The House of Mirrors: Reflections of an Academic on the Monastic Rituals of Death on Mount Athos

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Keywords	Abstract
Death *Monks* *Academics*	The purpose of this paper is to relate the rituals of death practised in the Monks' Republic of Mount Athos in northern Greece, and to reflect on them as an academic. To do this fifty days and nights were spent on the Holy Mountain conducting ethnography; this enabled both the monks' enactments to be captured and their interpretations recorded. The monastic rituals of death on Mount Athos are presented according to three emergent, paradoxical themes. These are that death is: both near and far; both a blessing and a tragedy; both uniting and dividing. The paper, the first study of monastic rituals of death on Mount Athos, then reflects on these themes in relation to being an academic, concluding that the limited commemoration of our colleagues in universities is intertwined with the slow death of the academic vocation.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
(Eliot, 1943, p. 38)

Introduction

Figure 1: The house of mirrors at an Athonite monastery

Monasteries on Mount Athos contain a room, typically underneath or adjacent to an out-chapel, where the skulls of their reposed monks are contained (see figure 1). Current monks come to this 'house of mirrors', to transliterate the Greek, to see their own reflection: seeing such ends is supposed to provoke new beginnings in their life. This paper relates this, and other rituals of death on Mount Athos, and considers what beginnings might come from these ends when we, as academics, look at this house of mirrors.

Such a comparison is not as far-fetched as it might at first appear as there are several points of connection between these monasteries and universities, particularly ancient ones. The architectural similarity strikes any pilgrim to Mount Athos who has visited Oxford or Cambridge. Like Oxbridge colleges, they have castellated façades and grand gates. Ottomans attacked from the East, Crusaders – and other Latinists – from the West, pirates from wherever. They also contain picturesque quadrangles from which emerge dreaming domes – if not spires – as they were not primarily purposed for defense but rather for scholarship – and relative solitude – in the service of the Church. Unlike Oxbridge colleges, their architecture suits their contemporary use. For the monasteries continue in the service of the Church and they continue to be subject to assault: although more commonly verbal, one monastery (and six of its Brotherhood) was subject to physical assault as recently as 2007 (Whipple, 2009). As well as this architectural point of connection, there are the English-language accounts of Mount Athos.

John Covel was the first English pilgrim to leave an account, in 1677 (1722; 1893); he later served as Master of Christ's College, Cambridge. Robert Curzon, educated at Christchurch, Oxford, was the next (1849). The Reverend Henry Fanshawe Tozer, fellow and tutor of Exeter College, Oxford visited the Holy Mountain in 1853 and 1861, accompanied by a travelling companion Mr Crowder, bursar of Corpus Christi College, Oxford (1869). In the inter-war period three accounts were published, by: Robert Byron, graduate of Merton College, Oxford (1928); F W Hasluck, fellow of King's College, Cambridge (1924); R M Dawkins, Bywater Professor of Modern and Byzantine Greek at Oxford (1936, 1953).

These, and later books by Oxford graduates (Speake, 2002) and/or fellows (Speake & Kallistos, 2012), do not, however, describe or reflect upon, the rituals of death on the Holy Mountain. To do so is the purpose of this paper.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section, Practice of Research, justifies the selection of the fieldwork site, describes my ethnographic practice and outlines key points of interest. The following section, Paradoxes of Death, presents the monastic rituals of death on Mount Athos, grouped according to three paradoxes which emerged from the data: both near and far; both a blessing and a tragedy; both uniting and dividing. After this there is the Discussion section which generalises from the monastic practices I observed and participated in on Mount Athos and reflects on what academics may, and may not, learn from them.

