

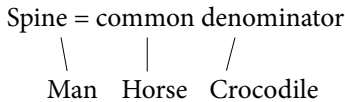
Unity and Universe

Understanding pilgrimage to Mount Athos

Introduction

Pilgrimage, like many of the concepts used in the study of religions, embodies both the aspect of concept and of word. As a concept it emulates the formation of categories in the natural sciences, in which science is characterized as searching for the 'unity in hidden likenesses', given its aim to find a new unity in the variety of nature, a likeness between things that were not thought of before. The term 'vertebrate' is an illustrative and perspicuous *univocal* concept, because it can be attributed equally well to a man, a horse and a crocodile, the vertebral column being present in its whole in each of these species (Bronowsky 1977: 12; Gothóni 2005: 110; Bianchi 1994: 921).

Figure 1. The univocal concept



'Game' and 'religion', as well as some other phenomena of human activity, are different kinds of concepts. Bianchi argues: 'The term religion (and religious) is better considered at this point of research as an analogical term which overshadows sets of concepts and realities having in common some typical characteristics or aspects, not always the same, sets separated, on the other hand, by differences which reach to the same depth as the similarities. This is a kind of family resemblance which differs from a strictly definable universal.' (Bianchi 1994: 921.)

Interpreting and understanding *analogical* concepts does not mean searching for the 'unity in hidden likenesses', but rather implies an *unfolding of the universe of beliefs concealed in the word* encountered. When we enter into dialogue with a word, our aim is to let the word speak to us in all its lin-

guisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*) so that it unveils the ‘inner existence space’ of the religious person or the religiosity concerned (Holm 1995: 134–7). Here the setting is the opposite.

Figure 2. The analogical concept

The universe of beliefs concealed in the word encountered



In a previous article I have discussed the concept of ‘pilgrimage’ from the viewpoint of searching for the ‘unity in hidden likenesses’. In that article I reconsidered Victor Turner’s well-known theoretical model of pilgrimage as a kind of *rite de passage* and pointed out that the universal characteristic of a pilgrimage is not that it is a transition rite (Gothóni 1995). Neither is *communitas* the specific quality of a pilgrimage.

In criticizing Turner’s conception of pilgrimage I referred to van Gennep, who clearly stated that the one thing in common in the transition rites (*rites de passage*) is the transition from one social position to another, which means transition over a social threshold. Field research by E. Alan Morinis and Harald O. Skar, for instance, has revealed that this is not the case with pilgrimage. Therefore, in order to find the ‘unity in hidden likenesses’ I asked the Socratic question: What, then, should we call the quality which distinguishes pilgrimages and which is characteristic of them all?

After comparing the findings of M. J. Sallnow (1981), E. Alan Morinis (1984), Harald O. Skar (1985), Glen Bowman (1985) and Barbara Nimri Aziz (1987) with my own field research on Mount Athos in Greece, I came to the conclusion that *spiritual transformation* is the specific quality of a pilgrimage. Moreover, I realised that

- Pilgrimages form an ellipse, although they are not transition rites, and that
- Pilgrimages are universal in form, but unique regarding their content of beliefs.

Having found the specific universal unity of pilgrimages, namely that pilgrimages are journeys of spiritual transformation (Gothóni 1993), I began to look more closely at the uniqueness of the content of beliefs embodied in pilgrimages to Mount Athos, particularly with the aim of unfolding the universe of beliefs concealed in the word *proskýnima*, which is the Greek word for



Mount Athos is inscribed on the World Heritage List of UNESCO. Photo © René Gothóni.

‘pilgrimage’. Therefore, I shifted my focus from the concept to the word ‘pilgrimage’, denoting the human phenomena of visiting holy and sacred places, persons, mountains, wells and so forth.

The aim of this article is to illustrate how our preconceptions of the word ‘pilgrimage’ determine our conception of the concept or category of ‘pilgrimage’, which again determines our interpretation and understanding of the content of beliefs of this form of human phenomenon. As a by-product this article is also displaying the process of how our

limited horizon of conceiving the concepts and words is extended in parallel with the process of research. The article aims at showing how this horizon determines our leaving out fundamental elements of ‘pilgrimages’ which, in this case, are characteristic of visits to the Holy Mountain of Greece.

The Holy Mountain of Athos: some basic facts

The Holy Mountain of Athos in northern Greece is a self-governed monastic republic belonging to Greece. It is a peninsula, the length of which is about 50 kilometres and the breadth about 10 kilometres. On this peninsula there are 20 ruling monasteries, which all of them own their part of the area: the buildings, monastic villages (*skete*), monastic cottages (*kellion*) as well as the farming land and the forests on their properties.

The fence at the border of the Holy Mountain of Athos. Photo © René Gothóni.



