

Orthodox theology and local practice in contemporary Greece: whose tradition? (Review Article)

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Loring M. Danforth, *Firewalking and Religious Healing: the Anastenaria of Greece and the American Firewalking Movement*. Princeton University Press: Princeton 1989.

Charles Stewart, *Demons and the Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture*. Princeton University Press: Princeton 1991.

Laurie Kain Hart, *Time, Religion, and Social Experience in Rural Greece*. Rowman & Littlefield, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland 1992

What is the relationship between the theological canon and everyday religious practice? Is it the same as the relationship (and difference) between what ought to be and what is? Is there an 'Orthodox world view'? Does the gap between theory and practice in Greek Orthodoxy differ systematically from a similar gap in Catholicism and Protestantism? Three studies published within the past five years, based on contemporary anthropological research in Greece (in northern Greece, in the eastern Peloponnese, and on Naxos), offer some interesting suggestions for tackling such questions by laying bare the context of particular taken-for-granted views of the world as well as views which are contested and under critical scrutiny. Each study reports discrepancies between the statements of church authorities and local people, and between different categories of local people (who include, variously, local clergy, monks and nuns). In some cases these concern the prescriptions of theology and the exigencies of practice; in others, the point at issue is whose definition 'counts'. All, in one way or another, raise the question of the relationship between the Great and Little Traditions (a distinction first drawn in

this form by Robert Redfield in *Peasant Society and Culture* in 1956).

Essential reading for anyone trying to understand Christian Orthodoxy, in my opinion, is Philip Sherrard's book *The Greek East and the Latin West* (originally published in 1959 and recently reprinted). Sherrard describes the work as 'not a historical study ... basically a study in types of mentality or forms of conceptual understanding'¹; it thus provides useful background to these three studies, and to the discussion which follows by way of introduction to them.

One way of trying to understand Orthodox Christianity is to see it, in a very limited sense, as an example of what the Catholic Church was like before Protestantism, before the conflict between 'tradition' and 'reason'.² 'The religious antipathy between the Greek East and the Latin West was a very real one. For the orthodox [sic, with small 'o'], Christianity meant a "way" to perfection, and the possibility of a form of "deification" through a type of spiritual knowledge, or "gnosis", accessible to initiated Christians through the cultivation of the heart rather than of the mind. Latin Christianity on the other hand came to be more rational in form, and to attach greater importance to the logical working of the human mind in the pursuit of divine knowledge ...'.³ Orthodox Christianity has in a sense a pre-Protestant theology, for what it is self-conscious about is its difference from Catholicism and its opposition to Islam, rather than its relationship to Protestantism.

One of the most striking differences between Catholicism (and Protestantism) and Orthodox Christianity is their respective attitudes to sin, death and salvation. Going back to Adam and Eve, the Church Fathers of each tradition may agree that the initial sin was disobedience, but Orthodox theologians insist that the result of this was mortality: human beings die. Easter is the 'Feast of Feasts' because it celebrates Christ's triumph over death. The emphasis in Western theology is that it is sin from which human beings need to be saved. While it regards human beings as affected by and involved in the results of the Fall, there is in Orthodox theology no sense of 'original sin' as a state of inherited guilt for which payment must be made and forgiveness granted, but rather a sense of human life's ending 'unnaturally' in death. Of course there is in Orthodoxy a clear sense of 'sin' to which human beings are inevitably susceptible, but there is not the same sense of 'guilt' and concern with the internalised conscience as there is in Western forms of Christianity. As Renée Hirschon has noted, '[W]omen I knew did not appear to feel a burden of guilt requiring a lifetime to expiate their inherited sin, nor were they preoccupied with repentance ... feelings of personal guilt and inadequacy do not

arise as easily as, say, in a society with a Protestant heritage of personal responsibility for salvation'.⁴

