HOLY WOMBS
The Persistence of Familial Ties in the Monastic Lives of Buddhist and Orthodox Christian Women
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The Persistence of Family Ties in the Monastic Lives of
Buddhist and Orthodox Christian Women

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Front cover photographs: (clockwise) me and the Sisters of Agion Paton in March 2013; the bhikkunis' robes folded and hanging in the yurt at the Aranya Bodhi hermitage; Sister Ipomoni of Agion Paton before she passed (credited to newsday.com); me and the bhikkunis of the Aranya Bodhi hermitage on my last evening during my visit in summer of 2012; and my fieldwork materials from the summer of 2012, including personal notes and plane tickets.
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To my parents who always taught me to “ask a question, answer a question.”

To my brother who challenges me with every step and stride we take together, a true
kalyanamitta.

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inspired and jumpstarted this project.

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who breathed life into this project. Your kindness will never be forgotten.
Preface

"Why can't women be priests in our church?" Perhaps a rather elementary articulation of a reasonable concern and lacking the sophistication to ground an undergraduate thesis, this question nevertheless seems to have foreshadowed my collegiate pursuits in Religious Studies, and more specifically my attraction to female theology and women's expressions of religious traditions. Directed towards my pair of Sunday School teachers (both men in their upper-50s) during freshman year of high school, this skepticism is aimed towards a very candid limitation placed on women that is part-and-parcel of an extensive pattern of seemingly accepted and established roles of women in the Greek Orthodox Church.

Though telling, I hesitate to designate this Sunday school snippet as the "that-was-it" moment of my later scholarly pursuits. Fast forward eight years or so, and it is more than easy to point to a number of serendipitous episodes that one could consider formative and vital in the development of this thesis. Whereas this first episode testifies that my work in some sense seeks a remedy of sorts, my sojourns in monastic communities largely motivate this thesis and embody an experience to which I am greatly indebted. This summer served as a summer for firsts: my first meditation lesson; my first time chanting in Pali; my first time holding gold leaf in between my fingers in the iconography room of Timiou Σταυροβ monastery (Timiou Stavrou, "Holy Cross"); and perhaps less pertinent, my first Greek coffee.

I remember speeding down the I-5 in a minivan with five monks\textsuperscript{1} of Shasta Abbey in northern California, packed in with little extra room because of the monks' traditional Japanese robes, bowls and hats. For the monthly Alms Round in the nearby town of Mt. Shasta, the renunciants silently walk through the streets holding baskets to carry the offerings of food and

\textsuperscript{1} At Shasta Abbey, in the Soto Zen tradition, the title of "monk" is used for both male and female monastics. This choice to not gender titles is further discussed in "What's in a Word" in the Introduction.
clothing from the townspeople. Once noticing the peculiar line of robed monks, one woman scrambled and desperately offered the pair of cookies she had just brought from the coffee shop; meanwhile, a grosser had waited expectantly with prepared offerings of bagged produce. Following at the back of the line, I brought up the rear carrying a large straw basket where accepted donations were placed after initially being placed in the monks' smaller baskets. Like the monks, I became a receptacle for this communal giving and became a member of this moving and breathing body; the five monks and I literally embodied this tradition as a moving unit. Such moments where I merged with the community of my study conveys the intimate collaboration between researcher and subject. Similar to this basket collecting food offerings, as a writer, researcher and student, my thesis serves as a receptacle for the personal stories of these nuns and spiritual lives of these communities. To chronicle these narratives requires sensitivity and patience similar to my responsibilities at the back of the line during the Alms Round. However, the Alms Round basket served as a repository that both received and gifted; the basket accepts the offering of others, but also provides this opportunity for laity to exercise the principle of dana and giving, which in the Buddhist tradition is the first of the ten paramis (quality of perfected character), one of the seven treasures, and the first of three grounds for meritorious action.

Just a few weeks prior, I stood at the back of the new church of the Timiou Stavrou monastery just outside of Corinth, Greece. Still unpainted with traditional icons, the church felt strangely bare for a Greek Orthodox place of worship. After being encouraged by the nuns to take a break from working, I stood in the back pews to witness a baptism. Surrounded by the family of the child anxiously crowded around the trio of priest, godparent, and baby, I stood self-consciously, fretting over my intrusion as a suspicious bystander on this intimate gathering. To
my horror, I remember looking up to find an older uncle of the family panning a video camera to record this religious rite of passage, into which I now would be inscribed. Whether the family will notice my anonymous face on the video, perhaps with the impression that I am a prospective nun of Timiou Stavrou or a dedicated laywoman, ethnographic research necessitates this willingness to become part of others’ narratives rather than simply to witness and study theirs.

In pursuit of answers to the same questions of women and religion that sparked my curiosity years ago, I have been and continue to be captured by narratives of holy women, those honored as saints and those whose lives are lived closer to the ground. As part-and-parcel of this pursuit, the fieldwork component with women “living closer to the ground” challenges me to navigate as an observer but also an insider within these communities. Welcomed into the communities, I lived the monastics’ day-to-day schedules, worked side by side and ate with them. At once, I was a laywoman abiding by the monastic rules for eating, sleeping and communicating, engaging spiritually and also seeking academic aims. As if to serve as a palpable testament to this grappling of different identities, my handwritten academic notes are adorned with hurried jottings of personal questions and commentary, some in awe and others in frustration. Though yielding one pen, I certainly had a foot — or perhaps, a hand — in both worlds.

So, how do you deal with real people of real communities of which you were a temporary member? How do they color your academic conclusions? This paper therefore challenges me — in much the same was as the holy women who may be encouraged to neatly abandon familial ties — to distance myself from my original romantic image of a monastery for pure and abstract spiritual growth that transcends gender and stands independent of familial, monetary and political concerns. Weaving together the voices of the women I met in the summer of 2012 and
March of 2013 with the women of the Buddhist *The Therīgāthā* and Greek Orthodox hagiographies, I will attempt to balance — perhaps at times precariously — perspectives as an outside researcher with my own academic questions and also, an awareness of what is at stake in the personal lives of my “informants.”
Introduction

When I asked a group of Greek Orthodox nuns at the Τίμιον Σταυρού monastery (Timiou Stavrou, meaning “Holy Cross”) outside of Corinth, Greece about the sure satisfaction professed by their parents in response to their choice of the ascetic life, I was startled by the subsequent outbursts of laughter. To my surprise, many of the nuns’ parents disapproved of their daughter’s decisions; in fact, for one Αδελφή (Athelphi, meaning “Sister”), her parents so disapproved that they did not speak with their daughter for years. However, twelve years later, the relationship was rekindled. Looking back, this nun accounted for her parents’ dismissal, “Well, every parent wants grandchildren.”

This nun’s period of separation from her parents, followed by an eventual reunion, calls attention to two curious and ambiguous elements of monastic life, especially in concerns to women: first, the absolute renunciation of one’s familial ties and second, the abandonment of the prospects of motherhood or of one’s particular ties with children that renunciation seems to require. In both, there lie tensions but also continuities between what is lived out by contemporary monastics in lieu of what the ideals professed in texts about motherhood and asceticism. Even the traditional texts lack a consistency in whether the rejection or embrace of family ties, emotions; it is clear that there is a deep ambivalence towards motherhood, both biological and spiritual.

Though this opening anecdote originates from a Greek Orthodox context, this paper will examine asceticism and motherhood in two religious traditions, Theravada Buddhism and Greek Orthodox Christianity. For my fieldwork, I lived in four monastics communities: in the summer of 2012, the Timiou Stavrou monastery for women in Corinth Greece; the Soto Zen Buddhist Shasta Abbey for men and women in Mt. Shasta, CA; and the Aranya Bodhi Theravada Buddhist
hermitage for women in Jenner, CA. Then, in March 2013, I visited the Áyon Pántov monastery (Agion Panton, “All Saints”) for women in Calverton, NY. Meaning “Awakening Forest,” Aranya Bodhi is the first notable Theravada monastery for women in the Western United States and this rare status, along with the bhikkhunis’ (Pali word for nuns) current engagement with international efforts to re-legitimize the line of female nuns, made this community a gem for my study. Unlike the older Timiou Stavrou with an established community structure, Aranya Bodhi shared characteristics with Agion Panton as newly burgeoning communities with monastics who tooted ideals that could be deemed more progressive. Whereas the Sisters at Timiou Stavrou generally accept the domestication of women’s spirituality and women as “priests of the household,” the other two communities see potential for leadership beyond the private sphere, especially at Aranya Bodhi Hermitage where the bhikkhunis are working to reestablish full ordination rights for bhikkhunis worldwide.

Beginning on page 12, this Introduction will establish the ‘monastic dialect’ of these communities and the titles, greetings and vocabulary that one appropriates as a member of these communities. Chapter 1: “Navigating Fieldwork,” provides a very abridged account of life within the monastery gates to give a sketch of day-to-day life for nuns and how community infrastructure that account for monasteries’ different ascetic flavors. Life within these communities reveals the difference between the romanticized ascetic life with complete tranquility and isolation from political and social ties, which foregrounds what follows in the remaining Chapters concerning the realities of persisting familial ties in monastic life. Following, Chapter 2: “Spiritual Posse” explores each tradition’s respective valuing of spirituality in communion with others and what it means to be “saved” in communal life. What does it mean to be a spiritual mother or a spiritual sister? Inspired by conversations at Timiou Stavrou and later
at Agion Paton, this section also reveal the exclusion, which often accompanies this valuing of the selflessness of communal living, of women who do not choose motherhood or monasticism.

Bridging together the narratives of the past and present, Chapter 3: Troupes of Sisters couples the efforts of the bhikkunis of Mahapajapati and of Aranya Bodhi, and separately the “sisters” of Agion Paton with the posses of St. Xene and St. Macrina to reveal the ways in which women similarly wield strategies of power within traditional frameworks to navigate political strife and personal loss. In what ways are the women of the traditional texts such as The Therigāthā2 and The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers3 still relevant to these contemporary women? Once adapted, what the resulting modern transformations? Specifically, the recognition of and practice of laments and death rituals in the Greek Orthodox tradition as a means to bridge the living and the dead within monastic sisterhoods also makes clear how particular familial relationships persist in ascetic pursuits. Adopting this train of thought, Chapter 4: From Blood to Adopted examines the new family that is adopted once one enters a monastic community, and specifically the assimilation of rather than the rejection or abandonment of previous family blood ties. How do “rites of passage” such as naming practices for novices, cultivation of personal altars and the development of individual prayer practice facilitate a transition from a family of blood relation and consanguinity to an adopted sisterhood? What residues of biological family ties linger?

Drawing from Augustine’s letter to Laetus, the Philokalia and St. Helia’s vita, along with the Buddha’s praise Sariputta and Moggallana in “Ten Great Disciples of the Buddha” and the Karaniya Metta Sutta, Chapter 5: Ambivalence Towards the Womb and Ties to the Mother integrates the traditions’ similar ambivalence towards the womb and maternal body, and their

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2 Often translated as Verses of the Elder Nuns, it is a collection of short poems written by the first order of bhikkhunis.

3 A collection of texts about Greek Orthodox female monastics and ascetics, organized by month.
attempts to resolve such anxieties in “virginal motherhood” and metaphorical mother-love. Incorporating the voices of contemporary women who grapple with their own prospects of motherhood, rearing of biological children and dependence on biological mothers, this section will explore a paradox: whereas “real” mothers are limited in terms of spiritual fruits, the virtues of motherhood are “made perfect” in pure, ascetic life. In what ways do women inherit their tradition’s doctrines and perspectives on the maternal body, and in others, creatively adapt these ideals in their own spiritual lives?

Specifically, the latter part of this Chapter will examine three ways — the memory of one’s mother, the process of mothering one’s own mother and the sacrifice of a mother, whether the dedication of her child or in her own pursuit of asceticism — that all suggest that the transition from lay life to monastic life is one of continuity rather than complete closure on connections to motherhood.

Invoking Gerontisa Methodia’s metaphor of a lighthouse for the purpose of monastic life, originally described by the Mt. Athos monk Elder Paisios, Chapter 6: From Lighthouse to Womb — Receptivity and Reciprocity proposes the womb, which is an enduring symbol of motherhood, as an alternative symbol for monastic life. Rather than reproducing the male values of “motherhood,” in which the womb is a reminder of mortality and thus, disgust, female monastic communities adopt the womb’s ability to receive, preserve and give back in their relationship with the lay community. Thus, although women may still find it impossible to “transcend” their female nature in an ascetic environment, there are ways in which these women creatively respond to the unresolved tensions concerning biological families and motherhood.

Since monastic life serves as a site for the balancing act between aspirational ideals and human lives with histories and attachments, the lives of these contemporary nuns embody the
creative adaptations and habits of female sanctity that possess the potential to inform the experience of the “average women of ascetic leanings” (Brown, 1988, 263). “As is well known, textual statements regarding religious practices, especially statements formally made by committed participants, are not necessarily description of either social praxis or belief. Instead, they are best taken as signposts for how groups went about formulating their notions of identity, proper behavior, and the general scope of good and bad ways of being in the world” (Cole, 2006, 303). In light of the hagiographies and scriptures that serve as these “signposts,” the spiritual posses of Timios Stravros, Aranya Bodhi and Agion Panton reproduce male values of “motherhood,” but also serve as pockets of transgressive potential in their particular lived religiosity.

I. WHAT’S IN A WORD

Within monastic communities, language is imbued with a great degree of purpose. Verbal language, both written and spoken, along with body language are instilled with particular purpose and ideally, practiced more mindfully. Though her reflections refer to Soto Zen nuns in Japan and consequences of translation from Japanese to English, Paula Arai’s conclusions concerning the consequences of language are sound ones: “Difference in vocabulary not only indicates differences in attitudes and self-understanding of monastics in Japan, but it also has ramifications that extend into the translations of terms from Japanese to English” (Arai, 1999, 13). This “difference [in] self-understanding” is not reserved for the individual, but rather applies to the web of relationships one adopts upon entering into monastic life.

Greek

Though this thesis will only briefly touch on my fieldwork at Shasta Abbey, for the purposes of generating a valuable comparison between traditions, the greater part of this thesis
will consider themes of womanhood and motherhood within the Theravada Buddhist and Greek Orthodox traditions (Τιμίου Σταυροῦ, Timiou Stravrou of Holy Cross Monastery and Αγίου Πάντων, Agion Panton or All Saints Monastery). However, in lieu of ‘monastic dialect’, it is interesting to note the Order of the Buddhist Contemplatives’ use of the term “monk” for women as well as men, since they “aspire to practice complete spiritual and functional equality within [their] Order.” Founder and first abbot of Shasta Abbey, Reverend Master Jiyu Kennett established such patterns of language and proved to be a trailblazer even beyond her passing in 1996. Inscribed one of the four sides of the stupa, a dome-shaped structure serving as a Buddhist shrine after someone’s passing, the title of “abbot” rather than “abbess” memorializes her lifelong promotion of “moving beyond gender.” Though refreshing, such efforts to equalize through language seem particularly American and prove to be consistent with the Abbey’s continuing experimentation with more traditional Asian customs to a Western audience (see Chapter 1: Navigating Fieldwork).