Altogether there are today about 2,000 Orthodox monks living on Mount Athos and each monastery also has a number of lay workers helping the monks with the maintenance and the refurbishing work on the monastic buildings and churches. More than 100,000 men visit the monasteries on this Holy Mountain every year.

Mount Athos has been regarded as the oldest democracy in the world. All the twenty ruling monasteries are legal entities of public law, and directly subject to the spiritual jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Although Mount Athos is a self-governed monastic republic, it is also supervised by the Greek state through the Governor of Mount Athos, who is appointed by presidential decree on the recommendation of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. According to the new internal regulation of the ministry, the Governor has the rank and remuneration of the Secretary General of a region.

The administration of the entire Mount Athos is carried out by the Holy Community at the capital municipality of Karyes, which is situated in the middle of the peninsula. It consists of twenty monks, each monk being elected as a representative of his ruling monastery for a year. The executive authority on Mount Athos is with the four monks of the Holy Epistasia, which consists of representatives chosen by rotation according to a so called *tetrad* system: the twenty monasteries are arranged into five groups of four monasteries (tetrad) in each of the groups. One of the first five senior monasteries in rank is the first monastery in each tetrad. Each tetrad in turn takes over the Holy Epistasia for a year the Holy Epistasia being headed by the monk representing the senior monastery of the tetrad. He is known as the Protos or first elder, from *Protepistatis*.

The Holy Mountain of Athos is known to many as the monastic republic into which women are prohibited to enter. The reason for this is religious and a fundamental cornerstone in the ecclesiastic legislation. Because the entire peninsula is dedicated to the Mother of God, the monks have since the first monastic buildings were raised considered this to mean that no other ‘rival’ woman should set her foot on Mount Athos. The prohibition of men to enter and sojourn in convents and women to enter and sojourn in monasteries, the so called *avaton* principle, is an old concept with roots in the earliest stages of the monastic movement. The prohibition is already mentioned in the Canon 47 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council of 692 AD and in the Canon 18 of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 AD. This *avaton* principle has faithfully been kept by all the Athonite ruling monasteries until the present day (Konidaris 2003: 14–16).

The question asked in this article is the following: How can we understand the phenomenon of more than 100,000 men visiting the Holy Mountain of Athos every year?

The challenge of understanding

The concept of understanding refers to the scientific process of acquiring knowledge that is universally applicable and equal both to the natural sciences and the human and social sciences. However, understanding is not the same as explaining and explaining is not a synonym for understanding. Understanding is here used neither in a general sense nor in the particular sense of a method. Understanding comes before method!

In philosophical hermeneutics, the notion of ‘understanding’ is derived from the German word *verstehen* = *davor stehen*—in Swedish *förstå* = *stå framför* (‘to stand in front of’), in Finnish *ümbärta* = *kulkea ympäri* (‘to walk around’) and in English from *understandan* = ‘to stand under’. To stand ‘in front of’, ‘under’, or ‘to walk around’ is to be ‘in relation to’ and, as we know, in a relation there is always at least two parties: (1) an I, or first person, who stands in front of the other or a subject matter, and (2) the other or subject matter in relation to which an I stands. However, it is elementary to realise that the I is never a *tabula rasa*, but always ensnared in preconceptions, which are the result of the process of learning a language, in other words a mother tongue, and of schooling.

Therefore, the first thing we need to do is to encounter our preconceptions of the subject matter, in this case of pilgrimage, in front of which we stand as a

first person. And we ask: In front of what is the I standing? Strictly speaking, we are not standing in front of the pilgrim only as a person, but rather in front of the words used by the pilgrim. The words expressed are not the property of the pilgrim only, but collective property. What we try to understand is the universe of meanings concealed in the word ‘pilgrimage’ as a word carrying preconceptions related both to Latin and Roman Catholicism!

Our preconceptions determine our interpretation and understanding in the following way. The word ‘pilgrim’ from Latin *peregrinus* (*per ager*) denotes ‘walking’ and within the Roman Catholic theology identification with the sufferings of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) through physical hardship. Hence our—i.e. the Westerner’s—preconception of the word ‘pilgrimage’, is that a pilgrimage is about walking, which means that the pilgrimage is conceived of from a limited horizon of understanding. Preconceptions are always language-bound and conditioned in two ways:

- Historically, reflecting time and space; language and mother tongue; and
- Emotionally, reflecting liking / disliking.



The peak of Mount Athos. Photo © René Gothóni.

- Confess their sins to their confessor or spiritual father
- Take part in the services
- Receive the Holy Communion, the climax of any genuine *proskýnima*

On Athos, then, we encounter another kind of preconception of the word ‘pilgrimage’, namely that of ‘worship’. Allow me to elaborate these lines of thought a bit further with a second example and illustrate how preconceptions determine interpretation.