Christian Orthodoxy itself recognises the distinction between the ideal and the actual through the notion of *oikonomia*. This word literally means 'economy' or 'household management', but in theological terms refers to 'the divine government of the world' (OED, 'economy', II.5 and III6a), the plan of God for the restoration of a right relationship between himself and human beings through Christ. Here we meet again that difference in the thought of Orthodoxy – or rather that different stress – compared with that of Western theologians. Salvation is not viewed in terms of Christ's 'paying the debt for the sin of Adam'⁵ but through his uniting the human and the divine, restoring the true nature of human beings as originally created. The 'anthropology' of Orthodoxy – that is, its view of human nature – is that 'deification', being 'in God', is the natural state and that since the Fall human beings live in an un-natural state, slaves to the body and to the world, living a life that ends in death. Original sin deprived human beings of the freedom of this 'natural state', so the focus is not on inherited guilt, but on the deprivation of freedom. An accepted Latin synonym for *oikonomia* is *dispensatio*, 'economical management', a word which equally recognises the need for 'the judicious handling of doctrine... in such a manner as to suit the needs ... of the persons addressed' which accepts a 'relativism of means and methods'; '... notions of good and evil are less than absolute moral categories in Greek thought'.⁶

Following this line of thought, I have argued elsewhere that there are particular cultural assumptions in Greece, rooted in Orthodoxy, about the relationship between outward form and inner meaning and about personal conscience and public knowledge (for which the distinctions between action or practice and belief and between 'guilt' and 'shame' should be taken as a shorthand summary).⁷ One way of putting the difference between these assumptions or axioms and those characteristic of Western Christianity, is to say that the logic of Orthodoxy works from outside in, while the other works from inside out. Examples often given in Greece are taken from the upbringing of children: they cannot initially understand the significance of making the sign of the cross, or kissing the icons, but 'eventually they believe'. Similarly, conformity to outward social forms, such as making the appropriate wishes for a particular occasion, establishes correctness, rather than an impromptu and spontaneous expression of personal feelings. What in one culture might even be interpreted as hypocrisy and hollow formalism is, in the other, the only guarantee of 'correct opinions' and the acceptance of social norms. Hence,

as Dubisch argues, writing of pilgrimage on Tinos, the importance of 'the public act ... through which an inner state is made visible' is precisely because one cannot know the inner state of another with any accuracy; however, common performance of ritual acts may in fact 'conceal a diversity of beliefs'.⁸

So much for context. These three books highlight the diversity of beliefs, as well as the often contested local practices, which exist in different parts of Greece: the beliefs and behaviour of firewalkers; a moral cosmology and associated practices concerned with demons; everyday religious experience in the context of a particular place and of cyclical, linear and eucharistic time. In all three studies the Greece of today impinges: European Union grants for development are sought; expatriates set up folklore museums; Greek university students revive local interest in old customs by carrying out summer projects using their own elderly relatives as informants. Anthropologists questioning 'locals' are, variously, referred to the mandrake plant and given psychoanalytic interpretations of their own dreams.

The first study to be published was Danforth's book and it is this which poses the question: whose tradition? in the strongest form. The major part of the book is based on research in the village of Ayia Eleni, near Serres in the eastern part of Greek Macedonia, at various times from 1973 to 1986, with the most intensive fieldwork carried out in the year from September 1975. The research concerned the Anastenaria, an annual cycle of rituals involving firewalking and spirit possession. To this is added an account of a fire dance in the northeastern United States (in which Danforth himself participated) and a discussion of the American Firewalking Movement.

Ayia Eleni had in 1976 a population of 700 people, about half of whom defined themselves as 'Kostilides', refugees, or descendants of refugees, who had come in the 1920s from the large village of Kosti in eastern Thrace, on the mountains near the Black Sea. Some Kostilides had been involved there in the Anastenaria, walking and dancing on a bed of hot coals while carrying icons, under the protection of St Constantine.

