery of Koutloumousiou. One of the pilgrims approached Paisios afterward and asked to discuss a personal problem with him. The elder told him that it was too late and that he should return to the monastery with the others, but the pilgrim pressed him for advice about his wife, who had cancer. The elder then answered, "Go, and your wife has nothing." According to the narrative, the pilgrim phoned home the next day and learned that his wife's pain had abruptly abated. Later, when the man returned home, his wife underwent tests and discovered her cancer had disappeared.

In addition to these accounts of the healing powers of elder Paisios, there are others that center on his charismatic ability to foresee the future. In these narratives, events taking place in the present are interpreted by the elder as portents of the last days of history, when the Antichrist has come and is attempting to brand the faithful people with the number 666. In Paisios' prophecies, the return of the Antichrist is connected with the narrative of Constantinople's future recapture by the Greeks: the Greek Christians will be among the authentic Christians who will resist the Antichrist and will take Constantinople back—a symbolic cornerstone of many Greek nationalist narratives (Herzfeld, 1982). One of Paisios' prophecies is as follows (Aggeloglou, 1996: 267; my translation):

A small group of students from Athonias Academy went to the elder. They focused on one theme: they had heard that the elder said to some that the Greeks would take Constantinople back. They wanted to hear it from his mouth, and especially wanted to ask if they would be living at the time. So they talked to each other on the road [to the elder's cottage] and agreed that someone had to ask the elder about this topic. However, when they came and sat down with him, no one dared to ask such a question. They got up, took the blessing, and headed for the

trail. The elder, seeing them, said, "And remember: we will take Constantinople, and you will be alive at that time!"

Many contemporary pilgrims visit Mount Athos in order to seek out an elder with an extraordinary power like the charisma of elder Paisios. In a small café in Ouranoupolis, I saw a small party of pilgrims waiting to board the ship to Mount Athos. One of them approached an elder who was also waiting on the quayside. When the pilgrim returned to his group, he said to the others, "This elder has experience; he's invited us to his cottage to show us things." Hearing this, the pilgrims immediately began pestering the elder for details of these "things." One of them asked, "Elder, what must we do in order to get anything that we want?" And the elder replied, "Prayer and fasting. Three days praying without eating or drinking anything." The pilgrims were clearly delighted.

Analyzing the discourse of Mount Athos' elders

The term of *charisma* in elders' discourse is not a contemporary invention. Christian ascetic texts through the ages have featured numerous narratives about elders who cast out demons, heal diseases, foresee events, and experience visions of saints as well as of Christ himself. The recognition of the contemporary elders of Mount Athos as charismatic is simply a reinvention of the age-old Christian discourse. The term of *charisma* in elders' discourse offers pilgrims a symbolic language, which they use to confront misfortune. It is a fantasy of wholeness in the face of disease, loss, or other threats to the self.

My reference to the fantasy of wholeness is not accidental but intentional. It reflects my effort to combine the analysis of elders' discourse with concepts of the psychic life. Jacques Lacan recognized the significance of relating the unconscious with language, suggesting that the signifier of the archaic Other, who is usually the mother, is a constituent of the unconscious. According to Lacanian theory, the fundamental fantasy is the narcissistic fantasy of wholeness that the infant enjoys as a result of the signifier of the archaic Other. The function of the fundamental fantasy is to submerge the subject in a pleasure of wholeness. In the shadow of the fundamental fantasy, the subject seeks the wholeness, experiencing in a competitive way its limits and the distinction of itself from what is not itself. Wholeness may be absent, but it is possible. Thus, the fundamental fantasy does not lead the subject to be reconciled with his or her limits, but causes him or her to challenge them (Lacan, 2006: 447).

Lacan himself was interested in analyzing how a historical cultural discourse may be in the service of these mechanisms of psychic life. Thus, Lacanian theory is useful not only for understanding psychic life but also for analyzing cultural categories and their function.⁹ The fundamental fantasy is accepted here as a permanent possibility of psychic life that is stressed in certain cultures and not in others. In the same way, Theodor Adorno (1994: 165) has noticed that "various historical situations and social settings favor various psychological syndromes and 'bring out' and accentuate distinct types of possibilities ever-present in human beings."

