

Pilgrimage as a Lifestyle
A Contemporary Greek Nunnery as a Pilgrimage Site

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Cover image: A church in Plaka, Athens. Photo by Mari-Johanna Rahkala
(The image is not related to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin)

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A note on transliteration and interview quotations

There are two ways of converting the Greek alphabet into Latin letters, transliteration and transcription. However, there is no unanimity in the use of either of these systems among scholars of Modern Greek. Below are some examples to illustrate the differences between transliteration and transcription:

In Modern Greek the letters η, ι, υ and the letter combinations ει, οι, are all pronounced i, as in the English word beet [bi:t]. Transcription renders them all as i, but transliteration distinguishes them as ē, i, y and ei, oi. Furthermore, the letter combination ευ is sometimes pronounced ev and sometimes ef, depending on the following sound. Transcription distinguishes them, but transliteration does not necessarily do so. Thus the Greek words Ελληνική Δημοκρατία could be transliterated as Ellēnikē Dēmokratia and transcribed as Elliniki Dimokratia.¹

I have attempted in this thesis to present the Greek words in a form that allows the best rendering into English phonology, and which is as close as possible to the standard Modern Greek, so-called *Dimotikí*² pronunciation: it is customary to make a distinction between Classical Greek and Modern Greek (after 1453) transliteration. In most cases the Greek terms are thus presented in a transcribed form rather than a transliterated form. Following the example of Jill Dubisch and the *Encyclopedia of Greece and the Hellenic Tradition*,³ I have also tried to make the pronunciation of the Greek words as accurate as possible for a non-Greek speaker. I have used only Latin letters (also in the references) in the transliterated and transcribed forms of the Greek terms. I have also marked the stressed syllables in the Greek words used in the texts.

Interview Quotations

I have used single spacing to mark the interview quotations taken from the research data. The square brackets containing three dots in the quotations [...] mark text I have omitted because it was not relevant to the context in question. Three dots without the brackets simply mark a pause in the interviewee's speech. Words or text in parentheses explain the word or the meaning the interviewee gives to it. For example, my question might have been "Have you been in many monasteries?" to which the answer was, "Yes, I have been in many". In that case I have included the word "monasteries" in parentheses to the text which does not include my original question: "Yes, I have been in many [monasteries]."

¹ On transcription and transliteration see e.g. Coulmas 1996.

² Dimotikí is the vernacular form of spoken Modern Greek, and has easier grammar, syntax and diction than the purist form Katharévousa. Kouvetaris and Dobratz 1987, 148.

³ Dubisch 1995; xv; *Encyclopedia of Greece and the Hellenic Tradition*, xxxvi.

I Introduction: Studying pilgrimage in a Greek convent

I love the nunnery. I would like to stay here forever. I feel as if it is my second home.⁴
(Aspasía, pilgrim)

They come here to discuss, and often just attending liturgy helps them because it's quiet here, the environment is tranquil; it's different from being out in the congregation where there's a lot of noise and disturbance. Being here makes them calm...also the presence of the nuns. I have heard many people saying that even if they don't always speak with us, attending liturgies, in Holy Communion, the fact that they see people in the church, speaks to people's souls. Many don't have a spiritual father, but they have started a spiritual life and approach to God.⁵

(Sister Theodóra)

The two quotations above illustrate the pilgrims' relation and attitude to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin⁶. Some people who visit the convent are deeply attached to the nuns and the monastic environment in general. In return, the nuns do their best to introduce all visitors to the monastic environment, and help them to maintain contact with the convent and with the Orthodox faith. The nuns also help people in their various situations in life and advise the visitors about their private affairs. According to Regulation 39/1972, article 1§a of the Church of Greece, however, a monastery or a convent is a "spiritual institution of prayer and work".⁷ Monasteries and convents, in

⁴ Field diary 1, 14.

⁵ Interview 2005: 27. See Appendix 3 for information about the interviews.

⁶ The convent of the Dormition of the Virgin is a pseudonym for the nunnery in which the research data was collected. Moreover, all the names given to the pilgrims and nuns and the igumeni in the study are pseudonyms. During my fieldwork I visited several Greek nunneries, but since the essential work was conducted in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, I told sister Theodóra, my key informant during the process, that I wished to write my thesis about pilgrimage at that particular monastery. However, since monastic life concentrates on tranquillity and prayer, I decided not to mention its real name or exact location in order to avoid any kind of extra publicity, even if the convent did not have anything against the research being conducted there. Consequently, the ethical decisions concerning the study were made following the ethical principles of the American Anthropological Association. According to the AAA Statements on Ethics, the "Anthropologist's" paramount responsibility is to those they study" and "the informants have a right to remain anonymous". See <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>. On ethical issues in fieldwork see also e.g., Shaffir and Stebbins 1991, 16; Burgess 1984, 185-207; Israel and Hay 2006, 12-39, 55, Gothóni 1977, 68-80.

⁷ C.f. Polizoidis 1991, 233.

other words, stress prayer and work as their primary tasks. The reality of a contemporary Greek Orthodox nunnery⁸ is more polymorphic than the regulation suggests, however. To an Orthodox believer, a Greek nunnery is an expression of the relationship between human and God, an expression of God's creation and an embodiment of the spiritual experience of the Church.⁹ In other words, a nunnery, like all monasteries, is considered an essential part of society, and monastic life is considered to be a path, committed to serving the whole of society, the "community of Christ". Contemporary Greek convents are popular pilgrimage sites, and the process of interaction between the monastics and the laity brings them to life. Present-day convents are dynamic centers of religious, social and sometimes even political life.

The convent of the Dormition serves as a good example of a vital Northern Greek convent in terms of pilgrimage because there are pilgrims there throughout the year. Naturally, different festivals, such as Easter and the 15th of August, which is the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin, increase the total number of pilgrims considerably.¹⁰ The length of the pilgrimages varies from a short visit to a sojourn of several days. The church is the concrete center of pilgrimage in the convent. When a Greek pilgrim arrives, first of all he or she enters the church, lights a candle, prays in front of an icon or a relic, and attends a service. Social events take second place. In addition to serving as an example of monastic life, the convent also provides visitors with counseling and guidance in spiritual matters. Pilgrims often wish to meet the nuns they know personally, and to discuss various matters with them. Pilgrims also usually talk with other pilgrims, especially if they are staying for a longer period of time.¹¹

⁸ I use the terms convent, nunnery, and female monastery in this study to describe the place in which nuns live, and the term male monastery or monastery for the place in which monks live. However, in most cases I also use the term monastery as a general term referring to both convents and (male) monasteries. On the term convent and the Latin-based term cloister see e.g., *Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus* 2000, 211, 250. On the terms convent and nunnery see Talbot 1991, 1504.

⁹ Feidas 1996, 39.

¹⁰ There are at least three places that have major celebrations on August 15: Tinos, the nearby island Paros and the site of Panagia Soumela, Southwest of Veria. See Dubisch 1995, 38.

¹¹ Field diary II, 2-3; Field diary IV, 40-50.

This study focuses on pilgrimage in a contemporary Greek nunnery. In particular, the aim is to present and analyze pilgrimage to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin. Pilgrimage is seen here as a dialogue between the nuns and the pilgrims. This dialogue produces various meanings for the pilgrims, and the meanings are reflected upon on the levels of the individual, the Church institution, and society in general. The thesis could be considered a qualitative case study: I interviewed and observed pilgrims in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin in Northern Greece in three phases from 2000 to 2005.¹²

Why study contemporary Greek female monasticism?

This study is topical for various reasons that are related to changes in the nature of monasticism in recent decades, and the special character of nunneries. The need for research on contemporary monasticism is clear given the fact that monasticism has changed in line with other social changes in recent decades. It has thus assumed new, more social dimensions. In the past monasteries and convents were often built in rural areas, but according to Alpéntzos, there is a tendency to build new ones in urban areas.¹³ The reason for this development is related to peoples' need to communicate: Alpéntzos claims that over 65 percent of monks and pilgrims think that monasteries and convents are built in urban areas because it makes it easier for monks and nuns to communicate with people.¹⁴ An urban or a suburban monastery offers respite to city dwellers, and is a meeting place for people who want to be in close contact with the monastics and the values they consider important for a harmonious life. This urban and more communicative form of monasticism has also led to a rise in the number of pilgrims.¹⁵ However, the fact that monasteries and convents are now more often built in urban areas does not necessarily mean that there are fewer travelers from distant places. The convent of the Dormition, like many Greek monasteries and convents, attracts visitors both from near and far.¹⁶

¹² I started my fieldwork in Northern Greece in 1998-1998, when I was collecting research data for my Master's Thesis. The findings from that first period are also utilized in this study.

¹³ Most Byzantine monasteries were traditionally situated in cities. See Talbot 1990, 129.

¹⁴ Alpéntzos 2002, 63.

¹⁵ See Chapter 1 for statistics on the numbers of nuns, monks and pilgrims.

¹⁶ Field diary V, 17.

The convent of the Dormition of the Virgin represents a suburban nunnery. The distinction between urban, suburban, and rural is made on the grounds of location. An urban monastery, then, is one that is located in the city area, a suburban monastery is outside the city area, and a rural monastery is clearly in the countryside. Even if Christian pilgrimage sites, especially monasteries, have traditionally been “out there”,¹⁷ tending to be located outside the main administrative centers of the Church and State, the convent of the Dormition could be defined as a suburban convent because it is outside the city center but it is easily accessible and not far into the country. However, given the vividness of pilgrimage and the interaction between nuns and pilgrims, one could say that it does not differ from urban monasteries and convents. A pilgrim called Stávros made the following distinction between urban and rural or distant monasteries:

I believe that this particular convent, and monasteries close to cities in general, have a different value, in other words a monastery that is close to the city is a hermitage that is a way out of the madness [of the city]. It is very important! [...]. Monasteries that are far from cities, that’s another thing. They have a different value. You think that you’re going somewhere way up a mountain, the whole business of going there...I think these [monasteries] are important for those who live in the villages nearby or [for those] who want something more silent, wild or difficult.¹⁸

Female monasticism deserves special attention too, because in general nunneries and male monasteries are slightly different in character, and therefore pilgrimage to nunneries also has its specific features. First, there are more nuns than monks in Greece,¹⁹ and female monasticism is alive in contemporary Greece. Convents such as Timios Prodromos near Serres and the convent of Annunciation in Ormilía, Chalkidiki are good examples of the great vitality of the nunneries. Secondly, convents are traditionally not as open towards society as monasteries, and this gives them a unique position with regard to pilgrims’ attitudes towards them. Various nunneries are considered relatively hard to access, and some, especially male, pilgrims think that nuns are not easy to talk to.²⁰ However, unlike the center of male monasticism, Mount Athos, which is situated in a

¹⁷ On the spatially peripheral nature of pilgrimage sites see Turner 1974, 192-196; Dubisch 1995, 36.

¹⁸ Interview 2003: 3.

¹⁹ See Chapter I for statistics on the numbers of nuns, monks and pilgrims.

²⁰ Field diary V, 3; Interview 2005:6.

rather distant location on the peninsula of Chalkidiki in Northern Greece,²¹ contemporary nunneries are often near or in urban areas and are therefore easily within reach. Hence, pilgrimage in nunneries has a slightly more ordinary feeling; many women even visit them daily. Women are not allowed to enter the monastic republic of Mount Athos, but they certainly visit other male monasteries. However, because of its central position among Orthodox people around the world, Mount Athos has a great value for the Greek Orthodox, both men and women. For this reason women may want to visit a nunnery that is dependent (*metóchi*) on a monastery on Mount Athos rather than on a less known male monastery. Thus, even if it is not possible to visit Mount Athos, they can still be in contact with it.²² Thirdly, nunneries are also communities of women, and this has its effects on pilgrimage as women naturally have different roles and positions in society than men. This difference is evident, for example, in the behavior of a female pilgrim who asks a nun to pray for her to get pregnant. Finally, there are several other minor differences between male and female monasticism that are founded on Greek Orthodox theological tradition, such as the fact that nuns are allowed to act as chanters, whereas women are normally not allowed to chant in parish churches.²³

There are hardly any studies on contemporary Greek nunneries, and therefore Greek female monasticism deserves attention. The significance of Orthodoxy in the Western European religious field has been rather minimal until the present time.²⁴ Thus, the practical aspects of everyday life in the Greek Orthodox Church have not awoken much research interest. However, on the European level one might speculate on the significance of Orthodoxy in the future. It is the predominant religion in a number of European countries, including for example Romania and Bulgaria²⁵, which were accepted for admission to the EU in 2007. Greece, which joined the European Union in 1981, is a predominantly Orthodox Christian state. Orthodoxy has been “territorial” to

²¹ See Appendix 4.

²² Interview 2002:1; Clark 2000, 4-6.

²³ See e.g., Clark 2000, 4-6, 211; Sotiriou 2004, 499.

²⁴ Orthodoxy has not been the same kind of religious front in Europe as the Roman Catholic Church, for example, because of the independent character of the local Orthodox Churches. See also Smith 1992, 69.

²⁵ Immigration may also affect the position of Orthodoxy in Europe. For example, Russian immigration to Europe may increase the numbers of Orthodox followers, and Germany has about 700,000 Diaspora Orthodox (Kärkkäinen 1999, 227).

some extent in the European context, but with the admission of new Orthodox countries into the European Union it is possible that it will consolidate its position in the future.²⁶ Moreover, for the last hundred years Eastern Orthodoxy has not been restricted to Europe, and has churches all over the world, most notably in the United States where close to one percent of the population declared a preference for Eastern Orthodoxy in 2003.²⁷ The changes in the position of Orthodoxy make the study of practical aspects of Orthodoxy important.

In recent decades Greece has become an increasingly multicultural society. It has also become more international on the political level, and other cultural changes such as secularization have started to play a notable role in Greek society. These societal changes give relevance to contemporary research on Greek religious institutions. Bearing in mind the complexity of the modern social situation, Ammerman describes religious organizations in the following quotation:

Religious organizations are important sites for religious experience and for the constructing of religious identities. They are suppliers of public narratives, accounts that express the history and purposes of a cultural or institutional entity. These organizations create widespread social arenas in which religious narratives – the saved sinner, the pilgrim – within which the actor's own autobiographical narrative can be experienced.²⁸

A contemporary Greek nunnery could be similarly evaluated. A nunnery, too, is a producer of narratives, and the narratives play a role in the cultural and institutional entity. The history and the purposes of the monastic institution are reflected in the pilgrims' relationship with the convent they visit. Current discussion on the role of religious organizations, secularization, and other inevitable challenges of modern times, makes it necessary to address questions on these topics. Like all European countries, Greece is facing secularization, but also the reinvention and revival of traditional and new forms of religion and spirituality.²⁹ In addition, many social-science theorists claim that

²⁶ Van Der Zwerde 2005, 259.

²⁷ There are also large numbers of Orthodox in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, for example. See Binns 2002, 26. Agadjanian and Roudometof 2005, 20.

²⁸ Ammerman 2003, 217.

²⁹ Woodhead, Heelas and Davie 2003, 1.

modern people may choose how and whether to be religious. It is thus interesting to evaluate the role of pilgrimage to a Greek nunnery in the Greek cultural and institutional entity.

Finally, Greek female monasticism and pilgrimage are worth studying because everyday religiosity has not attracted much attention in the study of religion. Some scholars, such as McGuire, argue that researchers must study religion as it is lived in peoples' everyday lives.³⁰ This study answers the call to study everyday religiosity in that it focuses on the experiences of the people who visit the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin.

Earlier studies on Greek monasticism

According to Jusdanis, a scholar of Modern Greek literature, Greece lies on the periphery of academic interest. He thinks that almost everyone studying Modern Greek has to justify the object of their research to skeptical colleagues because Ancient Greece does not have the same scholarly prestige as it used to have, and therefore this "tarnishing of antiquity's luster has also darkened the picture of Modern Greece".³¹ The situation is not very different in the field of religious studies. Neither the current religious situation in Greece nor Greek monasticism has attracted extensive scholarly interest inside or outside Greece in recent years. Nevertheless, here are some examples of studies that relate to this one.

The first field that attracted scholarly interest in the societal aspects of contemporary Greek monasticism was the sociology of religion. According to Gioultsis, its development in Greece was delayed in comparison with other European countries on account of the reservations among the Greek clergy and theologians about the sociological approach to studying religion: Greek theological research had mainly used historic and dogmatic methodology.³² Among the earliest sociological studies on Eastern

³⁰ See McGuire 2008, 11-17.

³¹ Jusdanis 1997, 167.

³² Gioultsis 1996, 160-161.

Orthodox monasticism was the work of Michael Choukas, *Black Angels of Athos*. Choukas was a Dartmouth sociologist, who lived among the Mount Athos monks and studied their life.³³ As it turns out, the first Greek studies on the sociology of religion were conducted in the 1970s, and the first publications appeared in 1975. The Greek theologians were interested in Greek religious morphology, and among the first publications were some articles concerning monastic life, such as the one written by Mantzaridis entitled *New Statistical Data Concerning the Monks of Mount Athos*.³⁴ Despite the promising start, Greek sociological research on monasticism has been minimal ever since. Ziaka gives some examples of Greek studies on religions in general, and according to her there are only a few scholars in Greece doing sociological research of religion. She mentions professors Gioutsis, Petrou and Papageorgiou from the University of Thessaloniki, and Professor Makris from the Panteio University of Athens. However, none of these scholars is profoundly engaged in Greek monasticism.³⁵

There are only a few studies on contemporary Greek Orthodox female monasticism, and even fewer conducted in the field of the study of religion. Apart from the historic-dogmatic tradition, another obvious reason for this lack of studies is the fact that the focus of interest in monastic life has been on Mount Athos, which undoubtedly is the center of Greek monastic life. Scholarly Greek theological literature on monasticism most typically deals with the theological foundations of monastic life and the history of monasticism.³⁶ The main stream of studies concerns Mount Athos, and there are guides for pilgrims with pictures of the monasteries, pilgrims' accounts of journeys to Mount Athos, hagiographical literature, and studies on the art, music and architecture of the monasteries.³⁷

One could also speculate that Greek scholars in both study of religion and other fields have considered contemporary monastic life as something that represents living

³³ For details, see the bibliography. Other early studies on Greek monasticism include the works of R.M. Dawkins. See the bibliography.

³⁴ See *Social Compass* XXII/1 1975 and Mantzaridis 1975.

³⁵ Ziaka 2006, 7-8.

³⁶ See e.g., Nikolaou 1996.

³⁷ On pilgrimage guides, see e.g., Kappai 1998; Kokoris 1997; Protopresviteros Polikarpos 1996 [1990].

religiosity, or even the sacred, and have therefore excluded it on the grounds that researchers focus on vanishing phenomena, which are hence considered more important. The situation is slowly improving, however. There is a generation of younger scholars of Orthodox theology and sociology, both inside and outside Greece, who have tried to bring Greece out of the rather peripheral position in which it has been in the past. For example, in 2004 there was a Social Compass volume dedicated to Greece, entitled *Religious Controversies in Contemporary Orthodox Greece*.³⁸

Byzantine studies represent another interesting research tradition in the area of monasticism. It is a tradition that is getting stronger as the general view of the history of the Byzantine Empire has changed a great deal over the years. Scholarly interest in the Byzantine Empire arose in France at the beginning of the 17th century, and France was the center of Byzantine studies until the middle of the 1700s. The emphasis moved first to Germany and other countries in Central Europe in the 18th century, and later to Russia and the United States. Byzantium has been a scholarly subject in Greece since the beginning of the 19th century in the universities of Athens and Thessaloniki for example, and there are many treatises on Byzantine history, culture and religion, and hagiographies translated into various languages that touch on monasticism.³⁹ The collection of studies that comes closest to this research is the *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* Volume 56, which focuses on pilgrimage and monasticism in Byzantium and contains studies of pilgrimage from the seventh to the 15th centuries in the Byzantine Empire.⁴⁰

Of the Modern Greek classics that cover Greek religiosity in general, I have selected some examples that deal with Greek rural life, family ties, and politics.⁴¹ Juliet du Boulay's *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village* is an account of village life in Ambéli, on Évvia, during the 1960s. The book concerns the phenomenon of a dying village

³⁸ Gioultsis 1996, 160-161; Social Compass Vol. 51 (4) 2004.

³⁹ Hakkarainen 1989, 44-51. For works on Byzantine monasticism see e.g., Talbot in the bibliography or Dawes and Baynes 1977.

⁴⁰ Dumbarton Oaks Papers 56, 2002. There are also some general overviews of female monasticism such as the work of Sister Theotekni *I thesi tis monahis stin Orthodoxi ekklisia*. For details, see the bibliography.

⁴¹ For details, see the bibliography.

community and the roles of men and women in the society. It describes many aspects of Greek religiosity, such as wedding customs, beliefs related to death, and even the theological conceptions of the villagers, but does not analyze religiosity further.

John K. Campbell's *Honour, Family and Patronage* is another classic study of a Sarakatsáni community in the Píndhos Mountains, with wider applicability to rural Greece. The work also discusses the religious beliefs and values of the community, but again the focus is on village life and family relations and not so much on Greek religiosity in general or the Orthodox Church's role in society.

There are also more recent studies that deal with Greek family relations. Loizos and Papataxiarchis have edited a collection of articles entitled *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*. This study describes family ties and other social relations in the Greek context, and discusses gender roles and representations. In addition, a number of scholars have written anthropological or ethnographic case studies covering topics that concern Greek religious life and customs.⁴²

The emphasis in studies of Greek culture is on Antiquity or Greek history in general. My research comes within the field of Modern Greek Studies, which is interdisciplinary in orientation and covers the language, arts, history, politics, economy and society of modern Greece. There are many American second-generation Greek scholars who have conducted field research in Greece on various aspects of Greek culture and social life. The expansion of Greek Orthodoxy in the United States following the Greek emigration phenomenon also increased the number of volumes on Greek Orthodox theological literature. According to Calotychos, Modern Greek studies do not have the status of Classical studies as they do not "cohabit" with the departments of Classics in the U.S. or

⁴² For example, Loring Danforth wrote about Greek customs related to death, and studied Greek fire-walking rituals. Katerina Seraidari has written about the religious customs of the Cyclades and about the icon cult in Greece. See Danforth 1982; Seraidari 2005 and 2007.

in Europe.⁴³ Obviously the fact that they have spread to many fields and have adopted various orientations also makes them less visible than Classical studies.⁴⁴

Moreover, despite the strong position of the Greek Church, academic studies that focus on Greek modernity rarely discuss the role of the Church or religion in Greece. There are some classic exceptions, however. Yorgos Kourvetaris and Betty Dobratz studied various aspects of Greek society, economy and politics in *A Profile of Modern Greece. In Search of Identity*. This is an extensive analysis of the social and political developments following the 1974 restoration of democracy in Greece, and includes a chapter on Greek religiosity. Further, *Greece in the 1980s*, edited by Richard Clogg, is an overview of Greek society in the 1980s. Kallistos Ware discusses current trends in the Church and its status in Greek society in one of the contributions.⁴⁵

The works that come nearest to the subject matter of my study are few in number. Several scholars have noted the lack of research on contemporary monasticism. For example, Ware calls for studies on the revival of monasticism.⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, most of the works that touch upon Greek monastic life deal with Mount Athos, the history of monasticism, or its religious foundations. Some scholars, such as Graham Speake, refer to contemporary pilgrimage in their work in the context of Mount Athos. Speake's study, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, gives the reader a historical perspective of the holy mountain, but also a pilgrim's viewpoint of today's Mount Athos. René Gothóni has studied contemporary pilgrimage on Mount Athos and has published numerous works on the topic. He discusses several fundamental aspects of Athonite monasticism and pilgrimage in his works *Paradise within Reach: Monasticism and Pilgrimage on Mt Athos* and *Tales and Truth*, for example.⁴⁷

⁴³ Calotychos 2003, 10.

⁴⁴ The work of Calotychos however, is an example of the increasing scholarly interest in contemporary Greek society and societal phenomena.

⁴⁵ For details, see the bibliography.

⁴⁶ Ware, 1983, 209.

⁴⁷ Other extensive works on Mount Athos include Constantine Cavarinos' *Anchored in God. An inside account of life, art and thought on the Holy Mountain of Athos*, a book dealing with both the past and the present of Athonite life. The same author has also written extensively on Mount Athos and Byzantine art and architecture. For Gothóni's works, see the bibliography.

There are also some studies on Greek pilgrimage that include the woman's perspective.⁴⁸ Filareti Kotsi studied female pilgrimage on the boats that cruise along the coastline of Mount Athos for her dissertation *La communication enchantée. Une anthropologie réflexive du tourisme religieux autour du Mount Athos (Grèce)*.⁴⁹ Kotsi's interest is in the women, who are not allowed to come closer than 500 meters from the coast and therefore they visit the region by ship and get to meet some monks and see the monasteries from a distance. Her work focuses on the distinction between religious tourism and pilgrimage. Jill Dubisch's work, *In a different place. Pilgrimage, gender and politics in a Greek island Shrine* is a classic study about pilgrimage on the island of Tinos in the Cyclades.⁵⁰ It is an extensive account, describing the process of pilgrimage at the Orthodox Church of the Virgin of the Annunciation, one of Greece's foremost shrines and focusing on the shrine of the Mother of God. In this case the pilgrimage site serves as a means for exploring a number of topics, including religion, gender, and anthropological fieldwork. However, Dubisch's notion of pilgrimage differs in many respects from the pilgrimage this study represents. Pilgrimage to Tinos is closer to traditional pilgrimage, in the process of which the journey and the site play important roles. This study emphasizes the interaction between the nuns and the pilgrims, and the everyday religiosity the pilgrims experience in the convent.⁵¹

Gavril S. Alpéntzos' doctoral thesis⁵², entitled *O paideutikos rolos ton monastirion* (The educational role of monasteries), is a pedagogical work about the educational role of contemporary monasteries and convents. It deals with the different aspects of the spiritual education or ennobling given both "inside and outside the walls of the monasteries and convents". The emphasis is on the different means they use to educate individuals, both ascetics and the laity. Alpéntzos also comments on the different concerns that attract people to monasteries and convents, having interviewed people to find out why they visit

⁴⁸ Ulla Salomäki studied Greek women's roles in villages and convents for her Master's Thesis *Nainen mustissa: tutkimus kreikkalaisista ortodoksinaisista kyläyhteisössä ja luostarissa*.

⁴⁹ Kotsi also published an article on the same topic entitled *The Enchantment of a Floating Pilgrimage*.

⁵⁰ Dubisch has also written on other aspects of Greek culture, such as Gender in the Greek context. Her latest work discusses pilgrimage and healing in various pilgrimage sites around the world. See Dubisch and Winkelmann 2005. For the location of Tinos see Appendix 4.

⁵¹ For details, see the bibliography.

⁵² Alpéntzos 2002. University of Athens.

them. However, he does not include many verbatim statements from the pilgrims in his study, and there is no analysis of the social dimensions of the interaction between the institutions and the laity. Nor does he make a distinction between male monasteries and convents, whereas this study concentrates especially on a nunnery. His study has much in common with this research however, although the perspectives as well as the methods and theoretical frame of reference are different.⁵³

Studies on Christian pilgrimage usually concern the Catholic world, and therefore do not always reflect the Greek context. According to Eade and Sallnow, the anthropological study of pilgrimage, and especially Christian pilgrimage, is “still in its infancy” and there is not enough ethnographical coverage of the many major sites in Western Europe, such as Fatima in Portugal and even Santiago de Compostela. Eastern European pilgrimage is also poorly accounted for, and Eade and Sallnow mention that there are many cults, such as that of the Virgin of Czestochowa in Poland, which should offer rich opportunities for the investigation of emergent state-centered and ethnic nationalism.⁵⁴ Greece has not attracted general interest in pilgrimage studies except for the works of Dubisch and Kotsi.⁵⁵

In summary of the above discussion about various studies and how they relate to this work, the lack of a deeper analysis of religiosity and the fact that the mentioned works focus on village communities leads to the conclusion that there is a need for a deeper understanding of the urban or suburban, present-day (monastic) milieu, and for a study, aimed at analyzing Greek pilgrimage and religiosity. In general, it should be said that ethnographic research on Greece has focused on rural life, and similarly that religious life has been discussed from the rural perspective. Both monasteries and the church institution have been neglected.

⁵³ For details, see the bibliography.

⁵⁴ Eade and Sallnow 1991, 26.

⁵⁵ For details, see the bibliography.

The aim and scope of the study

The aim of this research is to present, interpret and analyze the phenomenon of pilgrimage in a contemporary, suburban Greek nunnery. To begin with, it must be noted that most Greek nunneries are not communities of hermits but institutions that operate in complex interaction with the surrounding society.⁵⁶ Thus, the main interest in this study is in the interaction between pilgrims and nuns, pilgrimage as human encounter.

Pilgrimage is seen here as a significant and concrete form of interaction which in fact make the contemporary nunneries dynamic scenes of religious, social and sometimes even political life. The focus of the analysis of the interaction process is on the pilgrims' experience⁵⁷. In other words, the interest lies in their viewpoints and experiences, and the nuns' perspective serves only to clarify that of the pilgrims.

The interactions between nuns and pilgrims and how they are manifest are analyzed on the levels of the individual, the institution, and society. On the individual level the analysis covers various people's approach to pilgrimage and the concrete aspects of the process. The study also shows how a visit to a convent becomes a pilgrimage. On the level of the institution the focus is on the nunnery's functions as part of the Church institution, and further on its significance, in this context, to its pilgrims. Thus the research sheds light on the character of pilgrimage and on the functions that the visiting of monasteries and convents has for pilgrims in contemporary Greek society. I use the term function, in a similar fashion to Binns and Talbot, to describe the convents' meanings for the pilgrims and for society, or in Binns' case the Church.⁵⁸ Finally, I

⁵⁶ See also Kilpeläinen 1995, 96–97; Kilpeläinen 2000, 23. Kilpeläinen takes a similar approach in his research on the Valamo Monastery on Lake Ladoga in the 1930s, when the monastery and its Karelian peasants were dependent upon each other.

⁵⁷ The concept of religious experience is deeply embedded in the study of religion. I follow Taves' interpretation in shifting the focus from "religious experience" to "experiences deemed religious". In other words I am interested in the pilgrims' interpretations and allow them to dictate what for them is the essence of their experiences. Taves 2009, 12-15.

⁵⁸ As a minimal definition, function accounts for a social activity by referring to its consequences for the operation of some other social activity, institution, or society as a whole. A social function, according to Hout, is "the contribution made by any phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part." According to Parson, who developed the concept of functionalism in sociology, societies have certain

consider what the nunnery represents to its pilgrims on the societal level, on which pilgrimage in the convent is understood as a state of interdependence between religious phenomena and society. In other words, religion and society are considered here dependant variables.⁵⁹ Pilgrimage is interpreted as a model that produces a version of modernity by blending elements of local Greek culture with the challenges that the current cultural and social situation imposes on the pilgrim.⁶⁰

This thesis is a qualitative case study⁶¹. Its scope is restricted to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin in Northern Greece. I interviewed 25 pilgrims and observed their interaction with the nuns during three periods of fieldwork between 2000 and 2005. The convent chosen for the fieldwork represents a *stage* of Greek religiosity, and serves as an example of the different features and tendencies that are characteristic of Greek religious life today and Greek religiosity in general. One must naturally take into consideration the fact that Greek monasteries differ in many ways in terms of organization and character, and therefore any particular convent is but one example of a Greek nunnery.⁶² In other words, what is said here about convents, monastics and pilgrims applies to the convent in question, but not necessarily to all Greek female monasteries. Yet, it is feasible to examine Greek religiosity *as seen* from the perspective of a convent and then to *relate* it to wider perspectives. Given the nature of the research data, this study illustrates some characteristic features of Greek religiosity. It therefore contributes to the discussion on the role of religion in Greece, and more particularly on the connection between Greek nationality and the status of Orthodoxy in the Greek context, using pilgrimage in the convent of the Dormition as an example of recent developments in Greek religiosity.

The study represents study of religion, which is a multidisciplinary field focusing on religion as a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon.⁶³ Given the focus on the pilgrims' perspective in the interaction between nuns and pilgrims and the use of

needs that must be met if they are to survive, and institutions have to be seen as meeting those needs. See Binns 2002, 107-108; Talbot 1987, 237; Abercrombie et al. 2000, 145; Hoult 1969, 139.

⁵⁹ On interdependence between religion and society, see e.g., Allardt 1970, 8.

⁶⁰ See also Makrides and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 463.

⁶¹ On the nature of the case study, see e.g., Yin 2003.

⁶² On the organization of monasteries, see e.g., Gothóni 1993, 15.

⁶³ See e.g., Waardenburg 1999, 639; Ketola 1997, 21.

fieldwork as a method for collecting data, methodologically and theoretically this study represents the anthropological, ethnographic, and phenomenological aspects of religion. It also utilizes insights from the field of pilgrimage studies, the sociology of religion, and women's studies. These insights are introduced in the relevant chapters. For example, definitions of pilgrimage are discussed in the chapter that deals with the subject. In other words, the theoretical frame of reference of the study is data-oriented, meaning that the research data dictates the theoretical discussion, which is used to analyze the data.

Thus, the analysis focuses on the ethnographic data collected in the convent, and the orientation is ethnographic rather than theoretical.⁶⁴ Traditionally, ethnography involves the first-hand study of a small community or ethnic group. The main characteristic of conventional ethnographies, and of this study, is the focus on one specific culture or social group, and the subsequent theoretical generalization based on this example.⁶⁵

The fact that this study was conducted in Europe means that it combines the two ethnographic traditions of concentrating on cultures outside one's own, and studying the familiar. The homogenizing effects of the modern global economy and politics have been noted in ethnographic studies in recent decades. Ethnographies have become portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenized world. Consequently, the nature of ethnography has changed as our understanding of history and culture has changed. These changes also have an impact on the local level. Ethnography that is conducted in Greece has its special characteristics, but it is not isolated from more general tendencies. According to Dubisch, ethnographers studying Greece are forced to face the problems associated with the declining rural communities, the growth of cities, and the increasing anthropological awareness of regional variations within the country.⁶⁶

Modern ethnographers have realized that cultures can be viewed as narratives.⁶⁷ They have also discovered that the ethnographic field does not necessarily have to be

⁶⁴ On the distinction see Sakaranaho 1997, 47-49.

⁶⁵ Seymour-Smith 1986, 99.

⁶⁶ Dubisch 1991, 31.

⁶⁷ Sakaranaho, Sjöblom and Utriainen 2002, 5-7.

somewhere outside of one's own culture, but can also be "at home", and that concepts of home and field often overlap in the course of the research.⁶⁸ On the international level ethnography has "found its' way home" in the sense that the limits of the field have become blurred. Even if this study deals with contemporary Greece, it is still connected with Finnish study of religion in that it is being done in a Finnish university.⁶⁹ It thus falls into the category of "portraits of diversity" as it deals with Greek culture, which is exceptional in the European religious context.

Women's studies have, over the past thirty-five years, started to produce research in which a woman plays the leading role.⁷⁰ In a similar way, this study highlights the religiosity of Greek female pilgrims, visitors to the nunnery being mostly women.⁷¹ Moreover, a Greek nunnery is also a community of women who, as active agents, commit to themselves.⁷² The study is mainly empirical, aimed at enhancing understanding of the research topic and thereby adding to knowledge. In other words, it contributes to the study of religious women, the aims of which are to interpret and understand religious traditions, phenomena, individuals and collectives in a given frame. It is not critical or emancipatory.⁷³

This thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter one describes the methodological approach of the study and provides detailed information about the research process. The methodological approach is also referred to in chapters three, four and five when necessary. Chapter two focuses on my position in the field. Chapter three starts with a description of the pilgrimage process and moves on to pilgrims' behavior and customs.

⁶⁸ See e.g., Siikala 1997, 46–47 and Tiilikainen 2003, 93.

⁶⁹ Finnish comparative religion is rooted to some extent in Northern ethnography, mainly due to the Finnish nationalist ethos of the nineteenth century. However, from an early stage there have been Finnish female scholars conducting fieldwork in cultures other than their own. For example, Hilma Granqvist conducted fieldwork among Muslims in Palestine in the 1920s. Nowadays the field of Finnish comparative religion and ethnography is diverse and it includes textual research, and the themes vary from Muslim minorities to studies on death and gender. See Sakaranaho, Sjöblom and Utriainen 2002, 9. See also e.g., Sakaranaho 1997; Sakaranaho 2005; Utriainen 1999.

⁷⁰ Davis, Evans and Lorber 2006, 2; Pesonen 1997, 185.

⁷¹ This is true of most monasteries and churches in Greece. Men's church attendance is minimal compared to that of women. See Sotiriou 2004, 503.

⁷² Pesonen 1997, 186.

⁷³ Nenola 1999, 8-9.

The focus changes from the individual level to the institutional level in Chapter four, the aim of which is to consider the phenomenon from the perspective of the monastic community as a social institution. Finally, the pilgrimage phenomenon is analyzed on the societal level. The last sections discuss the various roles and functions that a nunnery may have in contemporary Greek society and religiosity.

The research questions of the study follow the above logic. First, I wish to paint a picture of an individual visiting a nunnery. Hence the primary questions concern the personal dimension of experiencing such a visit. What is a contemporary nunnery like as a pilgrimage site? What reasons do people have for visiting the convent? How do individuals experience their visits? My aim in asking these questions is to divide the people visiting monasteries into different groups. Here I use earlier pilgrimage theories in order to shed light on my research data. Secondly, I wish to explore the Church institution. How is the interaction between nuns and visitors manifested to the pilgrims? What can be said about the convent's functions on the institutional level? Thirdly, I am interested in the functions the convent has for pilgrims on the societal level, and in whether the cultural and ideological changes in society are affecting pilgrimage. The research questions could thus be summarized as follows:

- 1) What is a contemporary Greek nunnery like as a pilgrimage site?
- 2) How can the *proskínima* in a nunnery be understood in relation to earlier interpretations of pilgrimage?
- 3) What functions does the convent have for its pilgrims on the institutional level?
- 4) What functions does the convent have for its pilgrims in the larger societal context?

I lean on pilgrimage theories, and on theories about Greek society and religiosity and the roles of monasteries (and convents) throughout the study, starting with the formulation of the research questions. In the field of pilgrimage I have utilized the theories developed by Dubisch, Coleman and Elsner, and Eade and Sallnow, which are among the most frequently quoted references in contemporary pilgrimage studies.⁷⁴ In the analysis I have

⁷⁴ For details, see the bibliography.

evaluated Binns' conception of monasteries' functions (in the Church) in the light of my research data.⁷⁵ Furthermore, I consider the pilgrimage phenomenon as part of wider societal processes and ideas, such as secularization and nationalism. The perspective is that of the sociology of religion in the sense that it concerns the interdependence between religious phenomena and society. The development of pilgrimage and the revival of monasticism are thus seen as aspects of various historical-political developments. It is not possible to understand Greek secularization without giving attention to the above-mentioned historical-political developments that have influenced its development in Greece, which differs somewhat from Catholic and Protestant Europe.⁷⁶ The roots of the historical, political, and thus religious developments lie deeper than in the recent past: they go back to Classical Greece and Byzantium, which Greeks consider their cultural, spiritual and linguistic heritage. As a basis for discussion in the analysis I also refer to Steve Bruce's and David Voas' conceptions of the position of religion in modern nation-states. They see it as a significant force, but they also stress that it is not an autonomous force, and should rather be considered in its context and as something that often fits within the changing boundaries of the nation-state.⁷⁷ This is also a valid perspective from which to consider Greek religiosity. The historical context is taken as a starting point for building a conception of the different roles of the convent in contemporary Greece.

The research data

The research data for the study was collected by means of participant observation and unstructured thematic interviewing.⁷⁸ The participant observation and some of the interviews took place in the convent, and some interviews were conducted elsewhere. I interviewed 25 pilgrims, of which twenty were women and five were men. I also interviewed two nuns. The pilgrims represented different age groups and social

⁷⁵ For details, see the bibliography.

⁷⁶ Davie 2000, 1-23. The process of secularization and how it is linked to the process of modernization is one of the central themes in her work. As she points out, one has to consider the historical dimension of European religiosity in order to fully understand the religious life of Europe's constituent nations.

⁷⁷ Bruce-Voas 2004, 1027-1028.

⁷⁸ For these classical methods of collecting research data see e.g. Flick 2002, 74-91, 139-146,

backgrounds. All the interviews were tape-recorded and each one lasted approximately seventy minutes. The observations were noted down in two diaries, which consist of 50 typed pages and 19 hand-written pages. I also utilized the research data I collected for my Master's thesis in the convent of the Dormition during the academic year 1998-1999, which comprises 109 hand-written pages of notes in three diaries.⁷⁹

Ortner describes ethnography as an attempt to understand another life world using oneself as much as possible as an instrument. Furthermore, she claims that the ethnographic stance is committed to thickness, the primary focus of which is currently on relatively exhaustive "contextualization".⁸⁰ I have understood contextualization as one aspect of collecting the research data, the aim of which in my case was to understand Greek monasticism from as many angles as possible.

In addition to the participant observation and the interviews, which could be considered official fieldwork techniques, I systematically collected contextual research data that helped me to broaden my understanding of monasticism, the Church of Greece, and Greek religiosity. I talked with many people about these things and about monasteries and convents in numerous everyday situations, such as with my friends while having dinner or even in supermarkets with the shopkeeper. I also paid visits to other monasteries and convents in Greece, including the convent of St. John the Theologian in Souroti,⁸¹ the convent of the Dormition of the Mother of God Bytouma in Kalambaka, the convent of Eikosifinissis in Kavala, and the hermitage of St. Gregorios Palamas in Koufalia. I also read books that the nuns gave me at the convent of the Dormition and other monasteries. These books concern monastic life, Orthodox spiritual life, and the lives of Orthodox spiritual fathers and mothers.⁸² They are for sale at the monasteries and convents, and nuns often recommend them to pilgrims. I made notes on all these secondary activities in my field diaries and used them to build up a thicker ethnographic

⁷⁹ The opportunities to speak with the nuns were often limited because of the *typicon* of the monastery, which requires them to concentrate on the monastery program (Field diary IV, 7).