In 1977, Philip Sherrard discussed the paths on Mount Athos and, somewhat disappointed with the recent development of building more roads on the Holy Mountain, argued that ‘At least 90 % of the visitors to Athos today are not pilgrims. They are tourists. They do not walk along the long, steep, often relentless paths, so that inner change, for the production of which walking is an essential element, cannot take place in them.’

The facts are:

- 120 pilgrims/visitors are allowed to enter Mount Athos per day
- 100 Greek pilgrims
- 20 non-Greek visitors
- Non-Greeks are about 17 per cent of the total number of visitors
- 83 per cent are Greek Orthodox pilgrims

This means that the vast majority of the pilgrims and visitors are Greek *proskynités* and it is totally wrong to argue that most of them are tourists. To come to an authentic interpretation of the pilgrim/tourist discussion and to understand pilgrimage to Mount Athos we need to

- Encounter our preconceptions of the word ‘pilgrim’
- Learn Modern Greek
- Listen to the meanings of the words *proskýnima* and *proskynítis*
- Learn the structure and content of the Divine Liturgy and take part in the services
- Listen carefully to how the *proskynités* conceive of their pilgrimage to Mount Athos

Without a thorough knowledge of the Greek context, in which the Greek men go for pilgrimage to Mount Athos, our interpretation will inevitably be distorted by our preconceptions of what a pilgrimage is all about.

Gadamer's ball theory

Drawing on the thought of Aristotle and Rilke, Hans-Georg Gadamer elaborates on the concept of play, which then turns into what I have called his ball theory. The theory is simple: A ball is thrown to us without our taking the initiative. We receive it and this draws us into the game. The game has its own autonomy in that each player submits to the game in the sense of letting him/herself be carried away by the game. Gadamer concludes: 'We have seen that play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him.' (Gadamer 2003: 109; Grondin 2003: 40–1.)

Analogically to a game, Gadamer argues, a piece of art is thrown to us in the same way; as a challenge to take part in the 'game' of conversation about the interpretation and understanding of it. We experience a metamorphosis, because the play of conversation is self-governed and cannot be controlled by us as participants or subjects. By analogy, therefore, experiencing a piece of art is the same as what happens in a game or a play. While looking, we are absorbed by the experience of the truth in a painting or an icon, for instance.

What does a pilgrim experience on the Holy Mountain of Mount Athos? Following the lines of thought in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, we realise that seeing is given preference over all the other senses on the basis that 'sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions'. About hearing Aristotle says that he who hears thereby hears *more*, in other words also what cannot be seen, namely everything that can be thought of by means of language (Aristotle 1966, I: 1–2).

What the pilgrims see on Mount Athos is

- The landscape, monastic buildings
- Pilgrims and monks, the guest master in particular
- Icons, frescoes of saints in the church and relics of saints
- Monks living a life in prayer; angelic life

What the pilgrims hear is

- Prayers read during the services; *Kyrie eleison* in particular
- Discussions with monks about spiritual life

Apart from the universe of beliefs, conceptions and ideas concealed in the word, hearing also embraces the whole universe of the language. This is expressed discerningly in the Orthodox Creed:

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible (Divine Liturgy 1993: 29).

Pilgrims (*proskynités*) stand in front of the energies of God present in the icons, frescoes, prayers and the Holy Communion, as a friend taking to a friend, as St Symeon the New Theologian has expressed it. Not as a friend we can see, but in front of the (religious) word we can hear and the energies of God, the Holy Spirit, we can perceive. There is a presence and yet an otherness. To stand in front of is an encounter between two persons. It is not the monks the pilgrims try to understand, but the spiritual world the Athonites are talking about. *Logos* or word is our common inheritance, but we each understand words differently. (Gothóni 2010.)

Understanding happens as a revelatory linguistic event. The meaning of the word (*logos*) is revealed in the dialogue/conversation in that understanding comes as an elucidating surprise.

Proskýnima is an act of worship and worship is prayer. Pilgrimage as a concept in the Western sense does not articulate authentically the meaning of *proskýnima*, worship. To worship is to pray, and to pray, according to St Johannes Klimakos, is to engage oneself in a dialogue with God.

Where, then, is language and the revelatory linguistic event articulated? It is not articulated in the consciousness of a person—which is often wrongly implicitly thought to be the case—but in the discussion, in the exchange of ideas that takes place in a conversation, and in prayer, of course.

In the encounter with the word, *logos*, in a *dialogos—logos—dialogos—logos*—understanding, pilgrimage presupposes understanding the word ‘pilgrimage’; in other words, the universe of beliefs concealed in the word which is encountered in quite a specific context, namely the context of the culture studied.

