

An Idiotic Good? Discretion and the Tree of Life

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I.

In a certain sense, this essay is a continuation of my previous consideration of the work of Alexandros Papadiamandis (1851-1911), 'Papadiamandis' Story of Love and Hope in the Shadow of the Holy Mountain'. In the conclusion of that essay I write that

there is the constant sense in Papadiamandis' stories (and in his life) that the external forms and internal rhythms of Greek traditional life are played out in the light of monastic struggle and joy; the various melodies of personal life are grounded in the steadier *ison* of monastic discipline. Thus Papadiamandis' different stories ... have as their backdrop the ecclesial and ascetic rhythms of a considered form of life that offers in a fuller sense what is present for many of Papadiamandis' characters: a form of life dedicated to joy and thanksgiving. This lies behind everything that Papadiamandis writes; not utopia from elsewhere, but a simple distillation of prosaic gladness perpetually present and possible in its fullness.

While in *The Murderess* Papadiamandis depicts the struggles of an old woman who, with perhaps understandable intent, seeks to alleviate the sufferings of others, although in a finally reprehensible or inappropriate way, in working through the ideas of a few writers — Vladimir Lossky, Sophrony Sakharov, Maximos the Confessor, and certain of the Desert Fathers — and Papadiamandis' short story 'The Monk', in this essay I strive to consider the process or habit of construing something good as *the* good, or virtue rendered absolute, or an idiotic good — a good alone, unintegrated, apart from relation and communion.

The question at the centre of this essay is that of appropriate form — here understood in the sense of how things in life may be drawn together, integrated into 'one's own', and inwardly form one's intimate communions. Central metaphors here are the rhythm and tonality of integrity, as distinct from identity, which ends in confusion — things merged which are properly distinct and thus have come to violence. While in what follows I will treat identity — confusion — primarily in terms of idea and spirit, virtue and life, and goodness and fullness, there remains to be written an account of how the modernity (and Modernism) of which Papadiamandis is a part, through the vagaries of identification, ought to be figured in terms of its deep — and perhaps essential — 'conformation' to its contemporary ethos of which it so willingly and sometimes simply partakes, rather than in the more popular terms of resistance and rebellion in which it prefers to see itself in our time. This question would then include issues of time, pacing, presence, eschatology, and teleology. Just here, I want to draw forth something more delimited: the subtle links between identity, confusion, and conformation which do violence to 'one's own', and the forms of drawing together found in comprehension, comportment, conduct, and composition — those rhythms of being which prove integrally transformative and thus renewing for the ethos of one's own tradition.

For Papadiamandis and the other writers considered here, traditional life has little to do with identity and conformity and everything to do with inner transformation and spiritual renewal. However, since in our time the matter of tradition, and particularly religious tradition, is figured often in terms of identity, conformity, and even violence, we might do well to begin there. Yet with which question do we begin? As the matter of religion and violence is often figured in terms of good and evil, do we begin by asking what are the goods given to us through religion, and what are its evils, latent or manifest? This phrasing implies certain conditions of inquiry, and denies other avenues. Since in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of which Papadiamandis, Lossky, Sophrony, and Maximos, and the Desert Father and Mothers are a part these matters are framed most profoundly not through a Gnostic duality of good and evil but rather through the spiritual mystery of the relation of virtue to life — the image of the Tree in the Garden whose authority remains unassailable — should we not rather consider the ways in which virtue — in word, deed, or thought — comes to mar, harm, or indeed, violate the Tree of Life? One questions — when does virtue asserted, emphasised, or alone come to undo the communion at the heart of our traditional life? How do past, present, and future coalesce in the event of personal encounter and relation? In what enduring tone of voice may we speak of these things?

Thinking through the question of virtue posed in these ways can be a difficult task, given the general contemporary tenor of our spiritual ethos. Broadly speaking, one can say without exaggeration that we live in an era marked by multiple crises: religious and political fundamentalism, disease, terrorism, and forced mass emigration coexist with dying traditions, loss of community, an increasingly stressed relationship with the material world (environment, food, energy production, etc.) and a significant shift of everyday life to the online world. These and other crises condition personal life and ethical ideas in two related ways. First, in the general tendency to have our way of thinking marked by ‘crisis-time’, to the extent that our habits of mind grow accustomed to relying on drama, excitement, and their alternations in our imaginations, and grow unaccustomed to those ideas and events that do not trade on the excitement of spectacle or the drama of finalities and proposed solutions. Second, the loss, recession, or confusion of healthy traditions, cultures, and communities means that many individuals have a meagre or absent supra-personal context for strong, decisive events and how we comprehend them and integrate them into our own self. In this case, manifestations of ethical authority are measured primarily by an individual’s own experience, for there are few healthy larger and established meaningful contexts that significantly deepen common daily life. Without a larger meaningful context by means of which discernment may be cultivated, the individual is left alone and struggles to differentiate between appropriate and fundamentalist forms of virtue as they come to light. In this context personality becomes frangible and thus volatile — ‘strong’ events or experiences may alter one’s sense of self in decisive ways, and integrating these ‘strong’ events or experiences into one’s own understanding of other events and experiences may prove beyond one’s individual capacity. One possible outcome of this event is that the self grows into something monstrous — overreaching its own proper boundaries and infringing upon what ought to be related to and remain as something distinct, other, its own. On this ground spiritual

arrogance, single-mindedness, and impatience can come to characterise how one comprehends and seeks to embody virtue.

Building one's sense of virtue involves 'turning points' in life and the ensuing process of personal integration. To see as typical a certain kind of religious conversion narrative — in which God suddenly reveals the truth which now must be followed — is to frame conversion in terms of 'crisis-time'. It is also to understand conversion to be a passive experience, which in turn neglects the central role that active recognition plays in the conversion process. For conversion involves a sense of 'coming into one's own' — which, initially at least, is a coming into one's own through something different to one's own. So something must be recognised as 'true' about the different, new idea, and then the decision must be made to draw near to it. However, the truth of an idea or event may not be equated with the strength of its first impression; indeed, the opposite may be the case, for the sensation of being overwhelmed is essentially antithetical to reasoned discernment regarding its particular form of authority. If one 'turns' in a new meaningful direction — converts to a new way of life — without due and discerning consideration, the appeal of the authority of the newfound meaning often is amplified by a strong sense of enthusiasm and a desire to experience as much as possible of this new way of life — to the extent that impatience comes to define one's participation. Above all, impatience circles around ideas of finality and completion: finality because certainty is wanted to verify one's choice is correct; and completion because one wants all of what this new tradition or way of life has to offer. (Dostoevsky has in his *Diary of a Writer* analysed at some length this immediate desire for the furthest ends of the new 'continent'.) In broad strokes, this possible process of conversion begins with an overwhelming or static experience or event, which is followed by enthusiasm, passionate interest, recognition of a 'truth', and a subsequent identification with this new tradition. Because one's meaning has been defined by an *exceptional* moment either one must maintain a rigid and 'enchanted' (W.H. Auden's term, *A Certain World*, 149-50) sense of the moment's longevity through the many *unexceptional* moments that make up life, or one will inevitably slip into a kind of wary cynicism (with its mixture of indifference and despair) as the defining, exceptional moment fades into the dream-like past. Nothing else can live up to it, unless it is another similar moment which 'turns' one anew. In its basic outline this conversion-model closely resembles undergoing trauma: an event (and, by its light, its immediate surroundings) comes to be defining for a person, after which and by which light everything is renewed or must be rebuilt (one's sense of self, identity, purpose in life, relationships, etc.). Because the event is so overwhelming or strong, it prompts one to focus on oneself, to see things in terms of one's own experiences, and to proceed in life via new boundaries around and blocking things. These are boundaries that not only ground oneself but remake the world in their own image — boundaries that require strict control to maintain and a reactionary response when threatened. A very strong possible result of this process is fundamentalism, especially a fundamentalism of virtue which manifests itself in one being convinced, certain, assured that one is right: thinking aright and doing the right thing.