Though the Greek Orthodox tradition does claim to encourage such equality of the sexes, titles for monks and nuns are fixed within the context of familial relations. Through language, spiritual family is built: Orthodox monks are referred to as “Father” or “Brother,” while nuns are addressed as “Mother” or “Sister.” This language, though it may attest to the kind of intimacy bred in monastic communities, also lends itself more easily to fall back on traditional roles of men and women in family life. Thus, even the “most aestheticized of Christian institutions, monasticism, often patterned its language and its structure on the family” (Krawiec, 2003, 285). As discussion in Chapter 2: Spiritual Posse will demonstrate, monastic life does not thoroughly transcend gender and this linguistic investment in family structure limits women’s possibilities for leadership roles in the Church.
Within the community, it is interesting to note the Sisters’ use of the formal tense when speaking to or about Gerontisa to denote a degree of respect in their requests and statements. Even further, body language in the presence of Γερόντισσα (Gerontisa, literally translates to “eldress” but used for the abbess) strongly brands her as a bearer of authority and expresses a special reverence that in fact, mirrors the physical response to a bishop or priest. Whereas a Sister at Timiou Stravrou and Agion Panton quickly slipped her hand away if a lay member tried to kiss it, Gerontisa is the exception and kissing her hand — much like a priest’s, not only connotes respect of her spiritual rank but also elicits a blessing. Even though when approaching a Sister at either Timiou Stravrou or Agion Panton, one says, Εὐλογείτε (Evlogeite, meaning “Bless”), this expression to Gerontisa corresponds to a blessing for spiritual guidance and wellness, along with connoting respect. Each Greek Orthodox layperson has a spiritual father, who by default is usually her parish priest; for he nuns, their spiritual family is made complete with a spiritual father who serves as a spiritual mentor, along with a Gerontisa as the spiritual mother.

Buddhist

In the Theravada tradition, its inherited “Buddhist Canon” is in Pali and therefore, transformations of certain words marked my move from Shasta Abbey (where Sanskrit is used) to the hermitage: dharma became dhamma (doctrine or teaching); nirvana becomes nibbana (liberation); and karma became khamma (intentional acts that result in states of being and birth). Rather than the buddhanature of the Mahayana tradition, Theravada Buddhism describes the goal of one’s practice or nibbana as “the Unconditioned” that is not subject to birth, aging or death. The Pali Canon, or tipitaka, which literally means “three baskets,” includes the Vinaya
Pitaka (the disciplinary rules); Sutta Pitaka (discourses); and Abhidhamma Pitaka (abstract philosophical treatises).

Though eligible to be called Ajahn (Thai for teacher or mentor), Ayya Thattaaloka who is the abbess of Aranya Bodhi prefers Ayya (and to those who know her, “Ayya T”), which is used for fully ordained bhikkunis. A nun’s ‘monastic age’ is measured in vassas or “rains,” which is the annual three-month retreat during the rainy season; since her 10th vassa has passed, Ayya is therefore eligible for the title of Ajahn. However, the term Ayya is significant in light of the current controversies within the Theravada tradition regarding bhikkunis and whether or not their ordination is considered legitimate. In the next chapter, in the subsection “Aranya Bodhi, I provide a more thorough chronicling of these contentions. However, it is worth noting for now that as a contemporary leader in this movement for women’s spiritual rights, Ayya T’s preference for Ayya rather than adopting Ajahn is a significant statement.

Along with these titles and greetings, there is a vocabulary that one must learn. Following dhamma talks (similar to sermons or lectures), “sadhu” (“it is well”) is chanted three times as an expression of appreciation or agreement. Conventionally used to denote the communities of nuns and monks, sangha describes both the lay and ordained followers of the Buddha who have attained the first level of nibbana. Lay members of the sangha offer dana, which is defined as “giving, liberality; offering, alms” and “giving of any of the four requisites [food, clothing, shelter and medicines] to the monastic order.” However, this giving describes the system of giving by laity that sustains the hermitage since the bhikkunis adhere closely to the ancient Vinaya and therefore, do not ask for anything. Even though the monks at Shasta Abbey similarly operate on dana offerings by laity, the nuns at the hermitage do not touch money, drive cars or even take any of the four requisites unless offered to them.
Bearer for Others

In the Greek Orthodox tradition, since there is no formal ceremony for a novice, she may choose to leave during the period of the novitiate, as one nun did at Agion Panton. After completing the novitiate stage, the length of which is under the advisement of the Gerontisa, a nun then becomes a ρασοφόρος (or rasophore) and then, again when deemed by the Gerontisa, a σταυροφόρος (or stavrophore). Even with the ascetic’s life emphasis on simplicity, there is a sense of heaviness in deepening one’s commitment to the ascetic life, which is clear in the Greek etymology. Ρασοφόρος in fact means “robe-bearer” and inferring even greater consequence, σταυροφόρος means cross-bearer; rather than divesting of responsibility and a lightening of sorts that may be assumed in a retreat from the world, the language for monastic garb connotes a weightiness.

For the draped, rust-colored orange robes of a bhikkhuni (See cover photo), Ayya Sodinna echoes this sense of weightiness, however, one that imbues a sense of belonging: “Once you become a nun — a monastic — you get that feeling of belonging to the sāsana⁴. The fact that you are bhikkhuni and the fact that you are wearing this, it means you honor it and respect it and your whole life changes.” This sense of “bearing” that both nuns describe extends beyond the individual to belonging to a communal body such as the sāsana and one’s sisters, as Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi described. When speaking with me about “sisterhood” and how to unpack this term that often lack specificity, at first Gerontisa described the day-to-day forgiveness her Sisters offer with her shortcomings whether a “bad mood” or “slight.”

In the context of language and its complexities, this dynamism between individual and communal takes center stage in the meaning of the word for monastic — μοναχός (monachos)

⁴ Sāsana: literally means “message”; the dispensation, doctrine and legacy of the Buddha; the Buddhist religion.
for a monk and μοναχή (monachai) for a nun. At the root of the word is “mono,” which means “one” in Greek; therefore, this wording used to describe entering monastic life seems to create some sort of paradox — the sense of being “newly alone” upon entering a community. However, this oneness also describes an interior solitude of each monastic also used to describe the desert monastics who were “undivided” in mind:

The monachos has interior unity or purity of heart, bringing the whole self to focus on God and to desire God as the sole treasure. Unless we can bring our scattered thoughts and feelings into focus, we cannot see or understand ourselves, our neighbor, or the created universe, nor can we proceed from this indirect knowledge to direct knowledge of God face-to-face. (Allen, 1997, 81)

Thus, the monachai seeks to possess a sense of singularity in her mind and an interior focus on God that is unified rather than scattered in its devotion. This sense of being “face-to-face” with the divine provides the reasoning for the practice of devotees at Shasta Abbey when, no matter how close or far from the Buddha statue at the altar, she turns and gestures gassho. When asked, Rev. Jisho explained that this pause in front of the altar symbolized a “pronounced willingness to look the divine in the face.”

Similar to the gassho at Shasta Abbey, the anjali mudra is made whenever encountering another individual. To make the gesture, you bring your right and left palms together, being careful to match up the fingertips. Along with showing a degree of respect to the other individual, applying slight pressure at the joining of your hands creates a physical center of attention. Running through these strands of monastic traditions, there is a shared effort to foster a demeanor distinct in its awareness and a deeper engagement with one’s surroundings.

Though the hermitage is young for a monastic community and thus, still “fine-tuning” proper behavior and protocol in the community, Ayya Sobhana describes a flow that results from

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5 Similar to the anjali mudra in the next paragraph, this is a gesture where both palms are pressed together to express gratitude or humility.
what may be erroneously deemed as petty customs: “That mindfulness extends so that you have this mindful awareness of everybody around you and everyone in the community is able to function in this very smooth way.” In this sense, invoking again the dynamic suggested in the Greek word *monachos*, even personal mindfulness possesses a purpose for the larger community.

Therefore, both traditions share this emphasis on the *one* and an individual rigor is constantly balanced with the importance of bonds with sisters (or brothers) in one’s spiritual family. In Buddhism, there is the *Sangha* and in Greek Orthodoxy, *koinοvία*, both of which will be discussed further in Chapter II, “Spiritual Posse.” Even though the “blessed are the solitary (*monachos*) and elect, for you shall find the kingdom” (*logion* 49), as Gerontisa Foteini explained, it is “abundantly clear that [monastics] are saved in a community.”
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“Navigating Fieldwork”

Originally, I hoped to study iconography in a few monasteries in my yiayia’s (grandmother’s) hometown in Greece, but the idea that eventuated into fieldwork in monastic communities materialized about a year prior. In the summer of 2011, as a newly declared Religious Studies major, I remember considering the monasteries in my grandmother and mother’s hometown of Loutraki, just outside Corinth, Greece, as a rich setting for Religious Studies research. Perhaps the original seed for this project was sown even earlier during summer visits to Loutraki, which were coupled with regular visits to the monastic communities where my mother’s uncle who is a noted theologian often delivers sermons following Divine Liturgy. And even further, perhaps my drive is equally as motivated by my Greek relatives’ placing of women’s religious capacities exclusively in the home as “priests of the household” or by excluding them altogether. Just this summer, my beloved uncle provided a defense of the athonite practices of Mt. Athos: “Dina, if women — even if just one woman — set foot on Mt. Athos, the monks would be confused. Sexually, that is. They would be distracted by her and tempted.” Such wariness of women is not wildly unfamiliar to the Buddhist tradition, in light of the Buddha’s reasoning against a female sangha since female practitioners could disturb or distract Ananda. Thus, as I described in the preface, it is difficult to pinpoint the “a-ha” moment of this project; whether I’ve been engaged with these spiritual issues for one, two or five years — the jury is still in session. Nevertheless, the opportunity to more actively engage the particular expressions of women’s religiosity and to pursue questions of their influence in the Church presented itself this summer and spring, specifically in communities of living and breathing female monastics.
I. WHEN RESEARCH GROWS PERSONAL

New to this form of fieldwork, I practiced a method of research that, along with more formal and individual conversations with monastics, incorporated both observation of and participation in the respective communities’ lifestyle. A few nuns instructed me in formal meditation since I was new to the practice, a Zen Master provided personal spiritual counseling or what is called sanzen (the Japanese word for this formal counseling) and lay people joined with me for a five-day silent retreat at the Abbey.

Though there are obvious limitations, I tried to live the day-to-day lives of these women; I abided by their schedules for working, eating and sleeping. Even though a great deal of my time was spent in conversations with monastics and more traditional teaching, much of my research was also conducted in less expected ways: while on my hands and knees, scrubbing the carpets of monastery’s churches; carrying 4x4’s up the mountain to build a wooden meditation platform at the hermitage; or standing at chanting stand beside four Sisters repeating Κόριε έλεησον (“Lord have mercy”) for the prescribed forty times.

So, I was immersed and such that the lived experience that I sought to understand became — at least formally monastic and temporarily — my own. Thus, as may be expected, lines drawn between academic research and my own emotional experience grew fuzzy. I developed close relationships with other lay people, such as ‘Auntie G,’ the middle-aged Buddhist practitioner from L.A. who having “gone forth” (which describes the act of giving up personal possessions or being “homeless” in pursuit of the religious life) has given up all her personal possessions and property to dedicate two years of her life to serving Buddhist monasteries and Hindu ashrams (Sanskrit for spiritual hermitage). Auntie was the first and last person from Aranya Bodhi, therefore becoming the bookends of my experience. We parted with a tear-filled goodbye at the airport and in my dorm room now is her large flannel and plaid button up that had become my
second skin during my two-week stay since I had not expected the thirty-degree mornings in the mountains. Since even the daily rituals or chores in monasteries serve as opportunities to cultivate a frame of mind or as the *Typikon* explain, “work is the perfect form of spirituality,” ‘going through motions’ is never simply ‘going through the motions.’ For Buddhists and Orthodox alike, the aim is to develop a stilled mind, which is fostered through contemplation — meditation and ἰσὐχασμός (hesychasm, meaning “quietism”) respectively. Often, over the course of my two week stay, Auntie G and I would prepare the midday *dana* for the community and since the food prepared would serve as the bhikkhunis’ sustenance for the day, our state of mind had to be given attention. To do so, in a call-and-response, we would chant hymns from the *ashrams* she often visited.

When living with these nuns, what were typically deemed “primary materials” in my academic studies underwent considerable transformation from textbooks and scholarly arguments to the real-life narratives of others but then also to my own mental perceptions and physical sensations. In *Women Living Zen*, Paula Arai describes the wear-and-tear on one’s body in a Soto Zen monastery: “The physical demands of rising at predawn, sitting in *zazen* posture, eating with ritual exactness and grace, and cleaning with meticulous determination” (Arai, 1999, 4). Of course, since the nuns of these communities also rose before dawn, my body-clock had to readjust to the regular services at 3-hour intervals at Agion Panton: 3 a.m., 6 a.m., 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Do not be fooled as even youth and regular exercise do not ensure a graceful transition into this schedule; the wave of heat and subsequent nausea surprised me on my second morning while I chanted with the nuns during the usual 3:30 a.m. service. I had to sit down for the remaining ten minutes of verses as the nuns chanted on. Later, I returned to my
room to sleep off what seemed to be a reaction to lack of sleep (and perhaps, too much Greek coffee).

However, what Arai describes as "demands" extends beyond this Spartan sleep regimen and pertains to what the laywomen I would meet later at the hermitage described as a "high spiritual energy." Rather than the typical brand of high anxiety or stress, this "high energy" denotes the intense mental energy applied to menial tasks — cleaning vegetables, sweeping stairs and washing dishes. While working, the continued repetition of the Jesus prayer and chanting of the scriptures trains the mind, and one that encourages a self-awareness and perceptual evaluation. So, rather than mind-numbing, these acts are mind-clarifying or mind-purifying. Therefore, to enter the flow of monastic life is not a retreat from mental and physical exercise but rather a shift towards increased engagement, and quite clearly to exhaustion for a 21-year old lay woman.

As a final note, the participant characteristic of my fieldwork may best be expressed in the question that I have been asked even by my own mother, now on three separate occasions since the start of my research: "So Dina, do you believe you will become a nun one day?"

II. TIMIOS STRAVROS MONASTERY

I began my research in the summer of 2012 at Timios Stravros monastery, which is situated about a half hour outside of Corinth. Though I do speak the Greek language, I am certainly not fluent and therefore, my visit presented the challenge of navigating language barriers. However, communication proved less of a challenge than I expected (an awkward combination of Greeklish, hand gestures and oftentimes, guessing) and one of the Sisters who is very skilled in English (with an English-Greek dictionary in hand) guided me in my stay and helped to translate other more formal conversations with Sisters. Each day began around five
a.m. to the alarm of my watch, but also the clatter of Αδελφές who were already awake and tending to the cows in the courtyard below. After morning service, breakfast would follow before I joined the sisters in work around the monastery. Afterwards, lunch followed and then, I would take an afternoon nap while the Sisters continued to work during the afternoon (Sister Erini explained that if the Sisters did have free time, they most often spent it reading or praying). Then, I again joined the Sisters for a few more hours of work before dinner, after which the entire community joined together for a final evening compline around 6:30 p.m.

Since the language barriers could be assuaged only to an extent, much of my fieldwork revolved around the time I spent in daily services in the Timios Stravros chapel (See Image 1 and 2). Each day began and ended with church, with this “sacred time” communicated by the large wooden σημαντρον (semantron, or wooden block) that is struck by a novice to summon all the Sisters to church. This framing of each day in the chapel translates into a time that Mircea Eliade would deem “sacred time” (Eliade, 1957, 69), which manifests in the iconography. During one of my typical excursions with Sister Erini around the monastery property, which had included a visit to the dairy factory where cheese and milk are made and the iconography room, Sister Erini gave me a guided tour of the iconography in the small chapel. Beginning with the iconostasis (the wooden screen of icons separating the nave from the sanctuary) at the front, she continued to describe with great passion the narratives of depicted saints, to trace the progression of Jesus’ thirty-three years and also to distinguish between the traditional and unique features of the chapel’s iconography. Though quite cramped, especially when the Sisters attend service, the entire chapel is blanketed in a topaz blue, with figures in gold, red and green. Surrounding you, white space is scarce and this degree of detail and the richness of the crowded narrative scenes do not allow you to feel alone. Depictions on the wall and ceilings charge the sacred space with a
sense of being in community; though I stood alone in the section for laypeople, the iconography provided an avenue to feel in communion with others.