Figure 4. The dialogue of understanding

logos	< – –	dialogos	– – >	logos
(word)		conversation		(word)

From concepts to words and back

Philosophy has been concerned with concepts since its very beginning. The attempt has been to give an account of the world not merely in words, but in the universality of the words, in scientific concepts. This advance or progress has reached its peak in the exact sciences, especially mathematics and in the natural sciences, in the search for the unity (i.e. 'spine') in hidden likenesses as previously discussed. In the human sciences, on the contrary, the aim is more often to try to understand analogical units and to unfold the universe of beliefs concealed in the words of the language and culture studied (Gothóni 2005: 109). The way icons speak is a case in point. Allow me to give yet another illustrative example.

In September 2005, I went to see an Athonite monk I had been meeting regularly for many years and who was like a spiritual father to me. When I arrived at the monastery, it turned out that he was lying on his death bed with a brain tumour. He was fed by a younger monk and could speak only whispering. I stayed with him for two days and when the young monk saw how distressing this was for me, he tried to comfort me by saying: 'Don't worry! He is in good hands.' I was quite frustrated by these words. How could my friend be in good hands, when he was looked after by a young monk with only a few years of experience in monastic life?

After our farewells I went to another monastery. In the evening service I could not stay in my pew, but moved around restlessly, distressed by the fact that I was about to lose one of my dearest friends. Inadvertently I was standing in front of the huge icon of the taking down of the body of Christ from the Cross (*Apokathélosi*), when the words of the young monk came to my mind: 'He is in good hands.' Indeed he is, I thought. He is in the hands of the Mother of God, as in the icon it is the Mother of God who takes down Christ from the cross. My spiritual father had been just as pale as Christ in the icon and even looked the same in the bed where he was lying. At that moment I realised that my spiritual father was indeed in good hands also for the reason that he was going to be laid at rest in the Garden of the Mother of God, which all the Athonites conceive Mount Athos to be. Physically too, therefore, he was going to be resting in the arms of the Mother of God. My distress disappeared like a toothache at the dentist's chair and I felt a complete satisfaction at having heard the word spoken to me in this revelatory way, so that the entire universe of beliefs concealed in the word was revealed to me. To my own surprise the pieces in the Athonite jigsaw puzzle fitted nicely into a coherent system of beliefs, the belief of the Athonites and all Orthodox believers in the world.



The taking down of the body of Christ from the Cross. Photo © René Gothóni.



A burial in the monastery of Dionysiou.

Photo © René Gothóni.

This experience of the revelatory aspect of words proved to me how icons speak through thoughts that strike us like revelations, invite us to think, to rediscover the movement of the words and to hear the word as part of a wider context of beliefs. To understand really is to hear more! To hear: 'He's in good hands', in the hands of the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) as the Athonites believe, is more convincing than any scientific argument. No proof is needed. The experience of the revelatory linguistic event is the proof, the proof that my friend had really felt he was in good hands as for more than forty years of preparation he had been praying for the Mercy of God and was now finally to be laid to rest in the Garden of the Mother of God, which he had known he was one day to be like all the other monks before him.

Summary

Why do I insist on calling the *proskýnima* to Mount Athos a pilgrimage? This question was asked by Michael Pye after I had read my paper. My answer is simple. I am not prepared to give monopoly to the Western scholarly and Roman Catholic interpretation of what pilgrimage is or should be all about, both as a category and a word. Pilgrimage, like many of the other concepts in the study of religions and indeed the concept of religion itself, is limited to a Western horizon of preconceptions, interpretation and understanding. This does not do justice to the analogical phenomena in other cultures with different languages. This I have realized when studying monasticism and pilgrimage on the Holy Mountain of Athos in Greece.

There is, however, yet another aspect to consider and this is that by discussing the concept and word pilgrimage in the light of my own field research and in relation to the research process of interpretation and understanding, I at the same time illustrate the method of hermeneutic reflection, in other words the way we may disclose and learn to discern the limited horizons of the preconceptions we are all born into. Moreover, when we encounter our preconceptions by these means, we are widening our horizons and in that process we discover more authentic words; in this case words for the human phenomena of pilgrimage to Mount Athos in Greece.

Analogically, the process of interpretation and understanding is the same in any culture. What we need to do is to ground our research in language, in the interpretation and understanding of words that are the basic elements of language. Apart from searching for the 'unity in hidden likenesses' and agreeing upon *univocal* concepts, which are also needed, of course, we need to scrutinize the *analogical* concepts and *unfold the universe of beliefs concealed in the words* that these concepts inevitably are abstractions of. By these means we reach, for the time being, a more authentic understanding of the word used to describe or categorize the phenomena concerned, the word that reaches the other and the word we can agree upon as being the most authentic word at this particular stage of research.

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