One may outline — in equally broad strokes, and in contrast to this first 'model' of conversion — a different possible conversion process, one immediately healthier but by no means to be considered as a prophylactic against an idiotic good — one characterised by patience

and conditioned by an appropriate sense of 'spiritual pacing'. It too may begin with a strong, determining experience or event that pulls at one's mind and brings about a 'turning point' in one's life; it too follows the pattern of recognition and drawing near but, crucially, the recognition of the need to turn towards something new fits into and arises from a previously habituated effort to cultivate one's discernment of the truths and possible pitfalls of various traditional realities, and the decision to draw near this new current of meaning (to make it part of one's own meaning) is closely aligned with the realisation that it must be integrated into a newly understood sense of self, such that one's self neither loses its own coherence nor finds itself tempted into rigid, reactionary stances. Patience is essential, for one realises that this new world of meaning is larger than oneself and thus contains elements which may be only gradually apprehended; and a sense of 'spiritual pacing' is involved, for true participation in a new form of meaning occurs incrementally and varies from person to person. If the turning point is integrated carefully into daily life and thought, conversion becomes not so much a plain event as a steadily strengthened and enduring personal 'directedness' — an ongoing decisiveness to see things in a specific, inwardly formed, and considered way. This different way of seeing is or may be attended by a deep being-at-peace (regarding patience and pacing), but not by a state of intellectual certainty or spiritual necessity, both of which belong only to fundamentalism and the darker aspects of thinking in terms of 'crisis-time'. It is a way of seeing that necessarily deepens rather than diminishes or partitions the world; its own internal sense will augment rather than reduce experience and, as Bakhtin describes his idea of an 'internally persuasive discourse', it will retain 'semantic openness' for its participants and will find 'ever newer ways' (*Dialogic Imagination*, 342) to anchor and enrich the life of a person, family, community, or culture. However, even this measured approach does not necessarily inure one against the depredations of unconditional — inappropriate — virtue. There is no certainty in the spiritual life, but there is guidance. Let us attend: the following set of theologians each shed particular light on one register of virtue as an idiotic good: Lossky on virtue and idea; Archimandrite Sophrony on virtue and prayer; Maximos the Confessor on virtue and noetic teleology; and the desert fathers on virtue, vigilance, and fire.

II.

Orthodox theology is not properly propositional, it is lived in community; when not liturgical, theological articulation in this tradition functions essentially as chastening or perhaps pruning — seeking to clear away, to clarify and amend excess foliage which may grow around the Tree of Life and threaten to overrun it. Articulation, here, arises as a secondary and lesser register alongside a liturgical consciousness, living experience, and personal participation. On this ground, it ought to come as little surprise that the theologians one reads often sound the scope of our spiritual life gone awry, even as affirmation stays steadily the current of the whole.

For Vladimir Lossky, the Russian in France writing in the first half of the twentieth century, the pressing matter at hand centred on the temptations of the refined intellect and the images or concepts with which it works. While Lossky states that a person 'must have a full awareness of his faith', as they are 'responsible for the Church' (*Mystical Theology*, 16) and that the 'enemy of the spiritual life' is 'idleness' or inertia (18), he clarifies that 'Christianity is not a philosophical

school for speculating about abstract concepts, but is essentially a communion with the living God' (42), a communion which grows 'more and more intimate' with spiritual struggle and progress (67). The telos of the tradition is 'being with', not 'thinking about', and its finest realisation occurs as 'man is united to God as he adapts himself to the fullness of being which opens up in the depths of his very person' (244), an act which participates in the energy of the 'created universe' which is 'in itself implenitude and indeed non-being, but called to acquire that fullness' (91). This is accomplished through a renewal, a 'change of heart and mind' (43) away from alienation towards togetherness with the divine, the world, and each other. To this end, theology works with 'images or ideas intended to guide us and to fit our faculties for the contemplation [*theoria*] of that which transcends all understanding' (40). Images and ideas — these are with what the theologian works, and yet they must be treated with dread care. Harkening back to Gregory of Nyssa, Lossky writes that 'every concept relative to God is a simulacrum, a false likeness, an idol. The concepts which we form in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an indelible representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself' (33). To safeguard against this possibility, theology is properly apophatic, a register of conscientious articulation that deals primarily not with 'is' and 'is not', but with 'beyond', 'more than', 'greater than', or 'exceeds'. Apophaticism is a spiritual stance, a disposition of the mind that both disciplines and grants plenitude; Lossky defines it as 'above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God. Such an attitude utterly excludes all abstract and purely intellectual theology which would adapt the mysteries of the wisdom of God to human ways of thought' (38-9), which means that it 'forbids us to follow natural ways of thought and form concepts which would usurp the place of spiritual realities' (42). In basic matters of passion and clumsy thinking, the discipline involved is unambiguous — one eschews such spiritual crudities with a measure of peace and relief. However, when the images or ideas involved themselves verge on what is beautiful, the issue becomes one of ultimate discretion. Lossky writes that at this stage 'what seems evident at the beginning of the ascent — 'God is not stone, He is not fire' — is less and less so as we attain to the heights of contemplation, impelled by that same apophatic spirit which now causes us to say: 'God is not being, He is not the good'. At each step of this ascent as one comes upon loftier images or ideas, it is necessary to guard against making of them a concept, 'an idol of God'. Then one can contemplate the divine beauty itself: God, insofar as He manifests Himself in creation' (40). (A modest correlate in the world of art: 'Art is always *something more* and it is precisely in that that it escapes from the interpretation which approaches it most closely' — Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, 171.) Beyond all intellectual and spiritual activity, God is present — 'at the same time totally inaccessible and [yet] really communicable' (68), as Lossky states. Only beyond articulation does one come to divine presence and communion.

For Archimandrite (Saint) Sophrony Sakharov, the Russian monk and disciple of St Silouan the Athonite, the question of articulation and communion is one of speaking, silence, and prayer, the personal form of drawing near to God. One must, Sophrony writes, 'apprehend all things in the light of Person' (*His Life Is Mine*, 26), as the very mode of '*persona* is beyond all definition and therefore incognisable from without, unless he himself reveals himself' (43). If the fullness of life is divine and authoritative, and authority essentially arises 'from within' (*ex-ousia*), then the individual person, standing on their own ground, must be wary: 'Only after authoritative

confirmation may we trust our personal experience, and even then not to excess. Our spirit ought not to slacken in its impulse towards God. And at every step it is essential to remember that self-confident isolation is fraught with the possibility of transgressing against Truth' (27). This spiritual condition is precarious, for Archimandrite Sophrony; he writes that

until man is granted from on high to 'understand the scriptures' and to 'know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven', until through long struggle against the passions he humbles himself and experiences the resurrection of his soul and knows that all lies on this grand and mysterious path, it is vital that he should cling to the tradition [the rhythm] and the teaching [the enduring tone] and not teach of himself, however erudite he may be 'as a man', because even the most brilliant conjectures on the part of a human being fall short of authentic life in the Spirit (*St Silouan the Athonite*, 90-1).

If authority and truth are of a whole with *persona*, and if personhood is comprehended as an essentially relational mode of being, and as a fruitful relation requires discipline, discretion, and effort across the whole spectrum of the intelligible and the sensible, the delimitation of one's spiritual life to intellectual striving, even if conveyed with fervour, is inadequate both in part and in whole. The value of erudition is immense — Lossky, Sophrony, Maximos, and Papadiamandis are all erudite — and central to the tradition, the community, and one's own spiritual life, but the 'long labour' required for its acquisition does not alter the fact that deep prayer is both 'incalculably harder to acquire' (*Life*, 65) and 'the loftiest form of creation, creation *par excellence*' (*Silouan*, 131), according to Sophrony. For while erudition does not necessarily lead one beyond oneself — one can be satisfied with one's own images — prayer, as a form of spiritual ek-stasis — moving out beyond, reaching out and drawing near to Another — does necessarily surpass and thus augment one's own. In spiritual terms, one strives to render one's own *whole*, but in order to realise this one needs another, greater, divine One to draw near and fulfil one's effort. One must strive to proceed from blueprint to inhabitation, so as not to be left with merely the beloved image of one's own thought. Sophrony writes that those that give

priority to cogitation, not prayer [...] are often misled. Assimilating without difficulty intellectually even apophatic forms of theology, they content themselves with the intellectual delights experienced [... and] easily imagine they have achieved [the truth], whereas in the overwhelming majority of cases, while apprehending the logical structure of the theological system existentially they do not attain to the One they seek (*Silouan*, 139-40).

This is one's own image as a projection of God, when what is desired is the 'imageless contemplation of the essential one and only mystery' (*Life*, 75), beyond image as is the Holy Spirit. The ascetic strives for 'continual vigilance of the mind in the heart' (*Silouan*, 139), for by tempering the mind in the heart we set the ground for responding to a curious fact of spiritual life: Sophrony writes that

in his contemplation of the holiness and humility of God, man's spiritual understanding develops more quickly than does his ability to harmonise his conduct with God's word. Hence the impression that the distance separating him from God continually increases (*Life*, 74).