After their move to Ayia Eleni, and to other villages in the area, the people from Kosti who had brought their icons with them, continued with these practices. For several decades they were carried out in secret, the Kostilides fearing the hostility both of the local population and of the clergy. In 1947 the Anastenarides of Ayia Eleni performed their rituals publicly for the first time. The Anastenaria were described by various Greek church leaders as sacrilegious, idolatrous and orgiastic; the Anastenarides' ability to walk on hot coals was said to come from Satan. In

1976 twenty-five Anastenarides, eighteen women and seven men, participated in the festival which Danforth details in Chapter 1. These devotees were mostly poor men, not involved in village politics, and middle-aged and elderly women. Although the rites are now practised openly and attract a great deal of media and tourist attention, there is still some opposition from both villagers and clergy. It is not only the authorities of the Orthodox Church who are uneasy about the firewalkers. Some of the villagers of Ayia Eleni still regard the Kostilides as 'outsiders', and even more so, see those who are involved in the Anastenaria as disturbed people who bring the village into disrepute. Some Kostilides, in turn, regard those of their fellow migrants who are involved with the Anastenaria with respect, but also with pity, as the status is ambivalent and stigmatized: to be a devotee, one must first be marked by the saint with illness and suffering. Some of the Anastenarides question the involvement of certain others and cast doubt on the genuineness of their 'calling'. In addition, there has been an uneasy relationship between the group of devotees and the Folklore Society of Ayia Eleni.

The Folklore Society was founded in 1971 to help negotiate with Church and government officials to recover some of the Anastenarides' icons which appear to have been 'confiscated' on the grounds that they belonged to the Church. After a court case which ruled that they were in fact private property some were returned, but a number are still kept in churches and the Anastenarides are not allowed to take them out to dance with them. Some devotees describe these icons as 'in prison', and attribute the illnesses of various people to the icons' attempts to be freed from their confinement. The Folklore Society took charge of the Anasterides' financial affairs and began to negotiate with various bodies for grants to help with various practical improvements in the village to aid the performance of, and attendance at, the Anastenaria. They made these improvements often without consulting the Anastenarides, who felt that their relationship with the Saints was, being turned from something religious into something folkloric and touristic.

The support of local and national government officials for the Anastenaria as against the opposition of the Church requires, in Danforth's view, an understanding of the significance of the tracing of continuities between modern and ancient Greece in the construction of modern Greek identity; it might also be important to note that anti-clericalism can exist alongside staunch adherence to Orthodoxy as an essential component of Greek identity.⁹ While there might also be elements of economic self-interest at work – tourism and media attention bring much-needed money to the area – an even more powerful aspect of the value placed on the

Anastenaria is that the ritual 'serves ... as a powerful symbol of Greek national identity' (p.206). It is also clear from Danforth's account that at the local level the rituals serve as an equally powerful symbol of identity for the people from Kosti as against an alternative identity as villagers of Ayia Eleni.

How does a person become an Anastenaris or Anastenarissa and eventually dance with the icons on hot coals? Usually through experiencing various forms of illness which prove intractable to medical intervention and then having dreams, or hearing voices which are interpreted as a saint's commands, usually those of the grandfather – that is, St Constantine himself. Illness becomes health when they are empowered through their involvement in the Anastenaria to become possessed by the saint and walk on fire. If they are prevented or frustrated by others (a woman's husband, for example, may forbid her to get involved with the rituals, insisting that only doctors should be consulted) or through their own circumstances (moving to Thessaloniki may make it difficult to come back to Ayia Eleni for the various festivals), the illnesses return or worsen. An examination of devotees' histories from the perspectives of medical and symbolic anthropology reveals as much about social disjunction as somatic dysfunction: a disinherited stepson who at marriage is forced to live with his wife's family; a childless woman dominated by her husband's family; a young woman artist living in Athens, exploring alternative religions and searching for a trigger to help release an inner power. As this last instance indicates, some people have joined or associated themselves with the cult who are not Kostilides at all, but include university students and 'bohemian urbanites'. In 1986, ten years after his original visit, Danforth was surprised to find that Tasos (formerly a medical student, the founder and first President of the Folklore Society, and now a doctor) had taken over from old Yavasis, by then more than ninety years old, who had been leader at the time of Danforth's main fieldwork. Tasos' uncle had become President of the Folklore Society, neatly resolving the conflict between charismatic and secular power.