The term *charisma* in elders' discourse is a promise of wholeness and omnipotence in the face of disease, loss, or other threats to the self. In this way, the narratives that purport to demonstrate the *charisma* of the contemporary elders of Mount Athos operate in the service of the fundamental narcissistic fantasy. When a pilgrim identifies with the charismatic power of an elder, he also fantasizes about his own power and derives pleasure from this fantasy.

Michel Foucault (1984: 61) noted that “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure.”

It is not only the pilgrims’ fantasies that are being served through the term of *charisma*, but also of the elders. As some of them gradually became major figures and the narratives about them started to function in the service of people’s fantasies, they equated themselves with God. Elder Cherouvim Karampelas (1981: 84) writes, “The order of things follows this order: God-elder-subordinate. [...] Blessed are those who call their elder God after God.”

Equating themselves with God, the charismatic elders demand *tyfli ypakoi* (blind obedience). *Tyfli ypakoi* means that the subordinates are constantly obliged to seek their elders’ *eylogia* (permission); nothing can be done without the elders’ permission. This blind obedience is not limited to matters of behavior, but also extends to their thoughts. In his analysis of Christian ascetic texts, Foucault (1999: 179) writes, “[I]n the *exagoreusis* we have an analytical and continuous verbalization of the thoughts, and in this relation of complete obedience to the will of the spiritual father.” In these cases, not only the subordinated monks, but also pilgrims are encouraged to present their thoughts to the elders. When I was talking once with a monk in a monastery, his first question was whether or not I had an elder to guide me. When he heard that I didn’t, he urged me to meet his elder, “who is charismatic,” and to ask him to guide me.

However, Lacan (1981: 273) talks not only about the fundamental fantasy but also about its possible traversal, “la traversée du fantasme.” The traversing of fantasy is a kind of mourning process. Freud describes mourning as a process by which the subject attempts to break his or her emotional connection with the lost object. Freud views the process of mourning as deeply melancholic, as he understands it to exist in the shadow of an unattainable wholeness. Lacan (270), meanwhile, understands mourning as a process that makes possible a new relationship of the subject with the lack: “It is at this point of lack that the subject has to recognize himself.” This relationship facilitates “a serene, exceptional detachment from human desire” (275). In other words, it inaugurates another economy of desire, where desire is emancipated from the fantasy of wholeness. Therefore, it permits an alternative relationship of the subject both with him—or herself and with others.

The category of *metanoia* (repentance) can be understood as a cultural signifier of the elders’ discourse that is not in the service of the fundamental fantasy for wholeness, but rather in the service of its traversal. Stelios Ramfos (2000: 34) noted that *metanoia* could be understood as a change of desire which is opposed to “an appetite for quantity and power.” The narratives that describe elders who do not want to cast out demons, cure diseases, foresee the future, or see Christ and instead want only to repent are cultural signifiers in the service of this process of mourning or traversing the fantasy. They remain in opposition to the narratives that focus on elders with miraculous powers. In this way, they are in the service of the subject’s reconciliation with the lack of wholeness.

In a monastery’s chapel, in front of a famous icon of the Virgin Mary, there is an oil lamp; many pilgrims ask to take olive oil from it as they consider it holy and believe it has miraculous healing powers. During my fieldwork, I often worked with a monk in this monastery, putting the olive oil in plastic bottles. One day, I took the opportunity to ask the monk if he thought that the olive oil had such powers. “It is our weakness to ask for miracles,” he replied. “It is better to try through prayer to be patient in misfortune and to consider it as God testing us.” Thus, the object of this monk’s desire was not power attained through religious practices, but rather reconciliation with this lack of power.

There are not two distinct groups of elders, the first discursively representing the narcissistic fantasy of wholeness, and the second group the traversal of it. Instead, these two aspects work simultaneously within the same discursive subjects. The cultural signifiers in the service of mourning process are elements of the discourse that is used by the elders. However, in many cases the signifiers of *metanoia* are restricted, overwhelmed, or canceled by the signifiers of *charisma*.