Practice of research

I chose to hunt around for rituals of death in the Monks' Republic of Mount Athos in northern Greece. This formed part of a broader study of monastic beliefs and practices. The particular monastery I selected to focus on from the twenty that constitute this self-governing territory was representative of the 'mainstream' of Mount Athos, being both Greek-speaking and accepting the oversight of the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (Speake, 2002). All the other nineteen monasteries were also visited, if only for a couple of hours. A monastery is particularly interesting as a fieldwork site for a number of reasons. First, as a religious organisation it is based on a particular way of knowing and being: a monastic epistemology and ontology. Together these can be called the *doxa* of the community. Monks are expected to be more concerned with the spiritual as opposed to the material, and they have their own value system. This *doxa* grants the organisation a certain boundariedness. This is exacerbated by the fact that it is a type of 'total institution' (Goffman, 1961), a second point of interest. A total institution is an environment where individuals live and work in a community, there are limited possibilities for external contact and 'disciplinary practices' (Asad, 1987) are used to control the individual in terms of their internal response as well as their external behaviour, for example, confession (Foucault, Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988; Foucault & Rabinow, 1997).

As a total institution, especially one somewhat out of the way and overlooked, it lends itself to, and indeed requires, ethnography. Monks' interpretations were recorded in interviews and their enactments were captured via participant observation. Being a *participant* observer in this context meant, for me, eight hours of manual labour during the daytime, eight hours of church attendance in the early evening and (very) early morning and, in between, eight hours of rest, to include eating and conversing with the community and sleeping in a dormitory with the other guests. Being a participant *observer* in this context meant for recording notes as and when I could: by torchlight at night, in short breaks during the day. Such notes were, by necessity, handwritten: voice (and video) recording is prohibited on the mountain and the lack of electricity in the guest accommodation rendered information and communication technologies quickly redundant. All but one of the forty monks were interviewed at least once, most in multiple interview-fragments as work permitted. The interviews were conducted in Greek, English or a mixture of both languages. The monks were not observed equally for my participant role required more interaction with some and less with others. However, this was mitigated by my relative relief from manual labour on my final visit, having previously proved myself, literally, in the field, which enabled my participant observation to tend towards observation. I made a total of four trips to the mountain, of approximately twelve days each, between October 2008 and April 2010.

A point to remember in reading this paper is that I was to a large extent an insider. Being male gave me basic physical access to the monastery. Being, in addition, an Orthodox Christian gave me empathy with the monks and access to the central spaces of their communal life: services in the Church and meals in the refectory. Being, further, an academic enabled me to secure access of sufficient duration to get close to the monks, their enactments and their interpretations. However, I was not a complete insider for I am neither Greek nor an Orthodox Christian under the Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the patriarchate under whose oversight the monks of Mount Athos reside. I believe that being close, but not too close, to the object of my study meant that I could collect sufficiently rich data to inform analysis, and to be sufficiently critical in such analysis so as to make useful comparison with the academic profession. Another key point to make at this stage is that the institution has been anonymised; all of the individuals who were interviewed have been given an appropriate pseudonym as have Elders and Saints mentioned in those interviews if these would lead to identification of the monastery. In respect to the monks, they have been assigned names of male Orthodox Saints from Great Britain and Ireland, and will all be referred to as Father, following Greek practice, regardless of whether they are priests or not.

I write this article within a week of the death of my forty-one year old colleague, John. As I conceived this article his death was not expected but as I write it now it is inevitably conditioned by it. For this subjectivity I make no apology because it informs my reflection on what academics may, and may not, learn from the monastic practices I observed and participated in on Mount Athos. The next section explores such practices via the three paradoxes of death on the Holy Mountain: both near and far; both a blessing and a tragedy; both uniting and dividing.

Paradoxes of death

Both near and far

The majority of the monks in the monastery are under forty years of age and thus far off death. Indeed, considerably far off for it is common for monastics to live to a grand age. The oldest monk I interviewed was one hundred and six years old. However, between our initial birth and our eventual death our everyday life consists of minor deaths and births. For instance, at its most basic, in the words of Father Alban, 'awaking each morning is like a re-birth'. Indeed, in English-language Orthodoxy the term used for death is repose, a near-synonym for sleep. Far less frequently, separation from the places we like or rejection by the people we love can provoke transitions in life, such as from adolescence to adulthood. Such events are also often a catalyst to explore an alternative way of life, as was the case for Father Neot and monasticism. In being tonsured as a monk, the novice is given a black robe symbolising death to the world, and is subsequently referred to as a Rassophore, literally a robe-bearer. Father Chad, who was, in his time, relatively familiar with technology, having served as a radio operator during his military service, made an analogy: 'Monks are like radio operators, they must remove themselves from the noise of the world so that they can focus on their radio communications, in this case with God'.