⁸⁰ Ortner 1996, 281-304. See also Tuomaala 2008, 48-49.

⁸¹ On the location of the monasteries see Appendix 4.

⁸² For example, see Gavriilia 1996; Mpriantsianof 1995; Kiratsos 1998; Nektarios 2001; Papadopoulos 2002.

description and understanding. In other words, much of the contextualized data is not directly utilized in this thesis.

With my previous fieldwork and the contextual research data, I believe I reached saturation point,⁸³ and that the 25 interviews and my observations were enough to enable me to describe, understand and interpret pilgrimage in a contemporary Greek nunnery, and to make the research data valid and reliable.⁸⁴ It is also clear that participant observation was essential in broadening my understanding of the interaction between nuns and pilgrims, and thus in my opinion the relatively small number of nuns' statements is not a shortcoming.⁸⁵ Moreover, the interviews with the pilgrims clarified their individual relationships with the convent and its nuns. Conversely, the research data would have been even richer if I had had the opportunity to follow the private discussions of the nuns and pilgrims in the convent, but this was not possible for ethical reasons. The pilgrims had come specifically to have some private moments with a nun in order to speak about some delicate matters. However, the data includes their subsequent accounts of these discussions.

I divided the research data into two groups according to its relevance (I consider the interviews and the observation equally important):

1. Interviews and observation

- a) 25 interviews with pilgrims
- b) Two interviews with nuns
- c) Field diaries I-V

2. Contextual data

⁸³ See e.g., Mäkelä 1990, 52.

⁸⁴ According to Shabbir and Stebbins, the problems of validity and reliability rest on the question of whether another researcher with similar methodological training, understanding of the field setting, and rapport with the subjects would make similar observations, and whether the researcher takes into account the reactive, distorting and limiting effects his or her presence in the field might create. (A case study, of course, is not as easily repeatable as some other types of study such as a survey.) On the questions of the validity and reliability of field research data, see e.g., Shabbir and Stebbins 1991, 12-16.

⁸⁵ I became acquainted with many nuns during my fieldwork, but because of the nature of Greek female monasticism I usually talked relatively briefly with them because they are devoted to their obedience. In my experience however, this kind of low-profile communication is typical of interaction between nuns and pilgrims and could thus be considered data in itself.

- a) Discussions
- b) Visits to other monasteries/convents
- c) Literature

Fieldwork: interviews and observation

The research data for this thesis was mainly collected during the academic year 2002-2003 and in the summer of 2005. However, I started my fieldwork in the convent of the Dormition for my Master's thesis in 1998-1999.⁸⁶ It was at the beginning of this period that I became acquainted with my first informants, who later helped me to establish more contacts with pilgrims and nuns. I also visited other Greek monasteries and convents at that time, and interviewed eleven nuns and an igumeni during those visits.⁸⁷ The first year could be described as an intensive period in which my primary goal was to obtain a basic knowledge of Modern Greek at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and to gain insight into Greek Orthodox monastic life. The first nuns and other informants I interviewed, and my friends, served as guides in the process of understanding the thinking of Greek pilgrims. They also helped me to make contact with the convent(s). The Koumanídis family in particular, which visits monasteries and convents regularly, helped me to get in touch with nuns and pilgrims, and during my visits to their home I enjoyed many fruitful and interesting discussions on monasticism and monastic life. In general it was relatively easy to find people who visited the convent of the Dormition and agreed to be interviewed. It seemed that wherever I went I met someone who knew someone who went there or to other nunneries regularly. This gave me the impression that visiting monasteries and convents was rather common in Northern Greece. This impression may be flawed to some extent, of course, but I was rather surprised at the universality of interest in monasticism.

⁸⁶ My Master's thesis examined the process of becoming a nun for Greek women. See Juntunen 2000.

⁸⁷ The Greek word for the leader of a nunnery is *igouméni*. It could be translated into English as abbess, prioress, Mother Superior or Reverend Mother (Stavropoulos 2001 [1988], 360). I use the term igumeni in this thesis in order to avoid flawed associations that might lead the reader to think about the leader of a Catholic convent.

The second research period started in September 2002 and lasted until September 2003. During this time I visited the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin twenty-seven times and followed and observed the interaction between nuns and pilgrims. Most of the interviews were carried out during the spring and summer of 2003. My visits were rather short during this phase because I would have needed the igumeni's permission for longer visits. I also knew many pilgrims at this point and was able to interview them outside the convent. The convent admits pilgrims on all days except Wednesdays and Fridays, and therefore it was suitable for my research. I visited it primarily in the afternoons when there is Compline (Small Vespers, *esperinós*), or on Sundays when there is a Divine Liturgy. Both services are popular with pilgrims, and afterwards many of them stay in the convent for a while to have coffee and a chat with the nuns and other pilgrims. In addition I attended some all-night Vigils⁸⁸ (*agripnía*), which are also popular among pilgrims, and spent three nights in the convent during the Great Week before Easter. Notes of the discussions I had and all the observations I made in the convent during my second research period are collected in a field diary that consists of fifty pages. I tape-recorded the interviews and wrote down my observations during the evening after each visit, or if I was staying in the convent I used the free time for that purpose. Basically the process did not change: I carried on visiting the convent and conducting interviews until the end of my final fieldwork period in the summer of 2005. Only the content of the interviews changed a little because I felt that some themes had been sufficiently covered and others needed to be further discussed or clarified.

The final stage of my fieldwork was during the summer of 2005. Again I spent three months in Thessaloniki carrying out focused interviews with the pilgrims I already knew. I also visited the convent five times and had a private conversation with Sister Theodóra, my key informant. During all my visits to convents (1998-2005) I always spent some time with the nuns and pilgrims after the services, and often did some small jobs, such as making coffee in the kitchen, washing the plates and serving dessert to the pilgrims. I came to know many pilgrims over a cup of coffee provided by the nunnery, and talked

⁸⁸ In Greece all-night vigils are usually held on the eve of great festivals, starting late in the evening and lasting until the morning when the liturgy starts. Arseni 1999, 279.

briefly with them. I was not granted permission by igumeni Marína to record these discussions, but I agreed to interview many of the pilgrims outside the convent. I conducted many interviews in the pilgrims' homes, and thus was not constrained by the monastic schedule.

Participant observation should, according to Giovannini, be seen as a symbolic interaction process in which researchers play an active role in defining the situation and creating meanings. He thus challenges the traditional image of seeing the field researcher as a benign and impartial observer and recorder of socio-cultural events.⁸⁹ Yet, according to Hillery, there are various types of participant observation. The researcher may be a member of the group; the participant-as-observer is a group member who is trained in observational techniques and uses his or her own group as a subject for the study; the observer-as-participant participates as much as possible without becoming a fully-fledged member; and the observer observes but does not participate.⁹⁰ My fieldwork fell in the middle ground between the mentioned types. I did take part in the life of the convent as much as possible and was seen as one of the pilgrims from the convent's perspective. However, pilgrims cannot, according to the rules, participate in the whole program because the convent is not always open for visitors.

There are also various ways of conducting an interview. Hillery points out that if an interview is formal it is no different from a questionnaire, and in the same way if it is informal it becomes participant observation.⁹¹ The method used in this study was the unstructured thematic interview. My interviews could be characterized as "conversations with a purpose", as Burgess describes unstructured interviews.⁹² I had in mind a set of basic questions that I wanted to cover, but in most cases I allowed the interviewee to speak freely so that there was a possibility of obtaining new information. Therefore I did

⁸⁹ Giovannini 1986, 114.

⁹⁰ Hillery 1992, 224-225.

⁹¹ Hillery 1992, 228.

⁹² Burgess 1984, 102.

not ask all the interviewees exactly the same questions, and the themes varied a little in the course of the research process.⁹³

The analysis process

Field research in most cases involves the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, which according to Burgess means that the field researcher collects data and records it by making not only traditional substantive field notes, but also analytical notes. Analytical notes may include the preliminary questions that were posed and the hypotheses that are developed and tested in the field.⁹⁴ In the case of this study, especially at the beginning of the fieldwork, I formulated many questions on the basis of my earlier field notes. In other words, many of the research themes emerged from the data. This was part of the learning process, and led to the formation of the final questionnaire. However, even this was primarily used as an *aide mémoire* that helped me to remember the themes I wanted the interview to cover. Thus, during the process I conducted basic interviews that were, in some cases, followed by focused interviews. I also made supplementary notes (headnotes) afterwards if I had forgotten to write something down, and also in order to engage in dialog with the field material. Ottenberg sees the process of making headnotes as an essential way of specifying the field material, which is often written down in a hurry. It also gives space for the researcher to develop a living relationship with the field, and to grow in terms of understanding the research phenomenon.⁹⁵

The methods of collecting research data (unstructured thematic interview and participant observation) restrict the analytical options. I used content analysis in this study as a method of analysis.⁹⁶ After returning from the field I transcribed the interviews. This

⁹³ Information about the interviews is given in Appendix 3.

⁹⁴ Burgess 1984, 166, 174.

⁹⁵ Ottenberg 1990, 144–147.

⁹⁶ See e.g., Neuendorf 2002, 1. According to Neuendorf, content analysis is a suitable method for different types of materials, from human interaction to TV programs.

gave me a large amount of textual information, which I re-read and close-read⁹⁷ several times and then categorized into thematic groups. My method could therefore also be characterized as thematic analysis. However, many of the interviewees' responses had elements that I could have categorized in several groups. Thus in many cases I simply read the texts several times and made notes on the themes that emerged from them. That is to say, the function of content analysis as an analytical method in this study was to arrange and organize the data so that it was possible to make conclusions from it.⁹⁸

Thus, content analysis should be understood as the processing of data as distinct from analysis that aims at interpretation.⁹⁹ Although 25 interviews is a small number, it would have been possible to make a quantitative analysis of at least some parts of them. However, this would not have offered information that qualitative analysis could not have provided, and would have led to conclusions that were based on too narrow a comparison.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, I often refer to “some of the interviewed pilgrims” or “many pilgrims” in this study.

Because of the nature of the unstructured thematic interview I did not necessarily speak about the position of Mount Athos compared to the convent of the Dormition, for example, with all interviewees. However, I might have discussed this more freely later in the nunnery with the same pilgrim, or even with an ecclesiastically active Greek friend in Thessaloniki. When I use expressions such as “many pilgrims” I thus wish to convey that the theme in question emerged in, say, 20 interviews out of the total 25, and from the free discussions in the convent I had the impression that it was a common opinion.

⁹⁷ Looking for repetitions, contradictions, and similarities, for example. See e.g., Utriainen 1999.

⁹⁸ Flick 2002, 190.

⁹⁹ See Hirsjärvi-Hurme 2000, 149.

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion on mixing methodologies see e.g., Nau 1995, 1. See Internet sources in the bibliography. Correspondingly, Davie suggests that a researcher investigating pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela should first count the pilgrims, then document who they are, and what their motives and experiences are through conducting interviews and making the walk. She also thinks that the research should take economic and political factors, alongside the religious ones, into account. In other words, he does not require further quantitative methods, at least during the phase in which the data is collected. Davie 2007, 124-125.

The revival of monasticism

Greek monastic life has witnessed a revival during the past four decades.¹⁰¹ The Holy Mountain of Athos celebrated its millennium in 1963. Less than ten years after the festivities, in 1972, the number of monks started to rise for the first time since the Second World War. There were 1,146 monks living on Mount Athos in 1972.¹⁰²

Nunneries are also enjoying a revival, and in fact today there are more nuns than monks in Greece. The numbers started to grow in the 1920s, and in the 1980s totaled approximately 2,000. The new generation of monks and nuns is more educated and entered the monasteries and convents at a younger age than the previous one,¹⁰³ on average between 30 and 40 years of age. Many of them come after completing their graduate studies or even earlier. Previously they came from villages close to the monasteries, whereas today they are from all parts of Greece, and some monasteries are attracting new recruits from Cyprus, the United States and Australia, for example. Mount Athos in particular is enjoying this kind of revival, and is now a pan-orthodox community of monks. There were not many monasteries on the Holy Mountain during the first years of independence as the country was still recovering from the war. However, many monks moved there from different parts of Greece in the 1970s, and nunneries were established

¹⁰¹ Greek Orthodox monastic life has its roots in the monastic movement in the Egyptian desert during the third century. Christians began to retire there for prayer and to lead solitary lives. Freedom of religion was restored to Roman citizens in 312, and in 380 Christianity gained the status of the official state religion. The change was based on Emperor Constantine the Great's view of Christianity as a politically suitable religion that would unify the people. Even if Christianity became a socially crucial factor, however, not everyone was satisfied with the development; many were disappointed with the diluted spirituality of the Church and began to withdraw to monasteries. Monastic life was also known in the pre-Christian era - the Essenes lived in monastic communities, for example. Monasticism features in all world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. O'Neill claims that Christian monasticism is a continuation of Jewish monasticism, which has its roots in the communities of the sons of the prophets (Kärkkäinen 1999, 16-17; Ware 1997, 35-40; Talbot: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 1991, 1392; O'Neill 1989, 270-271). See, for example, Gothóni, 1985. On the history and sprawl of Orthodox monasticism see Stefanidos 2000 [1959], 153-164.

¹⁰² According to the World Christian database there are 1,233 monks on Mount Athos today. See the bibliography and the Internet sources there. However, the actual number is higher. For comparison, see also http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/Athonite_Hermits/.

¹⁰³ In the 1960s three percent of the monks held an academic degree. By the 1970s the figure had risen to 15 percent (Nikolaou 1996, 128).

in the male monasteries that were then left empty. Monks and nuns started to renovate the dilapidated monasteries and to establish new ones.¹⁰⁴

Currently there are more than 4,300 nuns in Greece and the number seems to be growing. According to Ware, among the largest nunneries are St. Patapios at Loutraki, outside Corinth,¹⁰⁵ Dormition at Panorama in Thessaloniki, Our Lady of Help on the island of Chios, Kechrovouni in Tinos, and the convent of the Annunciation at Ormilía in Chalkidiki.¹⁰⁶ Other large convents include that of John the Baptist in Megara, which has 64 nuns, the convent of Saint Kerikos and Ioulitta in Sidirokastro, with 55 nuns, and the Convent of Saint John the Baptist in Akritochorio near Serres with 44 nuns.¹⁰⁷ The number of nuns is even higher if the men and women who live in brotherhoods or sisterhoods, who are not married and usually carry out missionary work, are taken into account. These groups often represent a revivalist movement or some other religious associations of the Church. The men and women living in such communities are called *laikoí monachói* or *kosmokalógeroi*, meaning secular monks and nuns.¹⁰⁸

Monastic revival has also promoted scandal-mongering in the Greek media,¹⁰⁹ which repeatedly accuses the communities of being too secular or of tempting young men and women to become monks and nuns against their will. Disputes over belongings and property have also hit the headlines in the Greek and international press in recent years.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, as Alpéntzos points out, there are positive media reactions as well. In general, it could be said that monastic life as a phenomenon is familiar to all Greeks.¹¹¹ The monastic revival is noted in the media and in Greek society in general.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ Ware 1983, 221-225; Hellier 1995, 205-213. Mantzaridis 1975, 224-226; Ware 1997, 137, 143; Alpéntzos 2002, 11-13.

¹⁰⁵ On the monasteries' locations, see Appendix 4.

¹⁰⁶ Ware's statistics are from 1997 and they are applicable also today, when compared to the statistics of the Diptycha of the Church of Greece 2006. Ware 1997, 143.

¹⁰⁷ See Diptycha of the Church of Greece 2006, 661, 783.

¹⁰⁸ Alpéntzos 2002, 33.

¹⁰⁹ The Greek media follows the clergy intensively (see e.g., Zournazoglou 2003, 273-297). On the interrelationship between the Church of Greece and the media see also Gioultis 1997, 557-561.

¹¹⁰ For the debate on monastic belongings see e.g., <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/10/26/europe/greece.php>.

¹¹¹ The Orthodox theological interpretation of life, according to which a person is supposed to choose between marriage and monastic life, is generally known among Greeks. Monastic life has been and still is a source of inspiration in literature, music, folklore and popular culture, and culture in general. There are

Many representatives of the Greek clergy claim that the monasteries and convents reflect the status of society and the church. They suggest that the popularity of pilgrimage and the revival of monasticism in general indicate what Greeks feel about society and the kind of spiritual values they consider important. It is thus possible to draw some conclusions related to the popularity of the Greek Church on the basis of the numbers of pilgrims, monks and nuns.¹¹³

Even if Greek society has secularized, monasticism continues its revival. Secularization is a complex phenomenon that does not affect all aspects of religiosity to the same extent. In other words, it is obvious in Greek society and religious life, but it cannot be said to apply in the same way in all aspects of religious life. Whereas monasteries and convents have been enjoying a revival since the 1970s, church attendance has started to fluctuate.¹¹⁴ Kallistos Ware analyzed church attendance in his study of Greek secularization.¹¹⁵ In general, attendance has fluctuated dramatically in the last twenty years, but is now beginning to show an upward trend again.¹¹⁶

In recent years people living in urban areas have become more active in attending services. Moreover, both sexes used to be equally represented at the services, but nowadays churchgoers are mainly women. The revival of monasticism and the

Greek proverbs that refer to monastic life or the difficulty of it. In Northern Greece I have heard the proverb "*I mikrós mikrós pantrépsou i mikrós kalogerépsou*", meaning that "you should either marry very young or become a monk". Another proverb refers to something that one desires but which proves to difficult to achieve in the end. In that case one could say "*Dískoli i kalogerikí*" meaning "monastic life is difficult". There are even popular songs about monastic life. For example, the singer Foivos Delivoríás has a song called *Patír Foivos Olomónachos* in his album *I Zoi Móno Étsi Ein Oraía* (Sony Music: 1995). The title is wordplay. It could be translated as "Father Foivos all alone", but the word monachós also means "monk". It is about the artist's life as a monk in a metaphorical sense. (Field diary V, 14)

¹¹² Alpentzós 2002, 12-13. Monasteries are a rather ordinary topic in the Greek media. For example, on a random day, December 4, 2007 the daily newspaper Kathimerini had an article about the healthy diet of the monks of Mount Athos, and reported a theft in a monastery in Argolida. See http://www.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_kathextra_1_04/12/2007_1283653

¹¹³ Field Diary I, 11.

¹¹⁴ Ware 1983, 219; Hellier 1995, 205.

¹¹⁵ Ware understands secularization in this context as the weakening power or significance of the Church institution in society (Ware 1982, 218-219). I use the term similarly here. On the history and definition of the concept see e.g., Christiano, Swatos and Kivisto 2002, 59-88. For traditional definitions of secularization, see Budd 1973, 11-120.

¹¹⁶ Ware 1983, 218-219. See also Roudometoff 2005, 99.

developments in urban religiosity, in fact, challenge the traditional secularization paradigm, according to which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance.

Greek monasteries and convents are active centers of pilgrimage and of various other aspects of church life. Indicative of their vitality and activity was a meeting held in September 2000 in Meteora. It was organized especially for monks as part of the Church's millennium festivities. More than 450 monks and nuns took part, and the discussion covered current issues concerning monastic life at the beginning of the third Millennium. Similar events take place regularly. The Church organizes festivities always when an important monastery or a convent is celebrating.¹¹⁷

Contemporary Greek monasteries and convents have a secure financial basis as they receive funding from the Church¹¹⁸ of Greece as well as from individuals. In order to improve their situation, however, most of them have specialized in areas such as hagiography or handicrafts, and some have established health centers, organic farms or publishing houses, for instance, in order to maintain a reasonable economic standard. A number of them even have Internet sites where people can learn about the history, order the agricultural products, and even communicate by e-mail with nuns and monks¹¹⁹

Concurrently with the revival of monasteries and convents the numbers of pilgrims have also increased. Pilgrims visit monasteries and convents both privately and with groups that are usually organized by local congregations. The majority of them are Greek, but

¹¹⁷ See e.g. http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holySynod/committees/monastic/moni_stagiadon.html.

¹¹⁸ The term Church in this thesis refers without exception to the Orthodox Church of Greece, (and not to the so-called Oriental Orthodox Churches, which may have different theological conceptions and customs). The Church of Greece was founded in 1833 coincident with the birth of the present-day Greek state. The state became de facto independent in 1827 and a couple of years later the Church of Greece declared itself independent from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It was formally recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1850. Administratively it is under the authority of the Greek State, namely the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, which also pays the salaries of the clergy and other employees. It has 81 *metropóleis* comprising 7,945 parishes (More 1989, 88; Molotokos-Liedermann 2004, 20-21).

¹¹⁹ Alpéntzos 2002; 65-67. On monasteries' Internet sites see e.g., The Monastery of Annunciation of the Virgin Mary in Skiathos, <http://www.evagelistria.com.gr/>

there are also foreigners, especially on Mount Athos and in some specific monastic districts such as Meteora in Central Greece.¹²⁰

The numbers of monasteries and convents listed in Table 1 are based on Alpéztos's dissertation from 2002. However, it should be borne in mind that there are many ways of compiling statistics, and Greek monasteries are no exception because of their different orientations and legal standing. For example, some may be under the supervision and jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and others may follow the old calendar in their program¹²¹ and are therefore not necessarily counted among those belonging to the Church of Greece.

The statistics concerning pilgrims are estimations based on the numbers seen daily at the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. It should be noted that many people visit the convent often, and the same people may come to the Sunday liturgy and to Vespers during the week. Moreover, those who stay overnight attend the services during the week. It should also be borne in mind that pilgrims come to the convent every day during the week except Wednesdays and Fridays, when it is closed to visitors. Thus the statistics below are approximate and illustrate the number of visits and not the number of individuals. On an ordinary Sunday there are between two and four hundred people in the convent church, whereas during an ordinary week, not including the great festivals, the convent might accommodate only a few, five to ten pilgrims who are staying overnight.¹²² On an average day there are about thirty pilgrims. They spend some time there and usually attend vespers.

¹²⁰ For further information on Meteora as a pilgrimage site, see e.g., Brockman 1997, 173.

¹²¹ Monasteries follow either the Julian (old) or the Gregorian (new) calendar. On their use see e.g., Makrides 2005, 197.

¹²² There is no official data on the numbers of pilgrims in Greek nunneries. The figures presented here are estimations based on fieldwork conducted in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin. For comparison see e.g., Gothóni's statistics on the numbers of pilgrims on Mount Athos (about 40,000 *visits* per year at the beginning of the 1990s.: Gothóni 1993, 121-122). Alpéztos refers to the Greek newspaper *Eléftheros Típos*, according to which 30,000 permits (*diamonitítrion*) were issued for Mount Athos between January and June 1992 (Alpéztos 2002, 75). According to Monk Simeon from the Athonite monastery of Dionisiou about 100,000 pilgrims travel to Mount Athos per year. See Simeon 2006.

Numbers of nuns, monks, and pilgrims

Table 1. Numbers of monasteries and monks and nuns in Greece¹²³:

	Monasteries 637	Monks/Nuns 7318	
Male	Monasteries	271	2776
	Cells ¹²⁴	30	94
	Hermitages ¹²⁵	20	80
	Total	321	Total 2950
Female	Monasteries	230	4012
	Hermitages	86	356
	Total	316	4368

Table 2. Estimations of the number of visits to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary¹²⁶

Pilgrims attending service / day	30
Pilgrims staying overnight / day	8
People attending Sunday Liturgy / Sunday	300
Total / week	420
Total per year	21,840

¹²³ Alpéntzos 2002, 56. According to the Diptycha of the Church of Greece 2006, 1146 (Diptycha tis Ekklesias tis Ellados 2006), there are 259 nunneries under the jurisdiction of the Church of Greece, which house a **total of 2,500 nuns**. This does not include the semiautonomous Church of Crete or the Diocese of the Dodecanese Islands, which house a total of 377 nuns. According to Alpéntzos, there were 2,473 nuns under the jurisdiction of the Church of Greece in 2002. The 2006 statistics thus indicate there has been a small increase in the number of nuns in recent years.

¹²⁴ Cell (*Kellion* or *Keli*) has two meanings in the Greek Orthodox tradition, a room or a small house inhabited by a monk or a nun, and a self-ruling contemplation place. Small monasteries (*Skíti*), which are dependent on a ruling monastery, usually consist of several cells (Arseni 1999, 144).

¹²⁵ Hermitage, *Isichastírio*. The name refers to the monastery's focus on silence (*Isichía*, tranquility, peace). A hermitage may have more financial independence than an ordinary monastery, depending on the rules governing it.

¹²⁶ This is an estimation of the number of visits in a regular week. The numbers increase during the big festival periods. Thus the total number of visits per year is probably higher than 21,840.

The convent of the Dormition of the Virgin

I conducted my fieldwork in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin. It is situated in Northern Greece in the municipality of Thessaloniki. According to tradition, two nuns founded the convent in the 1930s in a place where a Byzantine convent once stood. It functioned as an unofficial convent (*laikó monastíri*) until it was officially inaugurated in the 1950s. Today it houses 51 nuns, their average age being about 40 years. It is an average-sized convent in comparison with other monasteries in Greece.¹²⁷

The convent was built according to the typical Byzantine convent plan, with a church in the middle of the monastic complex. The complex is enclosed by thick walls, which contain the nuns' cells.¹²⁸ The main church (*katholikón*) is a contemporary construction, built and decorated in the Byzantine style outside the original convent plan. During my research period the church murals were unfinished. Most of the icons, including the convent's portable icons, are made by the nuns. The complex also has, in addition to the nuns' cells, a kitchen, a refectory, a small guest house and reception area (*arhontaríki*), nuns' workshops, a library, the igumeni's office, and a spring with holy water. A small wood surrounds the convent but the nearest residential buildings are within sight. There is an impressive view over a small range of mountains.

The convent's funding derives from the diocese's financial support and the pilgrims' donations. In order to survive, however, the nuns make Byzantine-style icons, and do gold embroidery and traditional bookbinding. The convent is easily accessible by public transportation or by car, and it welcomes pilgrims daily, (except for Wednesdays and Fridays when it is closed and the nuns concentrate on their personal duties and contemplation). It is of average size and follows the new calendar in its festivals.¹²⁹ It also concentrates on the liturgical life of the church and prayer, and attracts pilgrims for

¹²⁷ According to Alpéntzos, there are many monasteries with over 80 nuns. There is even one with over 200, but there are also those with only one or two (Alpéntzos 2002; 32; Field diary II, 12).

¹²⁸ On Byzantine architecture see e.g., Mango 1986.

¹²⁹ The so-called Julian (old) calendar is thirteen days behind the Gregorian (new) calendar.

this reason, unlike the monasteries that attract pilgrims because of a miracle-working icon or a renowned spiritual father.

My choice of convent was dictated by the need to find one that was somewhat typical when compared to other Greek monasteries. Consequently the pilgrimage and the interaction in it would also represent the common Northern Greek paradigm. It therefore needed to be an urban or suburban coenobitic, average-sized, parochial female convent.¹³⁰ Given my aim to analyze and contribute to the discussion on the definition of pilgrimage and to add to the ethnographic coverage of pilgrimage studies, I also wanted the convent to represent the kind of pilgrimage that is not based only on a famous icon or relic, but where pilgrims also communicate with the nuns. Furthermore, I wanted it to have visitors from near and far so that I could compare contemporary pilgrimage to the historical examples of the Byzantine era.¹³¹ I chose the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin firstly because of its vitality. It would have been difficult to find interviewees in a small remote convent with only a few nuns and pilgrims, and this one has many pilgrims throughout the year. On the other hand, given my goal to paint a picture of relatively typical Greek pilgrimage and to concentrate on Greek religiosity, I did not want the convent to be a center of tourism, like the monasteries of Meteora that attract many travelers from outside Greece, too.¹³² These monasteries have many visitors during the year, but the nuns do not spend so much time with the pilgrims and do not necessarily build such strong ties with them as they do in the convent of the Dormition. In other words, the fact that the pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition come mainly from the surrounding areas helped me to understand the interaction between nuns and pilgrims.

In order to obtain an overall picture of pilgrimage in Greek monasteries, and also to evaluate how typical my findings in the convent of the Dormition were, I also visited several monasteries in Greece, as mentioned earlier. I found during these visits that rural

¹³⁰ Greek monasteries fall into at least three categories, according to 1) gender (male or female), 2) subordination (parochial, patriarchal or royal - meaning that it was founded by a Byzantine emperor), and 3) way of monastic life (coenobitic or idiorhythmic). Alpentzos 2002, 48-49.

¹³¹ As Talbot pointed out, scholars use the term pilgrimage in the Byzantine context for both long-distance journeys to holy shrines or living holy men and short-distance trips to a local or regional church for the sake of prayer or healing (Talbot 2002, 73).

¹³² See Appendix 4.

monasteries usually had a more relaxed attitude towards pilgrims, whereas the convent of the Dormition had a tighter schedule. For example, in smaller convents if there are pilgrims around the nuns will wait until they have left, and start their meal or prayers a little later. This relaxed attitude towards pilgrims also allows them to build up a more personal relationship with the nuns. However, a personal relationship between nuns and pilgrims is also possible in a larger and more strictly organized convents because many of the pilgrims have been coming there for years and are familiar with the customs and schedule.

It would have been possible to conduct comparative research in another, clearly rural convent, for example, in order to evaluate how typical the convent of the Dormition is, but I decided to concentrate on the one and to avoid what would possibly have been too narrow a comparison. I wanted to understand the convent's position among other monasteries in Northern Greece,¹³³ and therefore discussed this with Sister Theodóra.¹³⁴ She stressed the fact that the convent of the Dormition was a convent to which pilgrims came to get spiritual “building materials”, and that many people in the area considered it their own heritage that needed to be taken care of. In other words, it could be characterized as a nunnery that concentrates on liturgical life and prayer, and which also is a significant local symbol for pilgrims.

¹³³ In considering how typical the monastery of the Dormition is one must take into consideration the fact that Northern Greece and Thessaloniki as its largest city have a somewhat different religious atmosphere than the Greek capital Athens. Various geographical and historical factors make Thessaloniki a city with a particular character that might make it seem more “Byzantine and Christian” on the one hand, or more “Eastern” than Athens on the other. Mazower **uses** the words “sacred geography” to describe the position of Thessaloniki because for centuries it has been on the route to many holy places, including the Holy Mountain of Athos for Christians, and Mecca for Muslims from all over the Balkans. It still has a central position in the Balkan region as a thoroughfare and a center of commerce. You can still sense the closeness of Mount Athos and other monasteries. The city is influenced by the proximity of Mount Athos, both in the everyday life of the man in the street and in the official image that the city gives to passers-by, even if it houses only 3.04 percent of the total number of monasteries in Greece. The propagation of monasteries in the country is: Peloponnisos 20.5%, Attiki 16.80%, Mount Athos 3.14%, Thessaloniki 3.04%, The Islands 3.34% and other parts 25.11% (Mazower 2004, 94-95; Alpéntzos 2002, 61; Field diary I, 44-45).

¹³⁴ Interview 2005:27.

II Locating oneself in the field

For me, the fieldwork in the convent of the Dormition was more than a simple working period. It was an important personal experience, which taught me a lot about Greece, Orthodoxy, monasticism – and myself. As Hastrup says, fieldwork connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge.¹³⁵ The field always has many dimensions. I approached my field as a foreigner who was (and still is) interested in Greek religiosity, who was not an Orthodox and who was not a pilgrim. At first I felt that my interest in Greek religiosity would help me, but that my other qualities would be a burden. I was not quite sure how the pilgrims and nuns would react to me, or what my position in the field would be. The demand for awareness of the researcher's position started to emerge in anthropology and feminist ethnography after the 1980s and 1990s.

Awareness of the researcher's position is linked to the idea that the research subject and the researcher's set of values, age, and sex, for example, have a combined impact on the research process. The notion of subjectively interpreted reality is generally accepted, and reality is understood as socially constructed. Therefore the researcher is seen as a cultural product, just like the subject of his or her research. It is accepted that personal opinions and values have an impact, but the research should reflect the topic.¹³⁶ In order to reflect on and describe the object of the research it is essential to take the context, in other words the cultural entity, into consideration. However, the process of acknowledgment is not totally problem-free. As Rita M. Gross puts it, there is no neutral place from which one can objectively study religion. Everyone has preconceptions, and those who claim they are outsiders to religion are insiders to and advocates of some other belief about it.¹³⁷

It is not an easy task objectively to clarify and distinguish one's cultural presumptions, set of values or worldview. One could argue that it is not even possible to become conscious about all the factors that influence the research process. It cannot be claimed, for instance,

¹³⁵ Hastrup 1992, 117.

¹³⁶ On reflexive ethnography see Davies 1999, 3.

¹³⁷ Gross 2005, 150.

that the characteristics of one's personality are the result of one's religious background or a set of inherited values. Furthermore, it is dubious to evaluate their combined impact on the research process, not to mention more concrete features such as age, sex, and nationality as objectivity is, to some extent, always an illusion. The simple awareness of facts such as the researcher's religious orientation does not justify jumping to conclusions about possible ways of interpreting the research process or the collected material. In my opinion, at best, awareness of the researcher's position is an approximate description of the most visible features affecting the research process.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Greek ethnography offers some special challenges that result both from the current state of cultural change manifested in phenomena such as urban growth as well as increased anthropological awareness of regional variations, and the contemporary concerns of the discipline as a whole.¹³⁹

Not a Greek, not an Orthodox, but at least a Christian

“Are you a foreigner...Where are you from...Are you half Greek...What religion do you practice up there...How does it differ from Greek Orthodoxy?”

Ethnographical research has traditionally concentrated on distant cultures that have been considered exotic. Ethnography, anthropology and comparative religion have also often been Western projects involving research on the culturally other, the exotic, and the distant.¹⁴⁰ Greek female monasticism, on the other hand, represents the European Christian culture, but the research process clearly showed me how something apparently close can be unknown, and correspondingly how something that one considers to represent otherness can feel close and easily approachable.

¹³⁸ See Hirsjärvi – Hurme 2000, 17.

¹³⁹ Dubisch 1991, 31.

¹⁴⁰ See e.g., Dubisch 1995, 15.

The most common questions I heard during my fieldwork had to do with my ethnic background as a Finn. The interviewees were interested to hear my thoughts about religion and life in general. They often asked me questions about Lutheranism and the religiosity of the Finns. The stereotypical image that they had about Finland was that it was a northern, well-organized country with low class differences, and where people were well educated and well-to-do.¹⁴¹ These images might also have been influenced by Finland's geopolitical location between East and West, and the official status of the Orthodox Church. These facts could have helped in creating a positive image about Finland as they could also create a feeling of commonality between the Greeks and the Finns. This positive image the interviewees had made it rather trouble-free to conduct field research, and the field was relatively open to me. Owing to the political situation and various developments in today's world, the Greeks do not necessarily have such a straightforward attitude towards all nations, so it was definitely a benefit for me to carry out research as a Finn. As an outsider I was also potentially able to focus on different things than the locals, and obtained detailed and compact information about pilgrimage because the informants tried to be clear in their communication.¹⁴²

The interviewees were usually eager to learn why I had studied Greek. Many thought that I might be half Greek or a Greek native who had grown up abroad. I felt that if I had had Greek roots I would have represented something more familiar to them. I told them that I had studied Greek out of pure interest in the Greek language and culture, and they usually interpreted this as a form of homage to their culture. Communicating in a language that is not your own is not totally trouble-free in fieldwork, however.¹⁴³ I started to study Greek in 1998, and naturally my knowledge of the language is not equivalent to a native speaker's knowledge.¹⁴⁴ It is clear that the interview situations would have been different,

¹⁴¹ I refer to interviewees in this context on a very general level and as I understood their attitudes concerning Finns. The image might be different in other parts of Greece where there is more tourism.

¹⁴² Field diary V, 13.

¹⁴³ On language and anthropological understanding see e.g., Hastrup 1995, 26-27, 45. According to Hastrup, there is an ontological gap between words and social processes, and therefore language must be studied in context. This applies to both one's native language and foreign languages.

¹⁴⁴ I studied Modern Greek at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (20 hours a week for eight months), and then at the University of Helsinki. Nowadays I teach Modern Greek at adult community colleges and at a private language school.

probably more spontaneous and profound, if I had been speaking my mother tongue. I do not see this as a great problem in my research, however. If I found problems with the interview material during my fieldwork periods I had the possibility to discuss them briefly with the interviewees. The interviewees also seemed to trust my language skills in the sense that they spoke freely enough, and I encouraged them to do so as I could listen to the recordings afterwards.¹⁴⁵

The interviewees were interested in my religious orientation as well as my ethnic background. This was natural, given the subject matter. However, pilgrims are generally interested in religious matters and the interviewees would probably have been curious about my religious orientation even if the subject matter had been different. Religious orientation in this case had to do with the question of proximity and distance in the field.¹⁴⁶ As an Orthodox I would have been treated as an “insider”, and because I was not I was treated as an outsider. My personal religiosity was nevertheless more important to the nuns than to the interviewees. This is understandable in that my role was more clearly that of an interviewer with the latter, whereas in the convent from the nuns’ point of view I was also seen as a pilgrim and not necessarily only as a researcher.

As I am member of the Finnish Lutheran Church, the interviewees typically asked questions to do with the differences between the Lutheran and the Greek Orthodox doctrines. They wanted to know if I was Orthodox, and then wanted to learn more about the religion they thought I represented. Most of them did not have a deep knowledge of Lutheran dogma and some expressed their clear opinion about the superiority of Orthodoxy. In general, however, they were respectful and polite, although some of the pilgrims certainly tried to convince me that Orthodoxy was the way to salvation.¹⁴⁷ The

¹⁴⁵ Field diary V, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Flick 2002, 58-59.

¹⁴⁷ Two of the interviewed pilgrims, María and Angelikí, who were also theology students, told me many things about Orthodoxy and tried hard to see the Orthodox faith from the viewpoint of a foreign scholar of comparative religion, who as they saw it must have been confused about the superiority of the world’s religions. For instance, they told me a story about a foreigner who tried to find the religion that held the truth. This person visited several churches (Protestant, Catholic, and so on), finally coming to an Orthodox church and being surprised to find it full of noisy people, grannies gossiping, people coming and going and

interviewees were not particularly interested in my personal convictions, and wanted only to know which religion I represent on the basis of my nationality. Their way of formulating questions about my religion and nationality reflected the general Greek attitude according to which religion and nationality are almost synonymous.¹⁴⁸

It is challenging to try to assess the real impact of my religious background on the interview situation. It may be that in order to maintain their politeness the interviewees were not able to express themselves totally freely with regard to the relationship between religiosity and ethnicity. However, the interview themes did not directly cover topics in which ethnicity really mattered, and perhaps my being an outsider even helped the interviewees to see their own religious orientation from a distance and speak freely about their personal beliefs. Nevertheless, I sometimes used my position as a foreigner intentionally in order to get some idea of the interviewee's position. For example, I told one pilgrim called Anastasía that I did not always feel comfortable in the monasteries and did not always know how to behave in front of the nuns. I said this in order to find out if she had experienced similar feelings. This was her response, and it is clear that she was speaking to someone who did not represent her own culture and was therefore informing her about convent practices:

Well, you probably feel like that because you haven't always lived in Greece. Even a Greek male who has been to a monastery only a couple of times might feel uncomfortable in a convent. I once visited a convent with my sister and my brother-in-law and my brother-in-law was speaking too loud, he has a loud voice, and I told him not to shout. I speak with the nuns, I greet them using some special phrase like "evlogíte", and because of my experience I could show him how to behave. He felt comfortable, but he didn't quite know how to behave in the convent.¹⁴⁹

As mentioned above, the fact that I was not an Orthodox probably had more significance for the nuns than for the pilgrims. During the second stage of my fieldwork Sister

children crying. Finally, however, the foreigner came to the conclusion that the Orthodox Church must represent the truth because the Devil himself had gone there to fight for peoples' souls. (Field diary IV, 17)

¹⁴⁸ For more information, see the section in Chapter V entitled Pilgrimage and national identity and the sub-section Classical Greece and the Byzantium in contemporary Greece.

¹⁴⁹ Interview 2003: 24.

Theodúli, who was one of my key informants, was interested to know if I had converted to Orthodoxy, and seemed a bit disappointed when she learned that I had not. Almost all the nuns I met naturally wanted to discuss Orthodoxy with me, and told me about it in a very open and neutral way. Their approach to a non-Orthodox was certainly different than it would have been to an Orthodox researcher. From their point of view it was sad that I was not an Orthodox and they willingly talked about themes concerning my possible conversion. They told me about foreigners who had been baptized in the convent, and offered me readings dealing with Orthodox spirituality and so on.¹⁵⁰

The nuns might also have assumed that as a foreigner and a Lutheran I did not have an all-round (Orthodox) theological education, and it is possible that in our discussions they stressed theological fundamentals more than they would have done if I had been a Greek Orthodox. They may also have adopted a different approach to an Orthodox researcher. They probably would have discussed different issues, and would have moved more quickly to the pilgrimage theme whereas it took me some time to start discussing pilgrimage rather than the differences between the Lutheran and Orthodox Churches. On the other hand, these discussions gave me an excellent example of the nuns' approach to someone who was foreign and non-Orthodox.