This situation can result in new efforts to unite mind and heart and draw them into one energy directed at God, or it can result in a defensive overemphasis on what seems highest and brightest: the life of the mind, however beautiful, and even seeking union through prayer, but somehow off in energy, turned aside. Here, too, we find a deeper beloved image of one's own — figured in prayer, but without God. Archimandrite Sophrony writes that

'the overcoming of discursive thinking is proof of high intellectual culture but it is not yet true faith and real divine vision', and he continues that this overcoming 'enables' a person to 'arrive at a supra mental contemplation but what they then contemplate is still only beauty created in the divine image. Since those who enter for the first time into this sphere of the 'silence of the mind' experience a certain mystic awe, they mistake their contemplation for mystical communion with the Divine, whereas in reality they are still within the confines of created human nature' (*Silouan*, 161-2).

This is an abyss of beauty — only it lies next to the divine, which it does but mistake absolutely, as Shakespeare will say. There may be nothing more precious or beautiful of this earth, but when the divine communes with the mortal a greater beauty and plenitude is being manifested, and now one must move beyond oneself. Holding this, Sophrony writes that 'the Holy Fathers instituted three forms of prayer. The first, because the mind is as yet incapable of attaining directly to pure vision of God, is marked by the imagination. The second, by meditation, and the third by rapt concentration' when a person 'prays from the very depths of their being, without images, with a pure mind standing before God' (*Silouan*, 131-2). In the first stage a person is dealing with the wonders and playfulness of the imagination, which is not improper in essence but is inappropriate for our efforts to be present to what is — for it leans too much on philosophical systems, poetic poses, inner fanciful predilection, or our stock of dream-images. The second form of prayer, meditation, marked by steady and integrated attentiveness to and consideration of the things in the world, is a fine but finally removed stance when it includes abstract pondering of an idea. The third, highest, most potent, and difficult form is 'rapt concentration' on God: standing without adornment, image, or word, and with a chaste spirit and pure heart. From here one moves to seek 'that delicate communion in the existence of things' (*Silouan*, 101), the ultimate and only aim of which, wherever one lives, is to 'enjoy uninterrupted dwelling in God' (*Silouan*, 140).

If Lossky is concerned with the proper scope of the intellect, and Sophrony focuses on the texture and telos of prayer, Maximos the Confessor addresses more extensively our spiritual apprehension of truth — the appropriate form of the inner directedness of the soul, the cast of mind and heart which draws us near to the presence of the divine in all. Possessed of an extraordinarily subtle mind, Maximos uses distinct, occasionally sharp diction — a monastic

register of articulation akin to that which we find in Papadiamandis' story 'The Monk' and in traditional images of the desert. One's living personal *tropos* must be integral in the light of the Logos, for Maximos, and he states starkly the significance of the proper relationship between *theoria* and *praxis* in our ethos:

he who embodies spiritual knowledge in his practice of the virtues and animates this practice with spiritual knowledge has found the perfect method for accomplishing the divine work. He in whom spiritual knowledge and ascetic practice are not united either makes the first an unsubstantial illusion or turns the second into a lifeless idol. For spiritual knowledge not put into practice does not differ in any way from illusion, lacking such practice to give it real substance; and practice uninformed by intelligence is like an idol, since it has no knowledge to animate it (*Various*, §4.88).

This passage may be read as a remonstrance against those of us who sway too simply either to idea or to act, and indeed, given time and place, this may prove the possible extent of our engagement with the saint's words. But we may also strive, in the room of our soul, for a stricter sense of Maximos' insight. In this sense *theoria* not inwardly formed by *praxis*, and *praxis* not inwardly formed by *theoria*, each lack authority, i.e., they each become ontologically counterfeit — either an illusion which makes energy static and dissipate in reality, or an idol which frustrates vital relation and snares one within a deathly circularity. Illusion and idolatry — these stand as deceptive countermeasures to the difficulty of work, here 'divine work', the struggle, fullness, and joy elemental to personal reality and communal relations. The danger, according to the tradition of Maximos, in this modal confusion and the ensuing false inflations, is to mistake death for life — or, put in terms of personhood, to see the human being revealed in the disfiguration of the Antichrist rather than in the transfiguration of Christ. Maximos frames this condition in terms of action, but it may be more appropriate here to consider it in terms of the inner directedness of the soul. Maximos writes that

he who persuades his conscience to regard the evil he is doing as good by nature reaches out with his moral faculty as with a hand and grasps the tree of life in a reprehensible manner; for he thinks that what is thoroughly evil is by nature immortal' (*Various*, §2.36).

This confusion — of what is 'thoroughly evil', or estranged from the divine, with what is 'by nature immortal', or replete with Christ's gift to humanity of 'life in abundance' — leads in turn to an enervating inflation of the person to dimensions which recognise neither authority nor intimacy, and which lack in equal parts discernment and discretion. To counteract this spiritually unwell state, Maximos counsels us to look beyond ourselves — regardless of how brightly we may shine — to the rhythm, tonality, and enduring personal voice of that which has given nascent shape to our elemental being: the tradition. To discern the truth of what we live, Maximos advises, we must enter into spiritual dialogue with that which both precedes and will follow us, drawing near with discretion to that which we hold dear and seeking its fullness in those we hold dear. Likening our treasured thoughts to favoured children, who in their parents' eyes may seem 'the most

capable and most beautiful of all', even if in reality the 'most ridiculous', Maximos states that 'to a foolish intellect' — one enamoured of itself and unrelated to ascetic struggle — 'its own thoughts appear the most intelligent of all, though they may be utterly degraded' (*Love*, §3.58). We note the warning: not 'unintelligent', but 'degraded' — cut off from the tree of life. Maximos continues, evoking the Orthodox monastic sense of obedience:

the wise man does not regard his own thoughts in this way. It is precisely when he feels convinced that they are true and good that he most distrusts his own judgement. He makes other wise men the judges of his thoughts and arguments — lest he should run, or may have run, in vain — and from them receives assurance (*Love*, §3.58).

Our thoughts — whether as idea or act — are complemented and become whole in relation to another living soul engaged in 'divine work'. Left alone — as our own and only beloved children — they risk becoming 'degraded' in incestuous circularity, and this shapes our being in the world, which itself may lead to a larger, though not less deathly, form of circular idolatry. Maximos writes that 'things are outside the intellect (*nous*), but the conceptual images of these things are formed within it. It is consequently in the intellect's power to make good or bad use of these conceptual images. Their wrong use is followed by the misuse of the things themselves' (*Love*, §2.73), an echo of his earlier definition: 'vice is the wrong use of our conceptual images of things, which leads us to misuse the things themselves' (*Love*, §2.17). Noetic misapprehension in the soul of the truth of things means 'missing their mark', and 'misusing' them by entering into inappropriate relation with them. The erring condition in turn circles back to inwardly form the mind in unfortunate ways. Maximos writes that

when the intellect [*nous*] gives attention to conceptual images of physical objects, it is assimilated to the configuration of each image. If it contemplates these images spiritually, it is transformed in various ways according to which of them it contemplates (*Love*, §3.97).

Appropriately directed, the intellect finds itself proceeding in joy; inappropriately directed — i.e., apart from living relation and ascetic struggle — the intellect finds itself under the sway of rampant things. Maximos writes that 'when the senses [grown idolatrous] have the intellect [become illusion] in their clutches, they propagate polytheism through each individual sense-organ; because in their slavery to the passions they pay divine honour to the sensible objects corresponding to each organ' (*Various*, §4.75) — and enter into a stilted relationship of reciprocal 'degradation' with the world, confusing its registers of death and life. The work of the mind here in knowing and loving is without integrity, lacking a wholeness of intent and direction to guide it appropriately — it is given to 'unbridled speculation', which, Maximos says, 'can drive one headlong over the precipice' (*Love*, §4.5). One must work ... and ask oneself how may one be at the same time both disciplined and free? This question lies at the heart of tradition and spiritual discretion — for we are, in the end, to seek to attain a 'pure heart', one 'which offers the mind to God free of all image and form' (*Theology*, §2.82) in order that we may be inwardly formed through our intimate union with God to the degree granted to us in good time by grace. To

accomplish this perfectly may be a rare blessing; most of us find ourselves somewhere between hope and despair — on the cross with the two thieves — on this matter. And yet in our daily rhythms echo the implications of such refined theological insights, which provide light for our own consideration of how a mind given to illusion renders even ascetic efforts idolatrous. Maximos writes that

the demons of pride, self-esteem, desire for popularity, and hypocrisy, never act by trying to dampen the ardour of the virtuous man. Instead, they cunningly reproach him for his shortcomings where the virtues are concerned, and suggest that he intensifies his efforts, encouraging him in his struggle. They do this in order to entice him to give his full attention to them; in this way they make him lose a proper balance and moderation, and lead him imperceptibly to a destination other than the one to which he thought he was going (*Various*, §3.69).