The charismatic elders in the period after the fall of the Greek military junta (1974–2010)

A number of ethnographic studies have analyzed religious phenomena similar to the emergence of the elders of Mount Athos in modern Greece. For example, Michael Carrithers (1983) and Stanley Tambiah (1984) have examined the increasing size of some communities of Buddhist monks (*arahants*) in countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand during the twentieth century. Katherine Pratt Ewing (1997) examines the lived realities of Pakistani saints and their relation to the Westernizing influences during the postcolonial period. These authors' common analytical principle is the assumption that such phenomena cannot be understood fully without reference to the cultural context in which they emerge and function.

Since the fall of the military junta in Greece in 1974, the concept of *anexartisia* (independence), as exemplified by slogans such as "Greece belongs to the Greeks," has become central to Greek thought. This and other similar slogans were used against both the domestic elite and the so-called *Dysi* (West). If the basic feature of the dominant discourse of national identity in the postwar context was anticommunism, after the fall of the dictatorship it became anti-Western.¹⁰

However, this resistance cannot be taken at face value. Greece continues to be a member of Western institutions such as NATO and the European Economic Community. After the fall of the military junta, a new order was formed in which the existing economic and social elites were able to preserve their privileged position. At the same time, a new middle class emerged, consisting mainly of civil servants and entrepreneurs dependent on the state (Tsoukalas, 1977). Thus, the experience of pleasure was no longer limited to the powerful political and economic elite, which enjoyed the lion's share of the country's material wealth, but was expanded to the majority of people. All the governments since the fall of the junta have served this new order, in which, for the first time in Greek history, the majority has had the experience of being sovereign consumers. Foucault (1999: 135–152) referred to this kind of order as *pastoral authority*, denoting a power that not only commands or prohibits, but also produces pleasure for its subjects.¹¹

In this context, the elders of Mount Athos have no connection with the strict representatives of religious authority, such as old Jorge in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*.¹² As some of them gradually became major figures and the narratives about them started to function in the service of people's fantasies, religious elderism proved to be a *pastoral power* entirely consistent with this new order. Thus, in the cultural frame of Greek society after the fall of the junta, the religious pastoral authority of charismatic elders gradually came to be engaged with secular pastoral political power.

According to recent polls, the Greek Orthodox Church enjoys the confidence of two-thirds of Greek society (Public I, 2015). However, only a small percentage of Greek society,

around 17%, states that it participates in the Sunday Mass (Pew Research Center, 2017). At the same time many people, as pointed out by Charles Stewart (1994: 206) in his ethnography about the Naxiote villagers, “frequently voice disdain of Orthodox strictures and they regularly denigrate the Church as a ‘mafia’ or a ‘conspiracy’ (*kombina*).”

However, since the fall of the junta, many pilgrims from Greek society have visited Mount Athos, in order to confess their thoughts and seek advice from some charismatic elders. In some cases, these visits are not only for confession and guidance; pilgrims also seek healing from these elders, either for themselves or their relatives, or ask them to foresee their future. Most of these pilgrims come from the middle and lower strata of Greek society. However, beginning in the 1990s, members of Greek high society have begun visiting the elders as well.

In an article in the newspaper *Kathimerini*, Takis Kampylis talks about an important entrepreneur in the construction sector in Greece. This fifty-year-old former leftist “has filled Athens with buildings, of which he probably isn’t very proud [...] he knows several politicians, journalists, with whom he eats and has a fun.” Kampylis adds that “over the last few years [this man] has had a spiritual guide in Mount Athos [...] he believes that he has the best elder.” We are also informed that “there [in Mount Athos] he meets other persons from the elite of Greek society, including artists, athletes, academics, doctors, judicial officers, military officers, businessmen and politicians” (Kampylis, 2008; my translation). This description resonates with my own ethnographic observations and highlights the new generation of visitors to Mount Athos, who derive as much pleasure from their meetings with their elder as from their summer vacation on the glamorous Greek island of Mykonos.

The period of the crisis

Since the fall of the junta, the growth of the public sector—combined with tax evasion by business and self-employed professionals—resulted in deficits in the state budget, and the political leadership considered it preferable to borrow from banks rather than to reduce spending. By 2010, Greece could no longer borrow from foreign banks in the way it previously had, so in 2010 the Greek political leaders secured the required funding from the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. At the same time, they agreed to implement measures of fiscal consolidation.