Life, for nuns, is divine providence. They therefore considered the fact that I had come to the convent to be God's intervention, and equated it to pilgrimage. Sister Efanthía said that it was no coincidence that I had come. She thought that my being there was a sign of God's calling and guiding people. Her attitude to Lutheranism could be characterized as tolerant and understanding: "Even if you're not an Orthodox, you're still a Christian". Sister Paraskeví, in turn, adopted a sharper attitude. She said that only the Orthodox would be saved, and that the difference between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy was like "day and night". She thought that Lutherans knew nothing about how baptism should be conducted, that there were no saints, and that the sign of the cross was not made in the proper way. On the whole, however, the nuns had a positive attitude towards me and

¹⁵⁰ As Sister Theodóra said, "We would like to see everyone in paradise with us". (Field diary II, 4; Field diary IV, 12)

stated that I was a “good girl”. In one convent a nun called María thought that I was a novice because I happened to be wearing dark blue, which is the color of the novice’s cassock. As I was pruning a larch tree in the garden she asked me if I was going to stay at the convent. Thus as a foreigner and a non-Orthodox I was also perceived by the nuns as a pilgrim, and in the above-mentioned case as a possible future nun.¹⁵¹

Cultural prejudices

One’s own cultural background can and often does lead to misinterpretation in the research process.¹⁵² As an example I could mention the time when after the Sunday Liturgy a middle-aged man called Stávros told me that he had spent the previous night at a nightclub and had therefore slept for only one hour. My immediate conclusion was that Stávros was not serious about his visit to the convent and had come there only to please his wife. In the course of the fieldwork process I began to understand more about Greek pilgrims’ ways of thinking, and came to the conclusion that Stávros may not have seen any contradiction between going to a nightclub the night before and going to a convent the following day, but saw his visit to the convent as a natural part of his spiritual striving and the nightclub as a way of relaxing.¹⁵³

Such cultural preconceptions affect research even during process of forming the research questions. My cultural background, in which there are practically no monasteries and pilgrimage is, on the whole, a small-scale phenomenon, lay behind my research questions. Even if one tries to avoid generalizations they may still be there at the beginning of the research process. In the course of it I therefore had to reconsider some of my ideas about pilgrimage. My cultural presumptions affected the whole process, however, for example in how I understood and interpreted the interviewees’ answers, and how I interpreted the research material. The researcher as a subject and a person is one of

¹⁵¹ Field diary I, 10-14.

¹⁵² On misinterpretation in ethnography see Davies 1999, 11.

¹⁵³ Field diary II, 2-3.

the tools of the research process. It is interesting to compare Greek and foreign studies of Greek religiosity. In many cases the interpretations are different. Greeks may, for example, see their own people as more secularized than a foreign researcher might. As Laitila mentions, due to the fact that we always see the data from one perspective or another, any statement about religion is both a statement about human beings attributing meanings and values to something that manifests itself, and a statement of a theoretical or interpretive nature, which is a new meaning derived from our presumptions and the data we study.¹⁵⁴ According to the same logic, the interviewed pilgrims often saw their fellow Greeks as alienated from the Church, whereas for me, from the Finnish perspective, it seemed at first glance that the majority of the ones I met at the beginning of my fieldwork were religiously active and committed. However, being religious does not mean the same thing to a Finn as it does to a Greek. A Finn defines it in a different way.

The researcher's cultural background also guides the way the research is done. The Western way of approaching information could be characterized as "effective" and "aggressive", and for this reason participant observation is often considered a secondary way of collecting research material compared to straight interviews, for example. Participant observation nevertheless played a significant role in this research, and I assume that my living in Greece has given it credibility. Experiencing everyday life in Greece naturally helped me to understand Greek society and to form a picture of the significance of the monastic institution in Northern Greece. Without this the research would have been incomplete.

The duration and intensity of fieldwork also play a part in the research process. After spending more than two and a half years in Greece I had learned something about the country, its culture and society, but likewise many things remain unknown to me. I cannot say that I understand Greek culture thoroughly. Research is always about interpretations and bidirectional meanings, from those studied to the one studying.¹⁵⁵ Many cultural features remain blind spots, where the difference between being an insider

¹⁵⁴ Laitila 2005, 30.

¹⁵⁵ See also Utraiainen 1999, 54.

and being an outsider is unclear. At this point, the researcher is, in a way, too close to the subject matter.¹⁵⁶

I became familiar with the phenomenon of being too close to the subject matter in my discussions with my colleagues. When I returned from the field I noticed that sometimes someone who is not familiar with the field may be in a position to make relevant remarks, but I might ignore them as something without value for my research. For example, I discussed pilgrims' clothing with my colleagues. In the field I had started to consider the pilgrims' way of dressing a natural feature and part of monastic etiquette. Only after showing some photographs to my colleagues did I realize that the dress code said many things about their attitudes towards the convent. The challenge, in other words, is to find a balance between being an outsider and an insider. The process of finding the balance is not something that one can control totally, and is often random. It is also possible that the picture of the subject matter will remain blurred or subjective. The process of interpreting research data does not, in fact, have an end.

A woman in a female convent

A researcher in a female convent has to be a woman. Nunneries rarely accommodate men, usually only in exceptional cases such as when the parents of a novice wish to spend a few nights in the convent. A male researcher could, in theory, interview the nuns, but in order to get a holistic view of female monastic life it is essential to stay there overnight. It is not easy to ask questions concerning gender in a community that is obviously dominated by one sex. It has been said that women in ethnography are much more restricted in terms of access and moving around in the field than men, and on the other hand that women notice different things than men. Clearly the position of women depends on the field in question. A female scholar can move freely in a nunnery, and the restrictions have more to do with the customs and restrictions of monastic life.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Gothóni 2002, 162.

¹⁵⁷ Flick 2002, 138. See also Utriainen 1999, 216 and Ruether 1983, 52-53.

A convent is a community of women in which gender takes on a special meaning.¹⁵⁸ First of all, according to the Orthodox way of thinking, all monastics are considered to live angelic lives and are thus not considered women in the traditional sense of the word. In other words, nuns struggle spiritually against all kinds of temptations (such as corporal desires) and any other obstacles that might disturb their spiritual growth. They are said to have died for the world. Secondly, there is some kind of symbolic analogy between the monastic community and a family. The leader of a nunnery is called igumeni (*igouméni*), but also a mother (*mitéra*). The spiritual father and the clergy in general could be considered representatives of the patriarchal dimension of the female community.¹⁵⁹

There are also other special ways of addressing nuns and the leader of the convent. Igumeni is usually addressed as *geróntissa*, meaning “elder”, referring to spiritual wisdom and maturity and not to age in years. Nuns are usually addressed as “sisters”.¹⁶⁰ In the family metaphor the role of a pilgrim is like that of a child. She is like a pupil and the nuns’ duty is to guide her in her spiritual growth and to listen to her patiently.¹⁶¹

My gender was probably of less significance to the pilgrims. My position in their eyes was most likely based on the individual conceptions they had about Finnish women. Then again, some of those I interviewed had not met any Finns before and probably formed their impression of them based on my personality. The majority of these pilgrims were women and it was probably easier for them to speak about personal matters and about their discussions with the nuns than if the interviewer had been a man. Likewise, it would probably have been easier for a male pilgrim to speak to another man about his experiences.

My age and my university background did not appear to be important to the interviewees. No one was interested in finding out my age, even if it is not a taboo in Greek society.

¹⁵⁸ For more on this topic see the chapter on pilgrimage and gender.

¹⁵⁹ Field diary I, 4. Nuns are most typically called either *monachí*, or *kalógría* in Greek.

¹⁶⁰ Iossifides 1991, 146. Field Diary II, 4.

¹⁶¹ Field diary I, 8; Field diary II, 4; Field diary I, 22; Field diary III, 44.

Some pilgrims, who were not familiar with Finnish university traditions, were surprised when they found out that I taught at university. This may have put pressure on some informants and made the atmosphere more formal than necessary. Some pilgrims thought that I was doing my research for the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and asked me if I knew some professors personally.

Monastic life as a research topic, and the challenges

Anyone carrying out research in Greece, especially in the monastic environment, needs to have personal contacts, especially at the beginning of the process. I could not just open the gates of the monastery and walk in. I had to get to know some people who went to the convent often and could put me in contact with the nuns. Like all monasteries, it has a hierarchical social structure and the igumeni controls all the social interaction that takes place. Moreover, those who live there want to know who is visiting it and why. I lived in Thessaloniki and soon got to know people who were in close contact with the convent of the Dormition. With their assistance I made contact with it and got to know both pilgrims and nuns. The fact that my contact persons were Greek Orthodox Pilgrims was decisive, and enabled me to start visiting the convent because the nuns felt that they were talking to someone they could trust. When I returned to the field in September 2002 I was able, to a great extent, to make use of the contacts I had established earlier. I met and talked to a number of pilgrims I knew from the first research period.

According to Grönfors, anthropological fieldwork is the more difficult the more closed the group and the more intimate the subject matter one is dealing with.¹⁶² I faced both of these issues during my research. Most Greek female monasteries are relatively open towards society, but they wish to limit the numbers of pilgrims for economic reasons.¹⁶³ Even if many pilgrims make substantial donations, the growing number is a financial

¹⁶² Grönfors 1982, 58.

¹⁶³ Greek monasteries do not charge guests for accommodation or meals, but pilgrims usually donate something and sometimes bring valuable gifts.

burden. In addition, the monasteries want to know the reasons for the visits, both for their own safety and also for spiritual reasons. Guests are often asked what their reasons and motives for making the pilgrimage are, and their stay is often restricted to a couple of days.¹⁶⁴ The convent's igumeni Marína chooses a nun whose duty it is to take care of the visitor, the choice typically being based on her suitability in terms of age or education, for example. A university-educated nun will take care of a university-educated pilgrim, and so on. The visitor often has to wait, sometimes even hours, to talk to the nuns. Thus it is not always easy to stay a few nights in the convent. At the beginning of my fieldwork I was more of an observer and I did not have many opportunities to speak with the nuns. I had to wait a few months until I had got to know the pilgrims and the nuns and had earned their trust.¹⁶⁵

The intimacy of the research topic also affected the process. Nuns prefer not to speak about personal matters or their past. This practice has to do with the ideals of monastic life, which involves becoming dead to the “world” and devoting oneself to prayer. These ideals are complied with in *askésis*, and with the help of the teachings of the desert Fathers. During the first phase of my study igumeni Marína wanted to know beforehand what questions I would be asking the nuns. I gave her the questionnaire, and later heard from her that I could not ask personal questions,¹⁶⁶ but I could discuss any other topics with sister Theodóra, and that I was welcome in the convent.

I also found the intimacy a challenge when I was interviewing the pilgrims. It is not always easy to get someone to speak about his or her convictions and personal matters during an interview lasting between one and two hours. As mentioned earlier, I made friends with the pilgrims and therefore I had the opportunity to spend more time with them and to speak for hours with them about monasteries, Orthodoxy and other related topics. I could not do this with all the interviewees, however. In order to ease the

¹⁶⁴ My visits were restricted to three nights at a time. I had a letter of recommendation from His Eminence, Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland, and I had friends who knew some of the nuns at the monastery. I believe this was critical to the nuns' positive attitude towards my research.

¹⁶⁵ Field diary III, 13.

¹⁶⁶ The fear of personal questions also has something to do with the Greek media, which has represented some Greek monasteries in an unfavorable light, claiming that they force young girls to become nuns against their will (Field diary III, 30).

interview situation I felt it was necessary to mention that I was interested in Orthodoxy on a personal level. I also told the pilgrims about the nuns I knew personally, and mentioned that my grandmother was an Orthodox. These kinds of intuitively chosen facts about myself helped me to gain their trust.

Am I a pilgrim?

The researcher's background affects his or her role in many ways. When dealing with religious matters it is natural to ponder on one's religiosity and how it relates to the religiosity of the community being studied. In this sense my role in the field might sometimes have been closer to that of a pilgrim. In the course of the research I went through many changes in my personal life. After many appointments with Sister Theodóra I felt that I had become friends with her, and I trusted her in the sense that I wanted to speak about personal matters, even my concerns, with her. I knew that the nuns were used to discussing a huge variety of human dramas, and I was also sincerely interested in Sister Theodóra's thoughts in general. On the other hand, I had an excellent opportunity to see how a nun talked to a pilgrim about his or her worries. Ironically, I could say that, due to my personal worries, my life became a research instrument.

According to René Gothóni, an anthropologist should use him or herself as a research instrument in order to understand the pilgrimage phenomenon and thus, naturally, to participate in pilgrimage.¹⁶⁷ He concludes that increasing our understanding of pilgrimage requires temporal involvement. He seems to subscribe to the Weberian tradition according to which it is impossible to explain social actions without understanding them.¹⁶⁸ The notion of using oneself as a research instrument is crucial to all participant observation.

¹⁶⁷ Gothóni 2002, 162-163.

¹⁶⁸ See Weber 1978, 9.

On the subject of the researcher's position, it is essential to be aware that the impact of the research subject on the process of getting information also has to do with conceptions about the object of the research, and with how deeply the researcher perceives the studied community or individual to be "potentially right" in terms of their worldview or conceptions in general.¹⁶⁹ The research subject, or the researcher's personality, thus has a two-way effect on the research process. It affects the researcher's conceptions of the studied object on the one hand, and the object's conception of the researcher on the other.

Processing my personal problems with Sister Theodóra was an example of this. As a Christian I did not scorn nuns or pilgrims, and I sincerely wanted to hear their opinions and ideas about different issues. In this sense I did not make a distinction between my true self, my life situation and my researcher personality. I operated in the field as myself even if I tried to collect the research data in all possible ways and to do it objectively. My goal in the field was to act in such a way that the interviewees could easily approach me and could feel safe enough to speak to me truthfully about issues that might be considered private. By following the dress code and the conventions of the monastic environment I tried to make the process smooth for all concerned. Nevertheless, I do not feel that I could have been one of the pilgrims I studied because I do not think that it would be possible for me to fully identify with the world of the Greek pilgrim.

In the course of the research process I often pondered upon my attitude towards Greek Orthodoxy, and in my mind tried to answer the nuns' question about why I had not become an Orthodox. I have been interested in Orthodoxy since my teenage years, and have come to the conclusion that my interest has something to do with my Karelian roots and the fact that my grandmother was an Orthodox.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the focus of my interest is on the interdependence of religion and society and understanding Greek society, and not so much on my personal convictions.

¹⁶⁹ See also Gothóni 2002, 162. Gothóni refers to Turnbull's idea of the existential reality of those studied, and notes that the researcher should accept the possibility that "the God of the pilgrims" really exists. In other words, empathy is important in the process of understanding.

¹⁷⁰ The Orthodox faith in Finland spread first to southern Finland and to the people of Karelia. See e.g., Kärkkäinen 1999, 180.

III A sacred journey versus “proskínima”

It could be claimed that Greek pilgrimage, and especially the pilgrimage of the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, is unique, and differs from other types of Orthodox pilgrimage. Unlike Russian pilgrimage, for example, it emphasizes spirituality, spiritual renewal, and the inner journey instead of physical endeavor. Chulos explains the practices and meaning of Russian pilgrimage, which by the late Imperial period included both the spiritual and the physical side of religious traveling. As he describes it, “the equation of spiritual improvement with physical suffering” is a particularly Russian contribution to Orthodox Christianity and resembles more the Western *peregrinatio*, with its combination of secular and profane and “walking and suffering [to pay] off the reward there is to be attained,” than the Greek *proskínima* and its tradition of spiritual renewal.¹⁷¹

Archimandrite Dositheos describes Greek Orthodox pilgrimage in his guide for pilgrims, referring to pilgrimage as a “blessed habit” with a long history, in which Christian pilgrims visit holy sites, monasteries and convents that are known for housing Saints’ relics or miracle-working icons. He suggests that pilgrims visit these places in order to be blessed and to save their souls.¹⁷² According to Alpéntzos, a lot of people in Greece visit monasteries and the main reasons for doing so include “fulfilling a spiritual need, being uplifted and seeking inner calm”. People are also aware of the spiritual and social work that is done on a national and international level by the monasteries. They are considered important institutions even today, and people visit them for these reasons.¹⁷³

This and the subsequent chapters of this study focus on the course of pilgrimage from the point of view of the convent’s pilgrim, the different categories of pilgrims, and the individual’s experience of pilgrimage. Strenski’s words below illustrate the importance of seeing the individual behind the religious collective:

¹⁷¹ Chulos 1999, 24.

¹⁷² Dositheos 2004, 9.

¹⁷³ Alpéntzos 2002, 198-209.

[Or,] to explain religious *collectivities*, such as churches, movements, *ummas*, Chosen People, totemic clans, brotherhoods, sororities, *sanghas*, covens, cults, sects, priesthoods, sodalities, religious orders, *varnas*, and such, we need only understand their basic constituent parts or ‘building blocks’ – the individual human being.¹⁷⁴

The following narrative, which is based on my field diary, describes a visit I made to a convent with the Koumanídis family in September 2002.¹⁷⁵ It serves as an example and illustrates the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Greek context, and includes many of the essential elements of Orthodox pilgrimage, such as going to the church, lighting candles, kissing the icons, and having conversations with the nuns. It also serves as a general illustration that will help the reader to reflect on what is said about pilgrimage in the following chapters, and clarifies the social network of the convent, and also the family’s attitude towards it.¹⁷⁶ It is my description of its course, but it is also naturally my interpretation of a pilgrimage with the Koumanídis family. The intention here is to distinguish some of the most typical forms of ritual activity involved in the pilgrimage process, but not necessarily to label them as pilgrimage and thus to separate them from other religious activities.¹⁷⁷

A visit to a convent with the Koumanídis family

The Koumanídis family picked me up at 7.45 in the morning and we drove to the nunnery, or actually first to the monastery next to it, to celebrate the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year. The family wanted to meet Father Ioánnis and make their confession, which they may do three times a year. The liturgy had already started when we arrived and the church was full of people. Mrs. Koumanídis lit a couple of candles, kissed some of the icons and then we sat down together in the esonarthex of the church. The children went to play outside. Many women are bothered by the noise children make in the church and she explained to me that women and children usually listen to the liturgy in the crypt, which is equipped with loudspeakers so that everyone can hear it. The women tried to

¹⁷⁴ Strenski 2006, 283.

¹⁷⁵ This visit was not to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, but it is used here as an example because my fieldwork notes in the convent of the Dormition were usually not as exhaustive as in this case. However, I often visited the convent of the Dormition with the Koumanídis family.

¹⁷⁶ The narrative is a translation from Finnish.

¹⁷⁷ Coleman and Elsner 1995, 213-220; Field Diary IV 32-34. One might ask, as Coleman and Elsner do, if pilgrims in general have similar experiences if they visit the same site at the same time; the universal character of pilgrimage must be questioned even when the focus is on one denomination.

keep the children quiet, especially during Father Ioánnis' sermon, and that reminded me of the story María and Angelikí once told me, explaining that Greek Orthodox churches are so noisy because the devil naturally wants to be in the same place as God. Many pilgrims took notes of Father Ioánnis' sermon. Even Sister Ekaterína, who later came to greet us, was aware of the noise the children were making, and remarked to us that it was difficult to stay there in the esonarthex. I could see that Mrs. Koumanídis was moved by the Liturgy and was weeping at some point.

After the service Mr. and Mrs. Koumanídis met Father Ioánnis [privately] and I waited outside, together with many other people. While I was waiting I started to speak to a woman, possibly of my age, and she told me she was working on her PhD in the US on the subject of [some] Arabic manuscripts. She had traveled a lot and was now extremely happy to be back in Greece. We exchanged e-mail addresses. When we went outside Mr. Koumanídis praised Father Ioánnis, saying that you could see from his face that he was a saint. He told me about the confession and the kind of topics they usually discussed with the priest, and Mrs. Koumanídis encouraged me to write to Father Ioánnis if there were any questions I wanted to discuss with him concerning Orthodoxy or my personal life. Afterwards we lingered in the courtyard in front of the church and greeted friends and acquaintances of the Koumanídis family. They talked about everyday things, and one of their friends thought that my good knowledge of Greek was God's gift.

Finally Mrs. Koumanídis and I walked to the nunnery next to the monastery. It is still under construction and has not yet been consecrated. There are 30 nuns now. At the gate an elderly nun greeted us and pointed at me with an inquiring expression on her face. Mrs. Koumanídis told her that I was from Finland and we were let inside. The nun asked me directly if I was a Protestant and started telling me about the differences between these two denominations. She said that Orthodoxy stressed the individual, the human being him or herself as a starting point of believing, and that in this way the Orthodox learn to know themselves and therefore to help and love other people. She said: "When you go to a hospital and you want to help someone, for example, you don't go there acting like a saint, but you need to ask God what you can do". She also told me that people who come to the convent must have the correct attitude, meaning they must be pious, and should not wear fancy clothes. She took hold of my hand and spoke to me in a very friendly tone. While we were talking Mrs. Koumanídis was looking for Sister Pelagía.

The nuns offered us coffee in the courtyard that was situated between the old and the new buildings of the convent, and not only coffee but also water, cookies, and chocolates wrapped in silver paper. The children were given juice. There were maybe 25 people with us, mostly middle-aged, and only a few youngsters. The nuns kissed the few teenagers on the cheek. Mrs. Koumanídis told me that she preferred to come here on Sundays even if there was a church in their neighborhood, because their friends came here. Their youngest child's school was also on the way to the nunnery. Again I was introduced to many family friends.

Mrs. Koumanídis eventually found Sister Pelagía, and the two of them started to talk about their common friends. Mrs. Koumanídis wanted to know who had or had not been to the nunnery recently. Sister Pelagía laughed when she talked about her sister's family's visit, which had been "quite a hustle and bustle". We also discussed Father Ioánnis' sermon, and Mrs. Koumanídis was especially taken with some of his words.

After a short while Sister Pelagía took us to see some of the new buildings that had not yet been taken into use. The new church was very impressive. Six of the nuns were iconographers and they had painted the icons in the holy gates of the iconostasis. The floors were shiny and made of stone in all different colors. Sister Pelagía let us see the new reception room, which was about 100 square meters in size. She explained that it had to be large because Father Ioánnis had made plans for the future of the nunnery, and the nuns had to be prepared. We saw also a room that would be used as a Sunday school classroom in the future (*katichitikó*), and the new kitchen and *trapezaría*, the refectory. There were even elevators and ramps for the disabled. Sister Pelagía showed us one of the cells. Most of the buildings were still under construction, but I understood why both Mr. and Mrs. Koumanídis and Sister Pelagía were proud of the new complex.

Finally we went out and as we walked back to the old buildings Mr. Koumanídis pointed at some beautiful tomatoes growing in the small kitchen garden. This gave Sister Pelagía good reason to run to the garden and pick some tomatoes and cucumbers for us. The *tálandon*¹⁷⁸ had sounded about 15 minutes earlier and she had to leave us. Mrs. Koumanídis whispered something in her ear, and then we started walking to the car. When we reached the car park there were only four people besides us in the convent.¹⁷⁹

Pilgrimage - Proskínima

We often consider that pilgrimage is a unique, even an once-in-a-lifetime, experience. For some pilgrims however, as for the pilgrims who visit the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, pilgrimage can become such an intensive experience that they wish to visit the same pilgrimage site again and again. Pilgrimage may, in this case, become a way of life, in which the pilgrim is so inspired and fascinated by the atmosphere of the pilgrimage site, that he or she wants to return to the convent and spend as much time as possible there. Many pilgrims of the convent of the Dormition say that they "love" the convent and like to spend their free time there. They want to take part to the convent's liturgical life and discuss their life situations with the convent's nuns. The pilgrims want to be in

¹⁷⁸ A piece of wood used for calling people to services and nuns to their duties.

¹⁷⁹ Field diary II, 22-25.

close contact with the convent and in general the atmosphere, which the pilgrims consider holy.

As Elsner and Rutherford note, pilgrimage has proved extremely difficult to define.¹⁸⁰ There have been several attempts to devise a general theory, such as the one Morinis put forward according to which “pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or state that he or she believes to embody a sacred ideal”.¹⁸¹ Dubisch, on the other hand, has questioned whether pilgrimage as a general category can or should be used across cultures. She suggests using the plural form “pilgrimages”, which better indicates the multiple nature of the phenomenon and its various manifestations.¹⁸²

In order to define pilgrimage in the context of a Greek nunnery it is necessary to consider the terminology and the various ways in which the pilgrims talk about their visits to monasteries and to the convent of the Dormition in particular. Such linguistic examination should shed light on how the pilgrims determine the degrees of the sacredness in the process, and to understand better the pilgrimage to the convent of the Dormition. A term commonly used in this context, naturally, is pilgrimage (*proskínima*). The Greek terminology differs from the Latin-based expressions in connotation, however. As Dubisch has shown, for example, there is no exact equivalent of the English term “pilgrimage” in Greek, but the word *proskínima* is used both for the act of pilgrimage and for the devotions that are performed at any church. *Proskínima* thus refers to devotions, which include lighting a candle, kissing the icon or the central figures in them, and making the sign of the cross. It also includes venerating and bowing. Pilgrimage further refers to bending down on one’s knees, being at one’s devotions in a church or monastery or on a smaller scale, in front of an icon. The Greek term *proskínima* does not include the connotation of a journey either grammatically or semantically, even if the pilgrim has come from a distant location. Nonetheless, in the Greek Orthodox context pilgrimage could also be understood as a visit to a local monastery as well as a journey to

¹⁸⁰ For definitions of pilgrimage see Elsner and Rutherford 2005, 1-6.

¹⁸¹ Morinis 1992, 4.

¹⁸² C.f. Reader 2005, 32.

Jerusalem.¹⁸³ In addition to the noun *proskínima*¹⁸⁴ there is the verb *proskínó*, which is also used frequently in this context, and the commonly used “*na proskíníso*” means ‘to make my devotions’. A synonym for *proskínó* is the verb *aspázomai*, which has a slightly narrower connotation meaning kissing the icons or relics. Similarly, many pilgrims refer to visiting a church as going to light a candle (*tha páo n’ánápsó éna kerí*)¹⁸⁵, and anyone who visits a monastery may call himself or herself a pilgrim, “*proskinitís*”.¹⁸⁶

The main difference between the Greek- and Latin-based terms therefore has to do with the connotation of a journey. Gothóni, has pointed out that “pilgrim” is a Middle English word that comes from the Old French *perigrin* derived from the Late Latin *peregrinus* meaning “foreigner”, from *peregre* “abroad”, furthermore from *per* “through” and *agr-, ager* “land”, “field”. Originally the word meant a foreigner who lived outside the territory of Rome, and later came to mean a person who lived in exile looking for a higher goal. Thus the central connotations of the word pilgrim are to do with traveling and walking around. Eventually the meaning was extended to include those who travel to holy places.¹⁸⁷ However, even if the Greek and Latin terms have some fundamental differences, the distinction should not be exaggerated because there is always a small journey included in the Greek Orthodox context, too. Monasteries are often built in high, remote and undisturbed places, and the pilgrim typically feels some sense of gratification upon reaching his or her destination. On the other hand, in the case of an urban or suburban monastery, the journey does not play a significant role because the distances are often short and the monasteries are easy to reach by car or bus.

Another way in which Greek pilgrims talk about visiting a monastery or a convent is to call it a trip or an excursion (*ekdromí*). Many people go with groups, usually organized by

¹⁸³ Dubisch 1995, 24; Gothoni 1993, 120-122; Alpéntzos 2002, 12.

¹⁸⁴ The Greek noun *proskínima* has other meanings than the ones mentioned above. It can refer to the symbolic core of the act of pilgrimage, the church, or any place that is considered to be holy or worthy of respect. In everyday spoken Greek the noun even has the meaning of “greetings”. A grandmother for example, might send “*proskínimata*” (pl.) to her grandson, meaning loving regards. See also Babiniotis 2002, 1493.

¹⁸⁵ See also Dubisch 1995, 66.

¹⁸⁶ Dubisch 1995, 66-67, 78; Babiniotis 2002, 1493.

¹⁸⁷ Gothóni 1993, 120-121.

the local congregation, or with a group of friends or relatives. The trip is usually seen as some kind of religious tourism, which includes a devout visit to a monastery. Roula organized trips to various monasteries and convents with her friends:

We go in a group and make trips to different monasteries [and convents]. For example now that it's Lent we go. We want to visit several monasteries and we always go to a different one, to learn something new. But I have been here in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin many times, which is close, and I go to Koufalia, Gregorios Palamas every year. I'm going there the day after tomorrow because the nunnery celebrates this Sunday. I love that convent...¹⁸⁸

Some of the pilgrims I interviewed did not make a distinction between a visit to a church and a visit to a convent. Going to church is a central element of both, even if many visitors agree that the atmosphere in a convent is quite different than that in a parish church. In this case the Greek verb *ekklisiázomai* is commonly used, the principal meaning of which is 'to attend the Holy Liturgy' in church. The choice of the verb has something to do with the fact that the pilgrims do not stay in the convent overnight and therefore do not consider it to be any different from going to a church.

Greek laity also distinguishes shrines and monasteries according to their importance. Some pilgrims seemed to consider pilgrimage only as a journey to some shrines that are considered important, such as the Church of Assumption on the Island of Tinos.¹⁸⁹ Others, however, equated their visit to the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin with a visit to a church, even if according to the theological definition the whole life of a Christian is a pilgrimage, and all his or her actions are steps on the way to *théosis*. There are similarities here to 19th-century Russian pilgrimage, with some reservations. Chulos distinguishes several forms of pilgrimage in Russia at the beginning of the 1860s, prior to the emancipation of the serfs, and it seems that some of the Russian Orthodox experienced religious travel as part of ordinary religious practice.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Interview 2003: 12.

¹⁸⁹ Field diary I, 8; Field diary V, 7, 21. For more on Tinos, see e.g., Dubisch 1995 and Pakkanen 1995.

¹⁹⁰ Chulos 1999, 22; Field diary I, 8. See also Babiniotis 2002, 570.

Lína did not go to church or visit monasteries very often, but she considered them both liturgical options. She used the term *ekklisiázomai* in both cases:

No, I don't go to the liturgy [in a convent] very often but that has to do with the fact that I don't go to liturgies in general. But if I had to choose where to go I would prefer the convent, even if it means traveling some kilometers, whereas you can go to church on foot.¹⁹¹

Most visitors simply talked about *going* (*piǵéno, páo*) to the convent. It was also common to call the trip a visit (*epískepsi*), indicating that the pilgrims felt that they were visiting a place where someone lived. Many, like Glikéria, used many of the above-mentioned terms simultaneously:

I had been to a convent on an excursion, on a pilgrimage...with my confessor sometime before, we were only girls and we went to a nunnery and we stayed there, two female monasteries actually. [...] After this I went just with my friend to a nunnery in Thasos, in the convent of Archangel Michael.¹⁹²

The fact, that there are several ways of referring to visits to monasteries in the Greek language, together with the differences between the Christian East and West understandings of pilgrimage, at least on the linguistic level, leads to the following conclusions concerning the understanding and focus of pilgrimage in the Greek context. The veneration of icons and other holy objects is considered more important than the journey to the pilgrimage site. Many pilgrims use other terms synonymously with pilgrimage, but this does not necessarily mean that the process could not be considered pilgrimage. Indeed, the use of other more secular terms is indicative of the straightforward attitude the pilgrims have to the monasteries. These secular terms also reveal their attitudes to the relationship between divine and everyday life. As Dubisch noted, the divine and the mundane cannot be separated in the context of daily life.¹⁹³ In

¹⁹¹ Interview 2002: 23.

¹⁹² Interview 2002: 22.

¹⁹³ Dubisch 1995, 89.

this sense the usage of the term “*ekklisiázomai*”, churchgoing, also illustrates the informal and uncomplicated attitude of pilgrims towards the convent.

Definitions of pilgrimage are easily influenced by the Latin-based connotations (foreigner, abroad, land, journey). The concept of a journey is one of the crucial denominators and should be examined closely. According to Talbot, most Byzantinists tend to use the term “pilgrimage” rather loosely, referring both to long- distance journeys to a shrine or a living holy man, and to short trips to a local or regional church for the sake of prayer or in search of healing.¹⁹⁴ Dubish, for example, concentrates on the long- distance journey in her understanding. She mentions the women who come to the shrine of Tinos from the island itself, but she makes a distinction between those who come from near and those who come from afar. She concludes by stating that the idea of a journey “remains basic to pilgrimage” and “sets it apart from other visits to sacred places”. In other words, she does not consider a woman from Tinos a pilgrim, whereas a woman from Thessaloniki is because she takes in the island landscape, the town and its inhabitants in addition to her impressions of the church of the Annunciation. Her journey to Tinos is thus a journey to a “different place”.¹⁹⁵

Dubish admits, however, that the church at Tinos and its sacredness as a place constitute an experience that is common to all, whether they are from nearby or far away. In my opinion, however, it is not necessary to make a distinction based on the journey because the Greek term *proskínima* has no such connotation. As I understand the notion of pilgrimage, the convent of the Dormition, for example, does not have to represent something “different” for the visitor. The pilgrimage site may also represent something ordinary, common and already familiar. In the Greek case the limitations and connotations of the Greek term and the pilgrims’ attitudes and own definitions must be taken into account. Thus, in the context of a convent the journey is not necessarily basic

¹⁹⁴ Talbot 2002, 73.

¹⁹⁵ The title of Dubisch’s book is *In a Different Place*. The “different place” has a set of meanings for her that reflect her conceptions about herself in the field, the field itself, and the understanding of anthropology in general (Dubisch 1995, 253-254).

to pilgrimage, and in the contemporary Greek context a pilgrimage may be a long-distance journey or a short-distance visit.¹⁹⁶

In other words, pilgrimages to different places have different characteristics. As far as Tinos is concerned it is a question of the material and concrete activities that take place in the Church of the Madonna of the Annunciation. The miracle-working icon plays a central role in the motivation of the pilgrims going to the shrine.¹⁹⁷ One could nevertheless argue that there are other significant motivators, such as the opportunity to communicate with the nuns and to venerate the icons and relics in a nunnery that is less well known and to which pilgrimage is more local. Just as the motivators differ in the examples, so does the nature of the pilgrimage. In other words, pilgrimage to Tinos has a different character from pilgrimage to a less well-known nunnery. Regardless of the miracle-working icons and relics at the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, there are many other elements involved in pilgrimage to this particular convent, such as the liturgical participation and the opportunity to communicate with nuns and ask for their blessing and prayers.

In order to clarify the above discussion on pilgrimage in the context of the convent of Dormition I will now consider the definitions of the term from a historical perspective. Greenfield discusses the use of the terms pilgrimage and visitation in his article about visitation and the holy men in the Byzantium era, particularly Lazaros of Mount Galesion. He uses both terms to describe the range of circumstances in which people approached living holy men, although the ultimate pilgrimage was that of *théosis*, the journey to God in eternity. In this sense *everything* that led to God, everything that involved the movement from earthly image to heavenly original, was in some sense pilgrimage. Thus, according to Greenfield, an understanding of pilgrimage in the Byzantine world, whether to holy places, holy things or holy people, and whether in a general or a more local context, must incorporate the full range of reflections on and interpretations of the pilgrimage ideal. In other words, a local villager who visited a

¹⁹⁶ Dubisch 1995, 36-37, 253. See also Talbot 2002, 73.

¹⁹⁷ Dubisch 1995, 49-75.

nearby convent was still approaching the holy no matter how ordinary the reasons for the visit were.¹⁹⁸ In addition, Talbot notes that throughout late Antiquity and the Byzantine Middle Ages visitation to holy men, and sometimes women, was considered similar to visitation to a pilgrimage site. For Greek pilgrims of the eighth until the fourteenth century, for instance, the holy ascetic residence was as important a destination as *loca sancta*.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, the *Life of St. Irene Abbess of Chrysobalanton* describes visitation to a ninth-century igumeni who, according to the text, was greatly admired. Visitors gathered before her in order to see her “venerable face, hear a word from her and enjoy her prayers”.²⁰⁰

Pilgrimage as I describe it in this study is, in fact, very similar to visitation to holy men and women in late Antiquity and the Byzantine Middle Ages. It could be compared to “staying in the sphere of the convent”. Pilgrims often go to the convent of the Dormition in order to maintain their faith, and do not necessarily travel far to find solutions to particular problems or misfortunes they may encounter during their lives. In my understanding of the concept of pilgrimage I thus echo Greenfield’s view, according to which a local villager visiting a nearby convent was still approaching the holy. In other words, pilgrims are drawn to the convent of the Dormition by the richer liturgical cycle and the possibility to interact with the nuns. These two elements, together with the notion that the journey is not the most important point, represent the key diversions from the more conventional definitions of pilgrimage. In other words, it does not have to focus on something “exotic” or distant. Most pilgrimage sites have become holy because the traditions have defined them as such. In the case of the convent of the Dormition it is the predominant and local tradition.

¹⁹⁸ Greenfield 2002, 213-214.

¹⁹⁹ Talbot 2001, 102.

²⁰⁰ Rosenquist 1986, 41-45.

Interpreting the pilgrimage process

In addition to the differences in terminology, there are also differences among pilgrims in interpretation of the pilgrimage process.²⁰¹ The discussion in the following sections focuses on the main elements of pilgrimage in the convent of the Dormition, such as the relations between the nuns and the pilgrims, and between the pilgrims and the individuality of pilgrimage, in the light of earlier theories of pilgrimage.

The fundamental questions here have to do with the definition of pilgrimage. Recent theories question its universal character both in world religions and in individual experience. However, despite the individuality of the experience, according to Coleman and Elsner all pilgrimage could be regarded as a composite of certain elements, such as ritual, organized travel, objects of veneration, the constitution of temporary “communities” at special sites, sacrifices of time and effort, and requests and offerings directed towards sacred figures. They also note that any given pilgrimage may emphasize one or more of these elements over others.²⁰² The matter becomes more complex given the restrictions inherent in defining pilgrimage in a contemporary female convent.

In phenomenological terms, pilgrimage is a heterogeneous project and thus there are various theoretical models of interpretation. The individual case studies are often based on some existing theory and the researchers have therefore easily descended into generalization, applying a particular concept such as social theory (like the “*communitas*” of Victor and Edith Turner) and testing the case. The result has often been to force the phenomenon into a more homogenous format than it is in reality.²⁰³ I am of the opinion that there can be no broad generalization²⁰⁴ of the nature of pilgrimage because each

²⁰¹ Pilgrimage (like secularization) is understood as a process in this work because it is a ritual that reflects and responds to a variety of both constant and changing beliefs, values and needs. Thus, according to Dubisch for example, it lends itself to an approach that regards ritual as process rather than a fixed structure. See Dubisch 1995, 40.

²⁰² Coleman and Elsner 1995, 213-220.

²⁰³ Pellikka 1992, 24-25.

²⁰⁴ Even if the theories emphasize the individual religious experience this does not mean that it is impossible to theorize and generalize pilgrimage. Pilgrimage experiences are relevant in the cognitive science of religion, for instance, one of the basic ideas of which is that religious thoughts and behavior are made possible by evolved cognitive capacities, which are the same for all humans. Thus the pilgrimage

pilgrim's individual experiences are related to many personal factors such as age, background, and education that play role in the experience, and because each pilgrimage site has a character of its own. In other words, as Eade and Sallnow claim, the Turnerian²⁰⁵ paradigm and other generalizing models of pilgrimage portraying it as a homogeneous project are now being cast aside, and a more complex and diversified picture is emerging in their place.²⁰⁶ Together with the tendency to see the individual in all areas of life, pilgrimage theories have also focused on the individual experiences, interpretations, meanings and motifs behind the process²⁰⁷.

Eade and Sallnow see the pilgrimage site as an arena for exchanging ideas. Their conception includes the relativity of a granted meaning of pilgrimage for its participants, the pilgrims, and the heterogeneity of their motives for entering the site. They describe pilgrimage and the pilgrimage site as a "ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices" in which religious experts and the laity exchange ideas and even contest them. The title of their book, *Contesting the Sacred*, is indicative of their view of pilgrimage as an encounter between the secular and the sacred realms. Thus, a pilgrimage site is:

above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, for both the official co-optation and the non-official recovery of religious meanings, for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups, for drives toward consensus and *communitas*, and for counter-movements toward separateness and division.²⁰⁸

Eade and Sallnow discuss pilgrimage on a universal level and in various Christian contexts. However, their discussion also serves as a tool in terms of understanding the Greek Orthodox context and pilgrimage as it is seen in the convent of the Dormition. Of

experience can be explained based on knowledge about the human mind. For comparison, see Pyysiäinen 2002, 1.

²⁰⁵ Victor and Edith Turner developed a theory of pilgrimage as an ellipse; the pilgrim leaves the conventional social structure and enters a world of anti-structure, which is separate from his or her everyday experiences. See e.g., Victor and Edith Turner 1978.

²⁰⁶ Eade and Sallnow 1991; 2-3.

²⁰⁷ The tendency of interpreting religious experiences as individual in nature might have something to do with the broad agreement that individualism is a dominant feature in contemporary Western culture (Abercrombie et al. 2000, 175).

²⁰⁸ Eade and Sallnow 1991, 2-3.

particular relevance are some of their principal arguments, such as the notion of a pilgrimage center and their perceptions of sacred and symbolic exchange:

One of the fundamental distinctions made in pilgrimage studies, including the one conducted by Eade and Sallnow, is that between religious professionals and the laity.²⁰⁹ This distinction implies that neither the “sacred knowledge” nor the “ritual participation” of a pilgrimage site can be attained by pilgrims. Sarris, however, points out that in Orthodox thinking, especially on Mount Athos, liturgical participation is seen as the most important way of learning and mediating the sacred knowledge. As ritual participation is everyone’s privilege, one could argue that understanding the doctrine is something that everybody can aspire to. The pilgrims consider the nuns religious specialists and respect their opinions. Most of them also see the nuns as examples and hope to achieve similar progress in spiritual life. Nevertheless, in the convent of the Dormition the pilgrims seemed to talk to the nuns in a rather informal way and did not emphasize the gap between religious professionals and laity. Many of the pilgrims explained that the informality was based on the fact that people had always felt close to the Greek clergy, and for a long time priests did not have a formal theological education but were men of the community,²¹⁰ and everyone knew them personally.²¹¹

Assuming that pilgrimage is an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, we might also assume that the exchanging of ideas has to happen in communication between two or more parties that are present at the pilgrimage site. Furthermore, as my fieldwork material indicates, it could be argued that it is the interaction between nuns and pilgrims that has the central role in enabling the discourses to compete as it is a direct connection between the representatives of the church and the laity. The encounters between the nuns and the pilgrims are an essential form of exchanging ideas. Nevertheless, there is no reason to underrate the other elements of pilgrimage in the competition process (or in

²⁰⁹ Eade and Sallnow 1991, 2-3

²¹⁰ For instance, the Faculty of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki was founded in 1942.