Above the nave in the dome of the chapel, Sister Erini directed my attention to a depiction in a strip surrounding the Παντοκράτωρ (Pantocrator, meaning “Ruler of All”) that depicts a procession of angels preparing Holy Communion (Image 3). Each angel assumes a role in the liturgy: a huddle of angels holds the body of Christ; another angel holds the πρόσφορον (prophorion, the small pieces of leavened bread believed to transform into the body of Christ⁶); one holds up the cup of consecrated wine; and another prepares the offerings. Looking upwards still, Erini said, “[The image of the angels] is just like a liturgy because when we do liturgy, we believe that another liturgy is taking place in the sky at the same time.” This sense of vertical synchronization with the heavenly host echoes Eliade’s “indeinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable” sacred time, in which the religious participation in a festival, in this case the Eucharist, implies “emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time reactualized by the festival itself” (Eliade, 1959, 69). This Eucharist held above in the heavens and the nuns’ participation in the sacrament below equally partake in “a time that was created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their deeds or work” (Eliade, 1959, 69).

Typically in Orthodox monasteries, nuns maintain special services for the main hours of the day at intervals of three hours. Again, embodying “the integration of the mythical time” of Eliade’s “sacred time,” each hour commemorates a special event: the first hour (6:00 a.m.) marks thanksgiving for the new morning and prayer for a sinless day; the third hour (9:00 a.m.) represents the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; the Sixth hour (12:00 noon) signifies the nailing of Christ to the Cross; and the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) represents the death of Christ. These

⁶ πρόσφορον or prophorion describes the holy bread distributed to those participating in the sacrament, while αντίδωρον or antidoron meaning “instead of the gift,” is blessed but not consecrated bread that is given to each of the faithful after the celebration of the Eucharist.
daily hours attempt synchronization with "sacred time." Even though the Sisters do not adhere to these intervals, there is a pattern to the rituals that regularize and create a flow to their morning and evening services. During the first service I attended at the monastery, the regular 7:00 evening service, the Sisters suddenly stopped when certain scriptures were recited; this suspension of the black billowing robes of nuns moving around the chapel would continue to capture my attention during each service. Later I would learn that the Sisters paused when they recited the Lord’s prayer and Creed out of respect for the spoken word, or what Orthodoxy terms as Logos. Sister Erini explained that these two prayers possessed particular respect since they were "God-given." Such patterning of daily ritual that are particular to Timiou Stavrou are referred to as the monastery’s typikon or the bylaws of the community; Typikon, on the other hand, refer to the overarching prescriptions for Greek Orthodox monastic life. Therefore, each monastery possesses their own style of asceticism and such particularities appeared more striking after my visit to Agion Panton in Calverton, NY, where cultural differences surfaced.

Another feature of Timiou Stravrou’s typikon is its independence, which from the first moments of my visit, were very obvious. When my mother’s Greek uncle and brother-in-law sat with me with Gerontisa, the nuns immediately delivered chocolate bread they had baked, milk fresh from the monastery’s cows and of course, Greek cafethaki. Later on, daily actions were consistently informed by the nuns autonomy: when I would shower, the soap board had been made by the Sisters; in Church, the candles I lit had been made by the Sisters; and, at the table, most of the things I were eating had been produced by the nuns or produced by animals on the property and collected and cultivated by the Sisters.

Within this framework of daily life that testified to the nuns’ autonomy, there were disturbances of sorts that intimated a persistent dependency on male authorities: from the most
blatant — the need for a male authority to engage in particular rituals, to the more acute — the unquestioned acceptance of the Desert Fathers. Within the community, the *economia* ("economy" which means 'law (nomos) of the house (ecos)') refers to the rotation of jobs amongst the Sisters. While some responsibilities such as iconography and the production of cheese and milk products in the *tirocomio* required specialized skills, other responsibilities rotated amongst the sisters, which included the job of securing a parish priest for each weekend's liturgies. Though seemingly minor, this task was of the utmost importance because if unfulfilled, the nuns could not hold liturgy or receive Communion. Thus, their rhythm of sacred time and space — patterned by weekday and weekend services hinged on the presence of a parish priest.

As I noted in the resulting paper from my summer research, "Reverence and Resilience," there is a strong sense during the Divine Liturgy services on Saturday and Sunday mornings that Gerontisa is the nucleus of authority. As laypeople enter, after kissing the icons at the end of the nave and before the altar, they immediately approach Gerontisa who sits in a wooden chair that is stylized for her. With the priest behind the *iconostasis* in the altar, Gerontisa stands at the front of the nave with the laypeople; it is clear that she is fulfilling both the vertical connection — in "the life we are called to live in communion with God" (Zingaro, 2012, 23), and the horizontal connections with others — to fulfill the "corporate character of the Eucharist" in Θεία λειτουργία ("Divine Liturgy"), which actually means "people's work" (Krantz, 2011, 134). Described by Sister Erini in the heavenly communion depicted in the iconography of the chapel, the interdependence of heaven and earth in sacred time that is reflected in the architecture of the Church is described by Michael Quenot's *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*: "We should not forget that the House of God reflects the cosmic order: the ground level represents our world, the earth; the vaulting the celestial world, Heaven; and the sanctuary unites them both: Heaven and
Though "Reverence and Resilience" noted this horizontal and vertical connection created by Gerontisa, it does not note how Gerontisa herself transforms into a "living icon." Bridging the earthly and heavenly realms, specifically in Holy Communion, she creates the same opportunities for partaking in Eliade’s sacred time.

Even further, an encounter with Gerontisa imitates the personal encounter with the Holy Spirit experienced when with an icon, which St. Gregory the Great describes in his Letter to the Bishop of Marseille. He wrote that "icons are for the unlettered what the Sacred Scriptures are for the instructed" (Quenot, 2002, 155). Just as the icon "sanctifies the place where it is located and creates for the faithful a tangible sense of the Divine Presence," Gerontisa too transforms into a portal for parishioners to participate in the sacrament’s "sacred time." Even with this dynamic, in which the priest serves as an instrument rather than a spiritual motivator, the phrases "...the Desert Fathers said..." or "...we trust it because the Desert Fathers wrote..." began to haunt my day-to-day exchanges with nuns and especially my interview notes. This complexity in regards to gender and spiritual power pervaded each of my experiences in the three communities, though the Sisters of Agia Panton and bhikkhunis of Aranya Bodhi interpret these inequalities differently.

Though much of my research emerged from time in sacred spaces, one dinner I was invited to eat with the community in the refectory. In the dining quarters, four or so long tables lined the room and sat tangent to a table at the head of the room where Gerontisa sat. To the side of this centered table stood a podium where one of the Sisters read from scriptures throughout the mealtime. Thus, in silence, the meal proceeded with its own measured flow, to which I was foreign and quickly acclimated to: standing behind your seat during the blessing; waiting for Gerontisa to sit before taking your seat; waiting for her to eat before starting to eat; and again,
waiting for the her to take a drink (which was signaled by the ringing of a bell) before drinking anything. Once Gerontisa rose, the meal formally ended and those who were finished exited in order of seniority; the few Sisters who had to finish were welcome to finish eating. This sort of ritualization of mealtime characterizes each community; in the two Greek monasteries, one Sister read aloud and guided a communal reading. At the hermitage however, the meal offers and eating ceremony were much more formalized (discussed in this Chapter’s subsection “Aranya Bodhi”).

III. SHASTA ABBEY

Returning to the United States, I then traveled to two Buddhist communities in California; however, since one was of the Mahayana tradition (Shasta Abbey of the Soto Zen school) and the other Theravada (Aranya Bodhi of the Thai Forest Tradition), they bore very different flavors of monastic life. Immediate ostensible differences in the communities appear upon arrival since both men and women serve together at the Soto Zen Shasta Abbey, while the hermitage is strictly a community of female monastics. Most of this paper’s comparative perspective emerges from a conversation between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Theravada Buddhist tradition since their shared traditionalist style may provide a better avenue for comparison. However, here and there, excerpts of my experience with the Soto Zen tradition will lend themselves to a conversation about worldly and spiritual motherhood, specifically the narratives of Rev. Jisho Perry (male), Rev. Serena Seldner (female) and Rev. Amanda Robertson (female). Thus, a brief synopsis of life at the Abbey as a researcher may prove helpful.

Established in 1970 as a training place for Buddhist monks and a place of practice for laypeople, the Abbey belongs to the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, which was founded by Reverend Master (RM) Jiyu-Kennett. Born in England, RM Jiyu followed her Master, the Very
Reverend Keido Chisan Koho Zenji, to the Sojiji Zen temple in Japan, which is one of the two head temples of Soto Zen Buddhism in the country. There, she encountered a great deal of hostility amongst Koho Zenji’s male disciples simply as a virtue of being a woman and even worse, a *Western* woman.

Following the suggestion of her religious Master, RM founded Shasta Abbey as a burgeoning center for the Soto Zen practice in the West. Before her death in 1996, she served as the Abbess (or “Abbot,” as she insisted would be inscribed on the monument on the monastery property) for twenty-six years, ordaining and teaching monks and lay people. Along with Shasta Abbey, she also founded Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in England in 1972 and was Head of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives until her death.

Bringing the tradition to the West, RM Jiyu experimented with elements of the Order with the hopes of better acclimating the tradition to the lay community; in fact, for a period of time, monks experimented and wore the priest collars from the Catholic tradition to which many of the Order’s lay people — who often came from backgrounds in these eastern European Christian traditions — were more accustomed. However, this practice did not last long. Standing in the Buddha hall for a service following meditation, my first encounter with the remnants of the Abbey’s experimentation was quite an earful: the drone of an organ and hymnal verses in English. Coupled with the more Japanese traditional ceremonial acoustics of bells, clappers and gongs, which provide the pace for recitations and prostrations during the services, the organ and English hymns seemed reminiscent of a Christian tradition and felt incongruous with the golden and slightly smiling Buddha statue. According to the monks, some lay people react quite viscerally to these particular elements since it recalls oh-too strongly a tradition they hoped to leave behind in pursuit of the Buddhist lay life. Another experiment, allowing families to live
together as monastics in pursuit of the ascetic life, is of interest to this paper, especially since RM later disallowed the practice. Recognizing the endurance of familial ties or what are often deemed “horizontal ties” interfered with religious devotion.

As a visiting layperson and living in the monastery guesthouse, each day comprised of a medley of morning, afternoon and evening meditations, community breakfasts, work hours throughout the day, dharma talks by Senior teachers and silent hours for reflection, reading and walking around the property. Rising just after dawn for morning meditation at 6:30 a.m. in the Buddha Hall, which was ended by a monk banging the Dharma gong (which I thought marked the apocalypse when hearing it for the first time), morning service was held before everyone proceeded to the day’s chores just before breakfast. Following breakfast, working meditation continued before lunch and then sometimes before lunch at noon, a dharma talk was given. Following the noon meal, the entire community partook in a quiet resting period before evening meditation around 3 p.m. and the formal medicine meal at 5 p.m. Then after the day’s final formal meditation, silent time is given to engage in individual spiritual practices such as walking meditation and reading.

For me, working meditation usually consisted of working with a few monks in the kitchen. To my surprise (now wondering if Rev. Kodo Kay knew this when she welcomed me to work there), the kitchen served as a rich source of information about community life and the role of gender in the Abbey. After the meal times, in a kitchen exhibiting obsessive-compulsive disorder where each item has its own home, the fifteen monks volunteering to help would move around the kitchen in a fluid dance — no one bumping into anyone else and comments or questions reduced to hushed exchanges. Later, the Abbey’s abbess Rev. Meian would explain
that this organization allows for this precision, which only strengthens the spiritual focus of the community:

There are all of these little ways of being in a space like the kitchen where there are ways to practice mindfulness and kindness and considerations in the daily life — in these mundane ways. [They are] all part of teaching the dharma and Buddhism really because you are trying to practice mindfulness, kindness, consideration because of course you do not want somebody to grab the blade the wrong way. In these small spaces, working together, you are grateful for things. In all these little ways — rather than looking for ways — instead, they come up naturally.

Though described with the specific terminology at the Abbey of “working meditation,” this concentrated demeanor during menial or repetitive tasks is practiced at each community whether scrubbing candleholder with olive oil to remove candle droppings, building a tool shed at the hermitage at the hermitage or doing needlepoint at Agion Panton.

IV. ARANYA BODHI

Activism in the air

Though I did not know at the time, my travels from the Abbey after my two-week visit to the Theravada Buddhist hermitage Aranya Bodhi echoed the migration years prior by the hermitage’s abbess Ayya Tathaaloka Their (Theri means elder in Pali). Forced to return from South Asia to the U.S. after difficulties with her visa, Ayya T briefly took up residence at Shasta Abbey upon invitation by the Abbot before later establishing the Dhammadharini Vihara (monastery). Rooted in the Theravada forest lineage with its ties in Thailand, the hermitage is in fact, the monastic offspring of the Dhammadharini Vihara. As a monastic retreat for women in Fremont, CA, the Vihara opened in August 2005 with three resident nuns. Then, in 2009, the community transitioned to the Aranya Bodhi hermitage in Jenner, along with the “part-time” residence “Bodhi House” in Fremont. Along with being the first notable Theravada monastery for women in the Western United States and the third in the entire country, the Vihara preserves
its mission to support bhikkunis by virtue of the Dhammadharini Foundation (a not-for-profit religious support foundation).

Even earlier, Shasta Abbey had made an appearance on Ayya T’s path to monastic life. When she was a teenager, living in Washington State, a family friend explained that both male and female Buddhist monks practiced together at Shasta Abbey. In an interview for *Present* journal, Ayya explained, “When I heard that I thought, “right! — that’s how it should be” (Kramer, 2012). I felt this kind of awakening interest then. And I learned there were these differing dynamics about ordination and women being able to ordain or not.” With her curiosity incited, the discovery of the traditional order of Buddhist nuns founded by the Buddha’s stepmother Mahapajapati motivated Ayya’s activism:

And also then, that brought up in my mind, the wondering of, “Well, what happened? Why don’t they? What’s gone wrong there? What happened?” I think that has also, maybe, deeply prompted me in a lot of my academic work, which has been with really studying and doing text studies and looking at the history.

Pursuing ascetic life at the age of 19, receiving *anagarika* or pre-postulant ordination at the age of 20 and then full bhikkhuni ordination in 1997, her later graduate work in Comparative *Vinaya* and in World Bhikkhuni Sangha History at the Dharma Drum Sangha University in New Taipei City, Taiwan testifies to her continuing questioning of structural inequalities. Such inspiration seems to have come to fitting fruition as two worn copies of the *The Therīgāthā*, a collection of poetry written by the first order of Buddhist nuns, sits on the community bookshelf in the library trailer.

Ayya is one of those people that when she looks at you, she really *sees* you — you at once feel naked, vulnerable yet incredibly close to her. Yet, with this tenderness comes a tenacity for the fulfillment of women’s rights, specifically for female ordination. Within their tradition, these bhikkhunis write papers, attend ordinations around the world, educate bhikkhus along with
aspiring bhikkhunis; these nuns are engaged in an active and ongoing battle, or what the Greek Orthodox nun would call *ascesis* or “struggle.” In the same vein, the clear forest air and undisturbed atmosphere should not suggest anything less than active and engaged. In 2006, Ayya was honored with the Outstanding Women in Buddhism award at the United Nations in Bangkok, Thailand and in August of 2007, she was a presenter at the International Congress of Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha in Germany.