This plan led to a cut in wages and pensions in the public sector, rising taxes, and rapid increases in unemployment. The majority of Greek society reacted against the existing political system and in particular the members of the two biggest parties. By the 2012 elections, support of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and New Democracy parties had fallen to about 40% of the electorate, a sharp decrease from the previously mentioned 80–85% support rate between 1981 and 2009. At the same time, the left-wing SYRIZA party, which for years had enjoyed just 3–5% of the vote, witnessed a rapid increase in popularity. However, SYRIZA was not the only party to benefit from public dissatisfaction with PASOK and New Democracy. Support for the far-right nationalist party Golden Dawn also increased dramatically, from under 1% of the electorate between 1980 and 2011 to 7% in the elections of 2012.

Consistent with the general spirit of dissatisfaction, many of Mount Athos’ powerful elders resented the way in which the Greek state had managed affairs pertaining to the elders from 2010 onward. Many of these elders were aggrieved that in 2010, the state had decided

to tax the monasteries for income derived from real estate outside Mount Athos.¹³ The elders had believed that they, like other elites, would remain exempt from the fiscal consolidation measures. They saw the tax decision as a *casus belli* by the Greek state.

The powerful elders' resentment was further intensified by another affair. Previously, these elders had enjoyed privileged treatment in financial matters thanks to their close ties to political and juridical elites. In this new context, however, they lost not only their privileged status, but also their legal untouchability. In December 2011, elder Ephraim of Vatopedi was arrested and held in Korydallos prison for three months on charges of fraud that caused large losses to public property. In response, the Holy Community of Mount Athos (2011; my translation), the central governing council of twenty elders (one representing each ruling monastery), announced that "the attack against him [elder Ephraim] is an attack against the brotherhood of Mount Athos' elders." On the other hand, some elders said that "he [elder Ephraim] had departed from the spiritual road." However, the majority of the powerful elders were dissatisfied with the Greek state.

In December 2012, a team of elders met the leader of the left-wing party SYRIZA. They wanted to send the message that in order to defend their privileges, they would not hesitate to forge an alliance with even the traditional opponents of religion in Greece, namely the political left.

Some others expressed their feelings, supporting the far-right nationalist party Golden Dawn. The nascent alliance between these elders and Golden Dawn was evinced by the visits of Golden Dawn members to Mount Athos, as well as by meetings between these elders and pilgrims in Mount Athos, which focused on politicians who were *prodotes* (traitors) and the hope of revenge through Golden Dawn.

Since the beginning of the economic crisis, a number of far-right print and online publications have begun to replicate the prophecies of elder Paisios regarding the existing political system in Greece.¹⁴ A large number of pilgrims who have visited Mount Athos in recent years try to find an elder who, like elder Paisios, speaks critically of the political system and satisfies their fantasies. One such elder lives in a peasant cottage close to Karyes. Most mornings, he likes to stroll along the main road in the village, chatting with the pilgrims who pass by the shops. One day in autumn 2012, I heard him speaking with some pilgrims. His words were the same as those he used in an interview that he gave to the Web site of Golden Dawn shortly thereafter (Anthimos, 2012; my translation):

Greece is full of scurvy and money lending politicians! What a shame! Our nation has become a slave, but now it must awaken [...] to banish these Zionists who are to blame for all this suffering! Shame on them! On the other hand, there is Europe! What can Europe do for us? How will Europe save us? The only things that Europe knows are pornography, dishonesty, and illegality. Could we be saved in this way? The quislings should leave Greece! Those who want to be saved should vote Golden Dawn, for their sake and the sake of Greek society. Repentance, Christian faith, and Golden Dawn will save us.

Most of Mount Athos' elders who supported Golden Dawn preferred not to express their thoughts in the same public and graphic manner. However, they worked in the service of the same spirit, in ways that were subtler and perhaps more effective. For instance, they instructed those whom they guided to vote for the party in both the 2012 and, 2014 elections. Most of their spiritual children obeyed, since this was the elders' order.