Maximos continues his thought:

neither do these demons hate self-restraint, fasting, almsgiving, hospitality, the singing of psalms, spiritual reading, stillness, the most sublime doctrines, sleeping on the ground, vigils, or any of the other things which characterise a life lived according to God, so long as the aim and purpose of a person trying to live such a life are tilted in their direction (*Various*, §3.70).

The struggle of discernment and discretion — the tree of life, or the tree of death? — Christ or Antichrist? There may be no immediate difference to us, and so we find ourselves in the midst of uncertainty, hoping and yet unable to forecast whether we are properly conducting ourselves ‘for the sake of’ the divine. Maximos links neatly the relation of virtue, knowledge, and telos while refraining from overstepping an apophatic eschatology, writing: ‘the virtues exist for the sake of knowledge of creatures; knowledge, for the sake of the knower; the knower, for the sake of Him who is known through unknowing and who knows beyond all knowledge’ (*Love*, §3.45). The virtues — as idea and act — establish and confirm our hale being in the world we are given in this liturgical ‘today’; insofar as the person is realised as the crown of creaturely life, she recapitulates, gathers, and draws near within herself creation in offering her own unto the ultimate Logos of all life; and the Logos of all life — person and communion — becomes intimate even beyond all categories of heart and mind — beyond all that is and is not, beyond all mighty strivings of act and idea. One may not measure up to Maximos’ apprehension of these matters, and he himself declares his own falling short of the saints and elders he invokes as greater authorities. Yet we may turn back with him to ‘our own’ and work to comprehend some initial insights. Orthodox liturgical consciousness prompts us to affirm both the nearness of God and how He surpasses all conceptual images; in apophatic language, we note that God is ‘beyond being and even infinitely transcends the attribution of beyond-beingness’ (*Various*, §1.6), and in more practical terms we note that ‘the divine Logos is eternally made manifest in different modes of participation, and remains eternally invisible to all in virtue of the surpassing nature of His hidden activity’ (*Various*, §1.8). Such statements about God are designed as much for the edification of the spiritual *economia* of the knower as for the articulation of the theology of the

known (beyond all knowing and unknowing), and prompt us, as Maximos writes, to come to understand that as the intellect is 'established in God, it loses form and configuration altogether, for by contemplating [or partaking of] Him who is simple it becomes simple itself and wholly filled with spiritual radiance' (*Love*, §3.97). Inflected with this light and energy, the soul — as the whole person — strives to eschew all forms of spiritual certainty of God and all sure ideas of its own images of the divine, thus perhaps guarding itself against blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and tempers itself in openness to the eschatological fullness of the loving communion appropriate to its sound and enduring flourishing. In this way, it attunes itself to 'that which we believe to be and which we hope will come to pass', which 'love enables us to enjoy as a present reality' (*Various*, §1.26), even unto 'the presence of God Himself' (*Love*, §3.44), with Maximos himself as a witness in his latter-day 'desert'.

A repository of wisdom from some centuries before Maximos, the 'sayings' of the desert fathers and mothers are handed down to us as tales of encounter, struggle, and inner peace and silence, the gathered effort of which at best may be our comprehension and edification and at worst may be our identification with and emulation — in whatever register — of the embodied truths they contain. Lacking the narratives natural to the lives of the saints, these sayings nonetheless demonstrate the integration of word and life and the integrity of body, soul, and spirit through limpid prosaic images of times when a person sought, and failed or succeeded, to be 'wholly filled with spiritual radiance' in drawing near to God, neighbour, and creation. The sayings centre around particular efforts to realise our communion with He Who Is as persons who are properly as He is. Having said this, it may be a much simpler matter to talk about the theology of God than to discuss the spiritual *economia* of humankind; we find the latter in the desert. The fruit of such a process, such as it may be, may be found in the event of gathering, arranging, and integrating — i.e., composition. Central to the first steps in the desert are humility and wariness regarding self-inflation. We read that 'Abba Poemen often said 'We do not need anything except a vigilant spirit'' (186), and counselled a fellow monk to 'have the mentality of an exile in the place where you live, do not desire to be listened to and you will have peace' (194). We read that 'Blessed Archbishop Theophilos, accompanied by a magistrate, came one day to find Abba Arsenios. He questioned the old man, to hear a word from him. After a short silence the old man answered him, 'Will you put into practice what I say to you?' They promised him this. 'If you hear Arsenios is anywhere, do not go there'' (10). The inclination to shun recognition (being listened to, being visited and consulted) is one of the more overt forms of withdrawal, the ethos of the desert. Discrete withdrawal in the desert takes several forms: withdrawal from the world, from the city, from human intercourse, from fantasies and aspirations, from acts and ideas readily identified with virtue — withdrawal from all manner of things potentially idolatrous and events potentially illusory. And yet each instance of withdrawal is attended by the hope that it will give birth to a living encounter with one holy — that is, paradoxically, withdrawal means communion. Regarding withdrawal from illusions of ascetic accomplishments, we read: 'It was revealed to Abba Antony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession, and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels' (6); and we read: 'One day Abba Arsenios consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenios, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He

replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant'" (10). Regarding withdrawal from idolatries of place — perhaps a perennial temptation in the desert — Abba Sisoës says simply: 'Seek God, and do not seek where He dwells' (220). Seeking what *is* essentially, yet not figuring finally an appropriate form in which the essential ought to be stayed, leaves room for the freedom of the spirit to encounter and embrace, with provisional regard, the truth of the person present and enduring. This disposition or directedness of the soul enables one to treat lightly of the metaphors that may bind due to their strength, and to seek virtue integrated at ease. On this ground, we may strive to apprehend the mystery of the one way of the desert, where God is and is not, and more than is and more than is not, in the cell where one endures and finds the rhythm of divine presence. We read: 'A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything'" (139); and 'Abba Ammonas said, 'A man may remain for a hundred years in his cell without learning how to live in the cell'" (180); and: 'One day Abba Daniel and Abba Ammonas went on a journey together. Abba Ammonas said, 'When shall we, too, settle down, in a cell, Father?' Abba Daniel replied, 'Who shall separate us henceforth from God? God is in the cell, and, on the other hand, He is outside also'" (52). Incapable of figuring firmly, one comes to transcend isolated identification and instead keeps to the enigmatic 'for the sake of' which demands patience and more discretion than one may muster immediately. We read: 'A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'Is it better to speak or to be silent?' The old man said to him, The man who speaks for God's sake does well; but he who is silent for God's sake also does well'" (188). Alive to 'the sake of God', images of spiritual fervour — not to be trusted — may come to reveal our own, but not only or wholly our own. We read: 'It was also said of Arsenios that on Saturday evenings, preparing for the glory of Sunday, he would turn his back on the sun and stretch out his hands in prayer towards the heavens, till once again the sun shone on his face. Then he would sit down' (14); and 'Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot, 'You cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire'" (103); and 'Abba Lot came one day to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Father, I keep my little rule to the best of my ability. I observe my modest fast and my contemplative silence. I say my prayers and do my meditations. I endeavour as far as I can to drive useless thoughts out of my head. What more can I do?' The elder rose to answer and lifted his hands to heaven. His fingers looked like lighted lamps and he said: 'Why not become wholly fire?'" (103). Apart from inertia, in the midst of struggle, the energy of personal, divine presence endures.

III.

Papadiamandis' story 'The Monk' (1892) is, in part, a tale of personal inertia and how it inwardly forms the spiritual register of one's own self and one's own community. The tenor of Papadiamandis' art is hospitable rather than final, for his readers: he uses approximate images (which draw us towards the sense of the scene) and provisional language (which colours the environment and shades the characters to which it is bound) in a way that prompts the reader to consider the foreground, background, and framing of each successive particular moment and its own registers of meaning. As for its narrative, 'The Monk' might be termed a depiction of the desert in the world — an exploration of how body, soul, and spirit may or may not remain integral

over time with others. It is the story of a monastic staying in Athens, fulfilling his assumed role at a local parish:

Father Samuel was still young, under the age of forty. He had come from the Holy Mountain to be treated for the ophthalmia from which he had been suffering, and, for reasons of temporary economic exigency, had attached himself to a parent church in Athens as sacristan. But, after his cure, the years passed by and he continued on in the position of sacristan, planning, certainly, to return as quickly as possible to 'the monastery of his repentance', but never taking the decision (149).

