CHAPTER 9

Spiritual Direction in Orthodox Monasticism: The Elder Beyond Weber’s Theory of Charisma

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Anyone doing research on Eastern Christianity understands very quickly that monasteries are places of utmost importance for Orthodox spirituality. On several occasions over the last five years, I have visited Orthodox men’s and women’s monasteries in France, Switzerland, Great Britain, the USA, Romania, and Greece. It appeared to me that the most striking aspect of the monastic life in all these places was the relationship of the nuns and monks to their spiritual director, who most often was also the abbot of the respective monastic community. This relationship consists of total obedience to the spiritual father (elder in English, geron in Greek, starets in Slavonic, duhovnic in Romanian) with regard to all aspects of material and spiritual life: monks and nuns do not undertake any action without his blessing. Moreover, the elder benefits from an uncommon reverence from his monks, who bow in front of him and kiss his hand every time they meet him, and from a special treatment in everyday life (he eats at a separate table, uses nicer silverware and dishes, has a better cell, finer clothes, and so on.).

This distinction of the elder from the rest of the monastic community and the relation of obedience that binds the monks to him evokes to the social scientist’s sensitivity something similar to Weber’s theory on charismatic authority. This chapter will discuss the possibility of applying Weber’s theory in the case of Orthodox monastic tradition of obedience to an elder. I will proceed first to a brief account of actual aspects of monastic life and of spiritual direction that will provide a more concrete picture of the aim and means of Orthodox spiritual guidance. Second, I will attempt to apply Weber’s sociology of charisma to the Orthodox monastic tradition of obedience to an elder. Then, I will put into perspective Weber’s view on power relations in a religious setting with the authority the elder exercises in a monastery. Last, I will trace what Weber calls routinization of charisma in the case of the institution of eldership.

I base my argument on various sources combining my own field observations over the time, the actors’ discourse (personal communications with monks, abbots, abbesses and elders),¹ and embedded in the broader discourse

¹ What I mean by “personal communications” is long hours of unrecorded discussions with monks and nuns about the life circumstances that brought them to the monastic vocation,
of monastic tradition on spiritual guidance (readings from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and from contemporary prominent elders, such as Abbot Aemilianos in Greece, Abbot Placide in France and Abbot Sophrony in the UK).

**Actual Aspects of Monastic Life**

I was in a women’s monastery in Greece when, one night I needed to use something in the kitchen. There I came across the abbess of the monastery, the most revered *Gerontissa* (abbess in Greek), scrubbing the stove and sweeping the floor. She was doing this instead of the sisters in charge of the cleaning of the kitchen who, for specific reasons, had not been able to carry on their duties. The next day I asked her how come a highly educated and refined woman like herself had given up her career and scrubbed stoves in the middle of the night in the remote countryside of Greece. She answered: “The aim of our life, as nun, is to stop sinning. A sinless life can be achieved also through scrubbing the stove.”

Abbot Aemilianos said that in monasticism “visible man lives in order to possess invisible God/Man” (Aemilianos, 1999: 123). This confirms the general statement that the purpose of monastic life is *theosis* (deification), which does not amount to becoming a god, but to restoring God’s image in the human being. According to Orthodox spiritual writings, this should be the purpose of any human being, be it a lay person (single or married) or a monk. This aspiration corresponds to what Weber calls the *religious virtuosity*, or a kind of spiritual aristocracy devoted to the pursuit of perfection and salvation within a given religious tradition. In order to reach it, monks and nuns choose to live apart from the world, in simplicity, prayer and obedience to an experienced *virtuoso*. Their *ascesis* is only a means to achieve *theosis*, not an aim in itself.

Inheritors of the first monks of the Egyptian desert in 4th century, today’s monks do not flee the world for a geographical desert; they rather create it within: they are cut from the world, having no television, radio, newspapers, computers or internet and no entertainment. They have limited interaction with the world from which monks intend to distance themselves. In other places, however, there is a moderate consumption of information technology: mobile phones and personal computers are allowed, and elders keep electronic correspondence with their

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2 Actually, there is not one single approach to this topic in Orthodox monasticism. Each monastery makes use of media and new technologies to a different extent, depending on the abbot’s or elder’s spiritual school, and in some places these are completely missing (definitely at Mount Athos and its dependencies in Europe), because they are perceived as a way of keeping in touch with the world from which monks intend to distance themselves. In other places, however, there is a moderate consumption of information technology: mobile phones and personal computers are allowed, and elders keep electronic correspondence with their...