The relationship between Mount Athos and the far-right political party Golden Dawn was not supported by all the elders of Mount Athos. Many of them were not willing to sever their ties with the leadership of the right-wing New Democracy party completely, hoping that through patient negotiations they would recover their lost privileges. In the spring of 2013, a book was published entitled *Golden Dawn as an Antichristian "Trojan Horse": Neo Nazism – Neo Paganism: The Undermining of the Greek Nation* (Avakum, 2013). According to the book's dust jacket, the author is a monk, Avakum, who is identified as a member of Megisti Lavra Monastery in Mount Athos.

The publication of the book was clearly an attempt to stem the increasing power of Golden Dawn and dispel the impression that the elders of Mount Athos were universally supportive of the party. In the book, Golden Dawn is presented as a neo-pagan sect deliberately established to deceive Greek Christians who are suffering from effects of the crisis. Clearly, then, there were elders who wanted to close the door on Golden Dawn and resume their support for the New Democracy government and the Prime Minister Antonis Samaras. This determination grew following Golden Dawn's involvement in the murder of the hip-hop musician Pavlos Fyssas in September 2013.

On 15 February 2014, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras visited Mount Athos and was welcomed by the powerful elders with a lavish ceremony in Karyes, which received television coverage. Some Internet users have commented that this visit was a political exploitation of the "simple monks" of Mount Athos. However, after the visit, the government announced that it intended to cancel the tax imposed on the monasteries for real estate outside Mount Athos. The "simple monks" clearly managed to benefit from the prime minister's visit. The symbols of renunciation and holiness are used by these elders not to be reconciled with the lack of wholeness, but as readily available means for the pursuit of power. Behind the curtain of the ritual order, Mount Athos remains a competitive field.

Conclusion

Over the last forty years, the elders of Mount Athos have become central to social and religious life in Greece. Their social influence has grown over these decades, especially after some of them were recognized as charismatic. This recognition of the contemporary elders as charismatic is a reinvention of the age-old Christian discourse of *charisma*.

There is a variety of meanings which can be given to the concept of *charisma*. However, in the elders' discourse the term of *charisma* has the meaning of an extraordinary power to see inside souls (discerning charisma), predict the future (prophetic charisma), and heal illnesses (healing charisma). In this way, the term *charisma* is a promise of wholeness and power in the face of disease, loss, or other threats to the self. As some of Mount Athos' elders gradually became major figures, the narratives about them have functioned in the service of a series of individual or collective fantasies in Greek society.

However, my aim in this article was not only to describe this function, but also to show the invisible war in elders' discourse among the signifiers that are in the service of these fantasies, on the one hand, and the signifiers that are resisting them, on the other. The category of *metanoia* (repentance) can be understood as a cultural signifier that is not in the service of the fundamental fantasy for wholeness, but rather in the service of its traversal. However, in most cases the signifier of *metanoia* is overwhelmed or canceled by the signifier of *charisma*.

The critique of this *charisma*'s sovereignty has to be considered in this way—as an experiment with the possibility of going beyond it. As Foucault (1984: 50) wrote, “[T]he critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”

