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“The Spirit at Work: Hope and Wage Labor on Mount Athos, Greece”

The all-male monastic community of Mount Athos, Greece has been an important center of Orthodox Christian spirituality and asceticism since its founding more than one thousand years ago. In more recent decades—and following a period of population decline and infrastructural degradation in the 20th century—the community has emerged as a hub for thousands of Orthodox Christian men pursuing monastic asceticism, pilgrimage, and even labor opportunity. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic field work in several Athonite monasteries, this paper will focus on the lives and work of the men who make up this final and oft invisible group—peninsula wage workers (*ergates*)—and to the ways in which Mount Athos provides a transformative space in which different work ethics and different forms of ‘capital’ interface and inter-relate.

The growing economic power of Athonite monasteries, as well as large scale, publicly funded (NSRF-ESPA) restoration and renovation works on the peninsula, have increased the need for labor on Mount Athos to levels beyond those that can be sufficiently met by the community’s monastic population. As such, Mount Athos currently hosts an estimated six hundred wage workers who are employed by one of the community’s monasteries, *sketes* or cells. The majority of these workers originate from other parts of mainland Greece and neighboring Balkan countries, and most come from rural working class or, in many cases, working poor, backgrounds. Workers’ tenures on the peninsula tend to last between several months for some, to several years for others. Most wage workers perform ‘low skilled’ labor—including construction and agriculture—across monastery grounds and fields, and receive a daily cash salary. Although there is no explicit requirement for wage workers to participate in the Liturgical life of a monastery many elect to do so citing the added “benefit of working in such a holy place.”

The labor of wage workers is typically performed in collaboration with monks whose own work (*diakonima*) constitutes an important part of their vocational program and schedule. This paper will specifically attend to these moments of co-work in which, within the context of the Athonite monastic environment, individuals actively mediate between market capitalist ‘wage work’ (*ergasia*) and the Orthodox monastic ‘vocation’ (*diakonima*). This mediation manifests discursively through a creative use of Orthodox Christian *and* capitalist agentic symbols. These symbols include God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary, but also heavenly banks and money, and calculating saints. Lying at the intersection of the anthropology of religion and the interdisciplinary study of labor, this paper investigates how these particular mediating practices bear out in the material and ‘spiritual’ lives of wage workers who report their ‘spirits,’ relationships and money being transformed as a result of their employment on Mount Athos.

Paul Melas is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His dissertation, tentatively titled *Caring for the Spirit: Camaraderie and Asceticism on the Holy Mountain*, conceptualizes the Orthodox Christian monastic community of Mount Athos, Greece as a bordered but inherently connected space, and attends specifically to the relationships and interactions of care and support that the Athonite peninsula, its divine agents and border facilitate. For a total of sixteen months between 2021 and 2023 he conducted ethnographic fieldwork for this project in several Athonite monasteries and in their dependency parishes in Greece and abroad. Since 2021, he has also been part of a four researcher, multi-sited linguistic anthropology project funded by the Templeton World Heritage Foundation and titled “Encountering the Divine: Developing a Framework of Religious Intelligence.” The project specifically examines religious expertise across four communities in Ecuador, Greece (Mount Athos), Uganda and the United States.