The qualifications that attend this setting-forth of the concrete, essential scenario of the story alert us to certain of the central themes: the phrase 'still young', of the storyteller, indicates the open, undetermined, unfinalised character of Fr Samuel, whose true ends are not yet discernible; the words 'temporary' and 'certainly', of Fr Samuel, emerge from his own internal account, and indicate the basic irresolution in which he finds himself cloaked; and the description 'but never taking the decision', of the ethos of the story, indicates the general unreconciled state of personal activity and spiritual energy in the story's time and place.

The unreconciled, unrelieved nature of Greek culture in Papadiamandis' life, looking back from here and now to there and then, can be apprehended via the palpable issues of the day — the soul of the *polus*, the role of language in cultural heritage and continuity, the contested meaning and place of icons and relics, for example — or by what followed and grew in fervour — clericalism, the kind of moralism then promulgated by the Zoe brotherhood, a reduction of spiritual-cultural being to issues of historical identity, monastic fundamentalism, etc. Papadiamandis knows all of this and yet, for his part, chooses in 'The Monk' to delve into the ethos of his time and place through the subtler and less immediately remarkable issue of sacred form gone awry — the increased identity and confusion of the strictly delineated life of monastics and the loosely spontaneous life of the laity. The troubled outcome of such confusion is that the steady rootedness of monastic asceticism, which grounds lay life, merges in its own *ison* rhythm the counterpoint which it is meant to anchor and complement — or lay life, with its own liberties and vacillations, begins to impose, however innocently, its own ideas and tendencies onto the monastic element of the Church, a convergence which ends in discord — either of which ends in a counterfeit communion, although its inappropriate form may not be readily discernible. Papadiamandis draws forth these matters in scenes of struggle and intimacy, figuring desire through ideas and images of friendship, marriage, and love. The narrator opens up this matter by reflecting that his story occurs in Athens, which to his mind is 'a city in which, imperceptibly and uncanonically, the institution of marriage for priests is tending towards abolition' (148), but leaves it to Kyr-Yannis Manaftis, Fr Samuel's parishioner — apparently a decent man, a good surmiser of the truth, and a sometime thorn in Fr Samuel's side — to broaden the account: 'the whole matter of marriage and celibacy is profound and one of the most difficult social questions. Let's not make barbarians of ourselves, desiring to compel people by force' (156); he continues: 'many people have written a lot and said more about the monasteries in Greece and about their spiritual decline and moral weakness, but I believe that the prime reason for the decline of the

monasteries is the scandalous interference of the State and of worldly people in monastic affairs' (159). These statements occur in conversation with his friends, but we read, further, that *Kyr-Yannis Manaftis* has 'tormented the poor monk, never leaving him in peace' (149). When the monk, pained, confronts him about this — *Manaftis* has taken to greeting Fr Samuel with adaptations of the questions posed to novices as they come forward to affirm and embrace monastic tonsure — the parishioner concludes their colloquy with:

whatever you think, I didn't mean you any ill in speaking to you and I promise you, since you are annoyed, that I won't say another word about this. We simple folk, you know, give more importance to words than things. Why let words bother you, and what harm do I do if I beat the air with my tongue? Look at the reality. What does your conscience say? Is your conscience clear? If so, you've nothing to fear from words. Now forgive me, brother, and I'll never say anything to you again about these matters' (151-2).

In these short passages Papadiamandis presents a variation on certain broad traditional themes facing his contemporary culture in the 'keys' of two sincere characters — pious layman and simple monk — as they converge in brief, poignant conversation: the centrifugal elements of the story are the appropriate forms of drawing near and belonging together, grounds for action and guiding principles for movement, and personal conversation. That is, the questions assayed in the story are whether intimate familiarity is best understood as immediate address or the desire for the wholeness of the person; whether the spiritual grounds for action are best understood in terms of compulsion or of freedom; whether conscience is best understood as a chiding internal standard or law that clarifies and sets straight our moral decisions, or as an intuitive sense of the proximate beauty of the image of God in oneself and others; and whether personal intercourse is best understood in terms of idle talk or in the life-giving word. These fundamental questions are figured in the person of Fr Samuel as he comes to recognise the struggle for monastic integrity facing him in his cell.

A monk is not spiritually isolated, and the matter of his own integrity touches broader concerns pertaining to the rich, varied life of the community and how and why it coheres, or, put differently, how it lives in accord with its own elemental and ultimate principles (ideas and images). The matter of communal health and integrity is figured in three 'melodies' in 'The Monk': the cordial, frank colloquies of Fr Samuel and *Kyr-Yannis Manaftis*; the overly-familiar intimacy of Fr Samuel, the matron *Kyra-Tasou*, and her daughters *Elpiniki* and *Katina*; and Fr Samuel's own internal dialogue of conscience, moving from excuse (*alibi*) to recognition (presence) as the story proceeds. In these three melodies — with significance increasing with interiority — work the elemental and ultimate questions of the story, of intimacy, genesis, integrity, and witness, and within the whole frame of the questions the melodies constantly present are sometimes pulled to the foreground by Papadiamandis and illumined by word or act, at times integrated or verging on each other.

In 'The Monk' Papadiamandis concentrates the troubled ethos of his tradition in the figure of Fr Samuel, who proves either the prism or the conduit through which his themes shine forth,

and we note that the dreadful shift from communal (the personal writ large) accord to discord, which indicates temptation by what is inappropriate, and in particular by inappropriate form, begins with the spiritual (our will) before translating into the physical (our proximates). Thus we hear Fr Samuel internally reflecting that, by his own account, during his time in Athens he has 'lived with every propriety' (160), a note then reiterated, modulated: 'until the Sunday evening on which our present narrative begins, he had not fallen in any way' (168) — and Fr Samuel is likely right, given a certain perspective of observable piety and propriety. Our observable ethical state may be our own mask, chosen or not, and if one is in a monastery the struggle may continue in solitude; with others, however, one is in danger of assuming another's peace or tranquillity ill-advisedly, following this external definition with an unwitting form of intimacy which belies its own intent. Papadiamandis notes that 'gradually' the two sisters 'began to insinuate themselves even into the small cell where the monk lived' (167) — small, sharp steps into a chamber dedicated to another kind of echo — and this opportunity is taken:

the two sisters confided to him that their neighbour *Kyra-Kostaina* was even suspicious of them, gossiping against them mightily, and even presumed to speak ill of him, the monk — all of which, they said, was on account of her jealousy seeing their innocent relationship. Their innocent relationship! The monk, of course, believed this in all good conscience, and the girls believed no differently. What, after all, had been their sin? Had they not behaved with propriety? (168)

If the word 'insinuate' may be considered the narrator's slight comment on what is occurring, in this passage the first sentence 'belongs' to the sister's tonality, perhaps borrowed from their mother, *Kyra-Tasou*: 'confided', 'suspicious', 'gossiping', 'speak ill', 'jealousy', and 'their innocent relationship' — all these terms may bring to mind Hamlet's exchange with Queen Gertrude, that the characters protest too much. The phrase in which culminates the sisters' defence is repeated — starkly — and in the stand-alone sentence 'Their innocent relationship!' the three tonalities or voices here at play inflect this phrase each in their own way: for the sisters it is the end of their argument; for the narrator it seems a heaven-cast, mildly exasperated exclamation; and for Fr Samuel, it's where his defence begins. For Fr Samuel begins by assuming his personal state is inerrant, unconcerning, and instead of tending to his interior spiritual life, responds to external definition with initial, albeit slightly flimsy, defiance: 'the monk, of course, believed this' — 'of course' is Fr Samuel's self-assurance, at least here — and he poses the sisters' questions with them, although it's part of where he begins rather than ends: 'What, after all, had been their sin? Had they not behaved with propriety?' The first question is posed as if publicly to an audience: 'what have you observed us doing wrong?' The second is posed as if privately, to oneself: 'does not my own sense of innocent intent count? Do I not see things clearly, as unimpeachable?' The notions of 'not behaving with propriety' and 'sin' are equated here — identified — and we realise that the characters' self-defence which lies here — what is our observable wrongdoing? — has as its target a sense of 'sin' unfamiliar within the Orthodox tradition, and yet this very 'missing of the mark' in word-sense demonstrates the more familiar notion — that of the straying of the heart and mind in passion and fantasy, rather than the staying of the heart in great care and the holding of the mind in attentive presence in personal encounter.