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, if a woman believes she may be interested in monastic life, she begins her pre-postulancy stage once making her intentions clear to the community’s abbess. With an unshaven head, wearing white or black and white clothing, the pre-postulant abides by the same eight precepts same as the layperson’s five precepts plus three additional renunciate precepts. Also, there is a significant change in the third precept from “no sexual misconduct” to “no sexual conduct whatsoever.” Normally two weeks to two or three months, after this aspirant or pre-postulant stage, the woman then requests ordination as an *anagarika*, which literally means “homeless one.” Marked by a shaven head, white robes and the keeping of the eight precepts, this anagarika period is typically a year long depending on individual circumstances. Even though as a postulant, one is still officially a lay person, and as such still able to use money, hold property and finances and support oneself, the individual has surrendered all of their worldly possessions and responsibilities to commit herself — hence, the state of homelessness. Within a community, monastic communities share lodging and food with anagarikas, but an anagarika (observing fewer precepts) handles special healthcare needs, travel or other such expenses. Therefore, a similar dependency may exist between anagarikas and bhikkhunis as between lay people and bhikkhunis.
Following this anagarika stage, proceedings become more complicated. In Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma, Theravada Buddhism is prominent, however differences exist in what stage of female monastic commitment are deemed legitimate. Since the historical explanation of bhikkhuni status is complex, it may be best to offer Dhammadarini’s summary as adequate:

Bhikkhu literally means an almsman, bhikkhuni an almswoman. The Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sangha are the fully-ordained men and women of the Buddhist monastic community established by the Buddha in his lifetime. It is a tradition more than 2,500 years old that has continued to this day, first flourishing in India, then in South, Southeast and East Asia, and now in the West. It is unclear when the Bhikkhuni Sangha died out previously in Southeast Asia, perhaps as recently as the 19th century. It has never died out in East Asia, and is currently undergoing a revival in South Asia and now Southeast Asia as well, along with its contemporary development in the West. (“Bhikkhuni and Siladhara”)

With the more recent or ancient disappearance of the bhikkhunis' lineage of fully ordained women in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, other forms of non-ordained or partially ordained monastic life for women appeared and evolved: in Burma and Thailand, women live as anagarikas for short-term or long-term with the “uposatha” eight precepts and are called sayalays; in Thailand, Lao and Cambodia, anagarikas are called maechees and donchees. Visiting from Australia but practicing the Burmese tradition, Sayalay (Sy) Santacari came to the hermitage so Ayya T may serve as her teacher, which is unsurprising considering Ayya T’s international status.

As per the tradition in Burma, Sy Santacari wears the traditional light-pink robes and sweetly joked that the pigment seemed to suggest a novice’s absorption of the bhikkhunis’ lifestyle: “It is as if the white colored novice robes had been washed with the bhikkhunis rust-colored robes, and as if their spirituality had rubbed off on me.” When I arrived at the hermitage, Sayalay had just returned from a trip to the Bodhi House with Ayya T; following what is customary for an anagarika, Sayalay was responsible for the driving Ayya. Speaking outside the
kitchen trailer, Sayalay shared an anecdote from her time with Ayya that lays bare the potential for teaching beyond formalized lessons or recitation of doctrine. When Ayya expressed concern to Sayalay in the hospital that the frequent beeping of her heart rate monitor may disturb the other patients, Ayya’s heart rate then began to slow as the pace of the beeps slowed. Being so attune to her body and its functioning characterizes the ānāpānasati meditation that encourages an awareness of bodily sensation and accompanies vipassanā meditation⁷. Since I was a lay practitioner, and also new to the practice, Ayya Sobhana provided me with instruction. Though my own experience was quite painful, concentrating on bodily sensations ideally progresses to an ability to understand both pleasurable and painful sensations as constructions.

Under the ten novice precepts, which are the same from men and women, a samaneri (samanera for a male novitiate) takes “dependency” upon the elder community member who will be her acarya or her personal teacher and mentor who will guide her through the ordination process. Since Ten Precepts nuns cannot handle or keep money, along with no longer being able to drive cars, there is also a dependency of sorts that develops between the new novitiate and the laypeople of the sangha.

From this novitiate stage, women (who can) do achieve “full-ordination” and this adoption of the patimokkha ordination, under which she would practice the 311 rules of the basic Theravada code of monastic discipline. Practicing this ancient code of rules, samaneris become fully ordained nuns or bhikkunis; from samaneras, men adopt the fewer 250 rules to become bhikkhus. Modern South and Southeast Asian Buddhism is currently seeing the beginnings of a revival of this ancient women’s monastic tradition, initially in the West and in Sri Lanka, now followed by Thailand and Laos. Again, in the absence of bhikkunis, bhikkhus are both

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⁷ Vipassana: defined as “deeper insight” and describes the meditative concentration practiced.
Ānāpānasati: meditation focused on breath and bodily sensations
permitted and enjoined by the Vinaya to give both the novice and probationary novice ordination to qualified women candidates. The Bhikkhuni Sangha has existed since the Buddha's lifetime and continued into the present in China, Korea and Vietnam.

Actively involved in this movement for full ordination rights for women, the bhikkhunis of Aranya Bodhi are a rare find; since after 10 years in monastic life, a bhikkhuni becomes a Theri or Elder, to be in the presence of Ayya T who is eligible for this title was an incredible honor. Along with teaching within the monastic community and to the public at large as a Theri, since she has now experience more than 12 vassas, Ayya T can now serve as a pavatinni or a female preceptor in granting women in the full bhikkhuni ordination and to take part in training.

**Fire extinguished**

Typically more isolated, a hermitage itself serves a slightly different purpose than a typical monastic community. The hermitage’s only buildings are the petite kutis or individual living quarters of the bhikkhunis dispersed amongst the trails (See Image 4). However, there remained a sense of being an imposition in the natural space, which Ayya T attested to:

I loved being here before there was a kuti. It took me 2 months after the kuti was built to not feel traumatized with the presence of this building in this lovely space where there was no building before. I have a “something” about these kinds of things. It’s not so light and easy to invade an area, even a small hut like this.

Before this, the nuns stayed in simple tents where visiting lay people now reside. Other than the monastic kutis, at the heart of the hermitage, a nearby kitchen trailer and two additional trailers, one for tools and construction materials and another, a library and space for the bhikkhunis to study, read and sometimes, Skype with family or catch up on international happenings on the BBC (both of which I witnessed).
Though Auntie G describes it as mild concern, I am sure she must have been horrified when I descended from the airport bus wearing blue jeans and ballet flats. Though rugged and rustic, the hermitage environment provides a pocket of undisturbed repose, which contrasts the “Fire Sermon” (Pali: Aditta-pariyaya-sutta) in the Dhammapada, which the hermitage community read communally once after a morning meditation. Speaking of the nose, body, ear and intellect amongst other transitory elements, the Buddha speaks of each in the same way:

Monks, the All is aflame. What All is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Consciousness at the eye is aflame. Contact at the eye is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

First, the verses lead to a practitioner’s disenchantment with the eye and other senses, followed by dispassion and then, a “release” from interpreting the environment through the desires and senses. With language that echoes this sermon, after returning from a trip to the Bodhi House in the city of Fremont, Ayya describes the forest’s loosening of one’s ties and a release from this literal and figurative “burning” of the city:

To be here now [at the Hermitage], so fresh, so clean, so pure, so lively, it is so easy for the heart to move towards virtue and goodness and calm, clear and for looking into an understanding of the nature of things. The body and mind to see things externally and internally more deeply, truly and clearly. I feel that this freshness here. In the city with its conveniences, also there is a sense of burning because so many engines are there, so much electricity is there, so much fuel is burning around all the time, so many vibrations, fire and the wheel are being very actively used, so much use in our society and in the city and also people have so much desire. Desire is very strong and even when we think about the good thing like the billboard that reads, “Satisfy your thirst!” Like you should be thirsty. The issues and emotions about various issues, this strife with one another, who is above and who is below, striving for equality, also the friction and stress is there. There is burning in that and so that is not so much the physical burning of the car engine. But it’s like a psychic burning; you can feel it in consciousness. You can see it in how people are walking, driving, there is a desire always. So it’s so nice to come out into this space and return here. To have the flowing water here.
In comparison to this "friction" emphasized in the "engines," "electricity" and "vibrations," the rustic landscape ensures privacy, solitude, and a setting conducive to meditation. This burning within the city, which is cooled by the "water" and "freshness" of the hermitage, harkens back to the traditional exclamation of the bhikkhus in *The Therīgāthā* whose "defilements are burnt out" (The Therīgāthā, vv. 93, 174). Induced often by the death of a husband or children, a woman is driven to madness before – often at the sight of the Buddha – realizes the futility of her grief and finally, attaining enlightenment. Maddened by her children and husband, Theri Patacara’s attainment of *nībanna* after a period of intense concentration that serves as a catalyst for enlightenment: "Then I took a needle and drew out the wick. The liberation of my mind was like the quenching of the lamp" (The Therīgāthā, vv. 116, 152). This extinguished candle recalls the smoke of the funeral pyre where her dead kin burn and therefore, seems to strongly intimate an end to Patacara’s suffering. Further emphasizing the singular moment beyond words, the "ah" in the translation by Steven P. Hopkins denotes Patacara’s sigh (Appendix B); this "ah" could easily describe Ayya’s "awakening" (Kramer).

Similarly, in the narrative of Theri Khema, who is no longer conceited and interested in sexual involvement, she expresses others’ vanity with this language that describes burning: "Revering the lunar mansions, tending the fire in the wood, not knowing it as if really is, fools, you thought it was purity" (The Therīgāthā, vv. 143, 175). Throughout the narratives of women, both mothers and single women alike, this "quenching" of desires echoes the freshness of the hermitage that Ayya T describes that counters the "thirst" encouraged by the city. As Theri Ubbiri declares, “Today I have my dart plucked out. I am without hunger, quenched” (*The Therīgāthā*, vv. 53, 77).

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8 All quotations from *The Therīgāthā* are from Pruitt 1999.

However, The Therigāthā does not take into account that such wilderness and seclusion, for the untrained, is equally as conducive to frustration and struggle. Thus, more experienced monastics are more suited to the hermitage's challenges. The Vinaya requires bhikkunis to confess the killing of a living plant and so, on my first day while searching for a suitable and flat forest bed area to set up my tent, I found myself hacking away at branches with a lopper following closely behind Ayya Suvijjana. Plates had to be bleached after being washed in order to kill pathogens and with two wooden outhouses, the hermitage did not offer the usual luxuries to which most are accustomed. And this requires an endurance that I did not quite expect. One week into my stay, one of Ayya T's closest spiritual friends (kalynanamitta, Pali for “good friend,” “virtuous friend,” “noble friend” or “spiritual friend” within the Buddhist community life; this spiritual friendship is discussed further in Chapter 2) and mentor Ajahn Maha Somchai Tejapanno of the Thai Forest Tradition visited, and as tradition stipulated, accompanied by a younger bhikkhu. The morning after the pair had arrived, Ajahn approached me while I prepared my usual steaming hot travel mug of black tea and told me his young bhikkhu would be returning to the city that day. Supposedly this poor newcomer had met with a coyote and rattlesnake near his tent in the tall grasses and what had been named the “Man Mountain.” As I expressed pity for the bhikkhu's plight, Ajahn shook his head saying, “No, no, he is a city monk. He is not strong like you.”

However undisciplined the natural elements may seem, the lives of these bhikkhunis are constantly being molded and forged through ritual, day in and day out. Though my own daily routine does not mirror that of a bhikkhuni necessarily, it does lend itself to a better understanding of how communal rituals draw the nuns out from their individual corners of the forest to unify in their practice. Each morning began before dawn, with my watch's alarm
beeping at 5:40 a.m., I emerged from my 4x7 tent and groggily, slowly descended the steep slope down to the nucleus of the hermitage where the kitchen trailer and yurt sat (an enclosed circular tent. See Image 5). There, either the laywoman Sherene or Sayalay would be preparing breakfast, which was always offered to the bhikkunis first. After a silent breakfast, morning meditation and scripture chant followed (often coupled with a group discussion) before the three or four bhikkunis and lay people would sit to discuss the day’s business — chores consisted of working on building the wooden tent platform, the community tool shed and preparing the day’s midday dana. After the day’s meal around noon, a few hours of chores and then, a few hours of quiet time followed before metta at 6:30 pm. Afterwards, everyone then retreated back to their tents and kutis around 8 pm. Though lay people generally adhered to the schedule, bhikkunis practiced flexibility in the evenings and often did not attend metta service.

Made more concrete by the residential layout, the hermitage cultivated a relationship with its laity that seemed distinct from the other communities in that it very much served as a community of women for women. Though this did not come at the exclusion of men, it was impossible to ignore the enthusiastically waving laywomen who waved when we drove by their humble residences along the creek. Called the “Dhamma Creek Sisters,” these women had been supporting the bhikkunis since they first arrived on the untouched land with only small tents. Thus, the aspirations and inclination for the ascetic life radiated beyond the 100-acre hermitage enclosure to the entire 300-acres owned by a laywoman who hopes to later gift the hermitage with additional acreage. Working on the community’s tool shed (nail gun in hand), I left behind my own contribution that merged with the roughly dozen like-minded women who, as Ayya Sobhana explains, “each have had their hands on [the shed] and each one of them kind of has a
relationship to [the bhikkhnis].” Thus, individual efforts results in a collage of sorts from building this shelter for the bhikkhnis, which is one of the latter’s requisites.

V. AGION PANTON MONASTERY

Back at school and revisiting research and interviews from the summer, I felt that my comparative study lacked a more informed perspective on Orthodox monasticism and was limited by the cultural nuances of my time in Greece where 90 percent of the 1 million-strong population are Christian Orthodox. With the importance to root my research in a common milieu of the United States, the Agion Panton monastic community in Calverton, NY provided me with a kindred sisterhood to Aranya Bodhi. Geronisa Foteini, Sister Theonymphi and Sister Martha all attended Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology for undergraduate and/or graduate studies. Though both Timiou Stravrou and Agion Panton both adhered closely with the prescribed and orthodox monastic statutes — Typikon for the Greek Orthodox and the ancient Bhikkhuni Vinaya for the Buddhists, their youth as communities and more progressive leadership informed their perspectives on gender. Whereas the men and women sat separated at Timiou Stravrou (with oftentimes older yiayias in the pews snapping at others if they failed to realize this separation) and Gerontisa Methodia asserted a women’s unsuitability to even kiss an icon when menstruating, Agion Panton differed on both counts; men and women sat together in the chapel and during a conversation with Gerontisa Foteini, she clearly communicated her disapproval of this characterization of women as “impure.”

Before discovering these distinctions in monastic styles at Agion Panton, in early March, I was in search of a female monastery in the Tri-State area for an extension on my research. After Gerontisa Foteini’s quick and welcoming response, in a few shorts days I found myself on the 8-acre monastery property with the four Sisters: Gerontisa Foteini, Sister Theonymphi, Sister
Martha and Sister Maria. Playfully barking at neighbors’ show horses penned in on their respective properties, the Sisters’ dog Argos irritates the neighbors and makes clear the difference in physical isolation of the monastery in comparison to Timiou Stravrou. However, such difference does not seem to be consequence of cultural difference, but rather mere circumstance.