Here then, is an example of activities whose status as religious practices is hotly contested. What seems to lie behind the worries of the Church authorities is the more or less self-contained nature of the Anastenaria. As long as the devotees have access to their icons, they have no need of any representative of the Orthodox Church. In reading about the Anastenarides, I was in some places reminded of Shaw's argument in *Saint Joan* that the threat posed by Jeanne d'Arc to the Catholic Church of her day was not that she was a witch, but that she was the first Protestant: she did not require a priest to mediate her relationship with the saints or with God.

Then I came to Danforth's statement: 'The opposition of the Orthodox Church to the Anastenaria is a specific example of attempts made by hierarchical religious organizations throughout the world to suppress, or at least control, enthusiastic or ecstatic forms of religious worship based on direct personal experience of the divine' (p.204).

Of the three studies compared as pieces of writing, this is perhaps the most innovative in its use of the juxtaposition of participants', observers' and other actors' viewpoints, including Danforth's own, to give a finely textured account of the rituals, their social setting and their contested meanings. As employed in Chapter 1, this style of presentation plunges readers into the mass of material which later chapters gradually clarify. The 'review of the literature', in Chapter 2, a possibly deliberate contrast of the disinterested and objective academic style with the immediacy of the multiple subjectivities of the previous chapter, may also mark the book's origins as a doctoral thesis.

The other two studies similarly arise out of theses based on ethnographic research, and take account of developments in anthropological thinking about the self-consciousness of ethnographic 'texts'. Danforth has the advantage over the other authors of ten additional years since his original research in which to extend his, and our, knowledge of the Greek firewalkers, and in which to have combined the roles of observer and participant in an American firewalk (in the winter of 1985), but both Hart and Stewart have paid later visits to their fieldwork areas and bring readers up to date with current developments.

Stewart's book results primarily from an intensive period of fieldwork from March 1983 to October 1984 in Apeiranthos, a mountain village of about 850 people on the Cycladic island of Naxos. While the first of the book's three parts concerns the particular history and unique characteristics of the village, the second part deals with beliefs and practices involving *exotika*, literally 'things outside'; that is, supernatural beings outside the physical and social boundaries of the local community. These abnormal and marginal 'things' are associated with places which are unfrequented or betwixt and between, such as bridges and caves; they manifest themselves during 'unsocial hours' or days; they appear during transitional life-cycle events such as birth and marriage. After discussing the relationship of *exotika* with the Devil, Stewart decides on the translation 'demons' and goes on to discuss the many forms and types of ogre, mermaid, horned goblin, vampire, spirit, water nymph, bogey-man, and blood-sucker. In some respects the relationship of these demons to the Devil offers a mirror-image of the relationship of the

angels and saints to God.

Stewart argues that the *exotika* are a central rather than a residual category of modern Greek thought, essential for an understanding of the moral cosmology of Naxiot villagers and of Greeks in general. He notes, for example, the Greek state's recognition of the power of such beliefs in the clause of the advertising code which forbids exploitation of 'apotropaic and spiritual (religious) superstitions' (p.112). The moral cosmology discussed by Stewart, however, includes the pronouncements of both the Orthodox Church and educated Greeks that there are two traditions. The Church's view is that belief in, and practices concerning, *exotika* are 'superstitious' and inconsistent with Christianity. This cannot but remind readers of Church authorities' reactions to the practices of the Anastenarides: there appears to be a parallel in that the formal organization is circumvented and individuals attempt to manage their relationship with the supernatural independently. The research Stewart cites which shows that prayers against the Evil Eye have a fairly recent appearance in the Orthodox prayer book (pp.289-90) could be interpreted as evidence of the Church's attempts, through *oikonomia*, to re-establish control by incorporating Evil Eye beliefs and practices within the canon. While the Church says there are two traditions, Stewart insists that 'from the village point of view there is only one tradition' and thus his framework incorporates a serious consideration both of what villagers say about miraculous icons, cures for jaundice, or encounters with malevolent spirits in ravines, and the pronouncements of the Church.

The third section of the book discusses three rituals aimed at controlling evil spirits. By associating in this section baptism, exorcism, and protective and curative activities concerned with the Evil Eye, Stewart demonstrates the power of his theoretical framework. What can be defined as a prayer and what a spell is a 'question of performance in the proper context' (p.243); indeed on Naxos the same word is used for both, blurring any distinction which the Church might wish to make.