²¹¹ Eade and Sallnow 1991, 2-3; Sarris 2004, 132; Field diary III, 40.

exchanging ideas), such as the services, the icons, the prayers and the *támata*²¹² in front of the icons, and the holy water. Indeed, it is clear from the pilgrims' accounts that they considered it particularly important to be in close and frequent contact with every aspect of the convent's spirituality, which was part of the process they called 'spiritual growth'. Maintaining a certain religious identity and striving for *théosis* was one of their fundamental motives for visiting the convent.²¹³

One of my interviewees, Alíki, emphasized some classical elements in her understanding of Christian pilgrimage, such as "imitation of Christ" in observing and imitating the way of life of the nuns, and she considered it necessary to spend some time in the convent in order to understand the Orthodox way of life. She also explained how the interaction between nuns and pilgrims was essential in the sense that the pilgrim could trust the advice given by the nuns in their capacity as religious professionals:

Pilgrimage combined with the hospitality [of the convent], which means that you stay longer in the convent - and you feel some kind of relaxation. You stay there, you see their way of life, you follow their daily program, and you somehow live and experience monastic life. [If you only pay a brief visit] you don't live it to that extent. [...] One friend of mine is a novice and my confessor was also a monk and he often made speeches on Saturdays and I used to go and listen to him. They were mostly about the Holy Scripture, the Gospel, but also advisory, so that we would follow a more spiritual way of life, be closer to God. We can also ask the nuns for advice if we have some problems. They give their advice, their opinion, because they're people...who pray and in my opinion God has enlightened them so that they can help us, we who live here in this world. They pray constantly for our sake, every day. If they don't know us personally, they pray for the whole world.²¹⁴

Gothóni has also studied the gap between the professional and the laity, or between the current status of the pilgrim's life and the ideal, desired status. Pilgrimage could thus be considered a learning process in that the pilgrim wants to fill the gap between the two, and to live the ideal life.²¹⁵ Many pilgrims make notes during the sermons and buy the

²¹² a) An offering hung in front of an icon that is usually made of metal and depicts the problem the prayer is meant to resolve. b) A vow or a solemn promise.

²¹³ Field diary II, 10; Field diary IV, 2.

²¹⁴ Interview 2002: 22.

²¹⁵ Gothóni 1993, 43-47.

books the nuns recommend. At the same time, they all have different questions to ask. Every pilgrim has a different learning agenda.

Nevertheless, there are common features in the individual motives in that all pilgrims feel that there is a possibility to “make things better” in their lives. They are thus seeking a place in which “their God’s power is most concentrated”, as Brockman describes pilgrimage²¹⁶. Áris is seeking for a place where there is devoutness. He makes a distinction between monasteries and churches. He also discusses his personal matters in the convent and takes the advice of the nuns seriously:

[In church] there are more people, there are more lights. In a convent there is devoutness. You feel naked and alienated from worldly things, things are simpler. There’s no noise, not too many lights, the atmosphere is warmer. [...] She always asks about my life. My personal things. She asks a lot of questions and is a modern person. I have the feeling that even if they don’t have television or anything like that they still know everything. They know more than my mother and people who live outside. We discuss things like if I’m having a relationship or not, things to do with my work, if I should get married and other things, my parents; because she thinks that I’m responsible [for my parents]. I like listening to her advice, I respect her and I don’t feel stressed. I can understand her opinion. She gives her advice with a lot of love.²¹⁷

For a Greek Orthodox, pilgrimage to a convent or any holy place is a concrete event that also has wider, theological significance. As a concrete event it entails a visit to a convent or some other holy place where the pilgrim venerates icons, usually confesses, and attends the Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion if possible. On the theological level the whole of life is understood as pilgrimage in that all Christians, in other words the Church, are on the road to the future and eternal life. Pilgrimage is thus the living of the Orthodox faith and striving to understand the meaning of Orthodoxy. Armeni describes it in her book *Oi Peripeteies Mias Proskinitrias Simera. Dialogismos kai Proseuhi* [*The Adventures of a Pilgrim Today - Meditation and Prayer*] as the experience of learning about the Orthodox faith. Even if the title includes the word pilgrim, the book is about

²¹⁶ Brockman 1997, 225.

²¹⁷ Interview 2002: 5.

inner experiences of faith, as the subtitle (Meditation and Prayer) suggests, rather than pilgrimage to monasteries or other holy places²¹⁸.

Conflicting ideas or ideas in common?

It has been said that Protestantism supports individualism and the direct God-human relationship more than Greek Orthodoxy does.²¹⁹ Yet individuality is not necessarily an unambiguous concept in a Greek convent. The individual aspects of Greek pilgrimage are evident in its different interpretations and customs. A Greek Orthodox nunnery represents the Church organization and is considered part of it. The Orthodox tradition also emphasizes the role of the Church and encourages people to have a close relation to it. On the basis of the pilgrims' statements it could be argued that even though the Orthodox tradition does not necessarily sustain individualism in its teaching about the relationship with God, there is space for individual interpretations of pilgrimage, and also for being an individual in the context of the nunnery.

In the case of a Greek nunnery the individual character of the pilgrimage process is apparent before the pilgrim has even started to make preparations for the journey.²²⁰ Most choose the specific convent they visit very carefully, and their choice often makes them stand out from the other pilgrims.²²¹ It also seems that they remain loyal to their chosen one and visit it again and again. It is common for them to pay visits to several others too, but those who frequent a certain one usually have a personal reason for doing so and have

²¹⁸ See Armeni 2000.

²¹⁹ On individualism and its Protestant roots, see e.g., Shain 1994.

²²⁰ Preparations in the Greek Orthodox context mean inner preparations, such as prayer, making a vow, and in some cases preparing for Lent, rather than practical preparations for a long trip. Many pilgrims do not travel far to get to the monastery. See e.g., Dubisch 1995, 87.

²²¹ Eade and Sallnow make a distinction between place-centered, person-centered and text-centered sacred sites. The first is typically a site at which a miracle has happened, such as Lourdes in Spain, the second is a place that is famous for its living Saint, for example, and the third is renowned for its religious text - of which Jerusalem is an example. A Greek Orthodox monastery could primarily be considered a combination of a place-centered and a person-centered site in that some pilgrims choose it based on the nuns' reputation and others because of its location. However, the different types of "sacredness" are not usually in conflict in the pilgrims' interpretations, and may apply simultaneously in one site. See Eade and Sallnow 1991, 6-9.

consciously made the choice. Their reasons include the existence of personal contacts, the reputation of the convent's igumeni or confessor, its ecclesiastical policy²²² or orientation, or simply the location. Thus the choice could be considered a statement that reflects matters the pilgrim considers important.

Each convent seems to have a reputation of its own.²²³ At the beginning of my fieldwork I was advised about which monasteries to visit and where to go. None of them were portrayed in a bad light, but the interviewees considered some of them to be better than others, and they thus recommended certain ones. Mr. Alexópoulos, a 52-year-old professor, told me that his family chose the convent of the Dormition because of its confessor, who they considered to be a “very wise man”, in other words spiritually experienced. It was especially important for him and his wife that the confessor was a hieromonk (*ieromónachos*) from Mount Athos, and that the convent thus had a close relation to a certain monastery on the Holy Mountain. Because they were satisfied with the political orientation of the ruling convent there they could also trust the orientation of the convent of the Dormition, and knew that the nuns and the majority of pilgrims mostly agreed with them on the ecclesiastical and theological values they considered important. Mr. Alexópoulos also thought that the convent was well organized, meaning that the nuns took care of their duties, were well educated and followed its strict *typicon*.²²⁴

Pétros, on the other hand went because of the location and the feeling that, even if was close to the city, it provided him with an exodus and a trip to another “reality”:

²²² Ecclesiastical policy here refers to matters that touch upon the calendar used or the monastery/convent dependency, for example. Some follow the so-called Julian (old) calendar, which is thirteen days behind the Gregorian (new) calendar. A monastery may also be dependent on another (*metóchi*), as some are on Mount Athos. Ecclesiastical policy may also refer to the theological orientation on a general level, such as the monastery's attitude towards the policy of the Archbishop of the Church of Greece.

²²³ According to Dubisch, churches vary in reputation in that some are built in thanksgiving for a miracle, whereas others embody important past events such as manifestations of divine powers at a point of ethnic crisis. Monasteries could be evaluated from this perspective too, although the reputation of contemporary monasteries is more closely related to the above-mentioned factors: personal contacts, the igumeni's or confessor's reputation, or ecclesiastical policy. In other words, a monastery's reputation is often related to current social issues, most probably simply because there are people living there, unlike in a church. See Dubisch 1995, 64.

²²⁴ Field diary IV, 37-38.

The main reason is that it is high up and it has a beautiful view. And it's close. It's nice to know that there's a place that is both close to the world and out of the world. In other words you can go there, leave the world and isolate yourself from it for a while, and return with another kind of strength. For me it is out of the world. Actually it's close to a road, but it's out of the world because the people who live there don't live in this world, or at least not much.²²⁵

Dímitra thought that the convent's closeness to her home was an important factor, and she also knew many of the nuns personally because they knew her sister, who was a nun in another convent a little further away. She also thought that in her case going to monasteries was a habit that originated in her childhood:

It's closer to me and the nuns are my sister's friends, both the sisters and the igumeni, and I go there. [For me it just means] church-going. If I have time I might stay, go inside to see them [the nuns] for a while, greet them, have coffee. Sometimes I leave right after Divine Liturgy. I know quite many [nuns] who are my sister's friends and they've been in Ioánnina [Dímitra's hometown] as well... Yes, I have good relations with the convent. I've been going to monasteries since I was a child, my grandfather was a priest, and I have this kind of incentive from my childhood. We visited Meteora very often and since then I've had a good relationship with a convent where a lot of my friends are [as nuns], and of course with the convent where my sister is. I feel as if I'm going home ...I like it, that's how I relax. You feel something else in a place like that.²²⁶

Sister Theodóra pondered thus on the reasons why pilgrims came to the convent of the Dormition:

Well, it's known that we don't have famous relics or anything else that would make this convent a great pilgrimage site. But of course we have the miracle-making icon of the Virgin Mary, and that's why many come. But many have heard about the convent and come because of that. Many feel the love of the sisters and the igumeni and want to come here again and again. I think that people are tired of sin.²²⁷

Pilgrimage at the convent of the Dormition comes closer to Coleman's view than to the notion of Eade and Sallnow who describe it as a "ritual space" that accommodates diverse meanings and practices. According to Coleman, there are also sites in which boundary marking does not necessarily occur, or then the pilgrims might just look past

²²⁵ Interview 2002: 2.

²²⁶ Interview 2003: 10.

²²⁷ Interview 2005: 27.

each other, carrying preformed, discrepant images of each other.²²⁸ A Greek Orthodox nunnery is a pilgrimage site in which boundary marking is not so obvious. There seems to be no clear marking amongst the pilgrims, even if a closer look reveals many minor groups within the large mass. A Greek nunnery is certainly a place in which people exchange ideas, but again one could say that opinions and values are being contested and discussed in any place where people meet and discuss.

The process of *choosing the convent* is one of the key factors inhibiting obvious boundary marking. It serves a pre-selection purpose, so that very differently thinking people do not visit the same convent. For instance, those who think that nuns should be more active in society and help people in more concrete ways than the nuns of the convent of the Dormition do usually go to another one.²²⁹ The pilgrims are aware of its ecclesiastical policy and of other things that might influence their opinion, and therefore avoid the boundary-marking process on the site. They have their reasons for choosing the convent, but they do not necessarily agree on all the details concerning its ruling or orientation, on theological matters in general, or on other features related to it. However, many of them said that they did not speak about theological matters with the nuns. Most went there to speak about their personal life situation, knowing that they could think about theological matters outside the convent, but when they were inside they left such matters aside and concentrated on living through the experience.²³⁰ Anna's statement reflects the friendly atmosphere in the convent, where there was no need to challenge the theological ideas of others. She could speak with the other pilgrims without fear of confrontation. However, she preferred to discuss theological matters with someone she did not know so well. In her view, visiting the convent was a personal event that was related to the inner state of the pilgrim. In other words the pilgrim's thoughts are directed to personal matters and not

²²⁸ Eade and Sallnow 1991; 15-16; Coleman 2002; 357-359.

²²⁹ I understood this distinction when I visited some unofficial monastic sisterhoods in Northern Greece. Many people there said that they preferred it because the sisters were so active in helping society, whereas a regular monastery, as they understood it, did not help society concretely (Field diary IV, 36).

²³⁰ Living in this sense could be understood in the same the way as McGuire describes lived religion: "Lived religion includes the myriad individual ways by which people put these stories into practice" (McGuire 2003, 1).

to theological themes. Obviously those who stay in the convent for a longer period get to know the other pilgrims better and may even “contest” and discuss theological themes.²³¹

Sure. I’ve met some old ladies and small children who’ve come some distance. It’s very nice! When you’re in the guest quarters you also try to find an opportunity to speak with people. The fact that you’re in the same place with them means that you also share common interests. Anyway, it’s very pleasant. We speak about almost anything. You can talk about yourself, what should I say...[you can tell] a joke, with a child you can play.

[We don’t talk about] theological [matters], no. You don’t know the others well enough to talk about theological things, you meet the person in order to get to know him or her. In general there’s no theological discussion in the convent, you feel other things. You think about more theoretical things [theological matters] when you’re in that world. When you’re in the convent you actually live it, so it’s not necessary.²³²

Back to the convent

In his critique of Turner’s pilgrimage theory²³³ Gothóni emphasizes the fact that pilgrimage usually leads to some change in attitude and lifestyle. Both Gothóni and Turner see a pilgrimage route as an ellipse with a sequence structure, the most important components of which are the departure, the journey, and the return.²³⁴ Gothóni’s theory is applicable to the nunnery context only in a limited sense. As the journey is not usually a significant part of the process the pilgrim coming to an urban or suburban nunnery has probably reflected on his or her life beforehand and not necessarily during the journey. Thus, in this case the journey does not serve as a transformative phase between departure and return to the same extent as in the case of Mount Athos, for example.

In accordance with Gothóni’s view, nevertheless, pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition usually felt that their encounter with the divine had led to some changes of

²³¹ For instance, I heard some theology students discussing theological questions in the nunnery’s guest room in the summer of 2005. They were friends and were studying together (Field diary V, 7).

²³² Interview 2003: 11.

²³³ Caroline Bynum has also criticized Turner, specifically his theory of liminality and his notion of Dominant symbols. Bynum’s views imply rejection of the basic assumptions in the rites-of-passage theory (Grimes 2000, 266). See also Bynum 1984, 105-125.

²³⁴ Gothóni 1994, 195.

attitude. Most of them described their experiences as something that had given them strength to confront the challenges of everyday life. In other words, the whole process, the liturgies and conversations with the nuns, gave them meanings, energy, guidance, and refreshment. The most common word they used to describe the post-pilgrimage feeling was *anakoúfisi*, meaning relief. However, many felt that the changes of attitude did not last for long and that they would soon forget what they had learned when they went back to the real world. This was also why they wanted to return to the convent.

The pilgrims who visit the nunnery are already attached to the Orthodox Church and its tradition, and live in a close relationship with the convent. The possible changes in attitude are therefore not as dramatic as in the case of Mount Athos, which in addition to hosting devout pilgrims also attracts visitors who are not necessarily Orthodox or who might have a more distant relationship with Orthodoxy in general. Thus many pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition see it as a place that refreshes their relationship with God. Glikería, for example, saw nuns as role models who helped the pilgrims to fulfill their fundamental spiritual needs and who served as guides in their lives, reminding them of the elementary and essential teachings of Orthodoxy. This explained the need to return to the convent. As Glikería said:

We tend to forget things here in the world. They [the nuns] give us the basics.²³⁵

In a similar vein, some pilgrims joked that the blessings they received in the convent would “wear away” on their return trip because the bus usually came down from the mountains at quite a speed. This also reflects the idea of the continuous need for dialogue with the nuns and of the need to stay in the convent’s atmosphere. Stélla exemplifies the pilgrimage ellipse in an urban or suburban female convent. She had a spiritual need to go there and the services, and the conversations with the nuns gave her energy so that

²³⁵ Interview 2005: 13.

afterwards she felt that she could again cope with the various difficulties in life. She also thought that the pilgrimage process could be compared to a kind of therapy.²³⁶

I'm usually a bit stressed before going to the convent and I feel that I have to go. I might be spiritually tired and need to go so that my mood will change and I'll be able to continue my spiritual struggle. Everyday life is often tough, you don't have the energy to pray, to struggle and you feel that you're receding from God. You go to the convent to get strength and because you know that it helps. You often face temptation and think that it's too much trouble to go, but that's a good moment to pray. You can pray to the convent's saint and ask him to give you the energy to make the journey and your plans don't change. This is how you prepare yourself. [...] When you return you feel that you have strength. You have got what you were after. You feel that your thoughts are clearer, especially if you spend more time there, let's say five days. [...] It's therapy. It helps the relationships, our relation to God. If you have some problems you can discuss them and the nuns will give you a new perspective and help you to do the right thing. Your own prayers in the convent also help, because they are purer, stronger, and better.²³⁷

Pilgrimage to Mount Athos seems to be more sublime in character than pilgrimage to a suburban nunnery. In fact, for many pilgrims Mount Athos is a remote destination and they usually travel some distance. The English term monasticism is derived from the Greek term *monazein*, which literally means, "to live alone".²³⁸ Neither urban nor suburban female monasteries are particularly cloistered places. The nuns rather live in a community that is in the midst of a secular society and cannot thus escape interaction with the external world. They communicate with other nuns and with pilgrims. The "living alone" connotation is still valid, however, in the sense that monasteries are seen as being away from the world and this is part of the pilgrim's experience. The pilgrim wants some distance from his or her life and therefore goes to a place where he or she can escape the social reality for a while, but can also return to the world with a new perspective on it. Consequently, he or she has to return to the convent in order to maintain the desired spiritual status.

²³⁶ On seeing Orthodoxy as a form of therapy, see e.g., Moran 2001, 163-193; Naupaktou 2002, 21, 26-28. In this book monasteries are metaphorically described as "clinics" that attend to peoples' "spiritual illnesses".

²³⁷ Interview 2005: 8.

²³⁸ Elder 1990, 1.

In sum, the pilgrimage process in a Greek nunnery could be described metaphorically as a type of spiral that symbolizes the women's need to visit it and to come back as often as they can. Pilgrimage is a way of life for those who visit the convent often and want to live in a close relationship with it. It does not produce dramatic changes in their lives, but could rather be seen as a spiral involving continuously returning to the convent in order to be able to encounter their everyday lives with new strength and security.

The profile of the pilgrims - different groups of visitors in the convent

According to Alpéntzos, pilgrims comprise one group, with no particular age limit, are represent both sexes (except for pilgrims to Mount Athos), and all social classes. They come to the convent to “intensively experience the religious sentiments” and to confess.²³⁹ When it is a question of large groups of pilgrims it must be understood that the level of attachment to the place varies. There are, for example, those who fit Makrides' and Molotkos-Liederman's description of most Greeks who “seem to prefer a rather superficial attachment to Orthodoxy but who still acknowledge Orthodoxy as part of Greece's national history, cultural ethos and concomitant profile”.²⁴⁰ However, there are also those who are personally attached to the Church and to the specific monastery or convent. Alpéntzos distinguishes between researchers, tourists, and sellers in large groups of pilgrims, and finally those he calls the suffering, meaning the sick and the poor. Accordingly, Alpéntzos mentions that Mount Athos attracts scholars in that it is not only a center of Orthodoxy but also a museum that attracts international interest. Therefore it is, like many other monasteries, often seen also from a touristic perspective. Alpéntzos mentions the wardrobes that are found in almost all monasteries as evidence of tourism. By this he means that there are people who visit them without knowing how to dress properly and therefore the monasteries keep scarves and skirts for visitors to cover themselves. The suffering refers to some marginalized groups such as orphans and poor

²³⁹ Pilgrims may confess in a nunnery only if their confessor is present.

²⁴⁰ Makrides-Molotkos-Liederman 2004, 468.

children that are cared for in the monasteries.²⁴¹ However, my fieldwork in the convent of the Dormition revealed the existence of various other groups in addition to those mentioned by Alpéntzos. Regardless of the apparent homogeneity of pilgrims as a group, those who visit a particular convent could be categorized according to their length of stay, their attitude towards pilgrimage, and their interpretation of the process. Some of these categories overlap, but could still be considered separate in the context of the group as a whole.

A typical pilgrim

Pilgrims visiting Greek nunneries include men and women of diverse ages and from diverse social classes. On an ordinary Sunday the majority of them come with their families, thus there are men, women and children in the convent. Even on Sundays there are more women than men, but during the week the distribution is even clearer, with very few men and a large majority of women. One could say that a typical pilgrim at the convent of the Dormition is a middle-aged woman, who has a family, lives close by, and visits it very often, even daily. She is also profoundly familiar with the Orthodox doctrine and monastic life, and with other monasteries in the area. She knows the nuns personally and often speaks with them and helps them with their duties in the convent. Personally she might not have an urgent need for material help or spiritual advice, but wishes to maintain interaction with the nuns in order to fulfill her spiritual needs.

Another typical pilgrim is a middle-aged or younger woman seeking spiritual advice and prayer for personal reasons, such as difficult family situations, marriage problems, infertility problems, and health.

In terms of political orientation and social status, a typical pilgrim at the convent of the Dormition belongs to the middle or upper-middle class and her economic situation is sound. She is therefore more likely to donate money or something else than to ask for

²⁴¹ Alpéntzos 2002, 71-72.

material help.²⁴² According to Georgiadou and Nikolakopoulos, Greeks who go to church are more likely to be on the political right, but they clearly do not form a homogeneous group with a given political orientation. On a scale from one to 10 (1=left-wing political orientation, 10=right-wing political orientation) they frequently score an average of seven²⁴³. Georgiadou and Nikolakopoulos' findings could be applied to this study in that the majority of pilgrims also said that they went to church often. I did not systematically ask the interviewees about their political orientation, but some of them told me they were right-wingers.

Pilgrims' time and space

As mentioned previously, people use a variety of terms to describe their visits to the convent. Some use the term *proskínima*, meaning pilgrimage, and some describe it as churchgoing and use the term *ekklisiázomai*. A closer look at these terms reveals that we are speaking of two distinct groups: those who consider themselves pilgrims and those who consider themselves churchgoers. What is interesting is that, on the surface, there is not necessarily any difference in behavior between the two groups. Members of both may go to the convent on a Sunday for the Liturgy, to light a candle, venerate icons and have coffee afterwards. The difference is in interpretation and attitude towards the whole process. Many pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition saw their visits as churchgoing, but the two groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In some cases the same person may go on a Sunday for the Liturgy, and on some other occasion may stay for a longer time or have some other purpose and consider it pilgrimage.²⁴⁴

One of the reasons why so many visitors used the term churchgoing was because this suburban convent is close to an urban environment, and it is easy for pilgrims to go there

²⁴² Dubisch notes that pilgrimage to the church of the Annunciation in Tinos is by no means restricted to the poor, and there are people of all classes (see, Dubisch 1995, 83). The same applies to the convent of the Dormition.

²⁴³ Georgiadou and Nikolakopoulos 2002, 262-279.

²⁴⁴ Field diary IV, 17.

for only a short period of time. In fact, most of them come from Thessaloniki.²⁴⁵ They consider the convent an option when choosing the church at which they wish to attend the Sunday service, but they do not feel the need to stay there for a longer time. There are visitors in the convent all the year around, but the difference is huge compared to the crowded Sunday services, especially during the great Church Festivals.²⁴⁶

From the perspective of the convent and the nuns who take care of the pilgrims there is a natural distinction between the visitors who stay one day or less and those who stay overnight. Many attend Liturgy on Sundays and leave soon afterwards. The nuns may not speak with these visitors at all, whereas at least some of them will get to know something about those who stay for a longer period. The nuns also offer hospitality to those who stay at the convent, cooking for them daily and taking care of them in general. These visitors often have a particular reason for their stay. Usually they want to relax and to live their religious sentiments and spirituality in the full liturgical cycle of the convent. There may be other reasons too, such as a relative who is a nun there, or being from another part of Greece,²⁴⁷ or even being in a difficult domestic situation.²⁴⁸ However, it is important to

²⁴⁵ Many Northern Greeks and people from the municipality of Thessaloniki have close relationships with the monasteries. Thessaloniki is also renowned for its large number of Byzantine churches, such as the Church of Saint Demetrios and Hagia Sofia. (Saint Demetrios is considered the patron saint of the city of Thessaloniki.) Many of the Paleochristian and Byzantine monuments are on the UNESCO world heritage list. The various churches regularly put relics and icons on public display. Thessaloniki also hosted a large exhibition, “Treasures of Mount Athos”, in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in 1997. Zisis, for one, calls Thessaloniki “filomónachos”, the monastic’s friend, because many monasteries have been re-built and many ruins have been renovated since the city gained its independence in 1912. Thessaloniki is not only the closest large city to Mount Athos, it also used to be the second city of the Byzantine Empire, and has traditionally maintained good relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In the Byzantium era it had a significant role in the empire’s political organization and it was a lively intellectual and artistic centre. According to Zisis, Thessalonians love the monasteries and their leaders deeply, and continue to go to them and their services (Interview 2005:27; Field diary I, 45; Zisis 2000a, 87; Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou 1998, 155). See also http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory_body_evaluation/456.pdf

²⁴⁶ Field diary IV, 38.

²⁴⁷ One way in which the different groups of pilgrims can be distinguished is on the basis of location: some come a short distance and others travel from other parts of Greece and even from outside the country. The convent of the Dormition is not among the great pilgrimage attractions in Greece, but some pilgrims travel great distances in order to meet the nuns they feel attached to. For instance, there are some regular visitors from the United States. However, the location is not a motive for pilgrimage in the same way as among the other groups mentioned in this chapter, but it should be taken into account given the fact that the convent nevertheless attracts pilgrims from afar (Field diary V, 17).

²⁴⁸ When I was staying at the convent of the Dormition in the summer of 1999 there was a young woman there, Katerína, who had a difficult situation at home. She was in conflict with her parents, and her uncle was violent and sometimes hit her. At the time she had been in the monastery for four years and was

note that the wish to solve personal problems does not exclude the desire to live the spiritual life of the convent.

Friends, relatives, workers and tourists

There were various other groups that stood out from the general body of visitors, as described below.

“Friends of the convent”²⁴⁹ were women who visited it daily, or very often, and who lived close by. Many of them had been going there for many years. Nevertheless, even within this group were people who seldom visited it during the days it was closed. These women were usually married with grown-up children and were thus free of child-care duties and had time for the convent. They were also in a position to support it financially. Even if many of these “friends of the convent” had made substantial donations, they usually kept a low profile and did not tell people about it. Eléni, for instance, spoke about her contributions in a very modest way. “We do what we can to help the convent. Yes, we do some small jobs”.²⁵⁰

Some of the “friends of the convent” were unmarried women who had been focused on their career or had other responsibilities (such as taking care of family members), but were thinking of becoming nuns at some point. This group included religiously active young girls who visited the convent often and were in many cases members of religious

considering becoming a nun. She attended all the services, and spent the rest of the time reading spiritual literature. She also told me that she could have gone somewhere else, such as to friends or relatives, to escape her domestic situation, but she preferred the convent because “the liturgical life of the monastery calmed her down” (Field diary II, 6).

²⁴⁹ This is an emic term, which the pilgrims themselves used. Emic terms have traditionally been used as a strategy in order to minimize the effect of scholars’ own implicit or explicit interpretations of the material they are studying. The problem with emic categories is that they often do not make sense to those not acquainted with the culture or the language in question. I use the terms here to reflect the terms the informants used and to make the description thicker. On the use of emic/etic categories, see e.g., Sjöblom 2002, 126-128; Gothóni 1980, 29-31.

²⁵⁰ Interview 2003: 15.

organizations. They came from families that had a close relationship with the Church in general, and some were thinking of becoming nuns later in their lives.²⁵¹

A pilgrim called Zoí serves as an example of a woman who called herself a “friend of the convent”, and who “loves the convent”.²⁵² Zoí, a 55-year-old dentist with her own practice, has never been married and for that reason was planning to become a nun when she retired and sold her practice. She visited two monasteries regularly and was thinking of becoming a nun in one of them. She said she was already committed to God in her life and visited monasteries as often as possible, as a way of preparing herself for the monastic life she would live after her retirement. She prayed a lot, read the Bible and the Church fathers’ texts, and often talked to her confessor and the nuns. Her frequent visits to the convent and the discussions with the nuns were particularly helpful in this respect. For her the convent of the Dormition was a place where she could concentrate on prayer and put her trust in God.

Another distinct group of pilgrims comprised families that usually went to the convent on Sundays to attend Liturgy. The nuns often give special attention to the youngest family members, offering them sweets or playing with them for a short while. Relatives and close friends of the nuns also visited the convent, but most of them emphasized that they were there for spiritual reasons and not to chat with the nuns. In saying this they were acknowledging the monastic tradition of giving nuns the peace to lead a contemplative life. However, in reality friends and relatives are also given some time to speak with them, and this sense could be considered to belong to the group of people who go to the convent to ask for spiritual help and advice regardless of their life situation.²⁵³

There are also the sick and the poor who ask for the convent’s material help in addition to spiritual advice. In fact, Greek monasteries play a rather significant role in the Greek welfare system. The convent of the Dormition offered hospitality to those who sought help. According to Sister Theodóra it helped materially, providing meals and buying

²⁵¹ Field diary I, 33.

²⁵² Field diary I, 33-34.

²⁵³ Field diary II, 7.

clothes for some people.²⁵⁴ It sometimes helped financially too, although such help was often restricted to a short period of time. It was able to accommodate people for a longer period if they were in some sort of difficulty. I also saw an elderly man regularly coming to eat there.

Members of the clergy, bishops, priests and monks from other monasteries are among the regular visitors to the convent of the Dormition, as are igumenis and nuns from other nunneries. Clergy visits are often in the way of duty or in honor of the convent's annual festivities. Nuns visit monasteries in order to exchange spiritual and practical information on various matters concerning monastic life. Visits to other monasteries by members of the clergy and nuns are not necessarily pilgrimage, although they are also sometimes there to seek the nuns' advice, to benefit spiritually, and to get blessed.²⁵⁵

The above remarks about the clergy, bishops, priests, monks and nuns also apply to employers and employees who visit the convent in order to help the nuns in various ways, such as with construction work in and around it. The workers may be employed by the convent, or they may be volunteers. Many of them see working for it as a blessing and think of themselves as pilgrims.²⁵⁶

Finally, there are visitors to the convent of the Dormition who consider themselves tourists.²⁵⁷ Some people visit monasteries because of their cultural, architectural and historical value, just as many people visit museums. Others go out of curiosity as an opportunity to see an exotic way of life. A visit to a convent may also be built into a holiday program. Nevertheless, even if someone goes to a particular convent for its location or natural surroundings, it does not exclude the possibility that he or she has a

²⁵⁴ Interview 2005:27.

²⁵⁵ Field diary I, 12. See also Dositheos 2004, 30.

²⁵⁶ During my fieldwork I met two men who had helped with construction work. Both of them, Stávros and Kóstas were devout Orthodox who were happy to work for the convent. They also considered themselves pilgrims. Interview 2003: 3; Field diary IV, 20.

²⁵⁷ From the Church's perspective all non-Orthodox and everyone who does not have spiritual motives for the visit is a tourist (see e.g., Dositheos 2004, 20-23). On the other hand, from the monastery's perspective no one is a tourist, and there is always God's intention behind the visit.

religious frame of mind.²⁵⁸ Níkos,²⁵⁹ for example, often mentioned the beauty and the perfect view as a reason for going, but added that he felt as if he was at the “gate of God’s house” when he was there. There are also occasionally tourists in the mundane sense of the word, although Greek tourism is generally concentrated in other parts of the country and not many tourists go to the convent of the Dormition.²⁶⁰

Behavior and customs

According to Veikko Anttonen, people tend to set specific times and places apart as sacred, which is something that ensures the continuity of power, hierarchy or authority in any religion, nation-state or political ideology. He adds that pilgrimage, like any other universally distributed form of religious behavior, could be understood as sacred.²⁶¹ Below are some examples of the ways in which pilgrims of the convent of Dormition consider the place to be holy, and experience pilgrimage as a religious experience.²⁶²

Language is one of the first obvious indications to a convent visitor that he or she has entered a space many people consider sacred. The language used in Greek monasteries and the convent of Dormition differs slightly from colloquial Greek. Firstly, there is a special form of greeting used between nuns and pilgrims. Instead of using expressions such as *Kaliméra* (Good morning!, Good afternoon!) or *Geiá sas* (Hello!) it is customary to say *Evlogíte* (Bless me!), to which the nun answers, *O Theós’* or *O Kírios* (The Lord), meaning that God blesses the pilgrim, not the nun. These phrases are sometimes reversed, so that the nun says *Evlogíte* and the pilgrim answers *O Theós*. Again the symbolism is the same, the nun is asking the pilgrim to bless her and the pilgrim expresses in his or her answer that only God can bless her. The pilgrim usually makes a small curtsy while giving the greeting *Evlogíte*. Pilgrims also use other expressions, such as *Tin efchí sas* or

²⁵⁸ There are tourist agencies that organize trips to major pilgrimage sites and monasteries in Greece (see e.g., <http://www.lokristravel.com/religious-holidays-greece-gr.html>). Kotsi has also written about the boundaries between the sacred and the economic dimensions of pilgrimage (see Kotsi 2003 and 1999).

²⁵⁹ Interview 2002:4.

²⁶⁰ Field diary I, 44–45.

²⁶¹ Anttonen 2000, 271–272.

²⁶² For comparison to Mount Athos see Gothóni 1998.

tin evlogíasas (Your Blessing), in asking for the nuns' blessing. Again the response, *tou Kiríou* (The Lord's), refers to God. During Easter the above-mentioned greetings are replaced with the paschal greeting *Christós Anésti* (Christ is Risen), to which the response is *Alithós Anésti* (Indeed, He is Risen). As part of the greeting the pilgrim usually kisses the hand of the nun, or of the igumeni in particular, to show repentance and respect.²⁶³

Generally speaking, the pilgrims' respectful attitude towards the nuns and the monastic environment is apparent in the language they use. It tends to be more formal than in everyday contexts and is often accentuated by expressions of *Katharévousa*,²⁶⁴ which is a typical feature in ecclesiastical circles in Greece.²⁶⁵ Naturally, if a pilgrim knows a nun personally there is not a big difference in how he or she speaks with her compared to any other everyday situation, but on average the difference is noticeable. Everyone in the convent tries to speak softly in order to show respect for an area that is considered holy. Children are asked to keep quiet and in general the atmosphere is calm. Traditionally, however, pilgrims are expected to be cheerful, reflecting the Orthodox emphasis on such a disposition in a devout Christian as a result of the Resurrection. Thus, as a rule, neither nuns nor pilgrims appear gloomy.²⁶⁶ Stávros talked about his behavior in the convent of the Dormition:

Because I've always been lively, I'm like that in the convent too. I like to tease people and to make jokes, so I behave like that there. I even joke with the nuns, who have known me for a long time and love me. Everybody keeps a low profile in the convent. They keep quiet, no-one makes a noise or creates tension.²⁶⁷

There is also a special dress code in the monasteries. Women are supposed to wear a skirt and to have their shoulders covered. Men usually dress more formally, meaning wearing trousers even if it is hot in the summer. It is easy to recognize women who are committed to the values of monastic life from the way they dress. Regular visitors to the convent

²⁶³ Field Diary I, 4.

²⁶⁴ *Katharévousa* is a purist and archaic form of Modern Greek with complex grammar, syntax and diction derived from classical and Hellenistic Greek culture (Kourvetaris and Dobratz 1987, 148).

²⁶⁵ Field diary IV, 37.

²⁶⁶ Field diary V, 16; see also Dositheos 2004, 61.

²⁶⁷ Interview 2003:3.

usually dress more conservatively than those who come just to the Sunday liturgy. Their skirts are ankle-length, they usually have long hair, which they wear in a bun, or they cover their head with a scarf. Almost all pilgrims wear a cross around the neck and many of them have a Greek rosary (*komposchíni*) around their wrist.

The dress code in monasteries and churches has become a matter of both public and private discussion in recent years.²⁶⁸ Almost all the pilgrims of the convent of the Dormition said something about the clothes they wore in the convent. They usually distinguished between those who were and those who were not familiar with monastic life and customs in terms of their dress, more specifically the type of skirt they wore.

Popular piety: festivals, icons, relics, and votive offerings

Binns describes popular Orthodox faith as being centered on holy places.²⁶⁹ Monasteries and their festivals gather pilgrims from afar and people usually come to a convent when there is an *agripnía*, or all-night service, in honor of a saint. While the liturgy is going on inside they can stay inside or outside the church, sing and talk, and afterwards stay for a meal. According to Binns, going to a convent or church and being there at a holy time is important, and he refers to the phenomenon of people staying outside while the bishop celebrates inside as an example of ancient popular spirituality, which complements the piety of the bishop.²⁷⁰ I came across this type of pattern in the convent of the Dormition, especially during Great festivals such as Easter and the Dormition of the Virgin on August 15. There is a practical reason for it too, as the church is full on these occasions. It could also be linked to the generally relatively relaxed form of expression of the Orthodox faith. It is common for Orthodox worshippers not attend the entire service, and

²⁶⁸ The election of Christodoulos to the Archbishopric of Athens heralded a new era in ecclesiastic dress. The Archbishop focused especially on youth issues from the start, trying to make young people feel more comfortable in the sphere of the Church. He also gave statements about girls' clothing, encouraging young people to come "as they are" (see e.g., the site of Antenna news: <http://www.hri.org/news/greek/ant1en/1998/98-04-29.ant1en.html#01>) On the Church's policy towards the young, see e.g., Diptycha 2001, Foreword.

²⁶⁹ Binns 2002, 136.

²⁷⁰ Binns 2002, 136.

they may arrive late or leave early. Greek Orthodoxy has always been a community experience, and the priest is often a familiar figure.

Although pilgrimage takes place at any time of the year the Church festivals, and especially the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin, draw a large numbers of pilgrims to the convent of the Dormition. Its festivals are based on the Orthodox liturgical cycle. Every church, monastery and convent is associated with a particular Orthodox Saint or a specific event in the holy calendar. Some saints have a national reputation and are celebrated all around Greece, whereas others are celebrated locally. Saints also have particular tasks in helping people in their troubles. For example, Saint Nikolaos is known as the sailors' patron saint.²⁷¹ The biggest celebration at the convent of the Dormition is that of the Dormition of the Virgin (August 15), when it is full of pilgrims and friends of the igumeni and there is an all-night-service (*agripnía*). Other important festivals include Easter, the start of the church year (September 1), the Annunciation i.e. Evangelismos (March 25) and Saint Demetrios (October 26), and the feast of Saint Marina (July 17), which is also the igumeni's name day.

Icons, relics, healing waters and votive offerings also have great significance in popular faith. There are no especially famous icons or relics in the convent of the Dormition, but people sometimes bring relics from other monasteries. A relic has a special meaning for pilgrims; it is understood to be, or to have virtue, grace, benevolence, and life, features that are transmittable by touch or through less direct contact.²⁷² Thus if there is a relic in the convent or in some church, pilgrims queue to touch it.

The convent's main church (*katholikón*) is typically Greek Orthodox, decorated with numerous icons and mosaics. The arrangement of the icons is prescribed by tradition. However, the one representing an event or a saint that is celebrated on a particular day is usually put on display in the exonarthex (the outer vestibule of the church) so that all pilgrims can venerate it when they come in. There are also icons in the *naós* (the inner part) near the exonarthex, and even when the church is full of people most pilgrims are

²⁷¹ Field diary III, 3-4. See also Dubisch 1995, 62.

²⁷² Schopen 1998, 262.

able to venerate them. Some pilgrims venerate an icon that is dedicated to the saint they are named after. The convent's miracle-working (*thavmatourgós*) icon of the Virgin Mary attracts pilgrims, too, although it is located inside the church near the iconostasis, and they cannot approach it directly if there are a lot of people around.

When pilgrims enter the church they first buy candles (*kerí*) and put some money in a box nearby. They then light the candles and place them in candelabra, and proceed to venerate the icons. Usually when they light the candle they say a small prayer for themselves and for their family members. As Níkos says: "I light one candle for myself and one for my family". A layman who works for the convent takes care of the candles to make sure that the temperature does not get too high in the exonarthex, and that there is room for new candles. Most pilgrims venerate and kiss the icons and make the sign of a cross on their chest with their right hand. Some may also pray and kneel down in front of the miracle-working icon and ask for a miracle. They may buy icons from the convent shop, and sometimes they bring ones they have bought somewhere else for the priest or bishop to bless. Icons constitute an essential aspect of Orthodox theology and are seen as an element of the revelation of God's salvation. An icon in a church or a home is drawn into the liturgical life of the church; for the devout Orthodox it makes God present and works for the salvation and deification of Christians.²⁷³

When pilgrims venerate the icons they often also leave some jewelry or silver-colored pieces of metal under it as a symbol of a prayer or a wish. These small objects are called *támata* (sing. *táma*) and they serve as votive offerings. These offerings usually have a picture of the object for which the pilgrim is praying. For example, if there is a problem with the eyes and the pilgrim wants them to get better the *táma* may have a picture of an eye on it. It could also have a picture of a house, a key, wedding wreaths, or an infant, for example. *Táma* could be understood in two different ways. It refers either to the object that is left under the icon or to the whole process of making a promise to a saint or to

²⁷³ Interview 2002:4. Interview 2005:27. On the history and theology of Eastern Christian Icons see e.g., Miles 1998.