Unlike Timiou Stravrou, the Sisters in NY adhere more closely to the schedule stipulated in the *Typikon* in which monastics hold service at three-hour intervals; however, the Sisters combine the midnight chants and those for 3 am for one service at 3:30 am. Though their womanpower is significantly less than the community of 44 nuns of Timiou Stravrou, the Sisters produce *komboskini*, soaps and scrubs under the name “All for Nun,” and perhaps more importantly, children’s book for the tradition’s major annual feast days (complete with illustrations by Sister Theonymphi). Living in the same hallway as the sisters in their main housing building, the intimacy that characterized my visit, during which the Sisters welcomed me to chant with them during each service and for my comfort, did the majority of chanting in English.

VI. FAR FROM MT. ATHOS

Though each with its particular customs and varieties of asceticism, neither one of these communities would belong on Mt. Athos, not because of degrees of ascetic rigor, but rather in regards to reclusiveness and isolation\(^\text{10}\). Interviews with nuns and the degree of intimacy and closeness — sitting down at the same table, sharing living quarters — that I was granted testifies to the license I was given during my studies. Though nuns may be expected to live out their lives

\(^{10}\) Radcliffe, 2011: “Not surprisingly, journalists are not exactly welcome. For more than two years, we corresponded, negotiated and, frankly, pleaded for an invitation but ran into one monastic wall after another.” The last time a camera crew visited the island prior to the 2011 *60 Minutes* documentary was in 1981.
with such open arms, the degree of intimacy I experienced as a college researcher necessitates a trust on the part of the nuns.

Even though both the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravada Buddhism and the hesychastic (quietest) practices in Greek Orthodox eremitic monasticism similarly value stillness and silent seclusion as a foundation of their practice, each monastery in fact had a constant hum of work being done and people being welcomed. There was the chatter and conversation of the Agion Panton sisters outside my door as they made their fifth coffee of the day around 5 p.m. and at Timiou Stavrou, the drilling and hammering of the construction in the room above my living quarters, amidst the chatter of daily visitors both local and others dressed in matching tour attire. Thus, along with the patterned bells and σήμαντρον (semantron) in ceremonial for temple and church services, there were interruptions by doorbells, phone calls and laity. As a newcomer to the realities of monastic life this undercurrent of work and the buzz of activity seemed incompatible with my image of the silent and austere ascetic lifestyle.

This paper will explore such gaps between the ideal and real monastic environments, in the context of women and their motherhood. While living and speaking with these women, the difference between aspirational ideals expressed in traditional doctrine but also by these women themselves and what is actually lived out by these women. One desires women and mothers to transform particular loves into generalized ones and therefore, to be released and freed from bonds to one’s mother and childbearing responsibilities; on the other hand, in the latter, real women are emotionally attached to family and unable to wholly discredit those histories. *Holy Wombs* will explore the space between those two images, and in this gap, where these women creatively adapt to the ideals of their traditions to create new forms of Buddhist and Greek Orthodox practice that affirm images of “motherhood” and ties to one’s biological family.
2

Spiritual Posse

Inspired by the cornerstones of the traditions, Orthodoxy’s κοινωνία and Theravada’s sangha, this Chapter will examine how life within community is recognized, valued and fostered in each community. First, after examining the constant balance between individual and community practices that is conveyed in the “mono” (meaning “only”) of the Greek word for monastic – monachos, section II will consider the uniqueness of the friendships that result from such communities. Then, broadening the lens in section III, I will consider one of the Timiou Stavrou Sister’s statement that to choose the monastic life is to choose the ασφαλής or “safe” road. Finally in section IV, I will consider the “royal roads” of monasticism and motherhood that belong to Gerontisa’s metaphor for the ascetic life, which excludes those who do not choose either. For many monastics, life without the rigors and ἄσκησις (ascesis, meaning “struggle”) that accompanies communal life does not generate the same selflessness as a mother or nun’s life.

I. KOINONIA AND SANGHA

Though the word monachos emerges from the Orthodox context, its suggestion of paradox in a monastic’s self-understanding communicates the constant negotiation in all three monasteries between singular and communal practices. Both traditions recognize the value of worshipping in communion with others fellowship and seek to strengthen those ties in ways familiar and foreign to one another; in Greek Orthodoxy, κοινωνία (koinonia), which refers to a communion of intimate participation and for Buddhists, there is the Buddha’s established order of bhikkhunis (nuns) and bhikkhus (monks) referred to as the Sangha.

When translated by Greek-English New Testament sources, koinonia is defined as communion, association, fellowship, sharing, common, contribution or partnership. However, the
expression intimates a closeness that is better described as an adopted identity and hence, “the significance of its use to express the believer’s union with the ‘Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1 Cor. 1:9), and with the Holy Ghost (2 Cor 12:14 and Phil. 2:1).” In 1 John 2:9-11, he places this “fellowship” at the heart of Christianity with his definition of “brotherhood” or “brotherly love” (φιλαδελφεία) whether one abides in lightness or darkness (1 John 2:9f), and is therefore the essential characteristic of one who calls himself a Christian.” This union’s pledge of deep investment leads to the Greek Orthodox practice of ola koina, meaning “all shared,” which actually describes the streamlining of personal property and transition to collective possessions in all three communities. At Timios Stravros, a common storeroom of clothes and medicine for the Sisters fosters this ‘all-shared’ disposition, which is similarly cultivated by the shed at the hermitage where heaps of brown and black clothing are available to bhikkhunis.

At Ararya Bodhi, practicing the 311 precepts as consummately as possible, these bhikkhunis do not ask or request for things directly — hence the ceremonial offering of food at breakfast and dana, and also the labels, for example, on the soy milk container indicating whether or not it has been offered so a bhikkuni may return to the fridge and continue to use it. This accepting of whatever is offered is a thread that runs through the attitude at the hermitage to “work with things the way they are.” However, this axiom does have its limits; when shopping for hiking pole gloves with Ayya T and Venerable (Ven.) Suvijjana, the duo politely but quickly turned down a edgy pair of red and white gloves with the face of Marilyn Monroe.

Nevertheless, this encouragement of “acceptance” for essentials, such as food, becomes ceremonial. Before midday dana, the bhikkhunis and lay women silently gathered in the yurt, whereupon whomever prepared the food would then, formally offer it to the community. Then, with a humble nod and a gesture of anjali, Ayya accepted the offer and then recited the scriptures
in Pali first alone, and then quickly joined by the other bhikkunis. Thus, eating becomes one-and-the-same with training since along with the food being offered as a community, things are accepted in unison.

However seemingly constructed, such ‘logistical’ practices do mother an intimacy. When Auntie G humorously asked me after my first week at the hermitage if I was ready to shave off my hair, I laughed it off quite lightly. Yet, this act of head shaving for the bhikkunis transpires into a deeply more significant act of community building; I remember noticing the bhikkunis’ heads one evening at metta service, their act of communal shaving exposed by the group’s newly-shaven and shiny heads. Though at a different monastery, the intimacy of this bodily practice is a closeness I recall awkwardly interrupting when I entered the Guest Office at Shasta Abbey where Rev. Sheiko was shaving the head of another female monk who had just returned from a trip. Feeling as if I had intruded on a holy moment, I quickly apologized to the two and hurried back to my room with my notepad in hand and my tape recorder banging against my chest as it hung from its lanyard.

Despite my embarrassment, this shaving of a fellow monastic and especially at Aranya Bodhi where shaving is done as a community, does encourage a synchronization of sorts that mimics the spiritual friendship of the husband and wife pair, Bhadda Kapilani and Kassapa in the Jataka. As an exception to the marital trope of an unhappy wife, discontent with her spouse and life as a householder (Murcott, 2006, 41), this couple renounces the world on the wedding night before consummation. Years prior, their respective paths to the ascetic life coincided and both as children, separately witnessed insects killed and this witnessing of suffering catalyzed their later shared renunciation. In sync with one another, they “cut off each other’s hair, donned saffron-colored clothes from their vast wardrobes, granted freedom to their slaves, and set off into
homelessness” (Murcott, 2006, 101). Evoking an equality unaccustomed to marriage, their joint articulation “in just th[e] same way” is emphasized in the *The Therīgāthā*: “We saw the misery in the world, / the two of us, / and turned away from home” (Murcott, 2006, 103). Therefore, great intimacy similarly characterizes the communal experience of head shaving and preparing one’s body at Aranya Bodhi.

Similar to Shasta Abbey, head shaving at the hermitage is marked by great intimacy. Resisting influences of modernization with disposal safety razors and electric clippers that make it easier and less dangerous for monastics to shave themselves, the Aranya Bodhi community remain “old school” in this regard; whereas other communities permit monastics to shave whenever they desire, these bhikkhunis’ schedule for head shaving is ritualized to strengthen a sense of oneness. As in the Thai forest tradition, Ayya and the nuns shave their heads on the day before the observance of the Full Moon and New Moon Uposatha. Also at this time, the bhikkhunis also wash robes and clean up communal and personal spaces in order to, as Ayya explained, “foster a bodily sense of communion...so [the bhikkhunis] are unified in body in these ways, [just as] chanting together [they] are unified in speech, meditating together [they] are unified in mind."

On the first day of one’s ordination, to mark the entrance into this new family and new home on the monastery grounds, the hair-cutting ritual for a novice markedly recognizes this transition from blood to spiritual companionship. As if to make material the ideal of abandoning past relationships, a bhikkhu’s family and friends cut her hair section by section and then, her new sisters shave off what remains. From an interreligious perspective, this vow to practice in communion with one another — made concrete in tonsuring — echoes the Greek Orthodox

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11 Uposatha: an observance day that corresponds to the phases of the moon, on which Buddhist lay people gather to listen to the *Dhamma* and to observe special precepts. On the new-moon and full-moon uposatha days monks assemble to recite the *patimokkha* rules.
custom in the “rite of passage” of baptism for infants. Having nothing to give to God in return, as her first-offering to Jesus, a child’s hair is cut in three places in the shape of a cross.

For a bhikkhuni, this ceremony to mark the adoption of a new set of dependents happens only once and following ordination, a new monastic’s “Dhamma Sisters” may shave her head until she is confident to do so herself and often even afterward. Prior to AIDS education and disposable razors, one monastic in the community was responsible for shaving many sisters’ heads on shaving day, the act necessitates trust and tenderness: “One really felt her kindness and compassion in her gentleness and carefulness as she was holding a sharp knife to one’s delicate head!” Thus, to shave another bhikkhuni’s head therefore is to partake in her spiritual beginnings just as a godparent adopts that responsibility for a child. This degree of devotion to God connoted in the Orthodox tradition through offerings of hair is equally inscribed in the shaving of another’s head. Even further, in the Thai tradition to which Aranya Bodhi adheres, new monastics might also offer to shave their teacher’s head on the days before Uposatha, which Ayya describes as “an act of great compassion, as normally there are nicks and cuts while learning to shave.” Therefore the responsibility that a godparent declares for a child in the baptismal sacrament is made reciprocal between teacher and student in the monastery. Thus, along with partaking in each others’ material shares, monasticism welcomes a focus on Christ to pervade all levels of existence including spiritual, social, intellectual, economic.

II. KALYANAMITTA

Such emphasis on the Sangha and sharing a source of food, shelter and clothing, when coupled with a valuing of collective worship, generates interdependence amongst the nuns and therefore, friendships that possess unique character. Even though Ayya Sodinna lives a peripatetic monastic lifestyle and visiting the hermitage for only the extent of her 3-month vassa
retreat (since traditionally dependent on rain seasons, the Sri Lankan vassa differs from the Thai), she confidently describes her wandering from community to community “without plans” as what is endorsed by the Buddha himself as “going forth” and embracing homelessness.\(^{12}\) When I asked Ayya about the source of her confidence, she assured me that she lives “without fear [or anxiety] since it does not matter” if something goes wrong. In the monastic life, she explained that “your home means that you are bound to it. You are bound to a track like, but when you are homeless, you are not bound, trapped. You are free to go anywhere you like.”

Though striking in her confidence, Ayya’s pronouncements of full-fledged independence however, mingle with her kalyanamitta, which means “spiritual friendship,” with Ayya Sobhana. After meeting Ayya Sobhanna first at the Bhavana Society in Virginia where the two shared a cell, Ayya Sodinna traveled to Sri Lanka in 2009. Upon her return in 2010, she stayed at the Society alone for a year since Ayya Sobhana had come out to the hermitage; however, in 2011, she joined her spiritual friend at the hermitage. Though Ayya left the hermitage after her vassa as she planned, the “kalyanamitta” of her tradition recognizes this need for camaraderie in asceticism. In the Digha Nikaya 31 or “The Collection of Long Discourses,” the verses offer advice for relationships with pupils, mentors, spouses and in this verse below, friends:

A friend, who always lends a hand,  
a friend both in sorrow and joy,  
a friend who offers good counsel,  
a friend who sympathizes too.  
These are the four kinds of true friends:  
One who is wise, who have understood much,  
will always cherish and serve such friends,  
just as a mother tends her only child. (Digha Nikāya 31)

In this first line, “always” intimates a constant presence and dependency, whether physical or in thought. Though this reference to a “mother tend[ing] her only child” (emphasis added) may

\(^{12}\) Insert footnote.
seem a credit to motherhood, it seems to suggest the “metaphorical mother-love” that Reiko Ohuma discusses in the South Indian Buddhist traditional doctrine. However the repetition of “always” in “always cherish” that is equated with a mother’s tenderness pronounces that such a particular tie does not need to be cut. Ultimately, the “mother” reference suggests an ambivalence toward a mother’s particular love that I will discuss further in Chapter 5: Ambivalence Towards the Womb and Ties to the Mother.

Nevertheless, this “sympathy” in line 4 of this excerpt captures the emotional investment between monastics that Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi attribute to “sisterhood.” Going beyond the duties of providing good advice (“counsel”), a kalyanamitta emphasizes “too.” I asked each to describe what ‘sisterhood’ meant in the context of monastic life. Briefly mentioned earlier on page 16, I asked Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi to describe “sisterhood” in the context of monastic life. Gerontisa said, “For me, the thing that touch my heart the most is when I’m having a bad day or I’m in a bad mood for whatever reason, the other sisters are patient and gracious with me. That is what inspires me the most.” However, Sister Theonymphi characterized this “patience” with more exactness:

I was thinking of something very similar. It’s not just patience but it’s different than like, well a quality of it is different when someone offers it in the way Gerontisa describes. It’s different than say because you can be patient with someone even though they are really bothering you, but you can love someone so much that it’s a little more like a loving offer rather than you just trying to endure.

For this revised description, Gerontisa suggested the term “forbearing,” since sisters endure one another’s suffering and as she explained, “to bear the struggle with the person.” In agreement, Sister Theonymphi’s description captures the corporeal and physical dimensions of these relationships:

If I have the tendency to get a lot angrier than most people in the whole wide world — that’s an extreme statement [laughing] — but Gerontisa even if she might react to it,
generally she is trying to carry it with me rather than put up with it. You can put up with someone patiently but you are just standing them. You love them and stuff and you won’t try to say stuff about [their reaction to their struggle or suffering], but it’s different to really try to carry something of theirs on your shoulders.

Thus, amidst the shedding of unnecessary possessions and attachments, monastic community is just as strongly characterized by a gain. Even though Theonymphi advocates for the benefits of communal living—"You are saved in community. Community of nuns. Community of a family," she also warned against a closeness or intimacy that leads to jealousy or imbalance in the community. When she first joined the community as a novice, she found it difficult to maintain a distance from another novice (who eventually decided to not pursue monasticism) whom she had been a close friend:

I think it was harder for her because I don’t feel good to betray the sisters and say something so it didn’t feel good to encourage a ‘buddy buddiness’. I really couldn’t do it. Like let’s hang out, like special. It’s not bad or not allowed but in my heart, I couldn’t feel comfortable doing that.