Hart carried out fieldwork from June 1983 to December 1984 and again in 1985 and 1988 in the Zarakas region of the eastern Peloponnese. The focus of her book is the character of Christian Orthodoxy in Greece at the local level. For the main period of fieldwork, she lived with her husband and baby son in Richia, described as a number of settlement clusters rather than a nucleated village, where a core population of about 300 was more than doubled in the summer by returning migrants on holiday.

In Richia, the matter of fact 'piety' of everyday life is related both to time and to place. The calendar, embedded in the cycle of seasonal activities associated with agriculture and livestock, constantly reminds the living of the biblical, national and local past, and gifts between the living and rituals for the dead are explicitly linked to 'being remembered' after one's death. Only the cycle of funeral and memorial ceremonies can 'loose' the soul, as the flesh dissolves from the bones, and the living can discharge their obligations to the dead. Tying and loosing are key concepts: baptism is said to 'loose' the hands (tied up by original sin?) and it is said that while magicians and evil spirits have the power to 'tie', only practitioners of Orthodoxy have the power to 'loose'.

The cycle of the Church's year with its alternation of fasts and feasts, movable and fixed holy days, provides a model of order underlying the changing realities of local and personal life. The life course of individuals brings a linear and particularistic dimension into this repeating cycle, involving rituals of passage which extend the 'liturgical frame into everyday life'. The historical identity of this particular area and the individual family histories of particular local people are 'inscribed' on the landscape in the shape of fields, house-styles, and the location of chapels with which are associated particular saints, their icons and their feast-days¹⁰.

Mass emigration in the late nineteenth century to Romania and to Constantinople and more recent migration to Athens, parts of Europe, the USA and Australia, plus a background of linguistic diversity, differential access to education, and a variety of political opinions, give as many multiple perspectives on the local scene as Danforth provides for Ayia Eleni.

Migration has also played a part in breaking down the gender division of labour: in the absence of same-sex working groups, both men and women have had to tackle tasks previously defined as for one sex only. Marriage, while not 'companionate', is necessarily cooperative, and women still see their 'fate' as determined by the 'chance' which gives them to a particular husband. The entirely female practice of 'reading the coffee-grounds' is a pastime which, claims Hart, attempts to imagine various possible future 'fates' over which women seem to have little control. Cup-reading is condemned by the Church as a 'presumptuous' form of divination which conflicts 'with the hierarchy of knowledge which prevents human beings from knowing or scrutinizing what God ordains' (p.164). As with examples in the other two studies, it seems that it is also the self-assertive individualism of this activity, implicitly questioning the superior authority of the

priest, and through him, the Church, which makes it so problematic.

As women represent the family, and fast on behalf of other members, so those in holy orders represent the laity. Hart's account of Iera Moni, a small poor monastery two hours walk from Richia, gives a fascinating glimpse of the nuns' views of their vocation and relationship to 'the world'¹¹. Such believers are thought more likely to be attacked by Satan and *exotika* than half-hearted or non-believers; as a corollary, because of the loss of belief, people nowadays curse and blaspheme more readily, but such curses have no efficacy. Similarly, as Stewart tells us, beliefs in the *exotika* are scorned and fading on Naxos at the same time as they are beginning to furnish material for local students' projects. Young people in Athens are becoming interested in astrology, the tarot, and other aspects of the New Age movement, and also, as Danforth mentions, exploring aspects of their own religious heritage in a similarly experimental fashion.

In Richia, the mutual dependency of family, kin and a small circle of friends, and even the mutual relations between persons and objects is mirrored, claims Hart, by reciprocating speech patterns (may he live for you; don't let the child fall down for you; the pencil broke for me). While family members can also betray as well as nurture, and the community provide friends as well as competitors, to escape from this tight circle one must step outside its context of evaluation to non-conformist roles: heroes or saints. This is a risky strategy, for 'if honor is constructed through the fulfilling of social roles then the margin between dishonor and sanctity is narrow' (p.190).