God. It is a commitment or an obligation made so that God will hear the pilgrim's prayer.²⁷⁴

The tradition of *táma* incorporates the philosophy of offering, giving, and receiving. In other words there are two categories of *táma*, those that include offerings and those that represent deeds. A devout Orthodox commits to giving a votive offering or doing something for God or a saint and wishes to get something in return. The simplest form of *táma* is prayer. A prayer is said in order to gain God's favor in life in general or for some specific event. A candle could also be understood as a *táma*. When lighting it the pilgrim might think of something he or she would like to happen, and say a short prayer.²⁷⁵ A devotion may serve as a *táma* in a convent for example, and so could a pilgrimage journey.²⁷⁶ There is also a chronological distinction between the *táma* that is made in order to avoid something unwanted or something that is considered bad and one that is made in thanksgiving after the happy conclusion of an event. Rings and other personally valuable objects are often placed under the icons as a symbol of a prayer that has been heard.

Finally, *ágiasma* (Holy water) is yet another element of popular piety. *It* is a source of holy water from which pilgrims take some to take home with them, *and* is located in the convent garden or crypt, for instance. Pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition often bring bottles with them and fill them with water when they leave. The water is used for healing and blessing purposes. The pilgrims often tell stories about *ágiasma*, such as how drinking it helped someone to recover from an illness.²⁷⁷

Food and coffee

²⁷⁴ Lekakis 2001; 14-15.

²⁷⁵ Dubisch 1995, 76-79.

²⁷⁶ The Aegean island of Tinos and its church of The Virgin Mary of the Annunciation (Evangelístria) are known for this kind of journey. Many pilgrims visit the church as a vow and approach it on their knees or bearing a burden, so that the journey becomes painful both emotionally and physically (Dubisch 1995; 77, 88-89).

²⁷⁷ Field diary V, 4.

After the Sunday Liturgy pilgrims are invited to the convent's guest room (*arhontaríki*) for coffee. Greek coffee is served with a glass of water and usually with something sweet, such as a biscuit (*koulouráki*), a chocolate, or a piece of Turkish delight (*loukoúmi*).²⁷⁸ Coffee is a traditional expression of hospitality in Greece. The nuns also often give sweets as blessings. Those staying for a longer period eat all their meals in the convent. The meals are regulated by the Lenten rules,²⁷⁹ which restrict the use of milk products, eggs and oil for example, and meat is never offered. There may be fish at Easter. The convent diet consists mainly of vegetables, grain products, milk products and eggs. Pilgrims eat in a separate refectory in the convent of the Dormition, and the nuns have a refectory of their own. While the pilgrims are eating one of the nuns appointed by igumeni Marína reads the Holy Scriptures, usually about the lives of the saints, aloud in the guest refectory, or the pilgrims may be alone and chat. In the latter case one of them will usually bless the food with a short prayer.²⁸⁰

Sofía said that she received presents from the convent quite often, especially sweets:

Ooo, sweets! I mean they give us books, sweets and often things that they cultivate. They might give you a rosary, a small icon, but sweets...Let's not forget those. They can't give you books every time you go, but sweets are a must!²⁸¹

One of the services the convent of the Dormition offers its pilgrims is memorial wheat, *kóliva*. It is made of whole-wheat kernels, which have been cooked and sweetened with fruit, almonds and spices. It is eaten in honor of the dead, such as during memorial services and at Easter, and symbolizes the resurrection and the sweetness and abundance of life. The nuns make the *kóliva* at the convent and the pilgrims really appreciate it.²⁸²

Gifts and donations

²⁷⁸ Greeks started to call what was originally Turkish coffee Greek following the Turkish invasion in Cyprus in July 1974 (Browning 1983, 16).

²⁷⁹ On Orthodox Lent, its theology and practice see e.g., Koutsas 1996.

²⁸⁰ Field diary IV, 16; see also Gothóni 1993, 79-80.

²⁸¹ Interview 2005: 14.

²⁸² Field diary IV, 15-16.

Many pilgrims bring gifts or make donations to the convent. They also bring essentials and foodstuffs and make monetary contributions. Many women bring ecclesiastical articles such as bread,²⁸³ flowers that are put in front of an icon, oil and charcoal for the *lambádes*, or incense.²⁸⁴ The primary reason for bringing these things is that the pilgrims wish to repay the convent for their accommodation and, secondly, to express gratitude for the spiritual guidance or even for miracles they have experienced there. The gifts may be small, such as a box of candies. It is also customary to give some extra coins when buying a candle on the way into church. Some people donate large amounts of money for various renovation projects, for example. The traditional way of helping and expressing gratitude to the convent has been to give a donation for its wall paintings or some other valuable objects for the main church. Some people even bequeath their property. Pétros told me why he wanted to help the monasteries. For him it was vital to know that the money would be used for good purposes and in an honest way:

People help by giving donations. They help by building a church, they help with the liturgical expenses, and when I buy a candle I always put some extra [in the payment box], always. Because I know that they [the nuns] will not put the money in their pockets, they'll use it for something they need or that someone else needs. Their help may be random, but it is very important. And it's clear; it brings tears to my eyes.²⁸⁵

The Divine Liturgy

In the Orthodox context Divine Liturgy is thought to be one of the most effective mediators of “sacred knowledge”. Sarris noted in his ethnographic study on Mount Athos that liturgical participation has a significant role in the pedagogical practices of a monastery.²⁸⁶ Therefore, liturgy is considered essential in terms of passing on Orthodox tradition. This liturgy-centered attitude is visible in the convent of the Dormition of the

²⁸³ The bread can be used as *antidoron* or in the Holy Communion. Nuns bake some of the bread used in Liturgy in the monastery and the rest is brought by pilgrims (Field diary I, 24). See also Dositheos 2004, 45-47.

²⁸⁴ Field diary I, 24. See also Dositheos 2004, 48-51.

²⁸⁵ Interview 2002: 2.

²⁸⁶ Sarris 2004, 123, 132.

Mother of God. Pilgrims are usually first taken to see the church and they are expected to attend the services. Many of them consider participation in the full liturgical cycle of the convent a fine opportunity to experience spiritual life in its full extent.²⁸⁷

On an ordinary Sunday the morning service (*óρθρος*) starts at 8.00 a.m. The nuns usually attend all the services, unless they are busy with some other duties. When the *óρθρος* starts the church is almost empty because only a few people come during the first hour. Pilgrims who are staying in the convent or who are frequent visitors stand at the back. The atmosphere is somewhat somnolent as the church is lit by a few *lambádes* and the nuns chant quietly.²⁸⁸

The majority of pilgrims come to the convent later, when the liturgy has started. The church starts to fill up with men, women and children around 9 a.m. It holds approximately 300 people. Latecomers join the liturgy when the service has reached the Holy Communion stage. In fact it is not rare for the priest to criticize pilgrims for coming so late. They take Holy Communion and at the end of the liturgy receive a blessing from the priest, kissing a cross he holds in his hand and taking a piece of altar bread (*antídoron*).²⁸⁹ Afterwards they gather in the guest quarters to chat with each other and have coffee. On Sundays, unlike on other days of the week, the guest room is full of people and there is no opportunity for the pilgrims to talk privately with the nuns. However, some wait until the crowd has left, hoping for a short conversation with one.

Interaction or prayer?

The Eastern Orthodox tradition, according to Fokas and Molotokos - Liederman, tends to be mystical, meaning that the emphasis is on salvation and the celebration of the

²⁸⁷ Field diary V, 41.

²⁸⁸ Field diary V, 3. On the daily routine of the convent of the Dormition see Appendix 5.

²⁸⁹ A piece of altar bread (cut from the Eucharist bread) that is shared among the congregation after the celebration of the Eucharist. Antídoron was originally given to those who could not take communion, but nowadays it is offered to everyone (Arseni 1999, 30).

sacraments and rites rather than on missionary action or social service. In the monastic context this means that the monasteries function as places of higher Orthodox spirituality, and the monks and nuns consequently devote themselves to a spiritual life of liturgy, prayer and penitence.²⁹⁰

Greeks generally seem to have contradictory attitudes towards the higher spirituality of Orthodox monasticism. Some people think that monasteries should help those in need in more concrete ways than they do now. Most pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition seemed to be familiar with Orthodox monastic ideals however, and emphasized that nuns helped the world by praying. Many of them also knew that monasteries did help people in material ways too, and that there was a lot of philanthropic work and *diakonía* done.²⁹¹ As Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman point out, Orthodox tradition is not distant from Christian practice, but there are forms of social service, such as *diakonía*, that are somewhat distinct from the social theology and service of Western Christianity.²⁹² Angelikí thought that monasteries in general helped people in many ways and on many levels. She, like many other pilgrims I interviewed, felt that the spirituality was their primary contribution in helping people:

It [convent] helps on many levels. Some monasteries organize camps, others have old people's homes. [This is the] social level. Naturally they help on the spiritual level, I'm speaking about the old times, about the manuscripts, the scripts that were produced in the monasteries. But about their work nowadays ... our diocese organizes trips to a convent and I believe that over the years the lives of the people [who have been on the trips] have changed dramatically. Anyway, I believe that the most important thing the monasteries offer us is their spiritual work, which affects the lives of the rest of us and spreads to the world outside. That's the nuns' goal. The other things, whether they're old peoples' homes or something else, are somehow secondary. Monks and nuns aim at a spiritual life. The fact that they pray for the entire world every evening gives an enormous strength to everyone. If you're in a difficult situation and you know that they are praying for you... I have experienced that.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman, 2004, 24.

²⁹¹ Field diary IV, 38-39.

²⁹² Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 24.

²⁹³ Interview 2003:16.

Regardless of the fact that nuns concentrate on prayer and obedience, people seem to find ways of communicating with them and know that their prayers are directed to them and all people. Most Greek monasteries accept visitors. The pilgrims also seemed very attached to the nuns and spoke about them in highly appreciative and admiring ways. Conversations and dialogue between nuns and pilgrims are an essential part of the pilgrimage process. Even though the centre of pilgrimage is the church, and the liturgies and other services play a major role in mediating the Orthodox tradition, the role of the nuns, or more precisely the pilgrims' conversations with them, should not be undervalued. Even if the nuns concentrate on prayer and silence,²⁹⁴ they will often say a few words to a pilgrim who is walking or sitting in the convent area.²⁹⁵ After all, it is the nuns who make the convent something different from a church. Sometimes just seeing their faces is enough to make the pilgrim feel better. Many pilgrims referred to the nuns' faces, which strongly influenced what they thought about the convent. The smiling and calm faces often made them come back and enter into discussion with the nuns. According to Speake, conversations and encounters are a significant part of pilgrimage, and indeed are one of the main reasons why pilgrims return to a particular monastery.²⁹⁶ As Glicería put it, "Nuns come very close to people. They are very polite, very spiritual and they discuss everything...and they are very much connected with the reality".²⁹⁷ 'Anna said she discussed "existential and ontological themes" and themes that "occupied" her "mind" with the nuns.²⁹⁸

Dimítris told me that even if he did not speak much with the nuns, they still came and talked to him:

Of course they [the nuns] ask [many things]. About my work, about this and that. If I have brothers and sisters, where I live and so on. But I don't have personal contact with

²⁹⁴ According to the tradition of hesychasm (from *isicházein*, to be quiet, at rest), nuns pray and contemplate in order to achieve communion with God through interior quietude. The practice is centered on the so-called prayer of the heart, which signifies the constant recitation of the short Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" (Talbot 1991, 923).

²⁹⁵ On one of my last visits, for instance, Sister Mártha saw me near the monastery kitchen and told me to "stay away from men", and to confess so that "God will get to know me personally" (Field diary V, 47).

²⁹⁶ Speake 2006. Seminar lecture "Pilgrimage as Dialogue".

²⁹⁷ Interview 2005: 13.

²⁹⁸ Interview 2003: 11.

one particular nun. Others, however, are waiting to meet the igumeni, and many people phone [the convent]. I imagine that the others discuss everything possible with the nuns.²⁹⁹

Nuns try to find a solution to pilgrims' problems from the Orthodox tradition and teachings, and pray for them. They naturally represent the Church and its doctrine in their opinions and discussions. They give pilgrims advice on personal matters within a theological framework, and cover themes such as sin, marriage, equality, God's love and protection, confession, and the Holy Communion. Theological themes are brought out so that the pilgrim can see his or her life from a fresh perspective.

Angelikí described pilgrimage in the following way:

Communication with God [is] a different kind of communication. You pray, when you're in a holy space, you forget everything else around you and you go there. I pray for my family, for my children, if I have a personal problem, if I have a problem with my health, it's natural to go closer to God. You pray and you ask, there are many reasons. [...] You might say that I could pray at home or in a church, but it's different in a convent. You pray differently. I can tell you that when I go to a convent, when I return I feel relief. I feel that something has gone from inside of me and I have become someone new and that I'm a different person. You can't withdraw so much at home, you'd have to shut yourself in a room in order to feel that you're speaking with the divine, with the holy. But there, it could be the environment, you can hug the holy! At home I might feel stressed, but when I go there I feel like a different person. Different. Nuns play an important role. When I see them, the way they speak to me, the way they look at my face. I can ask for their advice and they'll give it to me. It's different. They act with grace, they are very graceful and peaceful, their smile, their appearance and everything. It's a great feeling.³⁰⁰

Sister Pelagía talked about the nuns' contributions:

Many parents come and ask for our prayers. They also go to see their spiritual fathers. But the secret is what you do and what kind of position you take. We try to tell people that God is right next to us, that we will pray but the question is what you will do. You have to restore your relation with God and the relation has to be evocative. This kind of relation is possible through confession and the Holy Communion. We have helped many people who could not find it at first, but found a way through confession and the Holy Communion.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Interview 2005: 6.

³⁰⁰ Interview 2003: 25.

³⁰¹ Interview 2003: 26.

Another major dimension of the interaction in the convent of the Dormition concerned the relationships between the pilgrims. Naturally pilgrims get to know other pilgrims and establish different types of contact. The nuns often act as intercessors in this process. A young woman might find her future husband with their help. They also introduce people to each other or they may help those with similar interests to become friends. Pilgrims usually respect the nuns and trust their discernment. Thus the convent's social network is flourishing. This type of social care is a modern response to the fragmentation of societies, when it is difficult for people to get to know each other. In fact, the interaction could be summarized as a process of different kinds of encounters. Pilgrimage is a triangle of relations in which the pilgrim encounters God, the other person, meaning both other pilgrims and nuns, and finally him or herself in the life situation in which he or she happens to be.³⁰² Evangelía told me that she had made contacts through the convent:

I've been coming to the convent since 1978. My husband has helped it in many ways and it's like a home to me. I have both spiritual and personal contacts with it, with the igumeni and the sisters. I've been hosted there and I go to the festivals. I have met many colleagues³⁰³ through the sisters.³⁰⁴

According to Stélla, pilgrims often spoke about God with the nuns:

You can speak about everything [with the nuns]. The simplest matter, like that you had a fight with your friend or your sister, or very personal things, for example why we don't understand some things about our relationship with God. [Questions like] Where is God and why can't I see him? Inside the same nuns read about and live those things. They have experience and they can easily say, like OK, this is the case.³⁰⁵

As Stélla mentioned, pilgrims feel that they can talk about anything with the nuns. However, they seldom speak about the nun's life. In situations in which pilgrims and nuns meet the nun is always the listener and the advisor, and the pilgrim is the subject of the discussion. Pilgrims do not necessarily seek advice for a specific problem, and may

³⁰² Alpentzos and Speake also see pilgrimage as a triangle of relations (Alpenzos 2002, 35; Speake 2006).

³⁰³ Evangelía used the term colleague (*sináderfos*) to refer to people who had been useful in her career.

³⁰⁴ Interview 2002: 7.

³⁰⁵ Interview 2005: 8.

have a very brief discussion and just receive a blessing from her. The nun may then make the sign of the cross with her hand in the air towards the pilgrim's chest. In many cases however, pilgrims want to talk about something in particular. The nuns do not necessarily give them concrete advice, but might encourage them to confess, to visit the church and the convent, and to read some texts they recommend. In other words they stress the importance of confession and a living relationship with God. Consequently, when they described their conversations with the nuns most of the pilgrims I interviewed did not mention whether their problem had been resolved, but rather used the term *anakoúfisi*, relief, to describe their feeling afterwards. However, many pilgrims also said that the nuns' prayers had helped them many times in their lives.

Pilgrimage and gender

According to Rita Gross, religions that are oriented toward the family usually have strong sex-specific codes of conduct and expectations, and are usually publicly male-dominated. She also claims that practitioners of these religions argue that the family is central to human well-being and that women are very much honored and valued precisely in their family roles, and that they have a hard time understanding feminists' claims that such religious prescriptions for women's lives are sexist.³⁰⁶ If Gross' argument is considered in the contemporary Greek Orthodox context one can observe a similar collision of ideas. In order to understand this collision one must try to understand the various ways in which gender is constructed inside the walls of a contemporary Greek convent and in the minds of the pilgrims.

A contemporary Greek nunnery seems, at first glance, to be a female community, or even more a community of women, even if men as visitors are not explicitly excluded. Yet, a closer look reveals that as a consequence of historical developments in Greek Orthodoxy,

³⁰⁶ Gross 1996, 91-92.

gender has a very special meaning.³⁰⁷ As mentioned earlier, a typical pilgrim is a middle-aged or younger female, who is religiously active and may even be considering becoming a nun. Families also visit monasteries. Men are allowed to visit nunneries, but are not allowed to stay overnight. Despite the apparent dominance of women in the female convent, both nuns and pilgrims are subordinated to the Orthodox doctrine, which has some practical theological implications. For instance, when a woman has given birth to a baby she is ritually impure for forty days and cannot enter a church. On the fortieth day a penitential service is held and prayers are read for the mother. Moreover, women are officially not permitted behind the iconostasis, not even during baptism: at a female infant's baptism the child is not taken to the altar as male infants are. Moreover, menstruating women are not traditionally allowed to receive the Eucharist. Women are encouraged to wear modest clothing in churches and monasteries, and trousers and short skirts are not acceptable. Women are also excluded from the clergy, and nuns are therefore dependent on the male priests who officiate at the convent liturgies.³⁰⁸

According to Sotiriou, contemporary Greek women have a flexible approach to Orthodoxy despite the Church's official restrictions, creating ad-hoc interpretations that make it more adaptable to their individual circumstances. She takes an example from her fieldwork in a nunnery, where women told her that they kissed icons, lit candles and received *antidoron* (consecrated bread) even if they were menstruating because they had a "need for it".³⁰⁹ This, of course, is against the Church's official prescription concerning women's ritual impurity.

³⁰⁷ From the very beginning monastic life was considered appropriate for women. The Virgin Mary is considered the first female role model of an ascetic, especially based on the biblical story of the time she spent in the temple of Jerusalem. Very little is known about the first female ascetics, but according to tradition, Saint Pachomius built a monastery for his sister Maria so that she, too, could devote her life to God. She soon attracted some followers, and later became an abbess and an elder. Makrina, sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, was also an abbess. As a young woman she became familiar with the Holy Scriptures, and lived in celibacy after breaking off an engagement arranged by her parents. It seems that she established a monastic community around 350, and it is said she assisted her brother with writing his monastic regulations. In general it could be said that from the beginning, men and women entered monasteries for similar reasons. Moreover, they both had to abandon their gender-related "weaknesses" and find the spiritual strength to rise above their gender. (Elm 1994, 39–44, 92–93, 289–290; Kärkkäinen 1999, 37–40)

³⁰⁸ Sotiriou 2004, 500; Talbot 1998, 113–127; Limberis 1999, 753.

³⁰⁹ Sotiriou 2004, 502.

The Role of gender in the convent and in Greece

A nun is a woman, but this does not mean that she automatically represents Greek women or speaks in “her gender’s voice”. In fact, pilgrims do not consider nuns to be typical representatives of the female sex, and see them in a somewhat different light. In fact, they see them in an angelic light, metaphorically speaking. A female pilgrim may not be likely to share her personal concerns with a monk, but she would expect similar answers from both nuns and monks because they both represent the transcendent. They are both considered religious specialists who have succeeded in getting closer to *théosis*, deification, and thus their advice is not influenced by their gender. However, one could still say that the roles of the nuns and pilgrims regarding various activities in the nunnery are very much gender-specific in that nuns, for example, are not allowed to carry out the duties of a priest. Moreover, female pilgrims are expected to behave in a certain manner and they try to adjust to these expectations.

Male and female pilgrims seem to act somewhat differently towards the nuns. Males are less active in starting a conversation unless they know the nun personally. As Dimítis³¹⁰ mentioned however, nuns often come to speak to him. The male pilgrims who visit the convent of the Dormition also visit male monasteries and Mount Athos. Thus their choice of the convent is not necessarily as limited as in the women’s case. Nevertheless, they, too, ask for the nuns’ advice and help. They discuss similar topics, related to health, work, and human relations, for example. The nuns, in other words, take each pilgrim’s life situation carefully into account. However, the male pilgrims I interviewed said that they usually preferred to talk to priests or monks. Níkos preferred discussing personal matters with his confessor, who worked in his home parish:

I have a confessor. That’s why I don’t speak about my personal stuff with the nuns. I know that many people go there and discuss with the igumeni because she is wise.³¹¹

³¹⁰ Interview 2005: 6

³¹¹ Interview 2002:4.

Women's role in world religions has often been said to be restricted to the sphere of the home, and is passive and secondary in nature.³¹² Greek Orthodoxy has been criticized on account of women's *nonexistent* possibilities to participate in any official religious activities. Some scholars of Greek religiosity seem to think that women and religion are almost polar opposites, and many especially criticize their limited opportunities to become involved in the leadership of the Church.³¹³

Representatives of the Orthodox Church often disagree about the woman's role in Greek Orthodoxy. Sotiriou, for instance, points out how Orthodox theologians of both sexes are quick to remind us that female martyrs, saints and *isapostoloi* (equal-to-apostles) are revered just as much as the males, and that hardly a day in the ecclesiastical calendar passes without celebrating the memory at least one of these remarkable women.³¹⁴ Dubisch, on the other hand, came to different conclusions in her fieldwork in Greek monasteries.³¹⁵ She saw that the women were active and had many duties, such as taking care of the graves, lighting candles in the church, bringing flowers and praying for their children. Even if men certainly prayed for their children and lit candles for their family members, it was nevertheless typical that women exclusively assumed these duties in the church or convent. A nun, on the other hand, has a slightly different role in Greek society. As mentioned earlier, she is considered to be a religious specialist, despite the fact that women are not ordained and thus do not have the right to preach. The *igumeni*, together with other nuns, guides pilgrims in their spiritual growth in very much the same way as the priest guides his parish. However, pilgrims make a clear distinction between priests or confessors and nuns. A nun is considered a religious professional, but she is not equal or similar to a priest. Nevertheless, she could be considered similar to a monk.³¹⁶

³¹² See e.g., Ruether 1983, 52–53. Seremetakis also describes the gender-specific and social roles in Greece. According to her, as a result of modernization in the region of inner Mani, men have assumed the position of the “modernizing elite”, and the woman's role is often linked to pre-capitalist and domestic modes and spaces of production (see Seremetakis 1991).

³¹³ See e.g., Limberis 1999, 752.

³¹⁴ Sotiriou 2004, 501.

³¹⁵ Dubisch 1995, 208-222.

³¹⁶ Field diary II, 3-4.

The roles of women in the monastic context certainly reflect the position of women in the Greek socio-cultural context in general. Many scholars, including du Bulay, see Greece as a male-dominant, patriarchal society in which female roles have been and still are constructed in relation to men. Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman also point out that according to Orthodox understanding men and women are equal, but they are not the same because they have distinct and complementary roles in life.³¹⁷ However, according to Sotiriou, women at the grass-roots level do not articulate strong emotions against the discrimination and impediments that the male church hierarchy has imposed on their religious life. She suggests two main reasons for their attitudes. Firstly, Orthodoxy as a practiced faith has strong feminine tendencies, such as the gender-specific duties that women carry out in churches and monasteries, and thus brings it closer to women. Secondly, even if it is characterized by patriarchy, its flexibility gives women the freedom occasionally to follow practices that usually would not be allowed.³¹⁸ Thus, despite their exclusion from the clergy in Orthodox churches, they participate actively in church life. According to Limberis, they serve as presidents of their communities, as readers in some services, and sit on parish boards. They also direct religious-education programs and choirs, and labor physically for fund-raising events.³¹⁹

Devout Greek Orthodox women seem to think that women and men differ in their spirituality.³²⁰ The following extract from my interview with Ioáanna, a pilgrim, gives one interpretation of the roles of and differences between the sexes. This was Ioáanna's answer to my question of why there were more women than men in the convent:

If we consider the situation objectively there are more women than men, that's true. The reason is because women are brought up close to the monasteries. They don't want to send boys ... boys are brought up to be harder. Little girls will become mothers. They will start a family and they need to get good things from the monasteries and the church. Little boys are...it depends on the family of course, but it's thought that the church makes a person soft, peaceful and defenseless, the kind of person that can't face the difficulties of life. This opinion is of course false, but parents want their boys to become

³¹⁷ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 26.

³¹⁸ Sotiriou 2004, 503.

³¹⁹ Limberis 1999, 753.

³²⁰ Koukoura 2005, 35.

tough men. You can see small boys working as a *papadákia*, a priest's assistant, but this usually ends by the time they start high school. If you speak with men you find that many have been assistants; they remember it and they liked it. But it's the parent's fault that children don't attend services. The Holy Mountain is a bit different. People who are not on a very high spiritual level are impressed with it. It's different. But men have the advantage that if they believe their faith is more stable than that of women, because they are more logical. If men think that something is logical they stick to their opinion and don't change it for anything. We women are emotional and depending on what attracts us, we might go to church for the wrong reasons. If there are ten men in church they are probably devoted. We're speaking of quality.³²¹

It is clear from Ioáanna's description that, first of all, she understands men and women to be different from each other, and that boys and girls are purposefully brought up in different ways regarding religiosity. She does not agree with the logic of discouraging men from attending church services, but she thinks that men are, by their nature, more capable of understanding the inner logic of Orthodoxy. She does not see any inconsistency or problem in her thinking. One could say that she is satisfied with her religious identity and is thus unlikely to change her views. Conversely, her thinking is contradictory to Orthodox thinking, according to which men and women share a common humanity, and there is only one type of spirituality that is common to women and men. Even though Greek Orthodoxy sees man and women as equal, it does not deny the differences between the sexes. However, this topic has only recently become a subject of discussion among Orthodox theologians.

Any discussion about the interaction between nuns and pilgrims in a female convent such as the convent of the Dormition should take into account the background of the women pilgrims who come to it. They are usually mothers and wives. The pilgrims' homes I visited during the course of my field work were homes of pious Orthodox wives and mothers, whose duty was to teach the basics of Orthodoxy to their children. Thus women in Orthodoxy have a pivotal role to play in creating an Orthodox home and an Orthodox family. Sotiriou also claims that the main bearers of tradition in Greece are women, on account of both their stronger participation in the religious sphere and their role as a

³²¹ Interview 2003: 25.

mother.³²² It is a woman's responsibility to teach her children the daily prayers, to tell them stories from the Bible and about the lives of the saints. Moreover, the veneration of icons at home is the woman's task. Orthodox homes have icons displayed in a corner and the woman lights an oil lamp in front of them and prays there. Moreover, a devout Orthodox woman must be familiar with the calendrical cycles of feast days and the required fasting. She must know the level of fasting prescribed for that day or period and, accordingly, prepare the meals.³²³ According to Anthí, the Orthodox doctrine is passed down from the mother to the children:

Yes, I think that Orthodoxy starts from the mother. My mother knows all the feasts, she knows what to cook and when. Basically she's more religious than I am, but maybe I'll change too when I get older.³²⁴

Given that many female pilgrims seemed to feel responsible for creating an Orthodox home, pilgrimage could also be seen as a part of this process. Women visit the monasteries to get spiritual building material for fulfilling their duties at home. They can share their worries about their children, husbands and relatives, and they know that there is someone who is praying for them.³²⁵ According to Koukoura, a modern Orthodox woman, whether she is a mother, a wife, a nun or a working woman, always asks for God's help in her decision-making in choosing which role to concentrate on. She thought it was possible for a Greek woman to be "modern" and "Orthodox" simultaneously.³²⁶ A pilgrim who comes to the convent thus seeks a perspective on her decision-making, and in the meantime she learns about Orthodox doctrine.

The famous French feminist Luce Irigaray has argued that the sexual difference between men and women is one of the most crucial questions of our times.³²⁷ What makes her argument interesting to this work is that her interpretation of the ideal world in which this difference no longer exists is very close to the Orthodox interpretation. According to

³²² Sotiriou 2004, 505.

³²³ Limberis 1999, 753.

³²⁴ Interview 2002: 18.

³²⁵ The pilgrims seemed to think that the nuns' prayers were an extremely important part of pilgrimage. See also Kappai 1998, 15.

³²⁶ Koukoura 2005, 68.

³²⁷ Irigaray 1996, 34.

Irigaray, the true difference between the sexes has not been noticed or understood because the body and soul, sexuality and the spirit have been kept apart in Western philosophy, and angels are a consequence of this separation. They are figures representing sexuality that has not yet become realized. She would like to see the angelic and the corporeal placed together in order to fill the gap between the sexes. Only then could the story of the Creation be realized. She is searching for a world in which a man and a woman can again or finally live together, “face each other and sometimes rest in the same place”. In a sense, Irigaray’s request is being fulfilled in the neutrality demanded by Orthodox monastic life. Nuns and monks are humans who try to live an angelic life, and have combined the body and the soul in their being.

Orthodoxy and Greek feminism

According to Moallem, gender issues play a central role in the crisis of identity in various societies, social groups and individuals. She sees both feminism and fundamentalism as growing forces that attempt to deal with individual and communal identities in global and local conditions.³²⁸ In Greece, feminism is not seen as a product of Greek culture, but rather as something coming from the outside. It has therefore not played a central role in the Greek “crisis of identity”. Consequently, an active visitor to the convent is not likely to address feminist critique to the “patriarchal” life of the Church because for her it is not an obstacle to taking part in its activities.³²⁹

Today, however, there are various women’s organizations in Greece dealing with diverse issues concerning women’s rights, education and other topics on which feminist movements focus. One such movement was started by the late Andreas Papandreou’s³³⁰ American-born wife Margaret, who founded the Women’s Union of Greece (EGE)³³¹ in

³²⁸ Moallem 2001, 119.

³²⁹ See e.g., Gioultsis 1993, 11.

³³⁰ The former Prime Minister of Greece and a central figure of the Socialist Party PASOK.

³³¹ Other Greek women’s organizations include Lykeíon ton Ellinídon, founded in 1911, and Énosi ton Ellinídon, founded in 1896. See Vasileiadis 1997, 5.

1975 immediately after the collapse of the military dictatorship (1967-1974). During the following decade she rallied for the most urgent reforms in the legal status of Greek women in the family and in the labor force. There was a women's movement before the military dictatorship, but the junta forbade women to take part in such organizations, and therefore feminism in Greece did not progress in quite the same way as it did in Western Europe and the US. Despite the activism, it has not been very strong because of the resistance in both private and public spheres. The leaders of the Church of Greece and conservative politicians consider it too extreme and unwarranted. According to Van Steen, the Church believes that feminism holds no validity for Greek society, which places family values over individual freedom. Feminism has been considered a corrupting influence that originated from the "West". Traces of this sort of thinking are still evident in contemporary society and the Church.³³²

Despite the relatively slow development of Greek feminism, it has been manifested, and consequently the Church has not been able to avoid the subject; many of the questions raised by feminists have been discussed not only within the feminist movement but also within the Church. The changes are not happening at the tempo that the feminist groups would like, however. Questions such as the revival of the order of deaconess and allowing females to enter the sanctuary of a church have been under discussion for many years. The Church is constantly facing both internal and external pressure as the surrounding society is changing. Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman note that Greek theological schools have gone through a process they call "feminization" in that a growing number of women are studying theology and are thus becoming increasingly involved in the educational, administrative and charitable social activities of the Church. Despite this process, however, they see women remaining in a role that supports the mission of male-ordained clergy.³³³ Sotiriou points out that the improvements in the position of women are the result not only of the ongoing discussion within the Church, but also of the accomplishment of ordinary women who disregard some of its rules and establish new practices that are more favorable to them. She also reminds us that the main

³³² Van Steen 2003, 251.

³³³ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 27.

stream of criticism comes not from Greek women, but rather from the outside, especially from northern European members of the European Parliament³³⁴.

Most Greek pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition see themselves as part of an *egalitarian* Christian culture in that it is known that Christ improved the position of women by his actions. Therefore pilgrims do not feel the need to agree with the arguments of various feminist groups either inside or outside Greece. The majority of the ones I interviewed thought that only people who were not familiar with Orthodoxy questioned the Orthodox tradition. One illustration of this is the *ávaton*³³⁵ tradition of Mount Athos. *Ávaton* is a traditional monastic rule that is observed with various degrees of rigor at different institutions, and which prohibits men and women from entering a monastery meant for the opposite sex. The self-governed Monastic Republic of Mount Athos is regarded as one large monastic complex and has hence imposed a total ban on women.³³⁶ During the 1990s many Greek Orthodox feared that the Schengen open-border arrangements would threaten the thousand-year-old decree that excluded women from the Holy Mountain. The monks call the mountain the ‘Garden of the Holy Virgin’ in accordance with the ancient legend about how the Virgin Mary, blown ashore on her way to Cyprus, was so overwhelmed by its beauty that she asked God to give it to her as a present. The principle of *ávaton* was ingrained in Athonite law in the Byzantine era, but there are no official documents from that era forbidding women to set foot on Athos. The explanation lies in the tradition. It is possible that it was universally respected and thus the official documents did not have to mention it separately. However, even today women and even female animals are excluded from the Republic. The only way women can view the monasteries is by taking a cruise round the coast of the peninsula.³³⁷

Over the years various women have tried to change this tradition. For example, a number of Scandinavian female Euro MPs have called for Mount Athos to be opened up to

³³⁴ Sotiriou 2004, 499-509.

³³⁵ From *ábatos*, inaccessible, untrodden, impassable (Talbot 1996, 67).

³³⁶ Talbot 1996, 67.

³³⁷ Talbot 1996, 67-69; Konidaris 2003.

women, arguing that their exclusion contravened EU legislation.³³⁸ The topic has not been widely discussed in Greece, however. The exclusion of women from the Holy Mountain is seen as a way of securing the peace needed in order to lead an ascetic life, regardless of whether it applies to male or female monasteries.

In Iríni's view Orthodoxy treats men and women equally in that they have the same opportunities to discuss their personal business with the monastics if they wish to do so:

No, it isn't [unequal], because there are female monasteries. If a woman really wants to find something similar [to Mount Athos], she will find it. So, I don't see this as something unfair... the husband of my professor goes very often to the Holy Mountain and their son became a monk there, so I too have a connection there.³³⁹

Feminists inside and outside Greece have also initiated discussion on topics such as excluding women from the altar and not allowing them to attend liturgies when menstruating. Some of the pilgrims I interviewed admitted that they might disagree with these traditional customs and even saw it as a form of spiritual struggling, whereas others simply accepted them as part of their living of the Orthodox faith. Devout Orthodox seem to think that feminism is a culturally imperialist Western-originated product, which should therefore be regarded as something that is threatening Orthodox family and community values. Thus, there is a consciousness among Greek men and women of being native to a country and culture that formed the basis of Western civilization and equality, even if Athenian democracy was not egalitarian in the way that the term is understood today. According to many of the pilgrims, the "Western" woman may have gone "too far" with equality, meaning that women have lost some qualities that are characteristic of them.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ See e.g., <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/113765.stm>

³³⁹ Interview 2002: 1.

³⁴⁰ Field diary IV, 29. On the Greek feminists' conception of democracy and the role of women in Greece see e.g., Karamanou 2003, 275- 279.

The Mother of God

The Virgin Mary is usually referred to by the Orthodox as “*Theótokos*” (Birth giver to God) or “*Panagía*” (All-Holy). She is highly venerated by both men and women, and female pilgrims can also identify with her as a woman. In fact, she is referred to in every Orthodox service. Schememann lists four main expressions of Mariology in religious devotions, Mariological prayers, Mariological feasts, Mariological iconography, and Mariological extra-liturgical piety.³⁴¹

The above-mentioned expressions of Mariology are visible in the convent of the Dormition, (except of course for piety, which is manifested outside the convent). The Virgin Mary is also very much present in its everyday language. The nuns refer to her very often when they speak to pilgrims, and use expressions such as “*Panagía mazí sas*”, meaning, “May the All-Holy be with you”.³⁴² Similarly, pilgrims use the same words to express their close relation to the Virgin,³⁴³ and there are many other reverent names symbolizing her position in the Orthodox doctrine. According to Campbell³⁴⁴, she is the eternal image of motherhood, which is why prayers for children are directed specifically to her. Women can also relate to her if they are worried about their children because she has suffered and experienced loss. Many mothers who visit the convent are generally concerned about their children’s’ future, and some have children who are studying abroad. In these cases the Virgin Mary is seen as a particularly important saint with whom they can identify.³⁴⁵ Orthodox women venerate the *Theótokos* in all situations in life, including marriage and motherhood. It is considered a protector and nurturer of women, their children and husbands.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Schememann 2001, 7, 86-87.

³⁴² The nuns noted, for example, that as my name is Mari the Virgin Mary is my patron saint. They also taught me that having a patron saint like the Virgin, who is the most revered saint of the Orthodox Church, was simultaneously giving and demanding in that I should try to live by her example (Field diary IV, 40).

³⁴³ Field diary IV, 40.

³⁴⁴ Campbell 1964, 343.

³⁴⁵ Field diary IV, 40. See also Koukoura 2005, 219-221.

³⁴⁶ Limberis 1999, 752.

The most important festivals, in addition to the liturgies, when the Mother of God is celebrated among the Orthodox include the Nativity of the Mother of God on September 8, the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple on November 21, the Annunciation on March 25, the Second Day of Christmas, in other words the Assembly in Honor of the Mother of God, on December 26, and finally the Dormition of the Mother of God on August 15³⁴⁷.

According to the Orthodox understanding of her position, which is based mainly on the Christological titles affirmed by the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus 431), the Virgin Mary is free of original sin and is thus set apart from the human race in a special and separate superhuman category. The Orthodox Church accepts the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, but she is not seen as immaculately conceived.³⁴⁸

The female pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition seemed to be happy with the overall representation of female figures in Orthodoxy in general, and in the convent in particular. The icons and frescos in the church represent typical Byzantine architecture, and most of the frescoes depict scenes from the life of Christ, the *Theótokos*, and the saints. There are therefore some female figures on the walls and the iconostasis of the church, including the mother of God and other female saints and martyrs such as Sophia and her daughters Pistis, Elpis and Agape. The pilgrims, that is to say, did not question the female representation. They felt that a female convent was the place for them and that they were as important in God's eyes as men. They nevertheless often spoke about the saints that had a special meaning to them. For instance, an Orthodox usually has a special relationship with the saint after whom she or he is named, but it is not necessarily important for that saint to be a man or a woman.³⁴⁹ The special relation is related to baptism and not to gender. The Mother of God is nevertheless important to all pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition, and to all Orthodox in general.

³⁴⁷ The Russian tradition also celebrates the Protection of the Mother of God on October 1 (Schmemmann 2001, 22-42).

³⁴⁸ Schmemmann 2001, 7; Warner 1976, 252; Dubisch 1995, 236.

³⁴⁹ In Greece women may have the name of a male saint, and vice versa, because many names have both masculine and feminine forms. For example, a child named after the Virgin Mary (*Panagía*) may be baptized as Panagiótis if it is a boy or Panagióta if it is a girl.

IV Pilgrimage and the functions of the convent

This chapter concerns the convent's functions, both from the Church's perspective, in ecclesia, and from the pilgrim's point of view. I refer throughout to John Binns' list of monastery functions in the light of the research data.

I will focus first on the convent as part of the Church of Greece, and as an individual institution. According to Meredith McGuire, a religious group, whether it is formal or informal, is essential in the formation of individual beliefs and norms. In her opinion, religious communalism is a protest against the privatization and fragmentation of social life. Thus religious communities are "ecclesiolae in ecclesia", which also accept a dual standard of religiosity - one for the religious elite and one for the masses.³⁵⁰ In a similar way, a monastery or a convent represents both institutionalized and private religiosity. On the one hand it could be seen as an important part of the Church, mainly because it operates with and within it.³⁵¹ The monastic network could therefore be characterized as an institution within an institution. In fact, the Orthodox Church considers monasteries an inherent part of it because they undertake various ecclesiastical duties that parish churches are not able to carry out, such as taking care of the elderly. This kind of social work is not done on the same scale as in the past, but it is nevertheless still an important way of helping people. The monasteries participate in the Greek welfare system even today. In fact, their social work is part of the Church's informal welfare activities, which are often realized on the local level.³⁵² Furthermore, they hold services that parish churches are not able to officiate.

³⁵⁰ McGuire 1992, 20, 148.

³⁵¹ Monasteries are also included in the Church when the term is understood in its Orthodox connotation, meaning the community of believers or the body of Christ.

³⁵² See Alpentzos 2002, 101-102; Kokosalakis and Fokas 2007, 10. The Church of Greece has various ecclesiastical organizations, such as the Orthodox mission of *Apostoliki Diakonía*, that have several educational and social purposes. The Church and its organizations are administrated by the Holy Synod, which comprises 13 members and is responsible for all its executive affairs. The Archbishop of Greece (the ruling archbishop from 2008 is His Beatitude Ierónimos) is the leader of the Holy Synod (Molotokos-Liedermann 2004, 21; see also Moore 1989, 88).

On the other hand, the Orthodox Church considers the monasteries indicators of its condition and state. It is said that a vibrant and growing monastic life is a sign of a healthy Church. The monastic network, which reaches all corners of Greece, is an institution in itself. As there are no orders in Orthodox monasticism, the monasteries form one community, but they are also places of private everyday religiosity and personal spirituality in which the *living true to the Orthodox tradition*³⁵³ takes place.