This wariness of growing too close with one’s sister only complicates Theonymphi’s newest spiritual sister, Sister Maria, who is also her biological mother. In Chapter 5, I will return to this mother-daughter pair and their attempts to transition from one sort of dependence to a spiritual one.

III. SAVED [ONLY] IN COMMUNITY

For however removed monastic life may be from the “burning” of life outside the monastery (see Chapter I), life within these communities requires friction and abrasion between “sisters.” Though I had hoped to speak with Sisters individually at Timiou Stravrou, whether my request was lost in translation or not, the conversation was structured as a group interview.
During the first day or so, while cleaning carpets with a few of the Sisters, I had spoken briefly to one of the novices — asking about the daily work schedule in the community; the next day, Sister Erini relayed a request from Gerontisa Methodia that I avoid conversations with novices for my studies since those Sisters were still young and inexperienced. Therefore, for this group interview, Gerontisa assembled the seven Sisters who sat before me and she explained that they were the “most ripe” and “most grown” in their practice.

Though Gerontisa at first went to excuse herself, the Sisters encouraged her to stay. Accepting the invitation, Gerontisa joked about the Sisters now feeling a need for λογοκρισία (logokrisia, meaning “censorship”) with her presence; however, this joke seemed more justified as the three-hour interview progressed. Unless I specifically turned my attention to a particular Sister and tailored it to her experience, Gerontisa was the default responder and the Sisters often nodded in or verbalized agreement. As a result, many of the questions that I hoped would draw out personal details from Sisters narratives generated more generalized responses.

Though targeted to the group, my question about their motivations for the ascetic life resulted in such molded responses, with Gerondisa leading the response: “Everybody [has] in mind to try to save their soul, but for monks and nuns, they feel that is it more safe to go this road under this road.” When I asked about the word ασφαλής or “safe” that Gerontisa used, she clarified that this sense of security arises as a result of living in a community:

Because of her character, [a nun] believed that perhaps she could be in the world and not go straight and make some things — perhaps make a good family, be a good Greek Orthodox — but would not be clean or pure…but here with the closed community we have, [the nun] believed that other sisters could see her and could understand her character and could see her wrongs and mistakes even if she doesn't see something…the other would see that and tell them, “be careful.”

Though entering a community to be “saved” seems to imply a degree of comfort in this safety, such ease would be misleading. Described by the sisters, the verb καλλιεργώ (“to cultivate”) and
τα〈ζ〈δ〈ι〈 (“trip”) suggests a long-term and laborious process that differs from the “ah!”-moments of enlightenment in *The Therīgāthā*.

To communicate this spiritual maturation through struggle, Gerontisa compared spirituality to a body of water where the waves on the surface keep the water clean. On the bottom however, bacteria grows deep in the ocean; thus, stillness prohibits purification. Though it may be unsurprising that a monastic’s experience is not like turning on a light switch, it is the reliance on community that is interesting. Echoing the rhetoric of warfare, specifically “battlefield,” employed by a monk on *60 Minutes* documentary to describe monastic life, Gerontisa used the word *aγώνας*, which means “contest.” Echoing Sister Theonymphi’s sentiments and also, those of Gerontisa Methodia, Gerontisa Foteini referred to St. John of the Ladder:

Saint John said that the ‘Royal Road’ or the best means of attaining salvation and communion with God is a small community of 2-5 monastics. If you are alone and fall (spiritually or physically), who is there to help you get up? If you are in a large community there are so many more temptations — irritations with others, more opportunity for passions of gluttony, lust, greed, power and such. Larger communities often have an easier lifestyle as the work is distributed between more monastics; and hermits (isolated individuals) are subject to many temptations.

Such purposeful abrasion is at the core of the bhikkhunis’ metaphor of monastics as jagged and rough stones. After initially entering the monastic life, with the intensity of day-to-day living, these irregular surfaces (faults or weaknesses) become refined and polished. Both Orthodox communities wield their own metaphor for this sort of perfection through intensity, which is particularly palpable at Timiou Stravrou in the complete absence of mirrors on the
property. On my first morning, I remember standing at the window anxiously trying to get the angle of the glass window *just right* to catch the sunlight and to see my reflection. These desperate attempts to catch a faint reflection of myself marks my early encounter with the retreat from vanity, as one may assume, that monastic life encourages. However, this absence of mirrors also speaks to the fellowship between the nuns, which Gerontisa later explained: “When you look at the mirror in the world, the real mirror, the mirror will say to you that you want to hear. but when the mirror is your Sister than that mirror will tell you what you don't want to hear — the truth. A normal mirror is not your best friend.”

In the *Dasadhamma Sutta* (meaning “Ten Things”), to which Ayya Sodinna referred, the opening articulates the sense of dependency that is characteristic of a bhikkhunis’ lifestyle: “There are these ten things that a person gone-forth should reflect on often. Which ten?...'I have become casteless’: a person gone forth should often reflect on this...My life is dependent on others’...” In fact, the structure of monastic life in Theravada Buddhism creates quite naturally a dependency not only on each other but also the un-ordained. However, here, the phrase “casteless” would seem to imply monastic communities’ existence outside of a space determined by factors such as gender and class; this is certainly misleading. For some of the nuns in fact, in a life without community – whether in monasticism or motherhood, similar to the dangerous “stillness” that Gerontisa Foteini described (page 53), women cannot make it to the city of salvation.

**IV. THE ROYAL ROADS**

Particularly in the Greek Orthodox tradition, an emphasis on community comes at the exclusion of others and specifically, those who do not choose the “royal road[s]” of motherhood or monasticism. In the midst of the interview, I found myself quickly crossing out entire
questions concerning limitations on women’s expressions of their spirituality that I had prepared beforehand once a particular attitude towards and inflexibility granted toward women’s lifestyle choices surfaced. When speaking about salvation for Christian women, this inflexibility manifested in a particularly poignant and for me, rather troublesome metaphor Gerontisa yielded. There is a city, symbolizing Christ and salvation, and there are exactly two roads that a woman may choose to take, which include motherhood or monasticism. Thus, the likelihood of you reaching the city correlated quite strongly to taking one of the two roads.

Though my own experience with the Greek Orthodox tradition has been laced with frustrations, this analogy unraveled into a flurry of exchanges concerning women’s role in the church. I started in with the rule against women serving in the clergy:

\[ Dina: \text{So for the moment, if we pretend that I want to become a priest and I want to have a family too like a priest, but I don’t want the life of a nun...} \]

\[ Gerontisa: \text{If the woman leaves the house, who will take care of the children? Because it would be very difficult for you to be good with your duty as a priest because you have to leave all the time from your house and then who would take care of your children?} \]

\[ Dina: \text{The man does not need to be there as much?} \]

\[ Gerontisa: \text{The man leaves the house because he works. But if the mother leaves, who will take care of the children? The mother stays in the house to take care of the children. Because generally it is wrong when it happens when a woman works and is not many hours in the home. The best thing for a mother and father to complement one another.} \]

Therefore, the spiritual metaphor procured by Gerontisa is grounded in a cultural fabric of familial obligations, with men and women fulfilling their appropriate roles. These sentiments echoed what Gerontisa had explained a day earlier when her and I had spoken:

\[ \text{Spiritually, [men and women] need the same things. Men think differently than women and act differently than women. Father and mother offer different things in a family. In the Greek culture, it is said that the mother keeps the house. This is not to be said that there are jobs for women and jobs for men. God physically made us different. How we think, how we feel, psychologically different. A father and mother complement each} \]
other in the household. Even though women cannot be priests, she has many other things she can do. Why must we see this and say we want to be priests. Isn’t it enough?

Months later, I chose to readdress this question of women as “priests of the household” at Agion Panton where the response was, in fact, a bit different with Gerontisa Foteini assuring me, “There has to be something more for women in our church than Φιλοπτωχας [Philoptochos, meaning “friend of the poor”]”\(^\text{13}\). After interviewing Gerontisa Foteini in the afternoon, while I stood in the kitchen with the four Sisters waiting for Sister Theonymphi to finish brewing the hot apple cider on the stove to drink with our midday snack at 3 p.m., Gerontisa read from her small black hand-bible an excerpt she quoted earlier that day in my conversation with her:

“Nevertheless, she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith love and holiness and self-control” (First Epistle of Paul to Timothy 2:15).

Written by Paul to his co-worker Timothy in Ephesus, 1 Timothy is a personal letter intended to address specific problems that Timothy was encountering at the church in Ephesus, namely, false teachers. To see if there was a fuller explanation in her Orthodox Study Bible (to which Gerontisa playfully said, “Cheater!”), Sister Theonymphi read the resource’s commentary:

“If salvation is holistic, involving all of one’s life, then women who have children are saved in part by motherhood, if they persevere in godliness. Our God-given role in life is the place our salvation.” Gerontisa pushed further: “But what about women who don’t have children. How can you say their salvation is about childbearing?” In response, Sister Theonymphi explained that the Bible assures that a woman who is barren can bring forth spiritual fruits or a Gerontisa who can bring forth spiritual children.” However, Gerontisa retorted: “Okay, but if you are not a biological mother or the abess of a community, then how do you childbear?” To this, Sister

\( ^{13} \)"The Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, Inc. is the philanthropic arm of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America that has offered eighty years of philanthropy through a multitude of programs that make a difference in the lives of people in the United States and throughout the world.” (www.philoptochos.org/index/about)
Theonymphi again upheld her previous advocation of community: “I do not think it is bad to be a woman who finds fulfillment in her career and everything, but it’s easier to not give to others and stuff because there is not everyday facing your annoying husband, your kids that are making you nuts or the nuns who are driving you crazy.” Evidenced in this exchange, though neither man nor woman is an exception to the importance of community in a Christian life, for women, it comes with a set of limitations that translates to leadership roles in the Church. Within the monastic family, specifically at Agion Panton, the spiritual father Fr. Maximos may completely absolve sins in confession, whereas Gerontisa cannot. As the spiritual mother, she provides a vessel for others’ admissions, however since the ascetic life does not transcend the gender roles of traditional family structure, Fr. Gerasimos has the power to completely absolve sins. Therefore, the importance of communities and their abilities “to save” is still informed by gender inequality and for women, limits their lifestyle choices to monasticism or motherhood.

3
Troupes of Sisters

In the verse and narrative of *The Therīgāthā* and the hagiographies in *The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers*, communities of women in the past prove to bear great authority and how they choose to similarly demonstrate this ‘strength in numbers’. In *The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers*, St. Irene of Constantinople is “inspired by God” to build the Monastery of the Pantocrator in Constantinople, however since this “god-pleasing project required enormous financial assistance,
she had to devise a plan” (The Lives, 1991, 339). Navigating her status as a woman and trying to convince her husband the Emperor to fund her project, St. Irene must be creative in her solution, which in the end is tearful. With her head prone to the ground, she weeps and speaks to her husband, “Accept, O Master, the God-build temple by The grace” (The Lives, 1991, 339). After Irene refuses to cease, the Emperor himself is then brought to tears as well and pledges to “whatever she required and devised” (The Lives, 1991, 339). Although not all of the women in the following historical and contemporary narratives choose to “shed tear after tear” like Irene, their particular means to navigate complex political situations and express their spirituality echo her creativity. Within traditional frameworks, women in their adopted kin groups wield strategies of power that affirm their unity.

In the narrative of bhikkhunis with Mahapajapati and at the hermitage, both in The Therīgāthā and Aranya Bodhi, political obstacles are met with united efforts and reinforced with a recognized communion with nature. Also banning together, nuns in The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers and at Agion Panton affirm their sisterly ties through death rituals and both recognize tears as a “form of communal expression that is both communicative and structured” (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, 34). Thus, in both traditions, the spiritual transformation of isolated individuals into monastics encourages potential agency to be actualized. However, particularly in the narratives of Sister Ipomoni and St. Macrina in section II “Til Death Do Us Part,” particular family ties persist and attempts to spiritualize one’s blood family in ascetic pursuits do not wholly abandon particular attachments.

1. FROM THE FIRST BHIKKHUNIS AND FOLLOWING

Monastic life is not a sphere wholly detached from political concerns and conflict, especially at Aranya Bodhi where the bhikkhunis have staked a claim in the international debate
on the legitimacy of full female ordination (see Chapter 1, “Navigating Fieldwork”). Echoing the efforts of the first bhikkhunis to attain enlightenment from the Buddha, which I will first trace, a contemporary bhikkhuni draws creatively from the monastic practice to help a fellow bhikkhuni who has been unfairly ostracized by a teacher offended by her support of female ordination. Both parties, of the *The Therigāthā* and of Aranya Bodhi respectively, orchestrate resolutions that are similarly characterized by a communion with nature.

To attain “final quenching,” Mahapajapati decides to “tak[e] leave of all the theras who are mentally compose and of [her] fellows in leading the holy life” (*The Therigāthā*, 185).

However, she is not alone in her desire and her fellow bhikkhunis approach her “and just as the theri had this thought, so did the five hundred bhikkhunis who formed her entourage” (*The Therigāthā*, 185). Wishing to be in communion with their spiritual mother and “lamenting very pitifully, their tears poured forth there” (*The Therigāthā*, vv. 9, 186), the five hundred bhikkhunis request to join in on her request. However, what is critical to note is that the union of the five hundred bhikkhunis with Majapajapati is marked by nature’s response with “an earthquake and thundering of the drum of the devas” (*The Therigāthā*, vv. 8, 186), and their joint commitment is again expressed through a natural metaphor: “We departed from the home and birth together. So as friends we will go to questioning, the supreme place. Further, they are compared to the Ganges [goes to] the ocean with five hundred rivers (*The Therigāthā*, vv. 18-19, 186). Thus, the commitment by these women to one another and also, to the pursuit of full ordination suggests a communion with nature.

Similarly at Timiou Stravrou, the natural environment merges with the monastic community and Sister Erini made sure to point out foliage in the mountains that has organically taken the form of a cross (See Image 6). Since the nuns only noticed this phenomenon after
establishing the monastery, they consider it what Mircea Eliade would term as a “hierophany” or “the manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object” (Eliade, 1957, 11), which possesses the power to bless the community. In the Theravada community as well, this communion with nature informs the experience of the bhikkhunis, specifically in their support of legitimizing full ordination for women. When Venerable Suvijjana received her novice ordination, marking the first “going forth” for a novice in the Theravada tradition in North American, Ayya explained that “there were suitably auspicious signs like weather phenomena.” She continued, “There was this breeze and these rare kinds of clouds and then around the same time of the ordination there was this streak of lightning that swept across the coast and it came down in about 1,000 places. We actually did not see it ourselves, but we hear about it on the news later.” Across traditions, these communities of “sisters” are mindful of natural phenomenon that act as qualifiers for their union.