This initial confusing of the sense of sin as improper or impious conduct with the truer sense of sin as inappropriate intimacy taken delusional form and as estrangement from edifying personal encounter means that while Papdiamandis' characters observe, or think they observe, a salutary moral code indeed they overlook the ethical erosion occurring at the edges of their own respective images of their communal reality. One keen moment of 'overlooking' occurs in the monk's cell one key evening, a moment in which we note the presence of encounter narrowed down to a word (kind or theological), with the rest of the personality discarded immediately, unwittingly, until the detriment involved in this spiritual reduction of encounter to exchanged information ruins its own cover and the proper pitfalls of their positions become clearer. We read:

Elpiniki had her forearms bared to the elbows and was wearing a thin white tunic, while Katina, the attractive sister, happened to be missing the top button from her white breast band and her blouse was collarless, and from thence her neck and the uppermost parts of her breasts were revealed naked (169).

The physical description of the girls by the two others (the mother, the monk) occurs in these other two voices, but with different emphases: the girls' mother, *Kyra-Tasou*, notices the accumulation of possibility or suggestion and their ends — 'bared to the', 'happened to be missing', 'and from thence', culminating in the phrase 'revealed naked' — elements of possible seduction or readied desire which suggest to her motherly attentiveness a door open to external shenanigans. We read that 'the old dame in all this had noticed that Father Samuel had been aroused by the close contact and conversation with the two girls, and a sense of indeterminate foreboding arose in her. Her girls weren't that sort, no indeed' (169). The shadow cast over Fr Samuel by *Kyra-Tasou* in this scene is reciprocated in his mind, but reversed: instead of a gathering of minor details that ends with something precious 'revealed naked' and thus open to misguided actions on the monk's part (which is still a matter of proper behaviour) the monk, as it were, begins at the end — 'revealed naked' — and allows this suspect prism to refract and draw forth the rest of the details, in which terms like 'bared', 'thin', 'attractive', 'collarless', 'neck', and 'breasts' stand out. The form of inappropriate erotic flush suffusing the characters' evening, signalling to the mother possible wayward adventure and to the monk sudden insight into his grimly blithe spiritual state, bestirs the mother and the monk to justify themselves, if not delve into regions of interested self-assurance. In the story, we have already experienced a previous example of Fr Samuel's response to a spirit troubled in place: 'the poor monk saw these things, and in conscience comparing himself with the priests, who — and this is the rub — bear the burden of souls, and he could not help regarding himself as a hundred times better. And he was not wrong' (162). In this case Fr Samuel sidesteps the gift and task of his tonsuring by taking shelter in a sense of his stronger righteousness, relative to his fellows in the church, and he is 'not wrong'. Given these terms — observable propriety — Fr Samuel is indeed better than the priests, indeed he does more good than they do, his value is worth more to the community. And yet... Papdiamandis wants us to see that this whole set of terms and criteria are improper to Fr Samuel's soul — to any monastic or lay soul — for they reduce to 'living with every propriety' (160) the fuller spiritual dispensation of striving to respond with appropriate attentive presence and love to all encounters, in which one attends ('Let us attend!') and draws near to what belongs

(or does not belong) in an event, a relationship, or a form of intimacy. In the story Fr Samuel is sometimes confused by ideas of belonging — he notes plain or singular aspects of a scene, but the import of the whole seems to elude him; in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare writes ‘He misses not much’ — ‘No, he doth but mistake the truth totally’ (II, i, 59-60). Fr Samuel is ‘not wrong’. He is better than some others, but by strange lights, by which the illumination of the monk counterfeits ethical purity — a habit of pride of which Fr Samuel needs to be divested. In her own response to the situation, *Kyra-Tasou* also appeals to a strong authority, in answer to which she regards herself as an ethically-good character in the evening scene in the monk’s cell. Following the descriptive phrases of the two girls (quoted above) in which the mother both declares her disapprobation of the sudden intimacy *and* mistakes her own image for Fr Samuel’s temptation, *Kyra-Tasou* justifies her own activity by integrating a phrase of St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: ‘she was simply *redeeming the time*, deriving some small profit from her friendship with the monk’ (169). Papadiamandis was a Reader in his local church, and knew the Scriptures well. Allowing his ‘matron’ to take one of the finer, more memorable parts of the early Christian writings unto her own self-enchanted image may indicate how profoundly in error she is, even if her intention and idea are as correct as Fr Samuel’s own self-assessment and self-assurance.

In what they say, are Fr Samuel and *Kyra-Tasou* seeking responsibility, or an alibi? Are they each offering a true *apologia* — a word or account out of their very being — or an excuse, a sidestepping, in the truths they utter? In other words, is Fr Samuel’s ethical truth appropriate for the environment to which he applies it? Does *Kyra-Tasou*’s traditional truth belong in and to the situation to which her heart gave rise? Do their responses illuminate or diminish the whole of which they partake? And if they diminish, how are they inappropriate or how do they usurp their position rather than belong? The criteria for this — the hale compass — lies in the eschatological truth of the characters, in their wholeness of personality and integrity of relationship, in what belongs and what they have made their own. And what is one’s own? How does one belong? These questions are answered through a higher form of obedience or heeding one’s call or One who calls to you or another, offering freedom. Discerning the voice of One who calls is its own great task; here we attend to illusion, false light. The illusion that tempts our receptivity to One calling partakes of pride (which obscures the need for others at the heart of personhood through virtuous self-satisfaction) and of spiritual delusion (which obscures the kinds of relationship with others needed for holy fire) and culminates in a form of demonic freedom, far more biting than the higher obedience of divinely heeding ‘το καλον’.

In *Of Water and the Spirit*, Alexander Schmemmann outlines the tradition’s understanding of this demonic approach to freedom:

‘the essence of the demonic is always *pride, pompa diaboli*, and the ‘truth’ of modern life is ‘whether a law-abiding conformist or a rebellious non-conformist’, generally one is ‘first of all a being full of pride, shaped by pride, worshipping pride, and placing pride at the very top of one’s values’, which means that ‘to renounce Satan’ is ‘not to reject a mythological being in whose existence one does not believe’, but rather it is ‘to reject an entire ‘worldview’ made up of pride and self-

affirmation, of that pride which has truly taken human life from God and made it into darkness, death, and hell' (29-30).

That this state lies unrecognised in life is due to another of its aspects — its inapparent nature. Echoing Maximos, Schmemmann writes that 'the 'demonic' consists primarily in falsification and counterfeit, in deviating even positive values from their true meaning' (29). The 'subtle and vicious lie and confusion' (29) at the centre of the demonic — falsifying light, counterfeiting goodness — means that its dire character is inapparent, there but not discerned for what it is — for it appeals as it appears, as something desirable. The demonic is difficult to distinguish from the salvific by its own lights; it is primarily when set into relation that the eschatological truth of thought becomes clear, for then its wholeness may be discerned either as a fruitful fullness or as a circular self-containment, self-involved. In *Of Water and the Spirit*, Schmemmann gives a fine account of how blind pride comes to be:

it is not our purpose to outline, even superficially, the Orthodox teaching concerning the Devil. In fact, the Church has never formulated it systematically, in the form of a clear and concise 'doctrine'. What is of paramount importance for us, however, is that the Church has always had the experience of the demonic, has always, in plain words, *known the Devil* (21).

Schmemmann continues:

Our first affirmation then is that there exists a demonic *reality*: evil as a dark power, as presence and not only as absence. But we may go further. For just as there can be no love outside the 'lover', i.e., a person that loves, there can be no hatred outside the 'hater', i.e. a person that hates. And if the ultimate mystery of 'goodness' lies in the person, the ultimate mystery of evil must also be a personal one. Behind the dark and irrational presence of evil there must be a *person* or *persons*. There must exist a personal world of those who have chosen to hate God, to hate light, to be *against*. Who are these persons? When, how, and why have they chosen to be against God? To these questions the Church gives no precise answers. The deeper the reality, the less it is presentable in formulas and propositions. The answer is veiled in symbols and images, which tell of an initial rebellion against God within the spiritual world created by God, among angels led into that rebellion by *pride*. The origin of evil is viewed here not as ignorance and imperfection but, on the contrary, as knowledge and a degree of perfection which makes the temptation of pride possible. Whoever he is the 'Devil' is among the very first and the best creatures of God. He is, so to speak, perfect enough, wise enough, powerful enough, one can almost say *divine* enough, to know God and not to surrender to Him — to know him and yet to opt against Him, to desire freedom from Him. But since this freedom is impossible in the love and light which always lead to God and to a free surrender to Him, it must of necessity be fulfilled in negation, hatred, and rebellion (22-3).