Binns lists four functions that monasteries (and convents) in general have within the Church: (1) liturgical, (2) educational, (3) providing future church leaders,³⁵⁴ and (4) providing hospitality and facilitating pilgrimage. First and foremost they are places of liturgical celebration in which the full round of liturgical worship is observed based on the Byzantine model, and this is not possible in parish churches. Most monasteries therefore celebrate all possible liturgies, and hold all-night vigils and other services. As each one has a character of its own, individual monasteries may also celebrate saints that are related to their history and therefore hold vigils and liturgies locally. Secondly, the monasteries are centers of education and study, providing teaching to people in all age groups, from basic instruction in reading for young boys to seminary training for future monks and clergy. Teaching and education should be understood here as a wide concept, starting from the very concrete teaching of the Orthodox faith to involvement in the Church's mission and maintaining Orthodoxy. In terms of practice, education in the monastic environment means providing teaching in the form of Sunday Schools for children and various seminars and symposiums for adults, and is also to a greater or lesser extent part of the liturgical life of the Church. Monasteries also provide church leaders in that monks can be consecrated as bishops. They are also centers of hospitality and pilgrimage, their relics, miracle-working icons and holy springs providing a focus for this. Finally, they may be places of economic activity, providing employment for local people on their land or a market for the exchange of goods.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ An expression used by one of the pilgrims (Field Diary IV, 38).

³⁵⁴ Binns' third function is only relevant in male monasteries, but it is mentioned here because he discusses both male and female monasteries in his work.

³⁵⁵ Binns 2002 107-108.

Binns' four dimensions were reflected in the interviews with the pilgrims, who considered the full round of liturgical worship a very good reason for visiting the convent of the Dormition. For many it was a way of *maintaining* their faith, of feeling close to God. Many of my informants tried to follow the liturgical order of the Church to its full extent, and liked to celebrate most of the saints. They also saw the liturgy as the centre of pilgrimage, the most important part of it. I quote a pilgrim called Anastasía:

Well, I try hard [to believe]. I try and I do what I can. The faith comes from inside. I only started to visit monasteries [and convents] when I was older, and the older a person gets the harder it is to change things. The question is how we look after our faith. We have all been baptized; God has given us faith, what we do with it is the question. Your faith is best realized the more you cultivate and nurture it, the more you read, the more you go on pilgrimages, to Church and to services. Tomorrow is the feast of Saint David. The Church of Saint David is open only a few times a year. I always try to go to these services if only my work allows me to. I always check my calendar to see what or who is being celebrated and do my best to attend the services. When you go to Church on some Saint's day you can feel this particular saint next to you. The saint helps in many things. I always think that he took great pains with his life for our sake, so why shouldn't we light a candle in his memory. I believe that we, too, have to sacrifice ourselves in some ways, and that the saint will be grateful even though he has nothing to gain. He has his place in Heaven already! [Laughing] These small things help in developing our faith. Just as you can't increase your knowledge without reading, you can't revitalize your faith without doing these things.³⁵⁶

Most people who visit monasteries and churches know the ecclesiastical calendar and the dates of the most important Orthodox festivals. They also know the specific customs that are related to them, such as what food is eaten and what kind of services there are in church on that day. It is common for pilgrims to read the announcements posted in churches and monasteries in order to find out what is happening in the local area. Many of the festivals could also be considered "common knowledge", familiar to every Greek Orthodox. Anastasía continues:

I usually read the Church announcements. There are posters in the hallways indicating which church is celebrating. They also show which monastery is celebrating or

³⁵⁶ Interview 2003: 24.

officiating at liturgies. This is one way. I also call my friends and ask what's happening in the monasteries. And because I'm involved in these things I know if some monastery or church organizes a regular vigil every Thursday or Friday, for example. I don't want to be in contact with people who aren't involved in these things or who don't go to church. We [friends] help each other in developing our faith. If someone says that he isn't interested in the feast of Saint David, OK, I don't want to be in contact with him. We form a small circle of friends and help each other.³⁵⁷

Binns includes spirituality in the monasteries' liturgical function within the Church. Not all of them have the resources for full and concentrated liturgical worship, but people continue to look for places of spiritual strength, encouragement, and examples of liturgical vitality³⁵⁸. Binns does not define spirituality in his work, but as according to McGuire, for example, it is an entity consisting of religious beliefs, religious rituals, religious experience, and the religious community. This definition is a fruitful basis on which to examine an individual's religion, and also more generally the ways in which religious groups organize themselves to focus on shared meanings.³⁵⁹ There are more detailed aspects of spirituality. According to the pilgrims' accounts, it comes in at least the following forms: the liturgical life of the Church, retreat, pastoral care, and encounters with the sacred. Evangelía described her emotions in the convent as follows:

Maybe, at that moment you regret something you have done. And you're probably asking for forgiveness, you're praying, you're hoping that something good will happen to you. On the one hand you beg and ask, and on the other if you have a weight in your soul you ask God to forgive you. And somehow afterwards the pain inside you softens, as does the weight you're carrying. You feel relieved and at ease. Yes, you feel that this thing lightens you. When you do it with a heart that believes, with real faith and penitence, you feel relief, great relief.³⁶⁰

Binns' second point, education, is also important. Many parents want their children to be in the sphere of influence of the Church, and therefore take them to Sunday school or offer them as a *papadáki*, the priest's (male) assistant. The convent of the Dormition of the Virgin does not organize Sunday school, but many of the pilgrims' children go regularly to those in the other churches or monasteries in the area, or take part in the

³⁵⁷ Interview 2003: 24.

³⁵⁸ Binns 2002, 108.

³⁵⁹ McGuire 1992, 15-20.

³⁶⁰ Interview 2002: 7.

activities of the church youth groups or various revivalist movements (Zoe and Soter)³⁶¹. The convent organizes teaching sessions for the nuns on the central themes of Orthodoxy, led by the igumeni or the confessor, and pilgrims are often welcome to these events. It is also common to see pilgrims taking notes in the Sunday liturgies during the priest's sermon. The Koumanídis family, which visited one convent regularly, used to take their son to the lessons in Byzantine ecclesiastical chanting it organized. Vassílios, the father of the family, said that he wanted his son to learn to “understand the value of Byzantine music”, because he himself understood the “beauty and depth of it only at an older age, after listening to Western classical music for many years”.

However, it seems that most pilgrims did not experience their visits to the convent only as education, regardless of whether it was in the context of a liturgy or discussion with the nuns. They rather saw them as more holistic attempts to *nurture their faith*, as Anastasía put it, and considered the whole visit a learning experience, one step on their way to *Théosis*³⁶² or deification. Many saw the nuns and the igumeni as spiritually experienced people, and therefore wished to learn about their words or behavior. A pilgrim called María spoke about the nuns as follows:

Yes, nuns are enlightened. Usually they know what a person needs. You don't necessarily have to ask something, related to a job for example, but the nuns come spontaneously and tell you a story suggesting that some job is not suitable. You usually get an answer [to your questions] in this way. The nuns are enlightened and in fact anyone who makes their thinking clean³⁶³, if you have a clear heart, like it says in the Gospel, anyone can pray to God in order to cleanse his or her heart and act according to God's will. In the convent the nuns pray more and are therefore more enlightened than we in the world are.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ The Zoe brotherhood of theologians was founded by a monk, Fr Eusebios Matthopoulos, in 1907 and in the late 1950 a conservative faction, led by the influential theologian Panagiotis Trembelas decided to split and to found a new brotherhood called Soter. Both organizations have been responsible for revival in Church life in post-war Greece. See e.g., Makrides 1998.

³⁶² On the Orthodox concept of Deification, see e.g., Monk 1978, 22-23.

³⁶³ María used here the term *katharós*, which literally means clean. By clean thinking and a clean heart she meant that her mind was free of any thoughts that might disturb her concentration on prayer.

³⁶⁴ Interview 2003: 19.

From the Church's perspective, Binns' fourth point, pilgrimage and hospitality, is also an important factor in the Greek welfare system. The convent of the Dormition provides shelter and material help for people in need. It receives financial support from the government and from individuals that helps them to meet the requirements of the surrounding society. The Church owns the majority of monastery land and other property, but monasteries and convents are the embodiment of hospitality because they are able to accommodate visitors, and the accommodation is free of charge³⁶⁵. As part of the Church of Greece they have, according to Greek law, an official social role. The Church operates on three different levels in terms of social activities and programs. On the national level there are seven welfare organizations operating under the Holy Synod; on the regional level the Archdiocese of Athens and other metropolises carry out social activities; and on the local level thousands of parishes and various monasteries and convents take care of the social side.³⁶⁶ Furthermore, according to the Charter of the Church of Greece, monasteries and convents are legal entities under public law³⁶⁷, and therefore are equal in position with other charitable organizations

All the pilgrims I interviewed mentioned social work as one of the most important ways in which the convent of the Dormition helps people. Female monasteries have traditionally carried out social and philanthropic work in many ways.³⁶⁸ Nonetheless, as mentioned, they were not supposed to be charitable institutions, and should concentrate on their traditional functions of prayer and work. Dímitra thought about the most important role that monasteries might have in modern society:

There are many...First of all, not all monasteries have the same activities and the same philosophy. I can't say anything about Mount Athos, I haven't been there, but even on

³⁶⁵ Normally pilgrims stay at the monastery for a limited period of time, and in the convent of the Dormition they commonly contribute by bringing gifts or leaving some extra money in the box that is used for paying for candles in the church.

³⁶⁶ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman, 2004, 28, 30. See also Kokosalakis and Fokas 2007, 3.

³⁶⁷ Along with the network of parishes and monasteries, the Church of Greece supports a vast number of philanthropic foundations including old people's homes, psychiatric clinics and orphanages. This kind of help is remarkable in a country in which social security has not reached the average European Union standard in all areas (Ware 1992, 129-132; Katastatikos Hartis tis Ekklesias; Nomos 590/1977; see also Sintagma tis Elladas 2001, 43).

³⁶⁸ Alpéntzos 2002, 8-9.

Mount Athos, which is considered to be the buttress of monasticism, [...] there are monasteries of many different understandings and schools. There are those that concentrate only on prayer, on saving the soul, but you hear of others that also do social work. As one igumeni said: “In honor of monasticism and God”. There are hermits, ascetics who have become monks mainly for their own sake, to save their souls, but there are also others who do social work.³⁶⁹

The pilgrims were nonetheless usually proud to say that monasteries were versatile institutions that helped people in many ways, and they appreciated the convent’s social work and charity. Alíki said that they offered help to people, and the help was altruistic:

[...] They offer! And even if they have needs too, they haven’t started to charge for the services they offer. In one convent, for example, they do memorial services and they have expenses for that. They have to prepare the grain, they have to prepare what is needed for the service, but they tell you, “We will prepare all the necessary things and you can put some money into the box if you like”. Is this not one form of democracy? And everyone pays accordingly, what he can. And nobody sees this or says anything. Don’t you make friends in this way?³⁷⁰

Anthí listed the types of social work carried out in the convent of the Dormition:

Social work, cultural work, helping children, helping the elderly and economic support of the local people. But OK, if you say it like that...you should use rich language, so that the other person understands the philosophy. It is love. Unselfish love. Help for one’s fellow man. We are taught that Christ is love. Don’t they say that when a monk is ordained he marries Christ, and so on? That’s it. The monastics. It is all in one word, love.³⁷¹

Like many other pilgrims I came across in the convent, Eléni also remarked that monasteries had offered Greeks material and immaterial help in the past, and kept on offering it, even today. In her opinion they had not changed, and still provided help, but she thought that people had become less dependent on their spiritual and material support. Nonetheless, they still had the potential power and ability to help and support the Greeks. Her words reflect the kind of attitude that Schäfer refers to as “common reference”, which here signifies the existing power of religion in the European secularized society. Religion had not lost its significance for Eléni, however, and the

³⁶⁹ Interview 2003:10.

³⁷⁰ Interview 2002: 22.

³⁷¹ Interview 2002: 18.

convent provided a perspective from which pilgrims could view their religiosity, traditions and culture.³⁷²

I don't know how many people would agree with me, but I see Greek monasteries in particular as... that in the progress of the Greek nation they have had and still have something to offer. It's just that now we're living in a period of prosperity, or maybe the economic situation is starting to stabilize. The more steadily and comfortably you live economically, the less you remember God, sacrifice and spirituality, and the less you think about those who are suffering. When you find yourself in a difficult position, when you don't have money, when you're not having fun, then you find time to think about yourself and others, and to hear what is happening in your neighbor's house.³⁷³

Sofía similarly pointed out that monasteries had helped the Greeks in the past, and that now people were alienated from them. However, they still had a role to play in society.

The importance of monasteries is meant to extend to the whole society. I believe that they could help more. In the 40s we had a lot of poverty and they fed people and offered services for people. They had a very important role in society, but now their value is a bit marginalized. They helped in difficult times, however. They used to be castles³⁷⁴. And today they still play an essential and considerable role.³⁷⁵

Angelikí trusted the nuns' ability to re-establish the Greek nation if necessary. She thought that the monasteries helped people on many levels simultaneously:

[The monasteries help people] in so many ways! Spiritually. Now, and in the history of Greece. A lot has happened in the monasteries. [...] These people [nuns] give you the foundation [of life]. A [Church] father once said that if the history and traditions of Greece were destroyed, everything could start from the beginning with what they had in the monasteries.³⁷⁶

Binns also mentions economic activities as aspects of the monasteries' hospitality and pilgrimage. Even if such activities and the services and duties performed by employees are not pilgrimage in the classical sense, they should be taken into consideration because

³⁷² Schäfer 2005, 96.

³⁷³ Interview 2003: 15.

³⁷⁴ By castles (*Kástro*, could also be translated as fortress) Sofía means that the monasteries protected Greek people from poverty, but they also protected Greek Orthodoxy from various unwanted influences, and thereby maintained the tradition.

³⁷⁵ Interview 2005: 14.

³⁷⁶ Interview 2003:16.

for some people a purely external economic activity may become an experience of approaching the holy. I was often aware of the economic activities going on when I visited the convent. It provides work for groups of carpenters, masons and other construction workers, for example, because the nuns are not able to carry out the heavy tasks involved in maintaining and fixing the convent buildings. Although the monasteries try to be self-sufficient, nunneries in particular are dependant on external help.

During my field-research I got to know a physiotherapist who used to treat some of the convent nuns. She was a German-born lady and not Orthodox herself, but she said the nuns were “very polite to her although she forgot to wear a skirt the first time she entered the convent”. However, she was surprised by the fact that nuns asked her about her faith, a thing she considered rather personal. The nuns consider all people coming to the convent pilgrims in the theological sense of the word; according to the Orthodox understanding, there is always a chance that God might be speaking to them even if they have other than personal or spiritual motives. Many workers, too, saw their contribution as something of a mixture between work and pilgrimage. They often emphasized their readiness to help even if the task in question was part of the work for which they were being paid. For instance, Stávros was a local municipal official. He was often in contact with the monasteries and parish churches because of his position. When asked about his relation to the monasteries he replied:

First of all, the relation I have [with the churches and the monasteries] has to do with helping. From a very early [stage of my career] I was given the responsibility of helping. The help meant things like organizing a demonstration or publishing an article in a newspaper or a magazine, or establishing a spiritual centre at the church where I was responsible for the acoustics, you know. I’m happy to be able to give something. Secondly, my mother is a devout person and we have a special relationship, I love her a lot. She was a person who often went to monasteries. Why did she go to them? She considered the work of the nuns very important. She used to make pullovers. Every Christmas she made ten, if there were ten nuns, she made ten pullovers. So I got used to this contact. I feel comfortable [with what I do to help monasteries].³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ Interview 2003: 3.

According to Alpéntzos, the financial situation of the monasteries today is not too healthy. They have considerable expenses, not least because of the large numbers of pilgrims, and they work hard to survive. Their income comes mostly from pilgrims' donations, farming, handicrafts and icon painting, sewing, book publishing and sales, and the renting of plots. However, even if they are working hard to survive, as in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, the visitor will see no sign of destitution, only a convent in a beautiful setting in which everything looks fresh and new. The pilgrims' trust in and affection towards the monasteries accounts for the fact that many, such as the convent of the Dormition, are doing so well despite the difficulties.³⁷⁸

The transcendent function of the convent

Binns' notion of the monasteries' functions within the Church appears in a slightly different light when compared to the pilgrims' perspective, which generally differs from the Church's perspective to some extent. Even if the Church sees the monasteries as an organic part of it, pilgrims often consider them very different from parish churches in terms of religious practices. Many at the convent of the Dormition thought that parish churches were part of the world, *cosmos* or *immanence*, whereas the monasteries represented *transcendence*.³⁷⁹ Parish churches belonged to the secular sphere whereas monasteries belonged to the holy. Moreover, according to Alpéntzos, 88 percent of pilgrims state that the reason they visit monasteries is to be closer to God.³⁸⁰ Many of those at the convent of the Dormition want to visit monasteries because they think that the atmosphere is different from that in a parish church. Almost all of my informants mentioned the different atmosphere as a primary reason for their visits. The adjective they most often used to describe the atmosphere was *kataniktikós*³⁸¹, meaning devout or

³⁷⁸ Alpéntzos 2002, 66-67; Field diary I, 5.

³⁷⁹ The dichotomy is used here in the same meaning as Beyer uses it to distinguish the whole of perceptible reality from its polar opposite, transcendence (Beyer 1994, 5-6).

³⁸⁰ Alpéntzos 2002, 198.

³⁸¹ *Katániksi*, according to Babiniotis, includes the connotations of faith and devoutness (Babiniotis 2002, 857).

literally, contrite.³⁸² Some people did have the same intentions as if they were visiting a church, but they seemed to be in the minority.

Many informants said that the parish churches were full of noisy people and that it was not possible to concentrate in the same way as it is in a convent. According to Iríni³⁸³, middle-aged ladies go to church to “show off their new clothes and to hear the latest gossip”. The attitude toward the parish churches seemed to be somewhat negative in comparison. Ifigénia also valued the convent of the Dormition and its atmosphere:

It’s best to attend liturgy or any service they organize in the monasteries. This is the most important thing, because a service provides you with the experiences that help you to concentrate on prayer, to pray and not to be disturbed. You take the prayers home, and on the way home you continue to think about the stuff you were thinking about in the convent. If you go to one liturgy in the convent it’s maybe equivalent to five liturgies in the world outside, because you can concentrate better. Of course there are problematic people who lack the will to change and these people can’t get what you’re supposed to get from a liturgy. So, the services are the most important thing in the convent.³⁸⁴

Áris made the following simple distinction between the convent and a church:

I think there’s some kind of difference between a church and a convent. Something happens in a convent, whereas a church is just a church.³⁸⁵

Thomái also distinguished monasteries from the world outside:

They [pilgrims] obviously want to relax from everyday life. They want to pray and they want to feel more spiritual for short moments. Because here in the world there are duties, family responsibilities that many times don’t let you live like a monk, the spiritual way. You can of course live like that but not that much. You can’t feel it, you can’t calm down. Here you get confused. This is why the monks and nuns left...to be far away from the world so that they can devote themselves totally to God. So that there aren’t any influences to prevent them.³⁸⁶

³⁸² Alpéntzos also mentions the silence and devout atmosphere in monasteries (Alpéntzos 2002, 72).

³⁸³ Field diary III, 32.

³⁸⁴ Interview 2003: 17.

³⁸⁵ Interview 2002: 5.

³⁸⁶ Interview 2005: 21.

Many pilgrims also thought that the convent did not belong to this world, and represented something that belonged to the transcendent. I asked Níkos what made him think that the convent belonged to something other than this world:

You understand it best in the way they [the nuns] speak to you. And in the way they look at you and in the way they don't look at you. When they look at you, it's like they know you. But they don't know you. You may have visited a convent only a few times, so they can't remember you. This is one factor and another factor is that there are not many people there. [...] They're there for you. And not only for you, for the whole world. Those who want to go can go.³⁸⁷

As mentioned earlier, monasteries are, and should be, regarded as part of the Church of Greece. Even if a few of them have some special characteristics, such as an interest in ecclesiastical politics, which might run counter to the Church's mainstream thinking, it does not make sense to speak about fundamental differences between Greek monasteries and convents in this context. They work within the Church, and the Church and the monasteries and convents acknowledge this fact. Yet, as is clear from the above quotations, pilgrims often seem to think of monasteries as separate from parish churches. In addition to the distinction mentioned, which could be characterized as *immanence-transcendence*, another underlying reason for such a division is the fact that each convent has a character of its own based primarily on its *typicon*, and secondly on its history, especially the miracles that may have taken place, and the monks and nuns that are or have been living there.

Distinctive spiritual personalities at the convent of the Dormition

As the pilgrims saw it, the distinctive personalities and special "spiritual" and "ethical radiance" of certain individuals living in the convent of the Dormition drew people there. For example, when asked his reasons for visiting it the father of the Papadóπουλος family, Geórgios, said that it was because they had a lot of "friends" there, and because they were especially attached to its confessor, Father Ioánnis, who was the spiritual father of the

³⁸⁷ Interview 2002: 4.

family as well as of the whole convent.³⁸⁸ Geórgios described Father Ioánnis as a saint: “You can see from his face that he’s a holy man (*ágios ánthropos*)”. Another reason why the family went to this particular convent was because one of the nuns, Sister Aíkaterina, grew up in the same village as Mrs. Papadóπουλος, and they were close friends before she became a nun. Many of the pilgrims knew some of the nuns personally. They highly respected them, were fascinated by their personalities and wished to spend some time with them when visiting the convent. This was also the case with Mr. and Mrs. Papadóπουλος. The family went to the convent almost every Sunday and listened attentively to Father Ioánnis’ sermons. They also liked to talk to him and Sister Aíkaterina after the service if possible. Mrs. Papadóπουλος praised Sister Aíkaterina, saying that she “is and always has been an extremely good person, always thinking of everybody except herself”.³⁸⁹

Katerína, who was living in the convent and was thinking of becoming a nun, also greatly appreciated igumeni Marína. She said she had witnessed the igumeni levitating during the liturgy once, and that she could also see a halo around her face.³⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that nowadays women can be considered spiritual examples in the same way as men. Sotiriou mentions that some igumeni, such as Evgenia Kleidara of the Saint Raphael Convent in Lesvos, occupies, as a spiritual mother, a role that was assigned only to men in the past.³⁹¹

The convent confessor has a special role in the monastic community. He usually comes to the convent on Sundays if he is officiating at the liturgy. He is the confessor of all nuns and the igumeni, which means that they confess to him and have spiritual discussions with him. Confession is a sacrament, and they have to prepare for it by fasting and reading prayers. Father Ióannis is not necessarily the confessor of the visiting pilgrims,

³⁸⁸ The term friend, which Geórgios Papadóπουλος used here, is a metaphor for people who share the same Orthodox values that the Papadóπουλος family consider important.

³⁸⁹ Field diary IV, 16-17.

³⁹⁰ Field diary II, 6. Katerína considered these events miracles. However, she did not want to discuss them any further because, according to the Orthodox tradition, Christians should take miracles calmly and not boast about having witnessed them. They should also understand that the miracles are from God and not the Devil. For more on this topic and Orthodox ethics see e.g., Yannaras 1984.

³⁹¹ Sotiriou 2004, 503.

and many people only see him at the convent of the Dormition. However, many of them feel attached to him and listen attentively to his sermons or teaching sessions. As far as the average pilgrim is concerned, the confessor's role is indirect. He is in charge of the spiritual growth of the nuns, who often emphasize the meaning of confession to the pilgrims. According to Sister Theodóra, confession is the beginning of a spiritual life, the aim being to know God and his will.³⁹²

Like Mrs. Papadóoulos, who went to the convent mainly because of her friend, Sister Aíkaterina, some of the other pilgrims were there to see some of the other nuns. Given the close relationship between many of the nuns and pilgrims and the local nature of many of the festivals and saints, this type of Greek Orthodoxy incorporates flexibility and the personal touch into pilgrimage in addition to the services and other elements that are shared by the mass of believers. The individual character of a particular convent also makes pilgrimage, *proskínima*, a personal experience.

Many pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition highly appreciate the igumeni, Marína, and go there for that reason. She is a mother superior, who above all is a spiritual leader. She makes all the practical decisions, and her role is to foster the nuns' and the pilgrims' spiritual growth. She is also administratively responsible for the convent. She talks to pilgrims and many of them tell her their worries. She may also redirect them to some "appropriate" nun. For instance, she sent me to Sister Theodóra, who had lived in Scandinavia for some time, thinking that she would understand me better than she did. Many of the pilgrims I interviewed thought that igumeni Marína was a wise person, and some saw her as a future saint. They said that they could feel her love and thus wanted to come to the convent "again and again".³⁹³ Evangelía talked thus about her encounter with igumeni Marína:

We had a difficult situation in my family. My parents were arguing a lot and they wanted to separate. My brother was a bit down psychologically and I was taking my matriculation exam. When the situation settled down a bit and my parents patched things

³⁹² Field diary I, 19; Field diary IV, 17; Field diary V, 6; Interview 2005: 27.

³⁹³ Field diary I, 19; Field diary IV, 28.

up my mom wanted us to go together to the convent. [...] We went and the igumeni took us to a room that is holy, a cell I think. She spoke to us and she read to us and said blessings. The whole thing was very moving. My mother was crying. We genuflected humbly and were alone with the igumeni.³⁹⁴

Historically both saints and fathers had a strong link to monasticism, usually having been monks or nuns. Because of the significance of the tradition and the Patristic character of the Church, pilgrims are usually familiar with the Hagiography, and regard monasteries as places that can “produce” saints and fathers. It is customary for people to call some monks or nuns saints, as in the above example, even if the Church has not yet thus proclaimed them. It is also common for a Greek Orthodox to pray to any member of the Church, such as late family members, monks or nuns, even if they are not saints.³⁹⁵

Orthodoxy emphasizes the significance of tradition. According to Kallistos Ware, tradition means the whole doctrinal system: the books of the Bible, the canons of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers, the service books, and the Holy Icons. What are of interest here are the Fathers and the patristic character of the Orthodox Church. The Fathers usually refer to certain writers of the fourth century, especially “the Three Great Hierarchs”: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianz and John Chrysostom. However, from the Orthodox point of view the period of the Fathers has not necessarily come to an end, for many later writers are considered Fathers and the Holy Spirit can still work among people and “produce” more. The same applies to saints. The Church has officially proclaimed a number of saints, but new monks and nuns are constantly being put forward as candidates.³⁹⁶

The fact that Fathers and saints usually have a monastic background is one more reason why pilgrims distinguish between churches and monasteries. Acknowledged spiritual figures usually come from monasteries rather than parish churches, and monasteries and convents are thus seen as vital centers of spiritual life, i.e. as different.

³⁹⁴ Interview 2002:7.

³⁹⁵ For example, Elder Paisios (1924-1994), who lived on Mount Athos, has not been proclaimed a saint but many pilgrims consider him one (Field diary IV, 16-17). See also Zournatzoglou 2003.

³⁹⁶ Ware 1997, 196, 256.

The convent as a place in which to remember the past

The convent of the Dormition could be regarded as a place in which pilgrims feel nostalgic, and remember their personal past and cultural heritage. This kind of remembering and the sentiments of nostalgia are mainly attributable to the historical role of the monasteries as institutions that united the Greek people during the Ottoman Empire, thus creating a common feeling of trust. In this respect, many people experience monasteries and convents as museums that have preserved the Byzantine heritage, and are thus valuable to the Greek nation. This is not necessarily contradictory to visiting a convent for personal reasons. The visitor may well understand the pilgrimage site as a nostalgic and a sacred place at the same time. There may be personal reasons for the visit, and the pilgrim may focus on what he or she considers sacred. However, the pilgrimage site could also be considered to have special value in the life of an individual and in the history of the Greek nation. As the following example shows, there are definitely pilgrims in the convent of the Dormition who visit it as a place of “nostalgia”. Moreover, it may be part of someone’s childhood experiences or past in some other respect. In other words, this “nostalgic function” may be combined with a living relationship . For example, expatriate Greeks combine a visit to the convent with a trip to Greece.³⁹⁷

While I was conducting fieldwork in the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin in the summer of 2003 I met a middle-aged Greek expatriate couple, Ms Kaliópi and Mr. Panagiótis, living in Germany. They told me that they visited the convent every time they came to Greece. This time they were there because Ms Kaliópi was mourning the loss of her mother. She spent some time talking to Sister Pelagía, a sister they had known for many years, over coffee provided by the convent. As places of nostalgia monasteries also function as tools for reflecting on one’s personal history and current life.

³⁹⁷ There is an extensive Greek Diaspora and in this sense their pilgrimage to monasteries is not a marginal phenomenon. According to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, citizens of Greek origin live in more than 140 countries around the world today. There are more than two million in the United States, Germany and Australia. On Greek Diaspora see e.g., <http://www.sae.gr/EN/Perifereies.asp> Field Diary IV, 2-4.

After coffee the couple told me that they were somewhat worried about their two daughters, who had no active contact with the convent, or at least they could not visit it very often because they both lived in Germany. Nevertheless, the parents were still satisfied because, as Mr. Panagiótis said, “Fortunately our daughters are devout people, one more than the other, but the other one is quite devout”.

Ms Kaliópi also told me about what had happened years earlier when their older daughter was operated on. She was worried about the operation and therefore telephoned the nuns and asked them to pray for their daughter. The operation was a success, and afterwards the daughter said she had seen a group of nuns around her bed when she was under the anesthetic.

This is a good example of a woman who has a close relationship with the convent and a strong belief in the power of prayer in helping family members. The ambivalent situation of a couple living in two countries and cultures was also made evident when Ms Kaliópi criticized the behavior of some German tourists that happened to visit the convent some years earlier. She said that they did not know how to behave there, and that the “women of the group were wearing make-up”. She seemed to be somewhat offended by the tourists’ behavior and considered it an insult to the couple’s ethnic background.³⁹⁸

The nostalgic function of monasteries is evident in the language of many Greeks when they talk about contemporary Greek society and its influence in wider international circles. On account of their historical role the monasteries are still seen as an imperative, as Mantzaridis calls the Holy Mountain of Athos. According to him, the strengths and capabilities of the Greeks lie in their traditions and spiritual heritage, which will help them to maintain their Greek identity further afield. Monasticism and the monasteries are thus seen simultaneously as Greece’s past and as its gift to the modern world.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ Field diary IV, 4.

³⁹⁹ Mantzaridis 1981, 235.

The Church in crisis and the loss of memory

Hervieu-Léger claims in her book, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, that modern societies have freed themselves from the constraint of continuity, in other words tradition. Her theory facilitates reflection on contemporary Greek religiosity and the ways in which pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition understand Greek Orthodoxy as a choice. According to Hervieu-Léger, increasing secularization has caused the loss of collective memory, and thus individuals have difficulty placing themselves in the chain of those who transmit the tradition. In countering the fear of not being able to be a link in this chain, religiosity provides and forms an optional way of building an identity in modern societies. She also points out that ethnic religions, such as in the case of Northern Ireland, have increased in Europe because of the fragmentation of modern societies. Religion consequently provides an emotive response to the demand for meaning and personal recognition, which the abstract nature of modern societies has made urgent. One could claim that in terms of religion Greek society still “remembers”, and that tradition has not lost all its power yet because of Greece’s religious homogeneity.⁴⁰⁰ It is not an amnesiac society, and the bond between Orthodoxy and national emotion is still relatively strong. In that sense, in the Greek context one cannot speak about a large religious market in which the individual can choose from a large range of religious orientations. However, Greece has faced modernity and post-modernity in the sense that the society could be characterized as open to influences and thus fragmented.⁴⁰¹

Particularly since 1990 Greek society has often been described in academic discussion as a society in which the relationships between self, society and tradition have become more complex. There are rapid changes in the mass media and in the culture of privacy, for example.⁴⁰² Consequently, as there are also more options in the religious market, pilgrimage to the convent of the Dormition, in other words choosing the traditional

⁴⁰⁰ Makrides and Molotkos-Liederman also argue that the Orthodox “chain of memory” has basically been preserved more or less within the Greek context (Makrides – Molotkos-Liederman 2004, 466-467).

⁴⁰¹ Hervieu-Léger 2000, 97, 125, 127, 157.

⁴⁰² On changes in Greek culture in recent years, see e.g., Tziouvas 2003, 54.

religious orientation, could be seen as an *option* among the innumerable interpretation models that provide an “emotive response” to the demand for meaning. In the Greek context this option seems to be connected to the notion of disappointment. The pilgrims who have chosen Orthodoxy and the convent of the Dormition as their religious orientation may have experienced disappointment with the other options in contemporary Greek society, or in some *part* of the religious milieu of the Orthodox Church. In other words, for the pilgrims I interviewed the convent provided forms of Orthodox tradition they found appealing and were not able to find anywhere else. The disappointment may lie in a simple detail such as the atmosphere. Glikería, for example, was disappointed with one convent she thought was too modern. This was why she went to the convent of the Dormition:

I like the old monasteries. In addition to the value the icons have [...] the traditional monasteries have a devout atmosphere. [...] Because there’s a convent here [...], I don’t know if you know it, but if you see it, it’s like a villa. They’ve made it modern and it doesn’t resemble a convent, even if they think it’s an important one. And when it celebrates its saint, everyone goes there on pilgrimage, but I don’t like it at all.⁴⁰³

Pilgrims’ attitudes toward the Church and monasteries have certainly altered over the years. The ecclesiastical life of Greece has experienced various crises and scandals⁴⁰⁴ and that has also affected public opinion. These crises have their roots in the history of Greece. According to Mantzaridis⁴⁰⁵, the ecclesiastical life of the Greek people has not developed smoothly since the reestablishment of the Greek state in 1974. He describes the developments in the following quotation:

This [crisis] has had important effects on the course of the entire nation. A large part of the Church’s work had remained undone due to poor organization and the clergy’s weakness or indifference, began to be undertaken by religious organizations. This created new possibilities but also new problems in ecclesiastical life as was natural considering the general confusion. Finally, in the second half of our century [the 20th], ecclesiastical institutions experienced a particular crisis and their value in the area of community life

⁴⁰³ Interview 2005: 13.

⁴⁰⁴ For example, in February 2005 the country’s powerful clergy was accused of corruption, drug dealing and sexual misconduct (see Internet sources9,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,1418094,00.html> Field diary V, 16.

⁴⁰⁵ Mantzaridis 1981, 231. See also Makrides 1988.

was seriously questioned. The religious movements [meaning particularly Zoe and Soter] also lost their power especially among youth that had supported them earlier. One could also speak of the crisis of monasticism during the same period, but monasticism had already been considered expended and unrelated to community life.⁴⁰⁶

Mantzaridis links the factors affecting the lower level of appreciation of the monasteries to certain crises in the Church. However, coincident with the crises during the second half of the 20th century the numbers of monks and nuns showed only a small increase. Mantzaridis does not fully explain the crucial factors in the revival of monasticism, but he suggests that the reasons are related to the weakening power of the religious movements and the disappointment of many young men with the organization of the Church. Thus the revival of monasticism is a reaction to the rather poor condition of the Church and even of society. The same reasons that draw nuns and monks to the monasteries also drive the pilgrims. Analogously, some of the pilgrims visiting the convent of the Dormition told me how they had been in touch with religious movements or brotherhoods earlier in their lives but had then been disappointed, in the same way as the monks had been. I quote Dimítis:

The Zoi and Soter represent Protestantism and they are not really Orthodox in their thinking. This does not only concern the ways they carry out their missionary work in the world, but also the Doctrine has been influenced a great deal by Protestantism. I used to go to the gatherings of these organizations just to play table tennis, but later I couldn't stay there.⁴⁰⁷

Despite this disappointment with religious organizations however, Dimítis continues to visit the Holy Mountain, the convent of the Dormition, and other monasteries. At the same time as Greek society faces secularization and potential alienation from the Church and Orthodox religion in general, the monasteries may provide an alternative for some individuals seeking enduring forms of religiosity within the Greek context. The monasteries could therefore be considered an *option* in terms of religious organization, one's own parish, or even some other convent. They are thus an option *within* Greek ecclesiastical life. A pilgrim called Ránia explained that, despite the Church's crises or

⁴⁰⁶ Mantzaridis 1981, 231.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview 2005: 6.

even possible scandals, people continued going to monasteries because the pilgrims thought that the crises only concerned some people, and not all of the clergy. Pilgrims, in other words, evaluate monasteries and try to find the kind of convent or form of religiosity that suits them best.⁴⁰⁸

Monasteries may also be an *option* for those who face personal disappointment in the outside *world*. Sister Pelagía said that people sought shelter in the convent of the Dormition:

Yes, there are a lot of people, we have a lot of pilgrims and this is because people are searching for shelter in the convent, because they are disappointed in the things they have met with in the world. Many times they have a need to discuss matters with the nuns. Usually they talk in the reception hall or with nuns who have this as their obedience. Usually people are in pain.⁴⁰⁹

Sister Pelagía used the vague term “things” (*prágmata*) to refer to what brings pilgrims into the monasteries. Because the reasons are often individual it is more interesting to think of the term “disappointment” (*apogóitēfsi*) in this context. This can be understood here in two ways, referring to some personal failures or misfortunes in life or, more deeply, to the state of society. According to Manzaridis, it is not that monks entering monasteries are disappointed with society and therefore decide to abandon it; abandoning it rather enables them to live a true spiritual life that would not be possible in the world outside. They leave conventional life because they seek the charismatic dimension of Christian life.⁴¹⁰

The same applies to pilgrims. Many want to live in a close relationship with the convent of the Dormition so that they can live their spirituality to its full extent. To them the disappointment is something that leads them to seek another option within Orthodoxy. In general, it should be said, visiting the convent is a rather conventional choice, which supports the mainstream culture and values. Yet, one could also say that the option is

⁴⁰⁸ Field diary IV: 28.

⁴⁰⁹ Interview 2003: 26.

⁴¹⁰ Interview 2003: 26; Manzaridis 1981, 228.

visible on the level of an individual's inner dialogue. Following disappointment with something in the world, the solution is to be found where the world is not present.

V Pilgrimage and reflections on broader social processes

Every day brings many pilgrims to the convent of the Dormition, and the numbers do not seem to dwindle. On the contrary, as mentioned, Greek monasteries, including this convent, are alive and pilgrimage is becoming more and more popular. The reasons for this lie deep in the general developments of Greek society. The following sections discuss pilgrimage at the convent and its role in the larger societal setting, and the processes contributing to the recent social developments.⁴¹¹ In order to set the research data in a wider perspective I will give some examples of discussions dealing with the current situation of European and Greek religiosity in general. Most sociologists of religion see religion as a social institution that develops in relation to its societal setting. In other words it is socially constructed like any other form of knowledge, and can be properly understood in relation to its social context.⁴¹² Thus I also consider pilgrimage at the convent of the Dormition within the general framework of Greek religiosity and the social processes in Greek society as a whole. My aim in doing so is to enhance understanding of pilgrimage. As Juergensmeyer insists, research on monasticism should take the larger social context into account, given its obvious social implications.⁴¹³

Secularization and the development of pilgrimage

⁴¹¹ One could also see a monastery and society as opposites, and thus it would not make sense to put monasticism, which could be considered withdrawal from society, in its social context. However, I incline towards Juergensmeyer's view of the monastic community as an alternative to ordinary society, in which the monk continues to be influenced by the very society he rejects. The monastic community is thus not an alternative to society but a refined form of it. Pilgrimage in the convent of the Dormition is an obvious example of the ways in which the nuns interact with the surrounding society and are influenced by it. The surrounding society forces them to react to its impulses. (Juergensmeyer 1990, 553; Field diary II, 7.

⁴¹² Kunin 2003, 73-74)

⁴¹³ Juergensmeyer 1990, 542.

The reasons why pilgrims continue to visit the convent of the Dormition and why pilgrimage is increasing are related to the process of Greek secularization. The pilgrims at the convent seem to have a close relationship with it and they stay loyal to it. At first glance, it seems as if nothing has changed, and that secularization has not touched it or its visitors, but this is clearly not the case as both the surrounding society and the people have changed. However, secularization in Greece seems to be a little different from that in other European countries. According to Kokosalakis⁴¹⁴ it has had a great impact on modernity in most parts of the world, including Greece. Yet, he suggests that Greece is less secularized than other European countries and that modernity has some special aspects, and thus it cannot be compared to other European countries.⁴¹⁵ Greek cultural originality cannot be explained in terms of Marxist or functional sociological theories, and consequently it must be seen as a result of the particular context and historical developments. Like many researchers he also thinks that Greece is a special case in the European religious field in that neither Reformation nor Enlightenment affected it directly, which makes its identity ambiguous. He argues that Greece as a nation is looking for its identity, and that *religion* plays a major role in this development:

”In her search for an identity in the modern world Greece experienced and continues to experience severe tensions which arise from her long and rich cultural history and from her struggle to emerge as a modern independent nation. In these tensions and struggles religion has featured very prominently as a cultural force. [...] According to the general criteria of modernity Greece is now a modern society. Yet, Greece does not seem to want to become a western society, but is ambiguously placed between east and west. Greek Orthodox Christianity expresses that ambiguity par excellence.”⁴¹⁶

The Greek secularization process and the current religious profile are connected to the country’s search for a role and an identity in the contemporary world. Thus, secularization and religiosity should not be considered separately from issues concerning the link between nationalism and religion. As Molotokos-Liederman remarks, the ambivalence between Eastern and Western identities is still a central theme in political, social, and cultural life in contemporary Greece. For example, in recent years the Church

⁴¹⁴ Kokosalakis 1987, 223-226.

⁴¹⁵ Makrides and Molotokos-Liederman have similar views about Greek religiosity, based for example on the 1999 European Values Survey (Makrides-Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 465-466).

⁴¹⁶ Kokosalakis 1987, 223-226.

of Greece has articulated a discourse that reveals the mixed attitudes among Greeks towards the European Union and globalization.⁴¹⁷ The global economy and the EU have been seen as threats to Greek Orthodox identity.⁴¹⁸ What, then, can be said about pilgrimage in the convent of the Dormition on the basis of the current Greek religious profile and issues of secularization and nationalism?