In a more controversial context, the bhikkhunis at the hermitage navigated political strife within their traditional practice, specifically through the practice of offering the merit of one’s practice14. While still living at a different monastic community with both men and women, this bhikkhuni or “Ayya X” was invited to a bhikkhuni ordination. Unsure of how her Bhante (“teacher”) would react, Ayya X went to the ordination, however under the pretenses of a spiritual retreat. Yet, when her teacher did discover the truth, he forgave her and even lauded her support of the progress in equal rights. However, the situation quickly grew sour; since the ordination had been organized amidst dissent and clear disapproval of a number of conservative monastics, the consequences were stark for some — a Thai monk who supported this ordination

14 For the purposes of sharing this anecdote, names of specific bhikkhunis have been removed as per request by the hermitage community.
was excommunicated for the believing his obligations to the Dhamma and Vinaya's essence of female equality and not the Thai state's convention of disallowing female ordination

Therefore, it is foreseeable that after being contacted by a well-known conservative monk, Ayya X's Bhante chose to punish her for her decision, which included the traditional ‘silent treatment’ imposed on a monastic who lies to their teacher. However, this punishment extended beyond the stipulated time and grew unfair and discriminatory. Another bhikkhuni Ayya “Y,” after learning of this abuse of the Vinaya's rules, yielded the power of “spiritual posse” creatively to combat this blatant prejudice. Drawing from the network of bhikkhunis (and also a few supportive bhikkhus), Ayya Y contacted her fellow sisters from different countries who offered the merit of their practice for the reconciliation between Ayya X and her Bhante. Thus, the everyday transfer of merit — practiced within the yurt for midday dana offerings and arises from spiritual practices — was then transferred to a broader stage. Now, when Ayya Y spoke with the Bhante and explained the bhikkhunis who graciously offered their merit for the reconciliation, he of course, in the wake of this now publicized disagreement, subsequently reconciled with Ayya X. However needless to say, Ayya X chose to leave her community.

15 For some time at the hermitage, I struggled with the bhikkhunis’ activism together with the practice’s cultivation of equanimity. When I asked Ayya T, she explained the balance in terms of evaluating the “essence” of the Dhamma and the “conventions” of what is practiced: “It doesn’t mean that in terms of the Buddhist teaching we just opt out, it’s not just about opt out. The part about not being so attached definitely is there. But it is about how to be calm, how to make our mind well, how to be peaceful with seeing how things are is definitely there, but doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be active in identifying and reducing causes of suffering, internally and externally or doing things that are beneficial and developing things that are beneficial that lead to personal and social welfare... There are so many things going on right now that are difficult, unjust, difficult, suffering and I’m not going to be able to myself be able to address them, engage all of them, assuage all of them. I cannot expect myself to. I am not God and also don’t wish to be. So, how to see and know and make peace with the way things are is one aspect and how to engage in as much as we can see and know how to in a proactive way is another aspect. Those are the two aspects that are conjoined, the essence and the convention. Those two get conjoined in unique excellence in the Buddha and his teaching. You could just take one part, but they become unbalanced if you take only one.” The Buddha spoke of “essence and convention uniquely coming together in the completeness and purity of the holy life he expounded” (Sattam sabyanjanam kevala-paripunnam parisuddham brahma-cariyam pakasesi) as one of the hallmarks of his Sasana.
Thus, monastic life is no exception to the political strife outside its gates and is just as easily susceptible to spoil. In the wake of such political struggle, there is a practical power and definite application of consolidating the merits of each other’s spiritual practices. Ayya Y assured me that her methods were far from “so radical” since she considers dedicating one’s merit as a daily practice within the community: “In terms of dedication, whenever I offer merit, it as a compassionate means to open a staff for beneficent interrelationships. That is how it is ordinarily put into practice for me so it is not such a big leap.” This power of sisterhood emerges in Ayya X’s reflections on the conflict, “I knew I had the sisterhood behind me.”

From an interreligious perspective, in this conflict, Ayya Y embodies the boldness of the 9th century Byzantine’s St. Kassia who wrote, “I hate silence, when it is time to speak! / I hate the one who conforms to all ways” (Tripolitis, 1991, 111). Among male Orthodox hymnodists, St. Kassiani is a rare find as the only female hymnographer whose work remains a feature of the contemporary liturgy. The Orthodox Church liturgical books contain roughly 23 of her hymns, including the *Troparion of Kassiani* or the Hymn of Kassiani, which is sung on the evening of Holy Tuesday. During my stay at Agion Panton, the story of St. Kassiani and specifically, the tense verbal exchange with Emperor Theophilos surfaced in many conversations.

At the bride-show of Theopilos, a tradition used by men for choosing a bride for heirs to the throne, Kassiani was a contestant: “The emperor Theophilos said to the astounded Kassia, ‘Through a woman trickled forth the Baser things.’ With modesty, she retorted, ‘But also through a woman gush forth the better things’” (Sherry, 2011, 16). Here, the tense of the Greek verbs reveals Kassiani’s theological competence; whereas “trickled” (απρόνη) suggests that a

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16 When she founded her own monastery in Constantinople, following the practice in the Byzantine Church for a nun’s monastic name to begin with the same letter as her given name, her name became Kassiani after her monastic patron, the 5th century monk John Cassian.
moment has past, the Virgin Mary’s capacity to birth Jesus “gushes” (πηγαζει), and therefore “remains ongoing” (Sherry, 2011, 17).

Just as Ayya Y’s solution emerges from within the traditional frameworks of her practice, Kassiani’s sharp remark to the Emperor manipulates language and incorporates a reference to the venerated Mother, the Theotokos, to assert her status as a woman, which is recognized by the Sisters of Agion Panton. When Sister Theonymphi defined ascetic pursuits as “running to something” rather than “running from something [i.e. Jesus],” she alluded to the bold hymnographer: “Even St. Kassiani, she wasn’t running from rejection or something. The story tells how she wanted to pursue monastic life even before the bride-show.” Shortly afterwards, while we walked to the chapel for evening compline, Gerontisa added, “One of my friends from seminary would always say that Theophilos could not handle a bold woman like her anyways.”

Though Kassiani single-handedly rejected marriage, the Sisters also recognize her for her pursuit of the ascetic life within the community that she founded. Later, the section “The Unseeded Womb” in Chapter 5 will demonstrate how the role of the Theotokos as bearer of Jesus that is recognized by St. Kassiani garners great significance for the Sisters of Agion Panton; their exegesis interestingly deviates from the traditional memorialization of the Virgin Mary’s womb as something more than human.

II. TIL DEATH DO US PART

Sometimes I play with your charms, one by one, like a komboloi
sometimes I thread them, sob by sob, into a morroloi.

— Yannis Ritsos, *Epitaphios*, VIII.8

In *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature*, Gail Holst-Warhaft explains that rather than the state, the Orthodox Church has attempted to control lament in Christian Greece. Published in 1936, this excerpt by the Greek poet Ritsos chronicles the
oscillation of Mary’s emotions at Christ’s funeral. Along with “an immediacy and a poignancy in the rhyming of the lines’ ending, the personal loss is captured by the *komboloi*, the string of identical beads used to pace one’s prayers. At once she is “enumerating his charms” and then, “stringing them into a dirge” (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, 146). This reference possesses a particular resonance not only because of its use by the Sisters at both Timiou Stravrou and Agion Panton, but for its characterization of female laments (“Μοιρόλοι” or *Moiroloi* meaning “funeral lament”) as patterned and purposeful. Within a Greek Orthodox context, this section will argue that women in community embody a “different voice that refuses to view death in terms of separation, rupture, and transcendence, but instead emphasizes continuity, connectedness, and enduring relations between the dead and the living” (Ohnuma, 2012, 211).

Specifically within a Soto Zen context, Jeff Wilson’s *Mourning the Unborn Dead* provides an account of how contemporary women in Japan an American deal with loss by adapting a Buddhist ritual, *mizuko kuyo*, which is a ceremony for abortion and miscarried fetuses. At Shasta Abbey, this importance of death rituals materialized within my first eight hours on the property when Rev. Kodo invited me to visit a funeral for a lay person’s cat named “Rusty Dusty.” Along with a cemetery for animals, there is an ever-present stress on proper death rites: to the right and left of the main altar in the meditation hall, small figurines sit with personal items of the dead and once Rev. Kodo abandoned her placed in the audience at a *dharma* (Sanskrit) talk to go bury a bird that a lay woman noticed outside the hall’s doors. However, in the Greek Orthodox context, laments, emotions and death rituals as a means to bridge this world and the next is located at the heart of women’s spirituality.

As Warhaft describes, “Men and women both weep in these societies, but while men’s weeping tends to be inarticulate, it is women who seem to be able to turn weeping into a
controlled, often contemplative lament,” which anthropologist and linguist Steven Feld’s describes as “tears becom[ing] ideas” (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, 16). First, in contemporary Calverton, NY and then in Byzantium, women’s laments and participation in death rituals become the sustenance to continue bridging the living and the dead. Specifically in the Greek Orthodox tradition, the story of Sister Ipomoni who inspired the founding of Agion Panton will first testify to the power of sisterhood and monastic kind, which is underscored in death rituals. Then, tracing the hagiographies of St. Xene and St. Macrina and specifically, the laments of their spiritual sisters, will demonstrate a continuity from the past to the present in how women’s tears and laments provide continuity and serve as a means to venerate.

From Cyprus to Calverton.

Loyalty to one’s sisterhood over and above family comes to fruition in the real life story of Sister Ipomoni of Agion Panton, marked in the arrangements of her burial after her passing. Then, the entourages of St. Xene and St. Macrina in Lives of the Spiritual Mothers serve as strong testaments to this “bearing” between sisters that Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi describe, which is further emphasized in death rituals.

Though no longer with the community of Agion Panton since her passing in 2010, Sister Ipomoni served as the catalyst of this monastic sisterhood. Born Chrystalla Petropoulou in Cyprus in 1917, the meaning of her monastic name — “endurance” — captures the obstacles that postponed her eventual renunciation. While still in Cyprus as a young woman, deaths in her family and the country’s political instability stunted her pursuits; once in American in 1997, after meeting Rev. Fr. Vaselios Govits and his Presvytera Christine, she shared her aspirations to pursue monastic life. Thus, along with the couple, Sister Ipomoni’s two blood sisters contributed to the funds to purchase the property and construct the monastery. However, shortly after this,
Ms. Petropoulou suffered a mild stroke which left her wheelchair-bound and therefore, impeded in her spiritual pursuits. Still recognizing the need of a monastic community in Long Island, Fr. Vaselios and Presvytera Christine brought the monastery to completion, despite the absence of monastics.

After Fr. Govits approached Fr. Gerasimos Makris in 2008, with the blessing of the Archdiocese in 2009, Fr. Gerasimos sent two of his spiritual children, Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi, to the monastery. Accepting an elderly and especially, sick woman into the folds of the Agion Panton sisterhood, which is a practice most monasteries try to avoid, speaks aptly to the “bearing” of each other’s burdens since one of the Sisters took care of Ipomoni at all times. In April 2010, Sister Ipomoni was finally tonsured and then, passed away six months later in October. Though she was originally buried beside her actual sisters who supported her pursuits of monasticism, Sister Ipomoni was promptly removed from her family’s plot once the monastery obtained a license to bury on the property. This insistence that she be buried not with her biological sisters and instead, with her spiritual kin affirms the importance in entering the after life with one’s spiritual family, or to borrow the language of combat often used in hagiographical material, to ‘cross the victory line and win the battle.’ In The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers, Theodora of Aigina is too buried with the other nuns and “those whom she struggled and labored with for the Lord” (The Lives, 1991, 361).

III. ST. XENE AND ST. MACRINA

In the hagiographies of St. Xene and St. Macrina, the spiritual daughters of these women use their laments as vehicles for communal grief and remaining tied to their “sisters.” Through their weeping, they honor the noble qualities of their spiritual mothers, and thus exhibit the power of tears to become ideas, specifically here theologically sound ones. As Gail Holst-
Warhaft writes, such “female lamenter[s] [can] articulate the inarticulate, forming a bridge between the living and the dead that is recognized by the community” (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, 9). In a contemporary context, Gerontisa Foteini acknowledges this power of lament through her particular interpretation of women at the base of the Christ’s cross and also, in her observations of how women of the lay community continue to sustain this bridge between the living and the dead through *Kolyva* and Saturday of the Souls.

**Transgressive tears.**

From the opening of the narrative, Eusebia (later tonsured St. Xene) is not alone in her ascetic pursuits and “schemes with her trustworthy maid servants” (*The Lives*, 1991, 59) who “collectively agreed” (*The Lives*, 1991, 60) to pursue asceticism. Therefore, our introduction to St. Xene immediately affirms the importance of monastic kin and spiritual companionship. Similar to the bhikkhunis with Mahaprajapti and those at Aranya Bodhi, these spiritual friends synchronize their exterior appearances as the sisters “donned men’s clothing...both weeping and rejoicing” (*The Lives*, 1991, 60). Also, echoing the parental dissatisfaction (though initial) that characterized the narratives of contemporary women like Sister Theonymphi and Sister Theoktisti (referred to in the Preface and whose parents did not speak to her for 12 years), St. Xene’s parents too presented obstacles to her spiritual life. In fact, her two parents “launch an extensive investigation in every convent to find her and bring her back home” (*The Lives*, 1991, 61). Therefore, when she “ask[s] her companions to conceal her” (*The Lives*, 1991, 61), these adopted sisters partake in the evasion of her parents and thus, adopt her burden as their own — again, echoing Gerontisa and Theonymphi’s “bearing each other’s suffering.” Once successful in evading her parents, St. Xene says, “forasmuch as I am a stranger this day I am in exile from my homeland and my beloved parents” (*The Lives*, 1991, 61). This reliance and dependence on one’s
adopted kin is affirmed particularly in death, as similarly to Ipomoni, adopted kin become one’s companions in the afterlife. Leading up to St. Xene’s death, her posse ensures their continued relationship with her with their tears.

Rather than a transcendence of bereavement or fracture in community, St. Xene’s community makes their bond to her concrete by mimicking the tears that were part of her ascetic practices. Since she “guides” her “fellow-slaves,” her example is a critical one; her own spiritual relationship with God is equally tear-filled and emotional: “she supplicated the Lord with tears” and “rejoiced exceedingly, and weeping, she fell at his feet” (The Lives, 1991, 62-63). They inherit St. Xene’s spiritual program of “prostrations and prayers,” in which she would often “spend the entire evening weeping while she prayed (The Lives, 1992, 63). Such coupling of ascetic practice and emotions recalls mealtimes at Agion Panton when Sister Martha would regularly begin choke up on the brink of tears as she read from the communal reading book, “Everyday Saints” by the Russian Orthodox Archimandrite Tikhon.

In her struggles with this “immaterial and strange” conduct of life, tears naturally accompanied St. Xene’s other ascetic practices: “When the spiritual warfare was relaxed, she would eat once every three days. When contended in warfare, she would eat dry bread once weekly. She never partook of other sources of nourishment, such as wine, oil greens, pulse or other cooked foods. Indeed, the little biscuit which she dipped in water was mingled with her tears and the ash from the censer” (The Lives, 1991, 63; emphasis added). As the text notes, her tears mimic the Prophet David who wrote: “I ate ashes like bread, and my drink I mingled with weeping” (Ps. 101:10). Thus, the vita suggests that tears belong to a lineage of ascetic practices passed down from the prophet to St. Xene and to her “sisters.” Also, as it mixed with the consecrated wine of the Eucharist, her tears too appropriate a sense of sanctity.
Even though St. Xene abandons her biological family and never reestablishes these ties, the text does suggest that particular love persists even in asceticism. As she prepares for her death and thus, addresses her sisterhood, Mother Xene seems to have rubbed off on her nuns as they “wept inconsolably for their orphanhood.” However, amidst the general grief, the two maidservants indicate their particular love—“more than all the rest”—with weeping; their grief is very particular. Again, similar to Sister Ipomoni, it is in the passing of one that a sisterhood reinscribes their devotion and in final her supplication to God before death, St. Xene exhibits such social equality into her own sisterhood: “...remember my two fellow-slaves who were with me in the world and in the escape...Grant us, O Lord, to remain inseparable forever” (The Lives, 1991, 67). Not only does she ask to be tied to these two particular women, but her maidservants have now—in the spiritual warfare—become her equals and remain “inseparable.”