Father Alban explained that: 'If one fears death one will become cowardly and over-careful; if one can face death, and determine one's relation to it, one can live life fearlessly and to its fullness'. This fearlessness has precedent, as Father Aaron stated: 'Our life is to be understood in terms of His story'. This embrace of death leading to embrace of life I heard sung in the Easter hymn: 'Christ is risen from the dead, by death hath He trampled down death, and on those in the graves hath He bestowed life' (Saint John Chrysostomos, 1987, pp. 176-177). Father Brendan paraphrased Saint Isaac the Syrian (original in 1984, p. 315) in explaining the practical implications for our lives: 'Each day prepare your heart for departure; do not neglect anything that shall help you on your journey'. The best way of preparation for the journey is sanctification, which also brings one closer to one's fellow monks. Father Teilo explained this via reference to an analogy: 'Picture a planetary system: the sun represents Jesus Christ, the planets represent the monks of the monastery; as we grow closer to Jesus Christ, through sanctification, we also become closer to our brothers who are likewise being sanctified'.

Both a blessing and a tragedy

Even if death has been prepared for in part by the minor deaths and births of everyday life, it is still a tragedy. Father Alban stated that 'we are not created to die'. Father Aaron explained that: 'We are created as soul and body united; death divides this'. Even if death is not a surprise, it is still shocking to confront the physical reality of the reposed's body. In the Orthodox funeral service the coffin is left open and the community approach the coffin, one-by-one, to kiss the departed.

Yet even at this point, there are indications that this is a blessing, a beginning of a new life. The monk wears their cassock and monastic cloak; part of the latter is cut into two long strips which are then wrapped around the body. Father Neot explained that the way in which the strips are wrapped symbolises the cross of Christ, but also the swaddling bands in which He was wrapped as a baby. This reflects the words of the accompanying funeral service, which makes clear that death is the pre-requisite for this re-birth:

> Thou hast returned me to the earth whence I was taken.
> Lead me back again to thy likeness.
> Refashioning my ancient beauty. (1987, p. 128)

An essential feature at memorial services is *Kolyva*, memorial wheat made from mixing boiled wheat with sugar, dried nuts, pomegranate and sesame seeds, and then decorated with coloured icing sugar to form one or more of the initials of the reposed, Orthodox symbols or icons (see figure 2). This is prepared on the third, ninth and fortieth days after a monk's repose, as well as on anniversaries; collective ones are prepared on particular Saturdays of the year – Soul Sabbaths – for

remembering the reposed; special ones are also prepared for the feast days of particular Saints. It symbolises hope in the resurrection of the dead, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12:24 in Carroll & Prickett, 1997). Father Alban explained that just as when wheat disintegrates in the soil it is transformed into a new plant that bears much more fruit than itself, so the monk's body will be transformed from the corruptible matter it now consists of.

Figure 2: Kolyva at an Athonite monastery

This transformation of corruptible matter is prefigured by another aspect of monastic liturgical practices. Every night the monks venerate the monastery's relics: entire skulls, arms, legs and various fragments of Saints, some of whom had themselves been monks of the monastery. Despite their age, and the frequency with which they are kissed, these still remain intact. In fact, certain of them have been transformed, emitting fragrance or streaming myrrh.

Both uniting and dividing

In one sense, death divides the community, taking its members away. However, this could be seen more as a change in the nature of the relationship between the members of the community. Father Neot explained that the spirit of the monastery was that of: first, its Abbot, Wilfrid; second, his Spiritual Father, Elder Kenneth; third, his Spiritual Father, Elder David, whose spiritual teachings and writings are known of in some form, however fragmentary, by most Greek Orthodox. In speaking of the Elders it was far from clear that one had now reposed. Father Brendan confessed to speaking to a reposed monk as if he was beside him. He also explained that, more formally, the community commemorates the reposed by name at the Divine Liturgy: 'We pray for them, but we are also sure that they are praying for us'.