José Casanova, who has concentrated mainly on European Protestant and Catholic countries⁴¹⁹ in his work, describes the European population as going through a process he characterizes as “unchurching” and religious “individualization”, rather than secularization. Europeans have ceased participating in traditional religious practices while maintaining relatively high levels of private individual religious beliefs. In line with Davie and Hervieu-Léger, he suggests that the European situation could be characterized as “believing without belonging” on the one hand, and as “belonging without believing” on the other.⁴²⁰ Greek society has not developed in a parallel way. Religious individualization and unchurching have not been as outward as Casanova’s theory suggests. However, opinions on attachment to the Church, as well as assessment of the numbers of people going to church, fluctuate.

Davie and Schäfer characterize European religiosity as a distinct case, rather than a global prototype.⁴²¹ One could claim that Greece is a distinct case in many ways, even

⁴¹⁷ Europeans are said to be concerned about losing their national character in the European Union. Many people fear that it is trying to reduce cultural variety in a unfair way. Greek attitudes towards it reflect pan-European concern about the loss of variety in national cultures (Arts and Halman, 2005-2006, 69).

⁴¹⁸ Molotokos-Liederman 2003, 294-295.

⁴¹⁹ Greece is very often excluded from studies examining European religiosity and the role of religion in modern Europe in the sociology of religion. This is mainly because the research focus is on Western Europe and the Catholic and Protestant Churches, which are the dominant forces, and is understandable given the size of the Catholic and Protestant population in Western Europe. However, it also means that a full picture of European religiosity is not given. The sociology of religion is not able to make sweeping generalizations about Eastern European Orthodox countries because most of them are autocephalous: the Ecumenical patriarchate, the patriarchate of Alexandria, the patriarchate of Antioch, the patriarchate of Jerusalem, the patriarchate of Moscow, the patriarchate of Serbia, the patriarchate of Romania, the patriarchate of Bulgaria, the Church of Georgia, the Church of Cyprus, the Church of Greece, the Church of Poland, the Church of Albania, the Church of Czech and Slovak lands and the Orthodox Church of America (the autocephaly is not universally recognized).

⁴²⁰ Casanova 2004, 2 (e-paper, see internet sources); see also e.g., Davie 1995 or 2000 or Hervieu-Léger 2000.

⁴²¹ Davie and Schäfer 2005, 11.

within the European frame of reference. For example, Huntington refers to Greece as “an anomaly, the Orthodox outsider in Western organizations”.⁴²² It is a unique case in some respects if one looks at its history from the perspective of religion.

First of all, until recently Greece has been the only Orthodox member state in the European Union, which it joined in 1981. As one of the few representatives of Orthodoxy in Europe, and given its geo-political position between East and West, its religious, cultural and political life is distinctive compared to the other European countries. This distinctiveness is visible on various levels, such as in the close relationship between the Church and the State. Greece’s historical development has differed from that in the countries of East Europe that share the experience of post-war-communist domination. Its different political orientation also distinguishes Greece from other countries of the Balkan Region. Its Western political orientation could be seen as a long-term development, starting in 1974 when Constantinos Karamanlis restored the Greek Republic in a referendum during his second term, and Andreas Papandreou built a welfare state in 1981-1989.⁴²³ Even if Greece’s politics have long been Western, however, the religion has always been Eastern. It has thus had a special history in terms of political and religious development, of which the traces remain. According to Bien, however, Greece’s exceptional position is, in fact, exaggerated. It is often claimed that the country differs fundamentally from the so-called West because it never experienced Renaissance or Reformation, but both are apparent because intellectuals outside Greece were influenced by these ideas and brought them in.⁴²⁴ Greece must not be seen as an isolated island, but as a state with its own religious development.

Many scholars studying the European religious scene make a distinction between Western and Eastern Christianity. Davie’s work serves as an example of this kind of approach. It is also a fruitful approach in the Greek case because the split between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy has divided the continent since 1054, and the integral parts of the gap have not been closed. Another typical distinction is that between communist and

⁴²² Huntington 1998 [1996]: 162-163. Cf. Makrides-Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 460-461.

⁴²³ Bacaloumis, 42-43.

⁴²⁴ Bien 2005, 222-224.

non-communist Europe in the post-war period. This approach is especially typical of research focusing on religion as a political force, and on changes in religiosity after the collapse of communism (as in Haynes in his work *Religion in Global Politics*). In this respect, the terms 'East' and 'Central' Europe have significance because East Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, and most of European Russia) belongs to the Orthodox tradition, and Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and what used to be West Germany) have developed within Western Catholicism.⁴²⁵ As Greece does not have a communist past and thus does not fit in either of these categories, it is necessary to examine it separately. Its historical development may also be a reason why it is often ignored in works dealing with European religiosity. Thus the case of Greece is important in terms of forming a fuller picture of European religiosity.

Pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition also go to services in regular parish churches, and represent the ecclesiastically active among the Orthodox population. Visitors to the convent are devout Greek Orthodox who say they believe in God and attend services both in the convent and elsewhere. They represent active Church members, who care about both local and religious customs, monasteries and saints, and also the Church institution as a whole. One might assess the religiosity of these pilgrims through comparison with the majority of Greeks. Even if most Greeks consider themselves Orthodox, church attendance has fluctuated since the 1960s, but then again in the mid-1980s it showed an upward trend. This development could be attributable mainly to historical and political conditions, such as the dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s that made the Church hierarchy submissive to the Junta. In the last few years regular churchgoing and church attendance have been relatively low, but still higher than in many other European countries. However, this does not seem to indicate any loosening of emotional bonds with Orthodoxy. In fact, Greek religious behavior seems to be somewhat unique in the sense that people pay more attention to local customs and saints, monasteries, particular religious festivals and other activities than to Church attendance. In a poll conducted in 1998, of those who regarded themselves as Orthodox, 56 percent reported that they went

⁴²⁵ Haynes 1998, 63-103; Davie 2000, 1-5. See also Diptycha tis Ekklesias tis Ellados 2004, 922-989.

to church only two or three times a year, and 15 percent that they did not attend church at all.⁴²⁶

Church attendance among the Greeks has varied in the recent past, but it cannot be said that religious non-alignment has emerged in a similar way in all aspects of religiosity and religious behavior. According to the 1999 European Values Survey, 93.8 percent of Greeks declared that they believed in God, which is above the European average. Nevertheless, Greeks remain loyal to local customs. Moreover, as Roudometof remarks, the Greek Church has assumed a highly visible public persona since the 1990s, and Greece has witnessed a revival of public religion in various political situations such as the collapse of Yugoslavia and the identity-card “crisis”⁴²⁷ that erupted in May 2000. Religion has thus not been restricted to the private sphere, but also has a significant role in the public sphere.⁴²⁸ Moreover, according to a Greek Sociological survey conducted in 2004, Greek youth has only little interest in politics and no trust at all in politicians. They do trust the Church, however, and see it as an institution that will help Greece to maintain order, equality and Hellenism, which they feel are in danger. Youth attitudes are characterized as “xenophobic”, meaning the favoring of everything Greek.⁴²⁹ Many of the young people I met in the convent confirmed this, and said that Greek youth in general had a positive attitude to the Church.

Pilgrimage at the convent of the Dormition may be a way of constructing identity and boundaries in a multicultural world. Thus the growth of pilgrimage may also be related to

⁴²⁶ Molotokos 2003, 295. Roudometof 2005, 85.

⁴²⁷ According to European law, the new identity cards should no longer indicate the holder’s religious group or category. The identity card is a document issued by the police that Greek citizens should carry with them at all times. This development has polarized Greek society as well as the Church, especially in 2000 and 2001 when there were a considerable number of demonstrations in Athens and the Greek media was full of discussions about this issue. Representatives of the church, together with monks and nuns, have also taken part in the discussion and in demonstrations. This kind of politicisation of orthodoxy is not at all surprising given its traditional “secular” and “political” role under the Byzantine and Ottoman systems, as well as under the auspices of Greek nationalism and the direct control of the Greek state (see e.g., Stavrakakis 2003, 153-156). On the Greek Church’s concept of the identity card see Zisis 2000b.

⁴²⁸ Roudometof 2005, 85-86, 99-101; Demertzis 2002, 172.

⁴²⁹ The newspaper reported a survey conducted by the National Centre of Sociological Research, which has carried out several surveys on Greek attitudes to different issues (Eleftherotyπia 7.6.2004).

what Alivizatos⁴³⁰ characterizes as “converting to multiculturalism”. As Greek society becomes more multicultural the people are forced to express their attitudes towards multiculturalism. Pilgrimage is one way of expressing an opinion. However, pilgrims in general do not form a unit within the Greek population, and it cannot be said that all Greeks visit monasteries. Pilgrims rather represent a limited sample of the population and have various interests and motives for their visits. Alivizatos characterizes Greek religiosity as relatively low, and as attached to the major Church festivals:

“Greece is facing for the first time in its modern history the challenge of converting itself from a monocultural to a multicultural society. Until now, if there is something that characterizes the average Greek’s religious attitude, I would call it low spirituality if not indifference, rather than fundamentalism. Although they consider Orthodoxy to be an integral part of “Greekness,” Greeks simply do not care much about religious matters, save Easter and some symbolic moments in their personal lives—namely, baptism, marriage, and death—which they like to celebrate or commemorate with relatives, neighbors, and friends.”⁴³¹

As discussed above, pilgrims’ religiosity is not necessarily similar to the religiosity of the Greek population; the pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition rather seem to represent both “belonging” and “believing” type of religiosity. As Voas and Crockett note, ‘Believing without belonging’ has become a catchphrase in many European works on religion in the past decade.⁴³² Davie first developed the concept to describe the religious scene and people’s commitment to the Church institution in Britain. He later used the words “believing without belonging” and vice versa, “belonging without believing” to describe Western European religiosity on a larger scale. In his book *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates*⁴³³ he uses the same characterizations to describe Western European religiosity in its present state. Even if he does not go deeply into Greek religiosity, the phrase can be applied to the Greek case. With regard to Greek religiosity in its present state, it seems that the majority of Greeks represent Davie’s model, “believing without belonging”, as belief in God remains relatively high, but attachment to

⁴³⁰ Alivizatos 1999, 33-34.

⁴³¹ Alivizatos 1999, 33-34.

⁴³² Voas and Crockett 2005, 11.

⁴³³ Davie 2000, 138-154.

the Church is relatively passive.⁴³⁴ Yet, it may be that Greek religiosity represents both “believing” and “belonging” if we take Roudometof’s notion of the revival of public religion into consideration. It should also be noted that church attendance is not always the best way in which to describe peoples’ emotional bonds to the institution. As shown in the following, Molotokos-Liederman reminds us that church attendance also showed signs of growth between 1985 and 2000.

If Greeks’ attachment to the Church in general has been relatively passive, what is it, then, that attracts pilgrims to the convent of the Dormition? It does not necessarily challenge traditional roles in society, but it does allow pilgrims flexibility and the freedom to follow many different interpretations of the Orthodox faith. Moreover, one cannot say that the religious scenery did not change at all in the past just because the monasteries are experiencing a revival in terms of numbers of nuns, monks and pilgrims. This revival illustrates the fact that the monasteries represent the kind of *values* and *aspects of religiosity* that are considered important among pilgrims and nuns and monks. Yet, the changes in Greek society have also forced monasteries and convents, including the convent of the Dormition, to change their attitude towards the public to a certain extent.

Convents have opened up towards society, and pilgrims have also noticed the change. Dóra and Aspasía gave me their impressions:

Dóra:

In Greece, during the last 30 years, and I can say something about it. I think that Greek monasteries have opened up to society. The change has been remarkable. They do social work, they offer their services, they have made people love [them]. Simple people and intellectuals to a large extent. The simple people [have started] to love the monasteries. To help and to be helped.⁴³⁵

Aspasía:

⁴³⁴Molotokos-Liederman 2003, 295.

⁴³⁵Interview 2003: 9. This was, in fact, the traditional role of monasteries in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. See Talbot 1987, 237. However, the pilgrims here were talking about the changes that had happened in recent decades.

Maybe some years ago you could not discuss some themes, but now you can talk about the things that occupy your mind. There is, I think, another kind of freedom in religion. How should I say it? I think they [the nuns] are freer, you can speak. And the Archbishop has changed [...] he accepts everything. Earrings, your hair [down], you can go [to church] wearing trousers, men with earrings... They're more advanced. [...] In general you can speak about more things.⁴³⁶

Assuming that religion aims to adapt to changing cultural and political situation, one needs to specify the concept of change. It is often seen as something intangible and difficult to grasp. In other words, even if changes are often not easily recognizable or identifiable, people still try to adapt to them. The term globalization, for example, is the subject of passionate ideological, political and economic debate, and it also poses challenges to many churches and congregations.⁴³⁷ It is one of the concepts that is widely used in the Greek media and in everyday language to describe the “changes” that are happening in modern societies, including Greece. In the everyday Greek context it is understood in a similar way as Robertson understands it, as “the making of the world into a single socio-cultural place”⁴³⁸. Monasteries and convents as parts of the Greek Orthodox Church are also trying to adapt to the changing cultural situation, and to answer the questions modernity poses.

Makrides and Molotokos-Liederman argue that Orthodoxy is able to adapt to contemporary socio-cultural changes. In line with Davie they agree that it is mostly the elastic administrative structure that enables adaptation.⁴³⁹ Monasteries often represent a stricter and more conservative stream of Orthodoxy, although the pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition still feel that monastics are open to the contemporary socio-cultural situation. As they told me, the nuns accept visitors with all kinds of problems and try to respond to the pilgrims' needs, according to Orthodox doctrine. It is also typical for them to recommend reading materials, depending on the problem the pilgrim has on his or her

⁴³⁶ Interview 2003: 20.

⁴³⁷ For more on this topic see e.g., de Santa Ana, 2005, 42.

⁴³⁸ Robertson 1989, 11.

⁴³⁹ Makrides – Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 465.

mind. The reading materials also cover many current issues. The whole range of modern social and personal problems is well taken into consideration in the Orthodox literature⁴⁴⁰.

Despite the cultural changes, it seems that pilgrims are quite loyal to the monasteries they visit and do not easily change their habits. The convent is full of pilgrims during the major festivals of the Orthodox Church. According to Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman, religious holidays, especially those that are related to national holidays, have a special meaning even among Greeks who are not religious⁴⁴¹. It is not, however, only on important religious occasions that pilgrims visit the convent. Even if there are crises in the Church, it does not stop the flow of pilgrims. In February 2005, for example, the Greek and international press revealed a corruption scandal suggesting that some priests and bishops had been involved in the illicit trading of antiques and drugs.⁴⁴² The crisis in the Church led many to think about the possible separation of Church and state. However, this kind of discussion is nothing new in Greece, and similar ones have taken place before⁴⁴³. Nonetheless, even if many people expressed their disappointment with the Church as an institution, there was no change in the number of pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition.

Anthí told me her thoughts on the Church scandals and explained her attitude towards the convent of the Dormition:

Well, the scandals influence some people, but not others. They influence people who don't know a lot. Those who know a lot aren't influenced. There are always good [people] and bad [people], in all sectors. Besides, the one who betrayed Christ was among the twelve apostles. [...] No, it didn't influence me at all because you have to have a role model. [You must choose] whether or not you believe what every priest says or if you really believe what Christ said, the Saints and what Christ has done for thousands of years. You have to have your eyes open and not look only at what is in front of you.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁰ See e.g., Moisis 1986, who expands on feelings of loneliness in urban societies. See also Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and St. Vlassios Hierotheos 1994, who has written on topics such as drugs and AIDS.

⁴⁴¹ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 19; see also e.g., Livizatos 1999, 33-34.

⁴⁴² On crises of the Church, see e.g., <http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,1418094,00.html>

⁴⁴³ See. e.g., Moore 1989, 88.

⁴⁴⁴ Interview 2002: 18.

According to Sister Pelagía, peoples' attitudes towards monasticism are good in general, but she thought they could be even better:

Yes, in general they [pilgrims and monastics] have good relations but there are always cases and there are prejudices from time to time, maybe because of ignorance. The Greeks are devout and they express their piety to the Mother of God and the saints and by going to the monasteries, but there is always ignorance in the world. And do you know why? Because monasticism, the spirit of the Gospels is strange for the world and because [the world] does not understand it. [They do not understand] what they experience, why do they live like that, and why they are closed inside there. But when they come here and get to know, many people have changed. I have heard a lot about that.⁴⁴⁵

It is difficult to predict how the “nation as a whole” will develop and react in the long term to factors that relate to the development of secularization. However, secularization is not an even process that takes place in similar ways in all areas of religiosity, and towards which a country moves in a monolithic way. On the contrary, here, too, individual differences between areas and groups of people must be taken into consideration. A convent may provide some Orthodox with tools, and others will find their solutions elsewhere. The pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition, however, thought that it and monasteries in general played an important role in Greek society. They considered the work that the nuns did for people invaluable.⁴⁴⁶

Níkos believed that the monasteries were still playing an important role in Greek society, and that the nuns' constant praying made the world a better place:

They [the monasteries] play a very important and fundamental role, it's important that there are so many people who pray- not only for themselves - it's beautiful. It's something that makes you feel safe. I know there's someone praying for me. And it's not at all in vain. Not at all. The more they pray, the better the world will be, this is the truth. If we don't realize it today, we'll see it tomorrow.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Interview 2003: 26.

⁴⁴⁶ See e.g., Ware 1983, 218-219, 221-225.

⁴⁴⁷ Interview 2002: 4.

Flexibility and a sense of understanding

The increase in pilgrimage at the convent of the Dormition is related to the Orthodox faith. What kind of Orthodoxy do the pilgrims come across at the convent and how do they interpret it? According to Sarris, the doctrine of the Orthodox Church is made meaningful primarily in the context of worship. In other words, unlike in Protestant Christianity, in which a lot of emphasis is put on the study and interpretation of Biblical texts, Orthodoxy emphasizes the significance of liturgical life. It generally assigns great importance to ritual practice and action, whereas the correct content of religious beliefs is seen as something that is present in religious practices.⁴⁴⁸ Therefore pilgrims at the convent also consider it important to live the liturgical life fully and not to ponder upon questions such as, “Do I believe in the correct way?” and “Do I agree with the teaching and values of the Orthodox Church?” According to Chrysoloras, Orthodoxy in Greece is mostly experienced as a “way of life” rather than an attachment to metaphysical beliefs or dogma.⁴⁴⁹ María confirmed that the convent was not a place where you should ask yourself questions related to your religious attitudes, orientation or doctrine. It is where the Orthodox faith is put into practice, lived.

In general there are no theological discussions in the convent. You feel other things. You search for theory when you’re in the world. When you’re in the convent you live it in practice, so it’s not necessary.⁴⁵⁰

The pilgrims felt that their individual life situation was understood at the convent, and that it helped them with their faith and their struggle on the way to *théosis*. They believed that the nuns accepted them, and they appreciated the fact that the monasteries were more open towards society than they used to be. The nuns took account of the pilgrim’s individual stage of life, and this made the interaction personal. They still represented the Church and its opinions, values and tradition, but allowed for different opinions and gave space to the individual. Níkos described his attitude to Orthodoxy thus:

⁴⁴⁸ Sarris 2004, 123.

⁴⁴⁹ Chrysoloras 2003, 3. See Internet sources.

⁴⁵⁰ Interview 2003: 19.

OK, beside the fact that I was born Orthodox, I like the freedom that Orthodoxy gives. God doesn't pressure me, as long as I live I'm getting better, I learn things constantly. [...] God wants us to understand ourselves and others, and in this way [to understand] God, too.⁴⁵¹

One could characterize the convent as representing a semi-public institution, in which two levels of piety – the official and the popular - meet. In other words, there is a smorgasbord-effect⁴⁵² within the tradition. The pilgrim makes an individual choice when deciding on which convent to go to, his or her individual situation is taken into consideration, and usually he or she feels free to speak about any subject. Thus the climate of the convent is perceived as tolerant and accepting. As a semi-public institution it thus represents a rather flexible environment. The flexibility may be inherent in the Orthodox tradition, however. According to Davie, Orthodoxy by its very nature allows for a greater degree of diversity than Catholicism, and Davie considers this to be one reason for its relative success in a changing moral climate.⁴⁵³ The faith is characterized by a certain amount of flexibility and accommodation, which according to Sotiriou is embodied in the principle of *oikonomía*⁴⁵⁴, used primarily in Canon Law but also applied generally. The exceptions allowed under the principle give the Church a popular tinge.⁴⁵⁵ Pilgrims consider the nuns modern and up-to-date, and *oikonomía* is certainly one reason for the popularity of pilgrimage. The pilgrims also emphasized the possibility to talk with the nuns. It seems that they have a need for a reliable discussion companion who is not afraid to face the reality of the lifestyle of an urban Greek.

Ánna talked about the things she thought one could discuss with the nuns. She felt comfortable bringing up almost any topic, although she thought that there were some themes that did not interest them:

⁴⁵¹ Interview 2002: 4.

⁴⁵² Silk 2006, xvi. Silk also points out that the religious market (at least in the American context) includes the choice of no religion at all.

⁴⁵³ Davie 2000, 20.

⁴⁵⁴ In Orthodox Canon Law the term “household management” signifies the freedom to depart from the rules of the Church to assist the salvation of particular persons. See Ware 1997, 311n.

⁴⁵⁵ Sotiriou 2004, 503.

These [political issues] are too worldly [for the nuns]. Usually they speak about spiritual matters, unless they're related to your family or...Anyway, they discuss topical issues. For example the war in Iraq...all the nuns knew and said something [about it]. And they had an opinion. [...] You can discuss anything with them. You might find it difficult to talk about some things, but that doesn't mean you're not supposed to do so. It depends on you. It's the same with your friends, you don't necessarily talk about the same things. In other words there aren't certain themes that you're supposed to discuss with them.⁴⁵⁶

Pilgrimage and national identity

They [the nuns] would pray for us [in case of a war]. Their prayer would be more intensive. But on the basis of history, I would say that they would also help some people. They do what they can. Together with prayer, it's only logical that they would help Greeks in other ways, because during the Ottoman period the Turks destroyed a lot of monasteries.⁴⁵⁷

María's statement illustrates her confidence that if there were a war the convent of the Dormition would do many things to help the local people. In the following sections I discuss the national sentiment and the historical processes that have led to this type of thinking among pilgrims at the convent.

The pilgrims felt strongly that the convent was part of their cultural property and heritage of which they could be proud. At the beginning of my fieldwork when I paid my first visit they showed me around with obvious pride in their voices. They used the most positive adjectives to describe the convent and the nuns. Their pride was embodied in expressions such as, "It's a great convent" (*íne éna pára polí oréo monastíri*) and, "Look how tidy it is" (*kitákste póso peripiméno íne*). They were obviously proud of the nuns and the igumeni, and of their attitude towards people. They described the nuns as very kind (*polí kalí*), very sweet (*polí glikiá*), or even as saints (*ágia*). Usually they were impressed with their calmness and energy in their physically demanding life, their smiling faces and the fact that they knew so much about life outside the convent.⁴⁵⁸ I also heard comments related to their ability to help Greeks at critical moments in Greek history. Many pilgrims

⁴⁵⁶ Interview 2003: 11.

⁴⁵⁷ Interview 2003: 19.

⁴⁵⁸ Field diary IV, 39.

also echoed María above: the nuns would help Greeks in the future too, if it were necessary. I then began to understand that the pride that I could hear in the pilgrims' voices had two dimensions. It was related not only to religious sentiments about the pilgrimage process, but also to aspects of Greek national history and the national sentiment in general.⁴⁵⁹

According to Bruce and Voas, religion is a significant force in modern nation-states, but they also stress that it should not be seen as an autonomous force, but rather in its context and as something that often fits with the changing boundaries of the respective state. This is also a valid perspective on Greek religiosity. Like many scholars, Bruce and Voas agree on the fact that the Orthodox Church has served to promote tradition and cultural identity in Greece, thus reinforcing an ethnicity-based nationalism.⁴⁶⁰ In terms of seeing religion in its framework, the Greek historical context must be taken into consideration in assessing the different roles that monasteries may have in contemporary Greek society.

There is a strong identity consciousness among the Greeks, that they are heirs of the classical Greek and Byzantine civilizations. Many modern Greeks, “*Éllines*”, claim Ancient Greece and Byzantium⁴⁶¹ as their cultural, spiritual and linguistic heritage.⁴⁶² According to Giannaras, there is a special Greek way of understanding religion, which from very early on was connected to the fight for survival and existence.⁴⁶³ Thus, for a Greek the ancient temples, art and culture are axes or paths to modernity and the Christian Orthodox faith. Further, as Alivizatos points out, the Greek Orthodox religion and the Greek language constitute the fundamental pillars of Greece's modern identity.⁴⁶⁴ Awareness of a great history and their rich cultural background in a way obliges the Greek people to demonstrate certain, still existing connections between their contemporary culture and their history. The Modern Greek term *Ellinismós* means (modern) Greek culture in general or Greek spirit, and refers to the centuries after the

⁴⁵⁹ Field diary I, 46-48; Field diary V, 12-13.

⁴⁶⁰ Bruce and Voas 2004, 1028-1030.

⁴⁶¹ In addition, the Greek term “*Romiosini*” literally means “*Romanness*” a synonym for “*Hellenism*”, which underscores the Byzantine heritage of contemporary Greek culture (Salamone 1986, 204).

⁴⁶² On the classical past and Greek nationalism, see Clogg 1992, 1-6.

⁴⁶³ Giannaras 1983, 243-244.

⁴⁶⁴ Alivizatos 1999, 33.

conquests of Alexander the Great (who died in 323 BC), when the economic, political and cultural emphasis was transferred from the Greek peninsula to the axis of Alexandria-Rome.⁴⁶⁵ Many scholars use the term Neohellenism as distinct from the term Hellenism when referring to the civilization of the modern Greeks, but this is not the case in the colloquial language because it does not make sense for a Greek to separate something he or she considers a continuing tradition. It is generally accepted that Hellenism, in the Modern Greek sense of the term, and Greek Orthodoxy are closely connected in terms of both history and contemporary thinking. For example, the Greeks usually identify themselves as Christians, whereas in some other parts of Europe identification is often on the basis of nationality⁴⁶⁶. When the independent Greek state was created in the 1820s there was an effort to combine both the classical and the Byzantine heritages, and Helleno-Orthodoxy became the term intellectuals started to use to describe Greek religiosity.⁴⁶⁷

The Byzantine millennium and the classical era undoubtedly comprise a basic element of contemporary Greek identity.⁴⁶⁸ However, the population is almost entirely Greek Orthodox, and the connections between Byzantium as a religious state and the Modern Greek state are visible even today. For example, Church-State relations⁴⁶⁹ are close, based on the Byzantine model. The Byzantine heritage is also apparent in various other aspects of religious life, in the architecture, iconography, music and liturgy.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁵ The usage of the term Hellenism varies according to the context. Jusdanis uses it to describe scholarly interest in ancient Greece (“love of ancient Greece”), the Byzantine, and sometimes even modern periods (Jusdanis 1997, 169). Kinitis, on the other hand, defines it as a culture incorporating democracy and rational philosophy (Kinitis 1998, 59). To a scholar of Byzantium it means two things: 1) the consciousness among medieval and modern Greeks of their identity with the inhabitants of ancient Greece and the emphasis on their position as heirs to Greek classical civilization; and 2) the period in the history of the eastern Mediterranean between Alexander the Great and the Roman conquest (Talbot 1991, 912).

⁴⁶⁶ According to Kokosalakis in some European countries religion has a close relation to ethnic identity for historical reasons. He gives Greece, Ireland, Poland and Malta as examples (Kokosalakis 2002, 71).

⁴⁶⁷ Molotokos-Lederman 2003, 292; see also Magdalino 1992, 1-12.

⁴⁶⁸ Yalouri 2001, 10-11. Yalouri makes a distinction according to which the history of the Greeks associated with the Byzantine Empire, the *Romiosíni*, could be seen as the inside view of Greek culture, whereas Hellenism could be seen as the outsiders’ view of Greece. For further analysis of the term, see Yalouri 2001, 10-11.

⁴⁶⁹ The particularly close Church-State relation includes the direct state financing of the Church, and the majority of Greek politicians do not support Church-State separation (Makrides-Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 462).

⁴⁷⁰ Frazer 1969, 45, 120, 125-127.

The Byzantine heritage is evident in contemporary monasteries, too. Even though the era came to an end in the 15th Century, it is present on all levels of contemporary Greek monastic life, from the liturgy to the conventions and architecture. Orthodox monastic life has naturally altered in many ways throughout the centuries, but the essential parts have stayed the same because of the significance of tradition in Orthodoxy. According to some, the Byzantine tradition is best seen on Mount Athos, but one could say that the nunneries are not at all overshadowed by the glory of Mount Athos in terms of maintaining the Byzantine heritage. Monasteries also have a significant role in preserving Hellenism today, as did post-Byzantine monasteries under Turkish rule. When the war of independence started in Peloponnesus in 1821 the monasteries helped the soldiers in various ways. It is in this context that Greek monasteries have been called “guardians of Hellenism”. For many Greeks the contemporary monasteries represent the few remaining positive and pure values of the Hellenic culture. They are often seen as a kind of “Noah’s Ark in the Flood of the wicked world”.⁴⁷¹

The potential guardians of Hellenism

The pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition saw it as a place that would maintain and support Hellenism in the future. For them, as for many Greeks, monasteries and convents have a symbolic value, which is closely connected to the past and to preserving the Greek mentality and culture. Alpentzos starts his dissertation by describing the monasteries as important spiritual centers, which preserve and prop up the national conscience at difficult times for the nation.⁴⁷² The pilgrims at the convent thus knew of and appreciated the significant role of the monasteries in maintaining Hellenism in the past, and they seemed to think they could also maintain and preserve Hellenism in the future.⁴⁷³ They thus discussed matters related to ecclesiastical and even secular politics. They considered

⁴⁷¹ Hellier 1995, 43-46; Ware 1997, 36-37; Field diary V, 11.

⁴⁷² Alpentzos 2002, 7.

⁴⁷³ Field diary V, 11-12.

the convent part of the Church and of society, both of which were struggling to survive in the modern world.

In practice the Church and the monasteries have helped locally in “moments of crisis”, such as during the Ottoman period⁴⁷⁴ and when nationalism emerged in the 19th century. The monasteries are also known for their *Krifá Scholía* (Secret Schools) in which the Greek language and other subject were taught, and they ran boarding schools and libraries during the years of Ottoman rule. According to Moore, the Greek Church *remains* closely even if sometimes narrowly identified with the historical struggles and social values of the Greek people in the popular sentiment and in the official ideology. Its identification development is mainly a consequence its role during Ottoman rule when it acted as a force that nourished the Greek culture. It had similar role in the War of Independence (1821-29), as well as in the subsequent formation of the modern Greek nation.⁴⁷⁵

Many of the pilgrims I interviewed mentioned the historical role of the monasteries during the War of Independence. A convent symbolizes freedom and other related values even today, because pilgrims associate monasteries with the War of Independence and the birth of the Greek nation.⁴⁷⁶ Freedom is also articulated in concrete ways, such as in the Greek flag, which flies outside the convent church and on Greek Independence Day on March 25, which is also the feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin.⁴⁷⁷ Many pilgrims first go to a service at the convent of the Virgin and then drive into the center of Thessaloniki to watch a parade of the armed forces and high-school students.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁴ Greece was under Ottoman rule from 1453 (the fall of Constantinople) until the revolution in 1821.

⁴⁷⁵ Moore 1989, 88. Correspondingly, Ware uses the terms *ecclesia* (Church) and *ethnos* (nation) to describe the Greek conception of the unity and interdependence of the Church and the Greek nation (Ware 1983, 208).

⁴⁷⁶ E.g., The Virgin of Guadalupe has been seen as a unifying symbol for the whole of Mexico by some anthropologists (Coleman and Elsner 1995; 199). Similarly, the monasteries could be considered a symbol of freedom for the Greeks. However, given their rich symbolism and practical value in the Greek welfare system, it must be added that to present them only as national symbols would give too narrow a picture.

⁴⁷⁷ Dubisch has also shown in her work that on this occasion the religious and the patriotic are officially joined in a variety of rituals (Dubisch 1995, 132).

⁴⁷⁸ Field diary IV, 8-9.

Thus, the pilgrims' statements reveal how religion and the Greek nation are interwoven and connected. Roula was speaking here about the ways in which the convent of the Dormition helped society today, but she ended up talking about the monasteries' role in the past. :

[People get help when they] talk with the nuns, when they pray [...] Then material help, with various things they knit and then sell. Of course they live like this too, but they can also help some children, give them a small amount of money, the advice they give to the pilgrims and the nation, which helped in 1821 when the revolution started with the Turks and so on. It [the help] started from the monasteries. The children did not have schools, the secret school started to work. A monk collected them by candlelight and taught the Greek alphabet because the Turks did not allow schools and churches.⁴⁷⁹

During national “moments of crisis” the monasteries and convents were also significant centers of social work and welfare, supporting people in the surrounding areas and also taking in refugees. Nunneries were important centers of social and philanthropic work, and took care of the sick and the poor.⁴⁸⁰ As Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman point out, the Orthodox Church emphasized the meaning of *diakonía*⁴⁸¹, not only as social action but also as a theological and sacramental event. Thus, the monasteries have played a significant role in the welfare process on a practical level, and also on the doctrinal level as social theology, which has made the help more meaningful.⁴⁸²

Consequently, the pilgrims seemed to think that even if the monasteries were not the focal point of European politics, or otherwise active in national issues, there was always the *potential* opportunity of promoting Greek characteristics, such as the Orthodox religion and the language. They might “take action” if necessary in the future, too. They had symbolic value, but also people's trust. They existed and they were doing their silent work. It was thus thought that in moments of crisis they could be of concrete help. Dubisch, following Turner and Turner, also noted that the power of a pilgrimage site

⁴⁷⁹ Interview 2003: 12.

⁴⁸⁰ Alpéntzos 2002, 8-9.

⁴⁸¹ On the Orthodox conception of *Diakonía* see e.g., Gioultsis 1996, 18, 171.

⁴⁸² Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 25.

usually derived from specific past events, and the site also gained power from the belief that what happened in the past may occur again⁴⁸³.

During my fieldwork I met pilgrims who were eager to discuss with the nuns issues that could be considered political. The nuns themselves also referred to matters to do with wars, social policy and Greek politics in general.⁴⁸⁴ The pilgrims thought the nuns were spiritually experienced “religious professionals”, but were not outside society in the sense of not being suitable discussion partners on social and even political themes. Many of those at the convent of the Dormition were interested in issues related to ecclesiastic politics.⁴⁸⁵ For example, the developments that shaped Church-State relations in the Christodoulos period constituted a subject of discussion during my research period.⁴⁸⁶ The pilgrims usually represented the more traditional viewpoint on issues concerning relations between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, for example, and did not dwell on ecumenical matters. Their thinking was in line with that of Veremis and Koliopoulos, according to which the Church of Greece has identified with national ideology at the expense of its ecumenical credibility, and will continue to hold onto its affiliation with the state as a life preserver in times of competing material diversions.⁴⁸⁷

The monasteries also affected the pilgrims’ thinking in an indirect way in their discussions with the nuns. Yet, it must be said that, in the same way as Greek women in general have not traditionally been as active in politics as men, nunneries are not “political” to the same extent as male monasteries. The emphasis of the conversation in a

⁴⁸³ Dubisch 1995, 37; (Turner and Turner 1978, 6. cf. Dubisch.)

⁴⁸⁴ Topics such as the European Union identity card.

⁴⁸⁵ Ecclesiastic political here refers to topics that concern the governance of the Church of Greece, such as its relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, or those concerning social politics or welfare and in which it is somehow involved. Greece’s entry into the European Monetary Union and the shift from the drachma to the euro illustrate the general interest in matters that concern the Church. Greece joined the EMU on January 1, 2001 and the euro replaced the drachma. The Greeks, unlike other Europeans, hardly raised their voices against the loss of the drachma, Europe’s oldest currency. Whereas this was an almost insignificant detail for them, the European identity card was considered much more important (Calotychoy 2003, 291).

⁴⁸⁶ The general discussion covered three main topics: 1) the decision to exclude religion on the identity card; 2) the disagreement over the visit of Pope John Paul II to Greece; and 3) discussions between the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Church of Greece regarding ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the New Lands (Prodromou 2004, 473). The pilgrims also talked about some monasteries that had raised the question of disentangling themselves from the control of the bishops

⁴⁸⁷ Veremis and Koliopoulos 2003, 19.

nunnery, according to the pilgrims' general opinion, was more on everyday life, families and human relations, and less on ethnic or political matters. In the following quotation however, Sister Pelagía confirms that people wanted to hear the nuns' opinions on various social and political issues, such as the identity card. She seemed to think that this was both a political matter and a matter of faith:

They often ask about these themes and sure, discussions like this do happen. It [the identity card] is a subject that is familiar to everyone. But then the diocese has the actual responsibility for the people. And the priests who speak. But OK, we're aware of this topic. [...] However, on matters concerning faith we can't tell people what to do. Everyone is a free human being. We can say what we believe, [we can advise people] about our convictions. We believe this is like that. Enlightenment.⁴⁸⁸

Angelikí told me that nuns were not politically active, but they were interested in society in general and had political opinions.

Now that I think about it, they might not interfere in politics, with the parties, so to say, but I think that at the time of the elections they didn't vote as such, but they were praying. But again, you can't really say that they don't deal with politics. They might not say anything to you about it, that the prime minister is like this or like that, but when there are elections they pray. Still, I don't believe you should talk to nuns about topical issues. When you speak with a nun you don't discuss politics or political parties. Yes, but to say that they're not interested, you can't say that. In fact they're interested in everything. As for those who are in power, they speak about our society, but in another way. Another way. They [nuns] have left the style we know and try to approach these [political themes] in another way.⁴⁸⁹

Ethnic matters, such as the question of Greece's political position in the future, and the political opinions of monks and nuns are also familiar in Greek religious literature. A bestseller in recent years has been *Pilgrims' Accounts, Elder Paisios the Athonite*⁴⁹⁰. This book describes pilgrims' experiences of meeting Elder Paisios, an Athonite monk. One chapter is devoted to questions concerning Greece's future role in world politics.

⁴⁸⁸ Interview 2003: 26.

⁴⁸⁹ Interview 2003: 16.

⁴⁹⁰ Zournatzoglou 2003.

According to Nikolaos Martis,⁴⁹¹ one of the pilgrims, Elder Paisios, was extremely interested in world politics and in Greece's political future. Numerous themes are mentioned on which he commented. He gave prophecies and expressed his opinions on matters such as the question of Macedonia and other parts that had once belonged to Greece, the future of Turkey, Greece's relations with Serbia, the future of the European Union, and the war in Bosnia. He also predicted that the Greeks would eventually take over Constantinople, i.e. Istanbul. Preserving traditions in the interests of Hellenism, Orthodoxy, and Christianity are often mentioned in this context, too.⁴⁹² The pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition read texts such as this. For many of them Elder Paisios set an example and was a saint. It was therefore only natural for them to believe his words and to receive inspiration from them.

The convent as an ideal Greek microcosm

The pilgrims I interviewed associated many positive aspects of Greek society with the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin. In other words, they regarded it as an ideal Greek microcosm, which embodied all the positive aspects of the Greek people and Greek society. These positive aspects come out when one listens to Greeks criticizing Greece and the Greeks. A pilgrim called Panagióta⁴⁹³ told me about the things she did not like in Greek society while we were talking freely in the convent garden. She mentioned, for example, pollution, the ugly architecture in the cities, bureaucracy, corruption, the poor education system and peoples' selfishness. The convent of the Dormition, however, is free of these negative features. The pilgrims saw it as a peaceful place, which the nuns kept tidy and clean. They admired its beautiful architecture, the flowers, the organic vegetables grown without preservatives, and the nature surrounding the convent area. Moreover, they often referred to the nuns as altruists, and kind and good people. They praised their hospitality (*filoksenía*), and the convent's tasty traditional Greek food. These

⁴⁹¹ Nikolaos Martis served as Secretary General in the Ministry for Northern Greece (1955-1956), Assistant Minister (Undersecretary) of the Ministry of Commerce (1956-1958), Minister of Industry (1958-1961), Minister for Northern Greece (1974-1981). <http://www.hri.org/Martis/contents/author.html>

⁴⁹² Zournatzoglou 2003, 273-297.

⁴⁹³ Field diary V, 13-14.

aspects ran contrary to the ones Panagióta mentioned. The list below illustrates the polarization between her view of the worst aspects of Greek society (on the left, highlighted) and the pilgrims' view of the convent's positive aspects (on the right).

Pollution – Clean, fresh air, beautiful nature, fresh vegetables and clean, minimally processed food

Traffic noise – Calmness, quietness, tranquility

Ugly architecture – Tidy garden, clean premises

Bureaucracy – Kind people, tight schedule, discipline and hierarchy, all of which help to prevent problems among nuns and between nuns and pilgrims.

Poor education system - Educated nuns

Corruption – Honest, good people

People's selfishness – The nuns' *filoksenía*, altruism and understanding

From the pilgrims' point of view the convent of the Dormition could thus be regarded as a place that combines the ideal elements of Greek culture. Pilgrimage, that is to say, is metaphorically also a force against these unwanted aspects, but it is also concrete in that the pilgrims support and maintain the convent with their own actions. The meaning of being a pilgrim and a member of the larger pilgrimage community is concretized if related to the differences between the "Greece outside the convent" and the "Greece inside the convent". The Greece outside the convent, in other words, represents the other⁴⁹⁴. The convent as a place of ideal Greekness represents the elements that the pilgrims thought no longer existed in Greek society, if they ever had.⁴⁹⁵

Eléni's statement below illustrates the tendency to see the convent as an institution that represents the positive values that remain from Greek history. It is an example of how pilgrims perceive it as a place that preserves the best aspects of Greekness, even from the time of ancient Greece. She combines culture and religion in her concept of Ancient Greek democracy, and stresses the need to respect its cultural specificity. She also sees

⁴⁹⁴ On the concept of otherness and counter images, see Vuorinen 2005, 246-248.