The 'angel of light', who is really the 'angel of death', depends upon one not heeding the call, on one neglecting spiritual steadiness and endurance, and thus giving over one's capacity for patience and duration, by cloaking 'darkness, death, and hell' in the guise of light, life, and heaven, and 'negation, hatred, and rebellion' in habits of affirmation, love, and accord. This allows for a 'deformed' personality, inappropriate truths, usurped positions, and false lights to gather into one deceptively appealing figure who offers a different kind of call, that of a demented freedom bent over its own image. The criteria needed to discern this pale, deathly, seemingly beautiful figure is found in the tradition's gift of our intuition of joy, but since this is indefinable we may note its absence in our religious sensibility become diffuse, disintegrated.

In 'The Monk', Papadiamandis has *Kyra-Tasou* relate one version of this state, following her earlier moment of finding herself brought up short by the evening scene. We read:

the matron felt genuinely sorry for him; her heart had gone out to him as she said. It had never crossed her mind that Father Samuel could throw everything to the wind, grab one of her daughters and abscond with her by night, taking her to wife by marriage or without marriage, with a priest's blessing or without a priest's blessing. Other mothers perhaps were capable of reconciling such acts with their conscience. But she, even though she was without education and even though she lacked any clear and potent religious sensibility, living as she did in the midst of the social and ecclesiastical wretchedness which presses in on us from every side, nonetheless she could never swallow it. In no way would she accept to appear 'excommunicated' in the eyes of the world. She knew a woman from another part of town whose daughter had married a monk. (Lord save us and have mercy!) After her consent to the unlawful wedding, that woman seemed changed, as if she had changed personality and was no longer herself (170).

Kyra-Tasou here unfolds much of herself: her basic sense of empathy and decent intent; her immediate myopia; her groping awareness of the gifts of her textured cultural time and place and of her part in it; and her concern for others, even if weighted selfishly towards public opinions. Most significant for us is the apparent difficulty of passage between inward awareness and outward manifestation, the stable coherence of which is needed for a 'clear and potent religious sensibility' to flourish. In this scene we note *Kyra-Tasou's* awareness proceeding from within to without — and staying there rather than returning to that inner place of peace, the conscience. Beginning with her own ideas and concerns regarding the monk, she compares herself in the public eye with another matron, whose daughter married a monk, the scandalous terms of fulfilment of which *Kyra-Tasou* will not allow to be 'reconciled' in her conscience, especially as afterwards the other mother 'seemed changed, as if she had changed personality and was no longer herself'. Filtered through the intelligence of the narrator, *Kyra-Tasou's* intuition that the root and result of 'appearing excommunicated' — related to the 'unlawful wedding' — is for the person involved to seem to 'lose' their own self, their own integral being, 'as if' permanent damage has been done to the image of God in one. Yet in her judgement here, *Kyra-Tasou* forgets that one can never actually leave behind the love of the divine, and neglects that she is in a very similar spiritual state, although one less vividly palpable due to the lack of a

wedding. She shifts her attentiveness from interior to exterior; missing the return within, where further concentration will allow more textured and nuanced forays of elaboration in her community, the ground on which she stands becomes stony, inhospitable to further sowing and cultivation, meaning that its support becomes meagre and unsustaining. The '(Lord save us and have mercy!)' may be shared by *Kyra-Tasou* and the narrator, the former's alarming spiritual state relating to the latter's alarmed observation that 'she was without education' and 'lacked any clear and potent religious sensibility, living as she did in the midst of the social and ecclesiastical wretchedness which presses in on us from every side'. Indeed, we get the sense that if *Kyra-Tasou* and the narrator/Papadiamandis converge on the invocation to the Lord, they seem to diverge on scope. For the matron, she herself is at the centre, and persons and things lessen at a distance; for Papadiamandis, we feel that the 'us' in 'Lord save us' relates to the 'us' upon which general wretchedness is pressing, indicating at least his Greek community if not the Orthodox world at large. A further distinction between where the two 'voices' end also pertains here: for while *Kyra-Tasou* does come to self-concern, this is not an indication that she has returned 'within' and is on firm spiritual ground — rather, she stays 'without' herself and allows her concern to be dictated by how she is seen in the light of the conduct of others; the narrator, in contrast, including himself in the second 'us' and therefore in the first 'us' too, seems to have integrated his interior and exterior realms of meaning, and is finally unwilling to consider himself spiritually apart from his community and tradition, something of which has resisted the general 'wretchedness' — a wretchedness which constantly 'presses', and therefore has not yet overcome. That which must be 'preserved' ('Saints preserve us!' ~ Fr. Moses), in the terms of this scene, is a 'clear and potent religious sensibility', which is linked by happenstance or design to 'education', with which it may or may not be properly conjoined in healthy relation. Lacking clarity and potency, the religious sensibility common to the world of the story feels diffuse and disintegrated; it needs the sobriety of memory found in ascetic toil and the staying of the mind in presence found in apophatic effort to respond to a sensibility diffuse, scattered like clouds, grasped at by us, and to a sensibility disintegrated — disintegral — through discord, or hearts at odds with each other rather than hearts present in one accord.

The desire for sober memory and the mind stayed in presence involved in ascetic, apophatic struggle may grant one's religious sensibility a hale ethos, the communication of which may be subtle rather than blunt, concerned as it is not with ideas, actions, and practices *per se* but rather with the register of spiritual intuition or instinct, gathered from long experience and relying on a firmly cultivated sense of discretion. Relatively sanguine as he is about his current ideas, actions, and practices, Fr Samuel seems to have neglected the richer, underlying sensibility necessary for spiritual wholeness and which integrates idea, action, and practice into an overall healthy *economia* of spiritual personhood and community. His hint that all is not well comes late at night, via taste and smell, the incidents of which in the story bookend his nascent self-awareness and also indicate his way forward. At the end of a long day and filled with the echoes of its encounters, 'at about eleven o'clock, when the monk returned to his cell, he started to rinse his mouth with water aplenty. He felt the most peculiar sensation, like the taste and smell of earth, in his nostrils and on his lips' (160); later that evening, Fr Samuel, 'having rinsed and re-rinsed his mouth, fell into a kind of deep reverie' (164), in which he relives his tonsuring, the entry into monastic life, and initial impressions of the monastery, including the stance of careful

commitment drawn forth from his novice days there, evoked earlier in the story in Manaftis' light-hearted sallies with him. These sober memories countermand Fr Samuel's intrusive thoughts of his own righteousness and of the three women with whom he has developed some intimacy, drawing him back to his own humility and prompting his nascent awareness that he is spiritually unattuned to his communal and ecclesial environment. The jostling of his conscience pulls down his vanity and self-confidence, and this sudden 'lack of faith' in himself prompts him to reconsider his immediate relationships which, as 'immediate' (the locus of the spiritual life), may tend towards either a mind stayed in presence or a mind strayed in passion. If we may define the conscience here as attunement within encounter, and if the undoing of Fr Samuel's confidence clarifies to what extent he has had 'faith' in himself rather than in God, then this moment in his life opens up not only the possible path of peace and healing going forward but also the welter of suffering within and without the monk that his confidence has hitherto obscured. The cracks in the self-reflective 'screens' Fr Samuel has set around himself let in a little light and air to his stuffy cell, metaphorically speaking, which means he must now relate to the suffering of his community (as part of its ongoing integrity) and must also leave his own suffering unrelated, as Archimandrite Sophrony states is the practice on Mt. Athos: monks there 'must learn so to comport themselves outwardly that nothing transpires of their inner life' (*Silouan*, 249). Having recovered an inkling of his monastic discipline, Fr Samuel undergoes an abyss — 'there in the darkness, the old woman came up as close as she could to the monk and flushed as she was with the resinated wine started to whisper something in his ear. The words were disjointed and the monk comprehended only the perilous phrase: '...you've wasted your youth away!'" (171) — and emerges in some sort of hell, where it is felt that the divine countenance has been obscured. Relatively little observable in his situation has changed, but with the expanding re-attunement within encounter of his conscience Fr Samuel has opened up himself again to the subtle, keen spiritual violence shifts in relation, and particularly shifts in tonality, may occasion. Shifts in tonality — perhaps akin to shifts in prairie road texture — alter not the definition of word, act, or practice, but its authority, as authority lies within tonality and tonality governs meaning: 'we only have to change our tone of voice for certain things within ourselves to become inexpressible — we can no longer think them, or even feel them' (Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, 79). If there is no new theme 'under the sun', then in order to make sense one uses emphasis and paraphrase: emphasis draws forth and brings to light in the rhythm of composition; paraphrasing, as it registers meaning become 'one's own', occurs in one's unique voice and therefore distinctive tonality (as person, community, tradition, etc.). The tonality given one's 'voice' or 'way', emerging from within one's very being, attends and belongs to the event and seeks to draw to presence and relation the eschatological wholeness of the event. Insofar as it accomplishes this integrity with its own integral ethos steady, and in so doing partakes of the essence of the event, tonality inwardly forms both authority and meaning. That is, tonality is about how one relates to ideas rather than about the ideas themselves. Tonality not only distinguishes heaven from hell, it can also indicate the necessary difference between intimate and communal discourse. For the tonality appropriate to singularly profound spiritual experience may differ from the tone of voice appropriate to conveying something of its truth to one's community. In the story, suddenly Fr Samuel's immediate environment seems atonal, harsh to his ear, and this seems to rake his heart, unsettling his inertia. Although he does not attempt to convey his new sense of things to the family of women or to anyone else, we read that later

‘there returned to his fantasy the two young damsels [...] they returned and wished violently to take possession of his heart’ (172). In this area of the spiritual life, Sophrony speaks generally (and of another monk): ‘I am not going to mention the name of this monk because he is still alive. Nor will I attempt to appraise his vision. I listened impassively, not reacting to his story, in accordance with the strict rule for monks on Mt. Athos — to be especially guarded where visions are concerned’ (199); Fr Samuel returns to Athos without explanation.