As well as these spiritual relationships amongst monks there are also relationships between the monks and, via icons, Saints from throughout the ages. The *katholikon*, the main church, of the monastery contains three miraculous icons. One featured in a miracle recounted to me. The then Abbot fervently prayed to the Saint as there was no oil for the lights in the Church on the eve of the Feast of the Translation of the Relics of Saint Alban (to the monastery). He fell asleep, and awoke to hear the Saint console him, assuring him not to worry as they cared for such things. He then noticed that the oil

jar, miraculously, had filled, as had all the other stores in the monastery. Father Aaron, explained that, via icons, our present world is connected to the past and the future.

The monks are formed into the tradition of the monastery. Father Edward showed me a Chapel outside the monastery amongst the outbuildings and beside a small cemetery of three graves. Three years after death the bones of the monk are dug up and washed with wine. The skull is inscribed with the name of the monk and a cross and placed with the others in the 'House of Bones' or the 'House of Mirrors' – to transliterate from the Greek (see figure 1). The other bones are buried in a communal grave. Monks visit the 'house' to be confronted with their own death, to see themselves in thirty years' time. However, they also visit to see their place in the continuance of the monastery over the millennia. As Father Edward said: 'Together, these bones are the building blocks of the monastery; what holds them [the bones] together is the cement of memory'.

This memory is maintained through the oral tradition. Novices – and those considering to become such – are allocated to work in small groups with a senior monk of the monastery. As they work, the senior monk instructs his 'pupils' and they ask him questions. In oral form, it is similar to the written dialogues which have, until recently, been the primary written means of conveying Orthodox theology (e.g. Cleopa & Heers, 2002). Topics I heard varied from issues such as the frequency of confession, historical matters such as the lives of the saints and training concerns such as the pronunciation of certain words in the liturgy – Athonite liturgy is in Byzantine rather than modern Greek – and how to chant them. In this way, the monastery forms its monks in a similar fashion to the *kalyvi*, cell, where the spiritual grandfather of the Abbot, Elder David, resided. This oral initiation into the collective memory of the monastery trumps formal education which is not considered important in the formation of a monk. As Father Teilo pointed out to me: 'Elder David had only been educated for two years'. The effectiveness of such oral instruction became apparent to me on my first evening at the monastery. Father Brendan, who had seen me waiting earlier to be allocated a bed, invited me to join him. He asked me to read – for due to his failing sight he could not – various signs, and articles in the leaflets, around us. He also asked me about my life outside. Literally and metaphorically I became his eyes to the world. As he spoke he recited teachings and stories, prayers and scriptural verses. He clearly had learnt – and now lives – an oral tradition.

Discussion

The various practices of the monastery, of which those with respect to death are part, have enabled the continuous monastic occupation of Mount Athos for over a millennium. Moreover, the form of monasticism is aesthetically and ascetically contiguous with that which has been practised there in the past. However, the fact of death means that there is also change as well continuity, even if the balance is weighted toward the latter. As the Monks' Republic does not permit women to enter, the mountain may be a place of physical death but cannot be a place of physical birth. Its continued existence therefore depends upon men of each generation choosing to leave the 'real world' to live the monastic life, and to live it on Mount Athos. As I found there in my research on monastic resistance to – or engagement with – information and communication technologies, some of the monks, especially some of the younger monks, are keen to bring artefacts from this 'real world' to the mountain, artefacts whose codification of rules from another place may be at odds with the ways of monastic life. The Holy Mountain, as has traditionally been conceived, is therefore under threat from within. It is also under threat from without.