⁴⁹⁵ Field diary I, 46-48; Field diary V, 13-14; Interview 2003:15.

the monasteries as an institution that maintains religion and culture in general. A moment earlier she had mentioned the identity cards, saying that she was against the fact that they did not give one's religion because she was afraid that if neither the State nor the European Union supported Christianity the Satanists would soon have more power in the name of apparent equality. She continued:

What was the meaning of democracy for the Athenians, for old Greece? This: To respect the wishes of the citizens. And this is the wish of the citizens [that the identity cards should state the religious group]. This is how I see it. And that's why I want there to be monasteries. Because, as we said, soon the last bulwarks of the protectors of institutions will collapse. I'm not a racist, but I want... You in Finland have your own cultural features. Don't you want to maintain them? You have your own religious features; don't you want to maintain them? [...] I respect your culture and I want to preserve my culture. [...] I will not bow to your symbol or your flag, and why should you do the same to mine? That's how I grew up, with that kind of understanding of democracy. Why should the religious or cultural elements be erased? They are elements of civilization. If I see someone tearing up my flag, I'll weep. I don't want that. At that moment he'll be destroying a piece of my culture and my soul. I'd never destroy anything. In other words, I respect what represents symbols for people. And even if they're not respected, they should not be destroyed. I'm now 57 years old and what is left [in my life] is religion, my native country and my family.⁴⁹⁶

For Eléni the convent was a place that maintained the best (or the ideal) aspects of Greek culture and protected the best cultural institutions and symbols: religion, her native country and her family. Other pilgrims at the convent also often mentioned the best aspects of Greek culture when they spoke about it, and described it as a place that maintained the kind of Orthodoxy they respected and wanted to preserve.

On the evidence of the research data, the Orthodoxy and the positive values the pilgrims found in the convent of the Dormition could be described as "authentic"⁴⁹⁷ Orthodoxy, as the pilgrims put it. I collected some examples from the interviews to illustrate what kind of positive aspects of Orthodoxy they associated with the convent. I assigned them to five groups, some of which overlap, but could nevertheless also be considered separate. With

⁴⁹⁶ Interview 2003: 15.

⁴⁹⁷ The term authentic (*gnísia*) is used here to describe the overall attitude among the pilgrims towards the kind of Orthodoxy that they found in the convent. It is also an emic term they used to describe it.

regard to the aspect of history, they may have spoken about monasteries in general or particularly about the convent of the Dormition. I have therefore made a distinction between the general (a) and the specific (b) in this case because I also wanted to exemplify the pilgrims' general attitude towards the monasteries' historical value. Moreover, the convent of the Dormition was officially inaugurated only in the 1950s, and thus when the pilgrims were speaking about the monasteries' role in the past they were usually speaking on a general level.

1) "Authentic" Orthodoxy

- The liturgies and other services that have a genuine and devout atmosphere
- The nuns' strong faith
- The convent's and its confessor's policy and the convent's *typicon*

2) History

a) If the convent is a building that has a special historical value

- The convent's special architectonic value (Byzantine plan, icons, treasures)
- The old convent's special atmosphere and its positive effect on the pilgrimage experience
- The role that the convent played in saving and supporting Hellenism

b) The convent of the Dormition and its history:

- The Byzantine music
- The role that it would play in preserving and supporting Hellenism if necessary (based on how monasteries have acted in the past)

3) People

a) Nuns:

- Their benevolence (friendliness, gladness)
- Their understanding
- Their diligence and strength
- Their calmness
- Their prayers for individuals, for society, the nation and the world
- Their altruism (being willing to help if you need it)
- Their high educational level

b) Other pilgrims

- Being "good" people

4) Place

- The value of the convent as a local site
- The value of the convent as part of the large Greek monastic network

- The tidy garden and clean premises
- The tranquility

5) Service and products

- Filoksenía
- The clean, authentic products that the pilgrims eat at the convent
- The products that pilgrims can buy or which the nuns give as gifts, such as icons, books, rosaries, vegetables, and eggs.

This list demonstrates in a concrete way the aspects the pilgrims considered important and valuable. It could also be seen as a summary of what attracted them to the convent. A pilgrim at the convent of the Dormition is looking for an interpretation of Orthodoxy he or she considers authentic, and which is “authenticated” by the convent’s history and general character. The pilgrim seeks nuns who will help him or her to maintain faith by means of their behavior and high level of education.

The future

Many pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition noted that Greece had become an international society with more and more foreigners living in the country. They also thought that, according to Christian ethics and values, the monasteries must also be open to foreigners. As seen above, however, there were traces of “us and them” thinking in their worldview. The monasteries’ symbolic importance to the Greeks and their institutional position as potential guardians of Hellenism offer tools for boundary making in the current social situation. According to Davie, the historic Churches of Europe are systematically losing their capacity to discipline the religious thinking of large sections of the population, but there is also a shift in peoples’ attitudes towards the institution, from “obligation” to “consumption”. The Church can no longer dictate the level of commitment. The range of choices is becoming wider largely as a result of the movement of people.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁸ Davie 2004, 78-79.

One could imagine that the influx of immigrants in present-day Greece would challenge the traditional tendency of viewing “Greek Orthodoxy as a marker of Greekness”, as Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman seem to think⁴⁹⁹. On the other hand, it is also possible to think the opposite in the light of the discussions on the identity card and other nationalist issues that have dominated Greek public debate over the past few years. Greece, like most European countries, is likely to face religious individualization in the future. Therefore it is possible that at least for some groups, such as those that present-day pilgrims represent, religion will remain an important marker of being Greek, and will be used as such in both private and public debate in a similar way as it is used today.⁵⁰⁰

The convent’s future role is connected to the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in that monasteries are part of the Church organization. In this respect, it would be interesting to see what the position of the Orthodox Church in Greek society will be in the future. According to Makrides, Western modernity is basically an exogenous situation for Orthodox societies, but he also reminds us that throughout their history Orthodox Churches have gone through many reforms, and that even if they stress tradition and are therefore sometimes seen as anti-Western or anti-modern, they still have always adapted to the social situation in question⁵⁰¹. However, my research data shows clearly that the pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition consider the Orthodox Church and the convent part of the Church as an institution, able to adapt to changes in contemporary society. In other words, it is possible that the Greek Church and Greek monasteries will be able to adapt to changing social situations in the future, and their popularity may well increase. It may equally well decrease, however, given the fact that many Greeks support the separation between the Church and the state.⁵⁰² In this context, at least two elements must be taken into consideration: the larger European social developments and the differences between generations. What might be applicable to the now middle-aged generation of Greeks is not necessarily applicable to the younger generation. According to a Greek

⁴⁹⁹ Fokas and Molotokos-Liederman 2004, 18.

⁵⁰⁰ For example, Archbishop Christodoulos used the demonstrators’ slogan “Greece means Orthodoxy” in his speech in Thessaloniki in 2000 at the ID card demonstrations (Roudometof 2005, 88).

⁵⁰¹ Makrides 2005, 187-197.

⁵⁰² Prodromou 2004, 481.

social survey, Greek youth “turns its back on political parties” and “trusts the Church”.⁵⁰³ In this respect, it seems that Christodoulos’ tolerant policy towards Greek youth has been successful, and it may encourage at least some of them to approach the Church in the future. This viewpoint could be compared to Hervieu-Legér’s idea that a new Christianity consisting of emotional communities is on the rise. It is possible that Greek youth in the future will form voluntary Orthodox groups in which the personalized choice creates an intense bond between the members, especially if the “sense of understanding” that pilgrims feel from the Church is taken into account.⁵⁰⁴

On the larger European and global level, right-wing politics and nationalism reasserted their position during the 1990s, and this development may have an influence in the Greek political field, too.⁵⁰⁵ According to Roudometof, populist pro-Orthodox intellectuals are producing a public vision that serves Greek nationalist sentiments⁵⁰⁶. He wonders whether the Church is able to create a vision that would transcend the nationalist myths and articulate political and cultural projects that are genuinely cosmopolitan and true to the universalist nature of Eastern Orthodoxy⁵⁰⁷. It seems that some pilgrims have already found such a vision in the monasteries. Some of those I interviewed considered it only natural for the convent to have some national features, and to have supported the Greek nation in the past. However, they also seemed to think that the monasteries had transcended the national level and were already committed to pursuing what was best for the whole world. Dímitra told me what she thought was the distinction between being national and being international:

In Russia, for example, the monasteries have preserved some Russian cultural elements. In Greece...not that our monasteries would have Hellenism as their interest, the monasteries are for the whole world. This is why they also accept people from all over the world. [...] In Syria they have preserved Syrian manuscripts. In addition to manuscripts, the Greek monasteries, because they are in Greek territory, they are obviously influenced. This is visible in history too, and in the period of Turkish domination. For example, it is characteristic, it came to my mind that on Mount Athos

⁵⁰³ Tziantzi 2005 *Apotipomata Kathimerini*. Sunday, June 5.

⁵⁰⁴ Hervieu-Legér and Champion 1986. Cf. Cipriani 2000, 221.

⁵⁰⁵ See e.g. Anastasakis 2000, 3.

⁵⁰⁶ Roudometof 2005, 99-101.

⁵⁰⁷ Roudometof 2005, 101.

there are Serbian, Russian and Bulgarian [monasteries]...I think this is important! We have all grown up in one kind of environment, but what does it mean? We must leave from ourselves and go into the world.⁵⁰⁸

Thomái also emphasized that the nuns lived for the whole world, explaining that they were international and that their prayers were not restricted to Greece:

[They] pray for the entire world in the liturgy and in general. It doesn't have geographical boundaries. These people [the nuns] have left the world knowing that they no longer think about themselves, but consider the entire world. They leave the world and devote themselves to the whole world. That's it. They leave the world to live for the world.⁵⁰⁹

VI Summary

The aim of this study was to examine, enhance understanding of and interpret the phenomenon of pilgrimage in a contemporary Greek nunnery, and to elucidate the different functions that present-day monasteries have for the pilgrims. The scope was limited to the case convent, the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, which is located in Northern Greece. The main corpus of data utilized consisted of interviews and field-diary material, which were collected in the convent mainly during the academic year 2002-2003 and the summer of 2005. The pilgrimage process was analyzed in three different social contexts: 1) the individual 2) as part of the Church institution, and 3) as part of the larger social processes of secularization and nationalism.

The pilgrims at the convent of the Dormition were divided into different groups on the basis of their own and the nuns' interpretations of the pilgrimage process. The first of these consisted of middle-aged women who were married, had families, and lived somewhere in the vicinity. These women could be characterized as upholders of tradition, being familiar with the Orthodox doctrine and passing it on to their family members. They also discussed personal matters with the nuns. I called this group "friends of the convent" because for many of them pilgrimage was a daily activity. These women

⁵⁰⁸ Interview 2003: 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview 2005:21.

represented people who wanted to maintain a close relationship with the Orthodox way of life and the values they considered important. They often used the term *ekklisiázomai*, going to church, when speaking about their visits to the convent. This study therefore showed that an urban or suburban nunnery, such as the convent of the Dormition, is seen as place of everyday religiosity, unlike other pilgrimage sites that are considered more prestigious, such as the Island of Tinos and the Holy Mountain of Athos. Pilgrimage to a contemporary Greek nunnery should not be ennobled, as has often been done in pilgrimage studies, but seen as part of a popular religious sentiment.

Some women visited the convent less frequently than the “friends of the convent”, but still usually had a similar socio-economic background. In general the roles of the female pilgrims reflected the position of women in the Greek socio-cultural setting in general. These Orthodox women were eager to get spiritual support in carrying out their duties at home. They could share their worries about their children, husbands and relatives, and were happy to know that there was someone who was praying for them. They did not see a contradiction in being modern and Orthodox at the same time. Men acted a little differently with the nuns. They seemed less likely to discuss personal matters and preferred male monasteries for this purpose.

Other distinctions between groups emerged, the basic and most significant being in the terminology used by the pilgrims and their attitude to the pilgrimage process. The Greek term for pilgrimage, *proskínima*, differs from the Latin-based expressions. In terms of connotation it reveals something essential about Greek pilgrimage in that the veneration of icons and other holy objects is considered important when visiting a convent. However the fact that many pilgrims used other terms that could be considered more secular at the same time is indicative of their straightforward attitude towards the convent.

The other groups of pilgrims reflect the nuns’ and the pilgrims’ own views and interpretations of the pilgrimage process. The nuns take care of the pilgrims, and it is thus natural to make a distinction between visitors who stay one day or less and those who stay overnight. Other visitors include relatives and close friends of the nuns, as well as

representatives of the clergy. In addition, some people travel from other parts of Greece or from abroad in search of spiritual guidance and help in some personal matters. Material help is another basic reason why people come to the convent. It plays a significant role in the local welfare system and, for example, gives food and financial help to people in need. All the pilgrims I interviewed mentioned social work as one of the most important ways in which the convent helps the surrounding society. However, as convents are often built on beautiful sites with well-kept gardens, they also attract tourists. According to the nuns' understanding however, there is no difference between a tourist and a pilgrim because all visits are divine providence.

Most pilgrims choose the specific convent they visit very carefully. Their choice of the convent of the Dormition makes them relatively uniform in terms of values. There are many factors that influence this choice, such as personal contacts, the reputation of the igumeni or confessor, the ecclesiastical policy or orientation of the convent, and its location. Consequently a Greek nunnery is a pilgrimage site that attracts people who have relatively similar opinions about the Orthodox faith and doctrine, and therefore "boundary marking", a concept developed by Eade and Sallnow describing the process of conflicting ideas at a pilgrimage site, is not too obvious.

Convents are places that communicate with the surrounding communities in direct and indirect ways. It seems that pilgrims want some distance from their everyday lives and therefore go to a place where they can escape the social reality for a while, but can also return to the "world" with a new perspective on it. Consequently, they return to the convent to achieve again the spiritual status they wish to maintain. The pilgrimage process could thus be described as a form of spiral.

The process consists of various elements, which are visible in the pilgrims' behavior and habits in the convent area. These elements reflect their attitudes towards the convent as a sacred place and towards pilgrimage as a religious experience. In the Orthodox context, the liturgy is considered to be the core of the pilgrimage process. It is also considered to have a significant role in the pedagogical practices of the convent. The pilgrims are

usually first taken to the convent church, and they are expected to attend the services as much as possible. There is also a certain type of language used in the convent, and in general the pilgrims show a respectful attitude towards the nuns and the monastic environment. In addition to the language and manners, there is also a special dress code. Icons, relics, healing springs and votive offerings also have a great significance in the popular faith, and play a central role in the pilgrimage process.

After the Sunday liturgy the pilgrims are offered coffee, which is a traditional expression of hospitality in Greece. This is a concrete step towards dialogue between nuns and pilgrims. Even if the Orthodox tradition stresses the mystical element in its doctrine, meaning that the convent functions as a place of higher spirituality in which the nuns devote themselves to a spiritual life of liturgy, prayer and penitence, pilgrims seem to find ways of talking to them about mundane matters, and receive guidance on spiritual and personal issues. Despite the contradictory feelings they might have concerning the convent's higher spirituality, many feel that their personal situation is taken into consideration, and that they can discuss almost anything with the nuns as this convent is more open towards society than convents generally were in the past. As a sign of gratitude many bring gifts, and some even make bequests in their wills.

Gender has a very special meaning in the convent, which is a consequence of the historical development of Greek Orthodoxy and the current social status. Despite the apparent female superiority in a female convent, both nuns and pilgrims are subordinated to the Orthodox doctrine, which has some practical theological barriers that stultify the theoretical theological equality between men and women. The roles of the nuns and the pilgrims regarding various activities in the nunnery are very much related to gender. For example, nuns are not allowed to carry out the duties of a priest, and female pilgrims are expected to behave in a certain manner. Despite the relatively slow development of Greek feminism, it is manifest, and consequently the Church has not been able to avoid the subject. However, Orthodox feminism is often seen in Greece as a Western project, and therefore an active visitor to the convent is not likely to promote feminist critique of the

Church. In fact, Orthodoxy plays a rather conservative role in the discussion on the country's ambivalent position between East and West.

This study showed that the functions the convent has in Greek society account for the increase in the numbers of pilgrims in Greece in general. It offers pilgrims various tools for reflecting on their personal life situations and on questions of identity, on both a national and an international level.

The convent has various functions seen from the perspectives of the Church and the pilgrims. For the Church it is a liturgical and educational center taking care of a large number of pilgrims, and also educating future pilgrims and Church leaders. The pilgrims consider the full round of liturgical worship a very good reason to visit it, and for many of them it is a way of *maintaining* their faith and of feeling close to God. The services are also lessons in the Orthodox doctrine. From the pilgrims' perspective the convent represents a different kind of institution than the parish churches in terms of religious practices. Many of them connect monasteries and convents with the sphere of the transcendent, whereas parish churches are considered part of the world, *cosmos* or *immanence*. Distinctive personalities also play a major role in the pilgrimage process. Many pilgrims feel attached to nuns they consider spiritually mature, who often have strong drawing power. Given the close relationships between many nuns and pilgrims it could be said that Greek Orthodoxy provides the individual with the possibility to undertake a flexible personal pilgrimage for personal motives, together with the experiences that are common to the mass of believers.

The convent could also be regarded as a place in which pilgrims feel a sense of nostalgia and heritage. This is mainly due to its historical role as an institution that has united the Greek people in times such as the period of Ottoman rule, and furthermore to the personal history of the individual. Despite being a model of traditional Greek religious orientation, pilgrimage could also be interpreted as a choice or an option among the multitude of models that provide an "emotive response" to the demand for meaning in modern society.

Secularization and religiosity in Greece cannot be examined separately from issues concerning the link between nationalism and religion. Its secularization process and current religious profile are connected to Greece's search for a role and an identity in the contemporary world. For Greek pilgrims the convent has a symbolic value that is closely connected to the past and to preserving the Greek mentality and culture, which according to their interpretation has its roots in antiquity and the Byzantine Empire. Despite cultural developments such as secularization and globalization, pilgrims are quite loyal to the monasteries and convents they visit, and even if a Greek nunnery does not necessarily challenge traditional roles in the society, it offers flexibility and the freedom to choose from many different interpretations of the Orthodox faith. Thus the growth in pilgrimage at the nunneries should be seen in the context of the Orthodox faith, which is characterized by a certain flexibility that is embodied in the principle of *oikonomía*. Consequently, pilgrims also feel that the nuns are aware of the current social situation with its problems and tribulations. In other words they see the nuns as modern and up-to-date, and also emphasize the possibility to discuss matters with them.

The positive image of nuns that the pilgrims have makes them feel comfortable discussing a wide range of topics with them, varying from health to family relations and even political issues. The convent represents the positive values of 'Greekness' and therefore the pilgrims also trust the nuns' approach to political themes. The coalition of Orthodoxy and nationalism is also visible in their attitude towards the convent, which they see as a guardian of Hellenism nurturing Greek values now and in the future.

The future of pilgrimage will most likely depend on broader trends in Greek society, which will probably face religious fragmentation and witness the reappearance of different, sometimes even opposing camps. This thesis supports the notion that Orthodoxy will, for some groups of pilgrims, represent a marker of nationalist sentiments and 'Greekness' in everyday life and in the socio-cultural system. However, others see monasticism as an ideal, which has already created a vision that has transcended nationalism and represents the idealistic elements of Greek culture and society.

Appendix 1. Interview questions and themes

The basic structure of the interview questions is given below. However, in the course of the fieldwork the themes were often covered in a more open and informal way than might appear from the list.⁵¹⁰

- Age, profession and/or education
- Which convents have you visited?
- Do you visit some convent regularly? How often?
- Why do you visit this particular convent?
- Have you stayed for a longer period in the convent?
- What does pilgrimage mean (to you)?
- How would you describe your visit? What is it?
- With whom do you usually visit the convent? Alone, with your family, with friends?
- Could you describe the convent and tell me what you know about it?
- Tell me about your last visit to the convent. / Describe one visit to the convent.
- When did you start to visit the convent/other monasteries?
- Has your attitude towards the convent change somehow over the years? How?
- Why do people visit monasteries/convents?
- How do you feel in the convent?
- How do you feel after coming home from the convent?
- What do you do in the convent?
- What is the most important part of or moment during your visit to a convent?
- Do you know any nuns personally?
- Do you speak to the nuns/discuss things with the nuns?
- What kind of things do you speak about?
- What kind of topics do other people discuss with the nuns?
- Are there topics that you cannot discuss with the nuns?
- Does it make any difference whether you talk to a confessor or a priest compared to a nun?
- What kind of people are nuns?
- Do you know the other people who are visiting the convent? Where have you met them?
- Do you speak with other pilgrims? What kind of topics do you cover?
- Does the convent help society? How?
- Do people help monasteries/convents? How?
- Do you bring anything to the convent?
- Do you buy/get anything from the convent?
- Is there a difference between churches and monasteries/convents?
- Do monasteries differ from each other?
- Are monasteries/convents valuable? In what sense?

⁵¹⁰ According to Flick, an ethnographic interview is more like a friendly conversation rather than a formal interrogation. On ethnographic interview techniques, see Flick 2002, 90-91.

- Do monasteries/convents belong to society?
- Have you had any experiences in monasteries/convents that you consider miracles?
- Would you like to tell me anything else about the convent or about monasteries in general?

Appendix 2. Glossary

A

Ágiasma, Agiasmós= Holy water or a Sacred well. Pilgrims take blessed water from a sacred well with them and use it for healing and blessing. The water is blessed at the service of the “Great Blessings” at Epiphany (Jan. 6) or on other occasions, i.e. “Small Blessings”.

Ágios = Holy, Saint, saint-like.

Ágios Ánthropos = Holy man, a holy person.

Ágios Dimítrios = Saint Dimitrios, the patron saint of the city of Thessaloniki.

Ágion Óros = The Holy Mountain of Athos.

Agripnía = All-night vigil.

Alithós Anésti = Response to the paschal greeting “Christós Anésti,” literally “Indeed, He is Risen”.

Apogoítefsi = Disappointment.

Apostolikí Diakonía = An ecclesiastical organization that is governed by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece and has educational and social purposes

Arhontaríki = A monastery’s guest quarters where pilgrims gather after the services to speak with each other and with nuns.

Askésis = Ascetism, training of the character/body.

Aspázomai = To kiss, embrace, hug. Kissing the icons or relics.

Anakoúfisi = Relief, alleviation (a word often used by pilgrims to describe the feeling after a pilgrimage).

Antídoron = (Gr.: instead of a gift) A piece of altar bread that is shared among the congregation after the celebration of the Eucharist. Antídoron was originally given to those who could not take communion, but nowadays it is offered to everyone.

Ávaton = Traditional monastic rule that is observed with various degrees of rigor at different institutions, and which prohibits men and women from entering a monastery meant for the opposite sex. From *ávatos*, inaccessible, untrodden, impassable.

C

Christós Anésti = Paschal greeting, literally “Christ is risen”.

Christódoulos, His Beatitude the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece = The Archbishop of Greece who was elected in 1998 and ruled until 2008.

D

Diakonía = Social service coordinated by the Church, the social theology of the Church.

Diamonitírion = A letter of recommendation entitling the visitor to hospitality in the twenty ruling monasteries on Mount Athos; permission to visit Mount Athos.

Dimotikí = The vernacular form of spoken Modern Greek with an easier grammar, syntax and diction than the purist form Katharévousa.

E

Efchí = Blessing or a wish.

Ekdromí = Excursion.

Ekklesiázomai = To go to church, churchgoing.

Ellinismós = (Modern) Greek culture in general, Greek spirit.

Epískepsi = Visit, visitation.

Evlogía = Blessing.

Evlogíte! = Bless me!

Esperinós = Vespers. There are two types of Vespers - Small Vespers celebrated during weekday evenings, and Great Vespers celebrated on Saturday evenings and Feast Days.

Vespers are conducted in preparation for the next day's service.

Exomológisi = Confession.

Exonarthex = The outer vestibule of the church.

F

Filoksénia = Hospitality.

Filomónachos = The monastic's friend.

G

Geróntissa = Female elder. A way of addressing the igumeni, the leader of the nunnery.

Glikía (masculine Glikós) = Sweet, kind, pleasant.

Gnísia (masculine Gnísius) = Authentic, true, genuine, real.

H

Hesychasm (from *Isicházein*) = A conventional term for monastic prayer and contemplation. It is also a spiritual tradition and movement that started in the fourteenth century. Its central figure was Gregory Palamas, who restated the understanding of theology as first and foremost an experience of God.

Holy Synod = The governing body of the Church of Greece, responsible for all executive affairs and comprising 13 members. The leader of the Holy Synod is the Archbishop of Greece.

I

Igumeni, Igouméni = The leader of a nunnery, the female superior of a community of nuns. She has general authority over her nunnery under the supervision of a bishop.

Ierapostolí = Missionary work.

Ieromónachos = Hieromonk.

Ierónimos = His Beatitude the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, elected in 2008.

Isapóstolos = Equal to the Apostles. An honorary title given to saints such as St. Constantine on account of their missionary work in the Church.

Isichastírio = Hermitage, a monastery that concentrates on tranquility. An Isichastírio may have some financial autonomy related to its ruling that an ordinary monastery does not have.

Isichía = Tranquility, peace, silence.

K

Kalí (masculine Kalós) = Good, kind, pleasant, nice, fine etc.

Kalógeros = Monk, hermit.

Kalógria = Nuns are most typically called either *monachí*, or *kalógria* in Greek.

Kástro = Castle, fortress.

Kataniktikós = Devout, contrite.

Katharévousa = A purist and archaic form of Modern Greek, with a complex grammar, syntax and diction.

Katharós = clean.

Katholikón = Main church of a monastery.

Katichitikó = Sunday school.

Kellíon or Kelí = The word refers either to a room or a small house inhabited by a monk or a nun, or to a self-ruling place of contemplation. Small monasteries (Gr. Skíti), which are dependent on a larger, ruling monastery, usually consist of several cells.

Kérasma = Food and beverage the monastery offers to visitors.

Kerí = Candle made of beeswax. Candles are used in the Orthodox Church as a form of sacrifice and devotion to God or Saints.

Kírios = The Greek word for “the Lord”.

Koinóbio = “Living together”. Almost all Greek monasteries today are coenobitic, meaning that monks or nuns live together.

Kóliva = Memorial wheat. *Kóliva* is made of whole-wheat kernels, which have been cooked and sweetened with fruit, almonds and spices. It is eaten in honor of the dead, such as at memorial services and at Easter.

Komposhíni = Prayer rope or rosary, is usually a knotted rope with 33, 50 or 100 knots.

Kosmokalógeros = Someone who is not officially a monk, but lives in a brotherhood. He is usually unmarried and carries out missionary work.

Koulouráki = Greek cookie often offered to pilgrims.

Krifó Scholío = “Secret School”. The term refers to the monasteries’ educational role during the years of Ottoman rule. They used to teach the Greek language and other subjects, and ran boarding schools and libraries.

L

Laikó monastíri = A monastery that has not been officially inaugurated.

Laikós monachós = A person who is not officially a monk but who lives in a brotherhood. He is usually unmarried and carries out missionary work.

Lambáda = Candle.

Loukouími = A Greek confection, so-called Turkish delight.

M

Metóchi = Monastery dependency. A farm or land belonging to a ruling monastery. In colloquial Greek also a monastery that is dependent on another monastery.

Mitrópolis = Diocese, bishopric, metropolis.

Monachí = Nun.

Monachós = Monk.

Monastíri = Monastery.

N

Naós = Church, temple, the inner part of a church.

The New Lands = The so-called New Territories or New Lands are in northern Greece and these provinces (Thessaly, Epirus, Macedonia, Thrace and the Northern Aegean islands) became part of Greek territory only after the Balkan wars, 100 years after Greece gained its independence, and they also remain under the supervision of the Ecumenical Patriarchy.

O

Old Calendarists = When the Greek Church adopted the Reformed Gregorian calendar in 1924 a split occurred that gave birth to the Old Calendarists, who stick to the Julian calendar.

Órthros = Morning service.

Oikonomía = In Orthodox Canon Law the term signifies the freedom to depart from the rules of the Church in order to facilitate the salvation of particular persons.

P

Panagía = “All-Holy”, denotes the Virgin Mary.

Papadáki = The priest’s assistant boy in the liturgy.

Patér, patír = Spiritual father, confessor.

Peripiméno (masculine Peripiménos) = Neat, tidy, well groomed, trim.

Pigéno, páo = To go.

Prágmata (singular Prágma) = Things.

Proskínima = Pilgrimage.

R

Romiosíni = The term used by Greeks in the Byzantine Empire to describe the empire’s relation to Christianity and Rome. It is used as a synonym for Hellenism, despite the conceptual and ideological differences between the two concepts.

S

Sináderfos = Colleague.

Skíti = A small monastery that is dependent on a larger, ruling monastery and usually consists of several cells.

Soter (Sotír) = A brotherhood of theologians that was formed in the late 1950s from the conservative faction of the Zoe brotherhood, and was led by the influential theologian Panagiotis Trembelas. Both the Zoe and Soter organizations have been responsible for the revival in Church life in post-war Greece.

T

Tálanon = Piece of wood used for calling nuns to services or duties.

Táma = A) An offering hung in front of an icon that is usually made of metal and has a picture of the problem to which the prayer is meant to find a solution; B) a vow or solemn promise.

Thavmatourgós = Miracle-working (icon).

Theós = The Greek word for God.

Théosis = Deification, sharing in the divine life.

Theótokos = The Birth Giver, denotes the Virgin Mary.

Tin Euchí sas! = An expression used in the monastery to get a blessing from a nun.

Trapezaría = Monastery refectory.

Typicon = Document prescribing the rules of life in a monastic community.

Z

Zoe (Zoí) = The brotherhood of theologians, founded by Fr Eusebios Matthopoulos in 1907. In the late 1950s a conservative faction of the brotherhood led by the influential theologian Panagiotis Trembelas decided to split from Zoe and to found a new brotherhood called Soter. Both organizations have been responsible for the revival in Church life in post-war Greece.

X

Xenónas = Monastery guest room where the nuns meet the pilgrims and offer them coffee.

Appendix 3. Interview synopses

The interview contents and the necessary information about the interviewees are summarized below. The basic interview questions are listed in Appendix 1. The unstructured interview discussions also focused on some special themes that were either personal to the pilgrims to a certain degree, or on information that I needed at the time in order to understand the pilgrimage phenomenon. In addition to conducting and recording the interviews, I talked freely with many pilgrims in the convent area and outside. My notes of these free discussions are included in my field diaries. The abbreviation HYUL stands for Helsingin Yliopisto, Uskontotieteen Laitos [Helsinki University, Study of Religions].

Recorded interviews with pilgrims

HYUL/2002: 1 Iríni

Iríni was a 30-year-old philologist from Kavála, Northern Greece. I interviewed her on two occasions and became friends with her. We often spoke about World religions, Orthodoxy, the Greek way of life, and other things that concern Greek Orthodoxy. The two interviews with Iríni focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Male and female monasticism and equality in Orthodoxy
- Orthodox fundamentalism and the Old Calendarists
- Traditional and popular forms of Orthodoxy in today's Greece

HYUL/2002: 2 Pétros

Pétros was a 22-year-old student of English philology from Athens. At the time of the interview he was visiting Thessaloniki and the surroundings, and was visiting the convent of the Dormition for the first time. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Reasons for visiting monasteries/convents
- Reasons for helping monasteries/convents financially

HYUL/2003: 3 Stávros

Stávros was a 45-year-old municipal officer from Athens who had helped to build and maintain monasteries, convents and churches. He visited the convent of the Dormition every time he was in Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The differences between urban and rural monasteries/convents

HYUL/2002: 4 Níkos

Níkos was a 35-year-old pilgrim from Thessaloniki with a PhD in biology. He visited monasteries and convents regularly and considered himself an Orthodox with an "open attitude towards all religions". The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Monasticism and its relation to tourism, and how the monasteries and convents have avoided mass tourism.

- The differences between monasteries/convents and the “world”
- Nuns praying for the whole world
- Freedom in Orthodoxy

HYUL/2002: 5 Áris

Áris was a 30-year-old computer engineer from Crete, who at the time of the interview was visiting Thessaloniki and the surrounding area. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Monasteries and convents in Crete and in other parts of Greece
- The term pilgrimage and its usage

HYUL/2005: 6 Dimítris

Dimítris was a 31-year-old media student from Komotíní in north-eastern Greece. He visited monasteries and convents often. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Orthodoxy as a part of the interviewee’s life
- The interviewee’s relationship with nuns

HYUL/2002: 7 Evangelía

Evangelía was a 25-year-old counselor at an employment office in Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The feelings that a visit to a convent arouses
- Reasons for visiting this particular convent

HYUL/2005: 8 Stélla

Stélla was a 41-year-old elementary school teacher from Kilkís in Northern Greece. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The ways in which the convent helps the surrounding society
- The theological themes that are discussed in the convent

HYUL/2003: 9 Dóra

Dóra was a 45-year-old housewife from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- How monasteries/convents have changed in recent years.

HYUL/2003: 10 Dímitra

Dímitra was a nurse from Ioánnina in north-western Greece. Her sister was a nun. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The convent’s role in the current social situation
- The convent’s message to the globalizing society

HYUL/2003: 11 Ánna

Ánna was a teacher from Kavála in Northern Greece. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Subjects of discussion in the convent
- Other pilgrims and her relationship with them

HYUL/2003: 12 Roúla

Roúla was a 54-year-old housewife from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Trips to monasteries/convents
- The role of monasteries/convents in the past

HYUL/2005: 13 Glikéria

Glikéria was a 43-year-old psychologist from Vólos in the center of the Greek mainland. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The nuns' roles in giving advice to pilgrims
- The need to come back to the convent

HYUL/2005: 14 Sofía

Sofía was a 55-year-old civil servant from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- How the convent serves the whole of society

HYUL/2003: 15 Eléni

Eléni was a 57-year-old nurse and a widow from Thessaloniki. She had a close relationship with two convents in Northern Greece. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Greek monasticism and its connection to values that are appreciated in Greek society.
- The role of monasteries/convents now and in the past.

HYUL/2003: 16 Angelikí

Angelikí was a 24-year-old student of theology originally from Náfplio, Peloponnese. She visited monasteries and convents often. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Pilgrimage and communication
- The nuns' attitude towards general and ecclesiastical political matters

HYUL/2003: 17 Ifigénia

Ifigénia was a 37-year-old secretary from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The differences between visiting a convent and visiting a church.

HYUL/2002: 18 Anthí

Anthí was a social worker from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The social work conducted in the convent

HYUL/2003: 19 María

María was a 25-year-old student of theology from Dráma in northern Greece. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The nuns' personality and their ability to help pilgrims

- Orthodoxy in practice

HYUL/2003: 20 Aspasia

Aspasía was a 50-year-old housewife, originally from Cyprus. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Reasons for visiting the convent daily
- The ways in which monasteries/convents have opened up to society

HYUL/2005: 21 Thomái

Thomái was a 28-year-old housewife from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The distinction between pilgrimage in monasteries and everyday life

HYUL/2002: 22 Alíki

Alíki was a 38-year-old dentist from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The material and immaterial help the convent gives to pilgrims and society in general

HYUL/2002: 23 Lína

Lína was a 50-year-old linguist from Igoumenítsa in northwestern Greece. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Why Lína does not visit monasteries or convents or go to church very often.
- Reasons for not visiting a convent

HYUL/2003: 24 Anastasia

Anastasia was 42-year-old a bakery worker from Thessaloniki. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Behavior in the convent.
- If values and religiosity change during the course of life.
- The religious and other circles to which Anastasia belonged.

HYUL/2003: 25 Ioánnna

Ioánnna was a 55-year-old teacher from the Dodecanese Island of Kos. The interview focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- Gender differences in religiosity and in the Greek mentality

The recorded interviews with nuns:

HYUL/2003: 26 Sister Pelagía

I interviewed sister Pelagía in the fall of 2003. The interview concentrated on the same themes as the questions and discussions with the pilgrims, only from the convent's perspective. It focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The reasons why pilgrims visit the convent
- The ways in which the convent helps pilgrims
- The nuns' prayers
- The pilgrims' attitude towards monasticism

HYUL/2005: 27 Sister Theodóra

I first got to know Sister Theodóra in 1998 when I was collecting research data for my Master's thesis. She was my key informant during the whole research process. She introduced me to the reality of the convent and gave me information about its *typicon* and daily routines. She also introduced some pilgrims to me, with whom I conducted interviews later on. I discussed various issues with her concerning Orthodoxy in general, Orthodox dogma, the differences between Orthodoxy and Lutheranism, my not being an Orthodox, and my personal concerns. The recorded interviews concentrated on the same themes as the questions and discussions with the pilgrims, only from the convent's perspective. They focused on the following themes in addition to the basic questions:

- The convent's history, its current situation and special characteristics in comparison to other monasteries and convents in the area.
- The reasons why pilgrims visit the convent
- The ways in which the convent helps pilgrims

Appendix 4. Picture 1. Map of Greece and some monasteries and convents.



- 1 Mount Athos
- 2 Thessaloniki
- 3 Serres
- 4 Sidirokastro
- 5 Chios
- 6 Tinos
- 7 Meteora
- 8 Korinth
- 9 Athens
- 10 Megara
- 11 Kavala
- 12 Kalambaka
- 13 Ormilía
- 14 Koufalia
- 15 Souroti

Appendix 5. An example of the daily routine of the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin:

04.00-08.00 Service⁵¹¹

08.00 Breakfast

08.30-10.00 Duties and obedience⁵¹²

10.00-12.00 Studying, duties (cooking, taking care of guests, administrative tasks, icon painting) audiences (visitors, guests)

12.00-13.00 Lunch

13.00-14.00 Rest

14.00-16.00 Vespers⁵¹³

17.00 Dinner

19.00. Time for studying, praying and other duties

21.00 Bedtime

⁵¹¹ Midnight service, morning service (matins) and Liturgy. The Midnight service does not start literally at midnight. It is connected to the Morning service according to the daily schedule of the convent.

⁵¹² Obedience is a nun's (or monk's) duty assigned by the leader of the monastery. In complying fully with the obedience the nun shows obedience to the monastery's leader and, ultimately, contributes to the search for salvation. Obedience includes tasks such as stewardship and taking care of pilgrims. The igumeni takes the nun's personality and special talents into account when she assigns the obedience.

⁵¹³ There are two types of Vespers - Small Vespers (*esperinós*), which are celebrated during weekday evenings, and Great Vespers, which are celebrated on Saturday evenings and Feast Days. Vespers are celebrated in preparation for the next day's service. See e.g., Arseni 1999, 68.

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Field diaries related to my Master's thesis, including both interview material and participant observation carried out in the field during the academic years 1999-2005:

Field diary I (1999) 50 hand-written pages
Field diary II (1999) 14 hand-written pages
Field diary III (2000) 45 hand-written pages

Field diary related to the PhD:
Field Diary IV (2002-2003) 50 typed pages
Field Diary V (2005) 19 hand-written pages

The recorded interviews with pilgrims:

HYUL/2002: 1 Iríni
HYUL/2002: 2 Péttros
HYUL/2003: 3 Stávros
HYUL/2002: 4 Níkos
HYUL/2002: 5 Áris
HYUL/2005: 6 Dimíttris
HYUL/2002: 7 Evangelía
HYUL/2005: 8 Stélla
HYUL/2003: 9 Dóra
HYUL/2003: 10 Dímitra
HYUL/2003: 11 Ánna
HYUL/2003: 12 Roula
HYUL/2005: 13 Glikería
HYUL/2005: 14 Sofía
HYUL/2003: 15 Eléni
HYUL/2003: 16 Angelikí
HYUL/2003: 17 Ifigénia
HYUL/2002: 18 Anthí
HYUL/2003: 19 María
HYUL/2003: 20 Aspasía
HYUL/2005: 21 Thomái
HYUL/2002: 22 Alíki
HYUL/2002: 23 Lína
HYUL/2003: 24 Anastasía
HYUL/2003: 25 Ioánna

**The recorded interviews with nuns:
HYUL/2003: 26 Sister Pelagía
HYUL/2005: 27 Sister Theodóra**

The diaries and the interview material are kept in the researcher's private library.

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Abstract

Pilgrimage as a Lifestyle

A Contemporary Greek Nunnery as a Pilgrimage Site

The aim of this research is to present, interpret and analyze the phenomenon of pilgrimage in a contemporary, suburban Greek nunnery, and to elucidate the different functions that the present-day convent has for its pilgrims. The scope of the study is limited to a case nunnery, the convent of the Dormition of the Virgin, which is situated in Northern Greece. The main corpus of data utilized for this work consists of 25 interviews and field diary material, which was collected in the convent mainly during the academic year 2002-2003 and summer 2005 by means of participant observation and unstructured thematic interviewing.

It must be noted that most Greek nunneries are not really communities of hermits but institutions that operate in complex interaction with the surrounding society. Thus, the main interest in this study is in the interaction between pilgrims and nuns. Pilgrimage is seen here as a significant and concrete form of interaction, which in fact makes the contemporary nunneries dynamic scenes of religious, social and sometimes even political life. The focus of the analysis is on the pilgrims' experiences, reflected upon on the levels of the individual, the Church institution, and society in general.

This study shows that pilgrimage in a suburban nunnery, such as the convent of the Dormition, can be seen as part of everyday religiosity. Many pilgrims visit the convent regularly and the visitation is a lifestyle the pilgrims have chosen and wish to maintain. Pilgrimage to a contemporary Greek nunnery should not be ennobled, but seen as part of a popular religious sentiment. The visits offer pilgrims various tools for reflecting on their personal life situations and on questions of identity. For them the full round of liturgical worship is a very good reason for going to the convent, and many see it as a way of *maintaining* their faith and of feeling close to God.

Despite cultural developments such as secularization and globalization, pilgrims are quite loyal to the convent they visit. It represents the positive values of 'Greekness' and therefore they also trust the nuns' approach to various matters, both personal and political. The coalition of Orthodoxy and nationalism is also visible in their attitudes towards the convent, which they see as a guardian of Hellenism and as nurturing Greek values both now and in the future.