

INTRODUCTION

THE subject of this book is the imaginative world of an Orthodox Christian village in Greece, and specifically the cosmological, religious and moral imagination associated with the characteristic forms of its life. The pattern of this life, formed for the most part by villagers living directly on the fruits of their own labour in their fields and forests, was the subject of my previous book, *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*,¹ and the present book aims to reveal the inner world which corresponds to that outer world.

To become aware of the religious imagination in subsistence villages of this kind in Europe involves engaging with a living reality which is often only seen at a distance, through the prism of debates which remain very much alive in the religious history of the West. With a Greek village this is particularly the case: Greece has remained to many the mother of the western world, whether as the first source of free, rational thought or as the source of the Greek language in which the New Testament was first written. And for this reason western preoccupations with Greece have shaped perceptions of the Greek imagination in at least three distinct ways.

First, in the nineteenth century, European Hellenists saw Greece as the birthplace of reason, the heir to classical antiquity; they formed the notion of a self-governing Greek nation state, destined to rise from the ashes of Ottoman oppression and recreate appropriate institutions of free speech and democracy. These lovers of classical antiquity liked to see the traditions practised in the villages almost as an earthy rationality in contrast to Christianity, admiring, for example, the bleak realism of Greek death practices even though at times they were moved to condemn aspects of them as at best magical and at worst destructive.² From the folklore industry generated by this perspective, and from some fine historical and ethno-

¹ Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

² e.g. John Cuthbert Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910).

graphic studies too,³ the notion grew up that the Greek villages, at any rate as they existed before the flight to the towns, were a repository of thinly-veiled pre-Christian or non-Christian ways of thought—a proof of their classical pedigree.

This way of looking at the religious imagination is associated with the modern period in the West, with its strong distinction between rational and magical thinking, where what is not explicitly reasoned is by definition illusory. Given impetus by the rationalizing tendencies of Protestantism, and later by proselytizing atheists,⁴ this distinction continues to surface in some historical accounts as well, such as in those which continue to portray the peasantry of the European middle ages as ‘magical’ thinkers who used fragments of older thought forms on which the medieval Church is thought to have had little impact.⁵

With time though, European Hellenism has generated opposing evaluations, which point instead to the Byzantine and Ottoman inheritance of Greece, encapsulated in a term which resounds with subtle connotations of both—*Romiosýne* (*Ρωμιουσýνη*), the historical experience of the *Romaíoi* (*Ρωμαίοι*, sing. *Ρωμιός*), the former people of the Eastern Roman Empire. The associations of this term under the Ottomans—reflecting the way in which these people learned to cope with their subjection using a varied repertoire including secrecy, lies, braggadocio and trickery—have gained a new lease of life in a view that sees Greece as possessing not only the institutions of a modern European nation state, and the professional identities which go with them, but also often a contrary identity. This contrary identity is resistant to Europeanism and is kept secret among one’s own familiars, protected by lies, jokes, tricks, irony and plays upon words—a *Romiosýne* like that of Ottoman days which, coexisting uneasily with the European values that dominate public life, is deviously asserted in encounters with others, especially with strangers and with insti-

³ Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Loring M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁴ For a recent example see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

⁵ e.g. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

tutions.⁶ In the villages this perspective has drawn particular attention to the individualistic and competitive behaviour of men, to such things as their blasphemy and their irreverence towards public organizations, their games with auguries and competitive stealing.⁷

This view of the Greek imagination has affinities with postmodern currents of thought in the West. From the 1930s onward, closer encounters with other cultures have been making the whole notion of magical thinking problematic and have encouraged an increasing openness to symbolic languages. Between the wars, social anthropologists working among the varied cultures of the British Empire had already found themselves at the limit of modernist assumptions, and they began to draw attention to other forms of rationality even in African ideas about witchcraft.⁸ As a consequence, which was further stimulated in the last few decades by widespread cross-cultural encounters in cosmopolitan cities, a second way of seeing religion has emerged in reaction to modernism which recognizes a variety of alternative rationalities, and, correspondingly, a variety of alternative ways in which individuals may thread together a self-made identity. The individualism of this postmodern sense of identity is indeed perhaps its chief distinguishing mark. Individualism and competitive choice of lifestyles permeate the market for religious experience which goes under the name of the 'new age', just as they permeate the growing fashion for agnosticism. And the implication that both are a lifestyle choice undermines any sense of belonging to a greater whole.

Both these western perspectives on the Greek religious imagination have drawn attention to a part of the reality; but if the Hellenist view was too narrowly focussed on the Greece of antiquity, so too, in a different fashion, has been the postmodern alertness to the disenchantment with western ways which is a facet of the term *Romiosýne*. Another great part of *Romiosýne* is the Byzantine legacy of the Orthodox Christian faith, whose symbols and thought forms are em-

⁶ Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking-glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); 'The Significance of the Insignificant: Blasphemy as Ideology', *Man* (N.S.), 19 (1984), pp. 653-64.

⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

bedded throughout the culture, and Greeks may resist the ethos of the modern European state not only from individualism or scepticism, but also from an Orthodox vision of society.⁹ Studies in Greek literature, especially poetry, by writers such as Zissimos Lorenzatos and Philip Sherrard, set a pattern establishing the influence of Orthodox as well as classical symbolism on the Greek poets.¹⁰ Positive reevaluation of the Christian influence on the Byzantine heritage had begun in the 1930s with Steven Runciman's *Byzantine Civilisation*,¹¹ and it continued with Sherrard's historical and theological treatise *The Greek East and the Latin West*,¹² and with the history of the contemporary Greek nation state which the anthropologist John Campbell and Sherrard later co-authored.¹³ Ethnographic studies, too, have increasingly noticed the influence of Orthodoxy on Greek popular culture; and for this they are deeply indebted to the vision of their first exponent, John Campbell, for he not only achieved the classic study of patronage, economics and kinship among the Sarakatsani,¹⁴ but he also perceived a whole range of imaginative elements, such as the sacred ties between shepherds and their sheep, the symbolic structure of relations within the household, the sense of release felt after the Easter service, the nature of the blood, moving as a 'mysterious and intelligent force' binding people together. In this way he was the pathfinder, and provided an incomparable base for those who came

⁹ The chief theorist of post-Ottoman *Romiosýne* has also remarked on this recently: see Michael Herzfeld, 'The Ethnographer as Theorist: John Campbell and the Power of Detail', in Mark Mazower (ed.), *Networks of Power in Modern Greece* (London: Hurst, 2008), p. 153. This essay takes a hint from the work of Charles Stewart, who 'has consistently and persuasively argued against the conceptual separation of church doctrine from folk practice in Greece', and suggests that 'Stewart's argument should in turn lead us to look for doctrinal principles...and to ask how far those doctrines might determine the shape of social interaction.'

¹⁰ Philip Sherrard, *The Marble Threshing Floor: Studies in Modern Greek Poetry* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1956); Zissimos Lorenzatos, *The Drama of Quality: Selected Essays* (Limni, Greece: D. Harvey, 2000).

¹¹ Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilisation* (London: E. Arnold, 1933).

¹² Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

¹³ John Campbell and Philip Sherrard, *Modern Greece* (London: Benn, 1968).

¹⁴ J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

after him. More recently aspects of church practice¹⁵ and church ritual,¹⁶ pilgrimage centres¹⁷ and monasteries¹⁸ have been described, and monastic teaching has been extensively documented,¹⁹ and even in the more elusive arenas of city, village and mountain pasture, distinctive Orthodox conceptions, for example of the angelic and diabolic worlds,²⁰ of time and memory,²¹ of women's role and the use of household space,²² of the sacramental quality of substances like wheat, wine and oil,²³ and of the relation between man and the land²⁴ and man and the natural world,²⁵ have been found largely intact and persisting.

¹⁵ Lucy Rushton, 'Religion and Identity in a Rural Greek Community', D.Phil. thesis (University of Sussex, 1982).

¹⁶ Margaret Kenna, 'Icons in Theory and Practice: An Orthodox Christian Example', *History of Religions*, 24 (1985), pp. 345–68; 'Why does Incense smell Religious? Greek Orthodoxy and the Anthropology of Smell', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 15 (2005), pp. 52–70.

¹⁷ Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ A. M. Iossifides, 'Sisters in Christ: Metaphors of Kinship among Greek Nuns', in Peter Loizos and Evthymios Papataxiarchis (eds.), *Contested Identities: Genders and Kinship in Modern Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and 'Earthly Lives and Life Everlasting: Secular and Religious Values in two Convents and a Village in Western Greece', Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1990).

¹⁹ e.g. Kyriakos Markides, *The Mountain of Silence: A Search for Orthodox Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), and *Gifts of the Desert: The Forgotten Path of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

²⁰ Charles Stewart, *Demons and the Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

²¹ Laurie Kain Hart, *Time, Religion and Social Experience in Rural Greece* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Renée Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

²² Renée Hirschon, 'Essential Objects and the Sacred: Interior and Exterior Space in an Urban Greek Locality', in S. Ardener (ed.), *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 72–88, and 'Women, the Aged and Religious Activity: Oppositions and Complementarity in an Urban Greek Locality', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 1 (1983), pp. 113–29.

²³ Hart, *Time, Religion and Social Experience*.

²⁴ Margaret Kenna, 'Houses, Fields and Graves: Property and Ritual Obligations on a Greek Island', *Ethnology*, 15 (1976), pp. 21–34.

²⁵ Dimitris Theodossopoulos, 'What Use is the Turtle? Cultural Perceptions of Land, Work, Animals and "Ecologists" in a Greek Farming Community', Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1997).