The Monks' Republic has long-enjoyed self-governance, even under the Ottoman Empire. This is now guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. However, their relative economic, regulatory and physical shelter is being challenged. In terms of physical shelter, for example, the European Parliament has adopted a text requesting the lifting of the ban on women entering the territory of the Monks' Republic (2003). The ban, decided on in 1045, 'nowadays violates the universally recognised principle of gender equality, Community non-discrimination and equality legislation and the provisions relating to free movement of persons within the EU' (2003). In terms of regulatory shelter, for example, the Abbot of Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos was imprisoned on the 'mainland' for four months, 'accused of inciting officials to commit acts of fraud, perjury and money-laundering' (Papachlimintzos, 2012). In terms of economic shelter, for example, their exemption from property taxes has been repealed in the midst of Greece's crisis (Kathimerini, 2012). This diminishing shelter is another point of similarity and connection with universities, in addition to those, especially with Oxbridge, outlined in the Introduction section.

However, before reflecting on what academics may, and may not, learn from the monks' rituals of death there are important points of ontological and epistemological difference to consider. In terms of epistemology, oral tradition

usurped the written tradition in the contemporary and ongoing functioning of the institution. In the past, the monastery produced great scholars such as the bibliophile Elder Cuthbert, now there is little emphasis on scholarship as such. However, the oral tradition in the monastery could be seen as serving the same ends as such scholarship, for the Athonite conception of scholars does:

> not mean individuals who preoccupied themselves with inquiry motivated merely by intellectual curiosity or by the desire to make "informative" or "original" contributions to the academic world. The latter conception of a scholar is alien to Orthodox monasticism. (Cavarnos, 1973, p. 17)

For the monks, this life is the preface to the main story. For most academics, this life seems like the main story; anything afterwards is an appendix. One can therefore reasonably wonder if there can be any implications for those who do not share the ontological *weltenschauung* of the monks. To the extent that the practices which follow such an orientation towards death bring benefits to life, one can posit the answer 'yes'.

In respect of my personal experience as an academic, three colleagues from my School – Neville, Gareth and John – have died whilst in post. Their deaths did not seem a natural part of our existence for which we were prepared. If anything, it was something we – myself as much as anyone – tried to hide, and hide from, rather than accepting their impending death openly. This may well have hurt Neville, Gareth and John, making them feel that somehow they are failing or that they are causing embarrassment. As a consequence, they may not have had sufficient opportunity to prepare themselves for their death.

As well as such difference in preparation for death, there is difference in remembrance. An annual student prize, presented at graduation and discussed in the preceding Exam Board is the nearest we come to commemorating these former colleagues, and then for only two of them. Otherwise it is left to individuals' memories and occasional private conversation. As for colleagues who have died after retirement, I know of only one person, Graham. For him no prize – as yet – is presented.

In terms of acting on these differences, accepting impending death openly is certainly something we can strive to do as academics. However, commemorating our reposed colleagues more extensively is perhaps more problematic. The only way to be commemorated in common discourse in a University these days is by sponsoring, or making a bequest for, a new building. A way not easy to tread for today's academics in view of the sums involved, such as £15 million at Oxford (Henry, 2012). As universities have been transformed from collegial to corporate entities, and the academic vocation built upon tenure has been replaced by academic employment built upon contract, there may be no lessons to learn. These changes intensify, and are intensified by, the loss of community. Seventeenth- to mid-nineteenth-century Oxbridge, from which Covel, Curzon and Tozer had travelled to the Monks' Republic, and against which they made comparison, consisted of communities of scholars researching and debating, eating and living in the same building (Engel, 1983). After all, dons had to be single until at least 1860 when Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge became the first Oxbridge college to abolish compulsory celibacy for all of its fellows (Reisz, 2012).

A monastery on the margins of Europe may seem a strange source for comparison with, and reflection upon, death and dying in academia. However, their contemporaneous contrast belies their common origin. The long, slow, and sometimes painful death of the academic vocation – highlighted by this increasing divergence from its monastic counterpart – may itself be the birth of something new. But out of such destruction what will be created? With what shall it be united? For whom will this tragedy be a blessing? In answering these questions, and confronting such 'realities' we may, like the monks of Mount Athos, be brave enough to embrace a different life:

> ...to make an end is to make a beginning.
> The end is where we start from. (Eliot, 1943, p. 38)

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