Fr Samuel does not tell us his thoughts after his resolve, so we’re unsure what heals him of his affliction. On the other hand, the history of the Church contains examples of ones who not only ‘stayed’ with images of their singularly profound spiritual experiences, but they further mistook the tone of voice in which these experiences might be conveyed to their community. This is not to say there is no truth to them; but their authority has shifted. What does this mean? Fr Samuel tells neither his community nor us of his vision or resulting thoughts; we are privy to it, though, as Papadiamandis includes it in his story and puts it to us as if a question or a quandary: what to do with this vision of erotic temptation? Ought we to emulate the Athonite practice, and maintain extreme spiritual vigilance and patience? This would be relatively straightforward to answer were one dealing with an image plainly made public — ‘Yes!’. Yet Papadiamandis would not make this image simply public; he knows it is too involved, fraught with all sorts of ledges on which one might sit or forget oneself. Instead, Papadiamandis allows us into Fr Samuel’s mind and shows its as yet still unattuned condition by granting him this vision and conveying it to us in his intimate tone, which in the world of the story no one else hears as Fr Samuel simply departs. And yet — what of when this does happen, when someone neglects the vigilance proper to communication regarding shifts of tone, spiritually? How may we address images of tradition in the Church, generally? (One may consider the following also in the light of Maximos’ ‘conceptual images’, Bakhtin’s ‘chronotope’, Dostoevsky’s *obraz*, or ‘discursive-images’.) These questions touch the relationship between subtle spiritual states and one’s community or tradition on the whole: how does one communicate without idolatry? That is, how does one draw near without identification with something?

These immense questions stand on how one discerns what one may call ‘the energy of the event’. If the energy of the event is conveyed best through its most dramatic icons and singular moments, then the energy feels static rather than kinetic, and the essence of Orthodox theology is kinetic. If one considers how work and image belong in the energy of the event, three elements central to the word may be transposed to the image — whether or not word and image congregate commonly in this way, and playing in part with the kernels ‘φρα’ and ‘φραντ’. As a word is provisional — it provides but does not complete meaning in the event — so an image is formally incomplete, approximate, drawing us in by what it asks of us; as a word is emphatic — it draws forth and focuses meaning particularly, but without necessarily denying anything else — so an image is ‘emphantic’, selecting, focusing, not necessarily banishing otherwise; and as a word is apophatic — its truth is not exhausted by any one formulation — so an image is ‘apophantic’, in that its truth is not exhausted by any one formation. The question of form is profound, as much so as tonality. In a distillation of his many remarkable moments of considered ‘Form’, Gombrowicz writes that humankind has an ‘innate need to complete incomplete Form: every Form that has been started requires a complement’; we have ‘this need to develop, to

complete, because of a certain logic inherent in Form' (*A Kind of Testament*, 73). Our natural instinct to 'complete form' — to partake in what is begun — is heightened in our spiritual life, and it is significant that completion only happens in the event (always kinetically, never statically) and is guided by the logic of form — the logos of the event — as that which beckons or calls to us (we remember that a sense of 'to call' echoes in the meaning of 'το καλον'). In good spiritual health, these elements coalesce in fruitful peace in the image (or the word). In spiritual error, we may forget that we complete the image's form during the event; in forgetting this timely completion, we may neglect that our own inevitable 'completion' of the image, now out of tune with its whole reality, grants the image shades of our own passions, drawn on as we are by desire not for the logic of form or for the logos of the event but rather for our own word about ourselves, our self-image, exhausted by our own voice. This process distorts all images, whether vision or icon, whenever it occurs. Yet, though one is not free of passion in the spiritual struggle one may catch the harmonies of this stance: that an image is formally incomplete means that it is always in the process of being completed, in the eschatological wholeness of relation; that an image is 'emphantic' means that it depicts not necessarily a strict theological truth (of proposition), but presents the conditions in which truth shines forth; and that an image is 'apophantic', unriven to and unexhausted by any certain formation, suggests the integrity of a presence beyond form, just as an apophatic word suggests the integrity of a presence beyond articulation.

This presence inexhaustible is the presence of communion, drawn forth in our apophatic or apophantic approach to discursive-images. Our apprehension of this presence (in word and image) clarifies our attempts to draw near and indicates our distance from ultimate, divine presence and its eschatological wholeness. Noting well this measure of distance, we refrain from all kinds of identification, as to identify an image with its truth is to frustrate its potential energy, to foreclose on its invitation to divine fullness and its gift of the divine light which encompasses each and all. This divine light, common in our everyday world, may be most palpable in iconography, the essence of which Archimandrite Vasileios notes in *Hymn of Entry*:

'the light of an icon is not of the present age. It does not come from outside to give light in passing. An uncreated light that knows no evening, like the grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, is shed from within the icon itself, from the faces of the saints and transfigured creation: a calm, restful, joyous light' (85); and 'while the icon does not have need of anything, at the same time it does not despise anything. Here everything is blessed, and exults and leaps for joy. Everything is filled with uncreated light. Expressing the tranquil victory of the light that knows no evening, the icon is alien to the dramatic shading effects and transient impressions that go with the representation of natural day and night. Here we find ourselves outside and above the disturbances of these alternations' (86); and 'the icon of the Transfiguration is no brighter than the icon of the Crucifixion. The Lord's face does not 'shine' at the Transfiguration more than in any other icon of Him. In iconography the Transfiguration is not an isolated and separate event, but a manifestation of the grace and mysterious illumination that fills everything and gives it life. All iconography is transfigured space, with a new order, structure, and

interpenetration [perichoresis]. It is the world of the Transfiguration, the world of the uncreated illumination' (87).

Comprehension of this light shines forth brilliantly in Papadiamandis' work, and we realise that as the icon is a type for all images, the iconographic telos is tonal illumination — not the outlining of a certain word or image, but the ethos of the tradition. Insofar as a predilection for depicted subjects may outweigh our concentration on tonal illumination, we need strict vigilance regarding our images, particularly as they come in the form of strong visions or sensations. We must resist extraordinary light or clarity, especially insofar as it renders the ordinary dull and fixes us in 'the disturbances of these alternations', bound in stasis to our current passions. This means a honed wariness of how one's own goes awry, 'frighted with false fire' (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 268) by our own lights and sense of virtue, key ways in which one goes awry. Thus should our focus lie on our own lights and our sense of virtue? No — these are enabled by something else. Our responsibility, here, lies not with virtue or insight but with our conscience or discretion, the initial definition of which — attunement within encounter — we may expand to mean that faculty of the intellect (*nous*) which will not admit lies; it is not a certain arbiter of truth but rather that interior, tended place (*topos*) in which truth finds itself the appropriate state of things; and its role is to prompt us to realise that the truth which we hold dear is larger than us, greater than our own ideas, images, and lives — and in this way, our conscience is the voice and tonality of our tradition appealing to us. Here we note the beauty of truth, how through *aletheia* it brings to light, draws to presence; here truth is gentle, non-insistent, gracious. It is here, too, apart from virtue and individual lights, that we find the Tree of Life, innocent of all but direct, immediate presence and communion — and of a fullness we *still* try to complete by our own lights. Here we repent: we strive to renew our energy of communion, to forgive our foremost sin of inertia, to rekindle the holy fire of communal concord. Papadiamandis completes Fr Samuel's story in this light: 'He boarded the first steamer for Thessaloniki, and with a sense of relief, which came as a surprise even to himself, he returned to the monastery of his repentance' (171). Divested of the need for virtue and self-explanation, Fr Samuel finds healing in the habit of innocence.

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