Saints, as has already been argued, are the mirror image of Stewart's 'demons'. While their life stories (Hart discusses a number of booklets about popular saints) show them as outside ordinary experience, through their rejection of the ties of family, abnegation of the lures of worldliness, and defiance of tyrannical rulers, saints represent one extreme of the possibilities of the Christian life. While capable of being 'bearers of objectivity' (p.195) in a world of small group interests, saints are appropriated by regions, localities and families to be identified with their own interests. Embodied in icons, they are made welcome like guests in the home and given an icon shelf (*sanidhi*, literally 'pew') to sit on (just like the icons of the Anastasiades in the konaki, their special shrine, or in private houses). Through the phenomenon of the *tama* (both 'vow' and the evidence of its fulfilment, 'votive offering') they are put in the superior position of patron, which they are then expected to discharge.

Hart's discussion of some of the differences between Orthodoxy, Catholicism

and Protestantism brings us back to the remarks with which I began this review. She feels that there is not in Orthodoxy the same sense of 'guilt' and concern with conscience that there is in western Christianity. The absence of a habit of self-reflection and of notions of individualism (coupled, however, with an appreciation of individuality) relate to this, too. Orthodoxy has experienced neither a Reformation nor a Counter-Reformation and this may account in some measure for its relative lack of scholasticism.

For these reasons, those who wish to find out about Orthodoxy, like the authors (and possibly the readers) of these three books, face difficulties whether they take the literary or the empirical and experiential route. There is a great deal written from within the Orthodox tradition, but little which lays out its axiomatic assumptions (I recommend once again the works of Meyendorff and Sherrard). Living in ostensibly Orthodox communities, Danforth, Stewart, and Hart observed discrepancies and disagreements from within the tradition as well as comments from those whose urban or migrant experience gave them a perspective from outside, and made the cultural politics of these differences part of their analyses.

One final comment. It is pleasing to find that all three books are available in paperback as well as hardback editions, making it more likely that they will reach a wider readership than those making quick reference to a library copy.

NOTES

- 1 P. Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition* (second edition, Limni, Evia 1992) v.
- 2 Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West*, ch. 6, and G.A. Maloney, 'Orthodox Churches', *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1986), 10. 789-801.
- 3 J. Campbell and P. Sherrard, 'The Greeks and the West' in R. Iyer (ed.) *The Glass Curtain Between Asia and Europe* (London 1965), 75-6.
- 4 R. Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus* (Oxford 1989) 152, 240.
- 5 J. Meyendorff, 'Eastern Orthodoxy', *Encyclopaedia Britannica-Macropaedia* (1986) 17. 867-85; reference to p. 878.
- 6 Meyendorff, 'Eastern Orthodoxy' 885; Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe* 240.
- 7 M.E. Kenna, 'Saying "no" in Greece: hospitality, gender and the evil eye' in M.E. Handman and S. Damianakos (eds.), *Les amis et les autres: mélanges en l'honneur de John Peristiany* (EKKE National Centre of Social Research, Athens, in press).

8 J. Dubisch, 'Pilgrimage and popular religion at a Greek holy shrine' in E. Badone (ed.), *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (Princeton 1990) 129-31.

9 R. Just, 'Anti-clericalism and national identity: attitudes towards the Orthodox Church in Greece' in W. James and D. Johnson (eds.), *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion presented to Godfrey Lienhardt* (Oxford 1988).

10 Readers might find it useful here to compare Hart's Figure 5a 'Illustrations of Topography' and Figure 9 'Calendrical Compass' with Greger's diagram (see S. Greger, *Village on the Plateau* (Studley 1985) Figure One, 55.) possibly adapted from Bourdieu (see p. 46 of P. Bourdieu, 'Le sens pratique', *Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales* (Fevrier 1976) 43-86).

11 For a more detailed study of the life of Greek Orthodox nuns, see M. Iossifides, 'Sisters in Christ: Metaphors of Kinship among Greek nuns', in P. Loizos and E. Papataxiarchis (eds.), *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece* (Princeton 1991).