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Notes

1. Over the years, the monastic population in Mount Athos has fluctuated in response to broader social and political changes. In the early nineteenth century, the number of monks was reported to be 2972. However, in the second half of nineteenth century, the number began to rise dramatically. In 1903, it reached 7432 monks, of whom 3260 (43.9%) were Russian. After the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the inclusion of Mount Athos in the Greek State in 1923 following the Treaty of Lausanne, the number of monks began to decline, and by 1965 had dropped to 1491, of whom only sixty-two were Russian. In 1971, the monastic population reached its nadir, with just 1145 monks, after which the numbers started to increase again with 1275 monks recorded in 1982. The gradual rise in the population continues to this day (Speake, 2002: 295).
2. Nicodemus was a scholar monk of Mount Athos during the eighteenth century (1749–1809) who dedicated his life to reviving the spiritual Christian tradition in Mount Athos in the face of its secularization. He is famous for his work with St Macarius of Corinth on the anthology of monastic spiritual writings known as *The Philokalia* (Palmer et al., 1983).
3. The meaning of *charisma* in Mount Athos' vocabulary is similar to the meaning of *charisma* that is described by Weber (1968: 241–242) as “[A] certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” This does not mean that the concept of *charisma* has this meaning in each case. There is a variety of meanings which can be given to the concept of *charisma* as well as a variety of its possessors. Usually, the leader of a religious group is considered to be the possessor of *charisma*. However, Csordas (1997: xviii) has examined the example of a religious movement in USA known as Catholic Pentecostalism and has described how “charisma is a self process the locus of which is not the personality of a charismatic leader but the rhetorical resources mobilized among participants in ritual performance.”
4. The initial visit of grace, its abandonment, and its subsequent return is a process that appears in the writings of Macarius of Egypt (Maloney, 1992). Elder Sophrony derived this trope from Macarius' text and applied it to the case of elder Silouan.
5. Paert has analyzed the relations of elders with the ecclesiastical power in Russia in the nineteenth century, during the so-called Orthodox Russian Renaissance, and the reputation that some Russian elders (*starsy*) then acquired. By recognizing these elders, the ecclesiastical power sought to draw strength in its fight against the reforms of Peter the Great (Paert, 2010).

6. The monks of coenobitic monasteries live together in the same monastic building, following a common daily program (*koinos bios*, “life in common”). The coenobitic monks eat together, pursue their duties together, and share in the central temple of monastery or chapels services. This mode was founded by St Pachomius (292–346) and St Basil (329–379) (Gothoni, 1993: 15–17).
7. Mount Athos has been the subject of several historical, archeological, and ethnographic studies. The first sociological study, which was based on just three months of fieldwork, was written in 1935 by Michael Choukas, a student in the Department of Social Studies at the University of Columbia, New York.
8. These translations are associated with the revival of religious life in Russia since 1989. Indicative of this situation is the fact that the book *Everyday Saints*, which discusses the modern elders of the Pskov-Caves Monastery in Russia, was voted the most popular book in Russia in 2012 (Shevkunov, 2012).
9. While in social anthropology the interest in this use of Lacanian theory still appears to be rather limited (see Ewing (1997) for a notable exception), Lacan’s approach has experienced a revival in the field of political theory since the 1990s, as evidenced by the works of authors such as Slavoj Žižek (1989), Ernesto Laclau (1996), and Yannis Stavrakakis (1999). There has also been a growing interest in the political meaning of the work of mourning since the 1990s. For example, Judith Butler (2004: 30) evokes the transformative effect of loss when she notes that “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.”
10. The Greek national identity in relation to *Dysi* has experienced several changes in the history of the modern Greek state. A description of this course can be found in the work of Herzfeld (1987). I place the term *Dysi* in italics since its meaning cannot be taken as fixed: since 1974 it has variously referred to Americans, Europe, NATO, capitalism, imperialism, Jews, and markets, among other things.
11. Before Foucault, Antonio Gramsci analyzed capitalist societies in a similar way, arguing that the dominant elite are able to build public consensus and in this way secure and perpetuate their power (Eagleton, 1991).
12. Eco’s character old Jorge is, as Žižek (1989: 28) notes, “the incarnation of dogmatic belief who does not laugh, is rather a tragic figure: outdated, a kind of living dead, a remnant of the past, certainly not a person representing the existing social and political powers.”
13. “Appeal to the Greek state to implement the promised legislation, repeated variously, is addressed by the Holy Community of Mount Athos in order to resolve the major issue of the taxation of properties located outside Mount Athos’ peninsula but belonging to its Holy Monasteries” (Kathimerini, 2012; my translation).
14. In 2012, in the course of parliamentary questions, a Golden Dawn MP directed the attention of state prosecution authorities to a Web site that, he claimed, “insults, ridicules, and tries to humiliate elder Paisios, the sacred figure of Greek, Orthodox Church” (Pappas, 2012; my translation). The Web site in question was a satirical page titled “Elder Pasticcio,” constructed by a twenty-seven-year-old man. The author was arrested on 21 September 2012, on charges of blasphemy. The news of his arrest was widely criticized in the international online community. At the trial, which took place on 16 January 2014, the man was given a ten-month suspended sentence for insulting religion.

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