Yet, even her command to “cease” their wailing does not seem grave since the text quickly notes her “tear-filled prayer” to God that follows. Again, her communication to God consistently integrates weeping and tears. Thus, similar to the bhikkhunis with Mahaprajapti and of Aranya Bodhi, this group of female companions follows the advice of St. Kassia—“I hate silence, when it is time to speak!” (Tripolitis, 1991, 111). Far from an inarticulate sobbing, the women’s weeping is more “contemplative” and similar to the “controlled” characteristics of women’s weeping that Gail Holst-Warhaft notes. Incorporating weeping into her ascetic practice, St. Xene reveals her “most marvelous characteristic” by the ever-present “tears in her eyes, as though she were a murderess, harlot or perverse person” (The Lives, 1991, 65). Here then, what Feld would identify as the idea produced by St. Xene’s “tears” is the character of a monastic: humility. In fact, when I first arrived at Timiou Stavrou and sat with Gerontisa to discuss my stay, she explained that “humility” is the most critical characteristic to be developed as a
monastic. Addressing God, Kassiani too uses emotions in her supplications: “Receive the fountains of my tears, O Thou Who didn’t bow the heavens by Thine ineffable kenosis” (378). Surging and gushing forth, this abundance possesses a power to communicate and testify to her devotion.

In place of St. Xene’s aversion to her family and her parents as an obstacle to her spiritual pursuits, the 4th century gem St. Macrina from the Cappadocian family merged blood kin with her spiritual and adopted monastic family. Described by Anna Silvas in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* as a “domestic ascetic movement,” Macrina leads her family as “an upper-class *matronae* of [her] household” in a shared commitment to pursuing a life of Christian piety (Limberis, 2011, 173-175). To be discussed further in Chapter 5, Macrina notably becomes the Gerontisa of her mother and “provided [Emilia] with an impressive leadership to the same goal” (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 167). Fusing political and social power as a “wealthy [matron] over [a] large household,” Macrina makes the “life of Christian piety the consummate focus of [her] life” (Limberis, 2011, 176).

However, her *vita* problematizes the smooth transition from natal to adopted kin, which is romanticized in displays of weeping in St. Xene’s narrative. Though different in the motivation for its inception, St. Macrina’s sisterhood intersects with St. Xene in its characterization of the female voice as enduring and encouraging connection rather than rupture and transcendence. Unlike St. Xene whose own weeping sets an example for her daughters, St. Macrina is described as consistently encouraging the abandonment of such emotional expressions. Espoused by Macrina’s brother and hagiographer, Gregory of Nyssa, her Spartan sentiments character her as an idealized devotee who has learned restraint. Exceeding the respect usually characterizing a funeral encomium, Gregory’s hagiobiography, *The Life of Macrina* lauds and praises Macrina as
someone for whom this “natural designation” of woman is not fit “for one who went beyond the nature of a woman” (The Life of Macrina, 1967, 163) However, the hagiobiography must be read with an eye towards its authorship who is susceptible to the “male ventriloquism” that Reiko Ohnuma describes in Ties that Bind. Originally coined by Bernard Faure, this term describes the adoption by women of a “patriarchal” voice “not in the sense that these women have been subordinated or suppressed by men, but, rather, in the sense that they have adopted without question the universal and abstract values typical of patriarchal, male-dominated religions” (Ohnuma, 2012, 50).

For example, Gregory praises Macrina’s community and its leveling of socioeconomic differences, in which “the same food and lodging and all other things one needs in daily life, and there was no difference between her life and theirs” (The Life of Macrina, 1967, 170). Even further, the community’s “wealth consisted in their poverty and the shaking off of all worldly abundance like dust from the body...they were not occupied with the concern of this life” (The Life of Macrina, 1967, 171). Yet, with this, Gregory fails to give apt attention to the privilege of his Cappadocian family who incorporated their privilege with its aristocratic ideals of “patronage, statesmanship, social networking, and maintenance of a good reputation,” which when coupled with their education in “pubic speaking civic deportment, and negotiating political affairs,” provided them with the means to publicize and inspire with their ascetic pursuits (Limberis, 2011, 97). In Body and Society, Peter Brown notes the transition from the year 350 when the “growth of forms of heroic asceticism, associated with extreme self-mortification, with physical danger, with mobility, and with the loss of conventional social identity” tended to drain prestige away from pious women” (Brown, 1988, 261-2). In 4th century Rome however, Brown notes that female asceticism grew out of the Christian household and women with ascetic
vocations emerged in upper-class circles. With such shifts in social patterns, along with the aristocratic status of the Cappadocian family, Gregory of Nyssa's narrative must be met with a due healthy skepticism.

In her spiritual life, Macrina may be dry and not wet, but her "sisters" and brother mourn her 'wetly'. For this daughter who becomes a spiritual mother as a holy virgin, she broadens her spiritual community by guiding both blood and adopted kin simultaneously in asceticism, but particular relationships are also valued in her vita. Her posse's orchestration of this almost musical performance is significant in its reverberations, one notably being Gregory's inability to resist the power of his particular affection for his sister. Blending with "lamentation," the maiden's psalm-singing possesses a definite power as it "resound[s] through the place,"

"spread[s] about on all sides" as people then flock and "began to rush in so that the vestibule was not large enough to hold them" (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 186). Producing overflow, the "men and women [who] broke in on the psalmody with their cries of grief" seem to resist Gregory's efforts to arrange and organize the ceremony:

Separating the flow of people according to sex, I put women with the choir of nuns and the men in the ranks of the monks. I arrange for he singing to come rhythmically an harmoniously from the group, blended well as in choral singing with the common responses of all. (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 186)

However, lamentation overcomes Gregory's efforts and "everyone wept in response to the wailing of the maidens" (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 187); thus, the women embody trendsetters of emotional displays. When Macrina is buried, Gregory describes her body as placed "beside our mother fulfilling the common prayer of both of them" (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 188); the "our" communicates the biological bond between him, Macrina and Emilia that will continue, as it did in their spiritual lives when all were living. Finally, before leaving the funeral scene, Gregory enacts a final display of particular devotion, which borrow
from the maiden’s style: “When everything was accomplished and it was necessary to go back, I feel upon the tomb and kissed the dust and retraced my steps, downcast and tearful, thinking of the good of which my life had been deprived...When I had stopped crying...” (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 188). His body’s collapse onto the tomb, his caresses and crying mark his desire to express his particular relationship with Macrina rather than the fulfill the aspirational ideal he espoused earlier with his praise of his sister’s refusal to weep and her “lofty understanding that had been tried by the different attacks of grief” (The Life of Saint Macrina, 1967, 173).

“Something to be said”

“There is certainly something to be said about tears,” said Gerontisa Foteini during our first formal interview, as she reflected on the Crucifixion scene. Though “Christian fathers may have diverted the subversive potential of private mourning, controlled by women, into the central focus of a ritual controlled by male priests in which the Virgin’s lament for hear dead son becomes a symbolic substation for the worshippers’ personal grieving,” (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, 6) Gerontisa recognizes the Theotokos’ emotions as not a symbol but an example. Describing the women’s “hands in the air, their hands are open, [their] tears coming down,” Gerontisa believes their display is one to be valued and mimicked. Reflecting on contemporary women’s roles in regards to such burial and funeral rites, Gerontisa explained how women of her community continue to sustain this bridge between the living and the dead through Kolyva and Saturday of the Souls. For her, these women serve as the “engines of the Church” through their offerings of kolyva (the traditional memorial repast), which seems to Gerontisa to be something women only offer. Recently passed when I visited, during the Saturday of the Souls, which recognizes those who have passed, the only parishioners present are often women and even further, not one man
“gave [them] a list of ancestors.” Thus, in her contemporary parish, Gerontisa identifies women as instilling these connections with particular members of the dead; further, their offerings of kolyva cultivate these bridges for the community as a whole.

Thus, although critical to monastic growth, these spiritual “sisterhoods” are bolstered by rituals that, however naturalized, are still fraught with traces of family ties that persist well beyond novitiate stages. Now, Chapter 4 and 5 will explore these strains of familial bonds that remain.
From Blood to Adopted

Such monastic valuing of Koinonia and the Sangha, along with the resulting kalyanamitta and intimacy between Sisters and bhikkhunis, characterize the idealized transition from one’s biological family to a more perfect communion in the spiritualized family in the monastery. However, this passage from blood to adopted kinship is fraught with remains of family ties.

On my final day with the Sisters of Agion Panton, I accompanied the four to a fundraiser hosted by the parish of the Cathedral of St. Paul in Hempstead, NY. Many of the Sisters consider the parish priest Father Luke Melackrinos to be their “spiritual uncle,” since he also studied under Fr. Gerasimos at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and adopted him as his own “spiritual father.” At the table where I was seated for dinner, this spiritual family expanded as I met more of Fr. Gerasimos’ “spiritual children.”

Terminology in the Theravada tradition equals in its construction of family relationships and Buddhist female monastics are reverentially called “mothers” whether Maechee (“mother recluse”), Loung Mae (“Venerable Mother”) in Thailand, Dasa Sila Mata (“Mothers of Ten Virtues”) in Sri Lanka or Mataji (“Reverend Mother”) in India. When speaking about her kalyanamitta Ajahn Maha Somchai, whom I described in Chapter 1 who visited the hermitage with his discouraged city monk companion, Ayya T described him as her “uncle” if monastic relations were “compared to a family tree.” Therefore, this his reappropriation of familial nomenclature runs through Aranya Bodhi as well.

Boundaries and lines grow fuzzier as nuns share not only a new adopted kin, but also absorb each other’s familial ties and develop close relationship with them. Sister Theonymphi joined me and Gerontisa while we did chores after being on the phone with Theonymphi’s aunt and Theonymphi’s father (birth father) endearingly calls his daughter “T” and Gerontisa “G.”
Once, when Theonymphi apologized to her father for sharing with Gerontisa a difficulty he was experiencing, he said, “Oh no, that’s good, she will have some good advice.” Nuns acquire new spiritual relationships with the women within these communities, but also relationships with families that have clearly not been abandoned. Practices for naming novices, creating personal devotional spaces and routines of prayer and metta demonstrate that rather than adopting spiritual kin “at the expense of” or “as a supplement to” biological kinship, in the style of the Cappadocians, the Sisters maintain both types of ties (101).

The aim of this Chapter is to make palpable the complexities of this transition from the blood to the adopted, which is evident the naming of new monastics, creation of personal altar spaces and the respective prayer and metta practices. Such a seeming powerlessness against the persistence of familial ties speaks to the larger and perhaps, deemed more dangerous, ties to one’s mother and her nurturing womb that I will explore in Chapter IV and V.

I. A FATHER’S REQUEST

In The Scent of Holiness: Lessons from a women’s monastery, one of the books the Sisters of Agion Panton gave me from their bookshelf, Constantina R. Palmer documents her visits to a number of Greek Orthodox monasteries. Describing the grace —filled atmosphere of monasteries in Greece for an Orthodox audience, Palmer’s stylistic aims differ from this paper. After reading aloud to Sister Theonymphi, Palmer’s suggestion that the nuns face “are extraordinarily young-looking...a naturally pleasant appearance that has long passed away from our contemporary world [since] their faces hold traces of he purity that dwells in their hearts ” (Palmer, 2012, 263-4). When I asked what Sister Theonymphi thought of the claim, she giggled kindly and said, “Oh no, we definitely all know how ugly we are inside.” Palmer often seems to oversimplify the memories of and commitments to life before the monastery, politics within
communities and relationships with lay communities. Describing commitments before and after renunciation, she writes, “Instead of family, [the nuns] have saints; instead of husbands, Christ; instead of friends, each other; instead of children, virtues; instead of paychecks, prayer ropes; instead of outward beauty, internal purity; instead of perfume, myrrh; instead of wealth, holy icons and relics.” Such an explicit division proves insufficient in capturing the continuity rather than rift between lay and monastic life. As the women of *Lives of the Spiritual Mothers* and contemporary women of these communities reveal, the two phases overlap rather than exist separately.

For monks and nuns alike, there exists the assumption that one yearns to fulfill the ideal of cutting off the natural bonds with family in order to dedicate one’s life loyally to a divine figure. Yet, even the seemingly strictest adherents to monastic ideals, such as the monks of Mt. Athos in the Greek Orthodox tradition, do not cheat a little. After evening compline, the Sisters and I sat together to watch the 60 Minutes segment about Mt. Athos. Gerontisa explained that there was a part that may interest me in particular. Touring the mountainous peninsula in northeastern Greece where Greek Orthodox monks in 20 monasteries adhere to athonite practices, the show’s producer Michael Karzis spoke with Fr. Iakovos who has been living at the Simonospetras monastery for 25 years. For a few minutes, their conversation focused on the ideal of cutting of all ties to the outside world and specifically, to family. Ill and with only a few days to live, Fr. Iakovos’ father called to request his son visit him one last time before he passed:

*Karzis*: A reasonable request?

*Fr. Iakovos*: From a father I think so. My response was negative though.

*Karzis*: You didn’t go?

*Fr. Iakovos*: I didn’t go. I didn’t go because of the fact that monastics do not go to funerals of their relatives or their friends. They remain here at the monastery.
Karzis: When your father asked you to come see him one last time and you said no, is there any feeling of "I am letting my father down?"

Fr. Iakovos: Not at all. I know we are going to see each other in paradise one day.

With this final confident assertion, Karzis shakes his head ever so slightly in awe. Though such a verbal commitment should be respected for the discipline to which it aspires, there is a Chapter missing in this story. In fact, Fr. Iakovos in fact visited his father each year in Massachusetts and would also make a visit to the Sisters’ school of Holy Cross. Thus, even at Mt. Athos, this ability “to let go of memories of one’s past life” is complicated.

Such an assertion of a separation from family recalls Ayya Sodinna’s assertion that she considers her lay life and monastic life as “entirely separate.” Raised in Sri Lanka and practicing the tradition since her youth, Ayya pursued monastic life only once she considered her responsibilities as a mother to be complete. However, as Chapter 5 will explore, Ayya’s role as mother does not intimate this sort of closure and instead, her particular relationships persevere with her children and grandchildren, with whom she “Skypes” with regularly. The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers recognizes this tension in abandoning family in the hagiography of St. Euphrosyna whom the devil targets; he tempts this “single tender maiden” by “recall[ing]...the love her father” and thus, parental love is coupled with “the desire of the betrothed, the glory of the world, wealth and pleasures of the flesh” (429). In the real lives of these monastics, a chief characteristic of the lifestyle is not obliterating natural bonds to family, but rather an integration of the latter into a newly acquired family.

II. SAINTS AS RELATIVES AND RELATIVES AS SAINTS

This section borrows its title from Vasiliki M. Limberis' Architects of Piety, which chronicles the members of the 4th century family Cappadocian family — aristocratic, educated and rich — who were quite the rebels; rather than perpetuating the family line, the kingroup
pursued Christian asceticism. “Architects” of their spiritual life, the family never surrendered their blood ties to one another, and in fact, justified their distinction by “memorializing” by laying claim to the martyrs as their own spiritual kin. In emotive funeral panegyrics, values of the saints were instilled into the lives of the deceased family members; therefore, a funeral encomium served as the means to sanctify a family member’s life. With this, the Cappadocians moved “seamlessly from the inner sanctum of their families to the public sphere of the Church” (Limberis, 2011, 99). Similar to the naming process at Timiou Stravrou, in his hagiobiography to his sister Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa (one of the Cappadocian sons), writes of his sister’s true namesake. Describing a vision his mother Emila while pregnant with Macrina, Gregory writes:

When the time came in which she was to be freed from her pain by giving birth to the child, she fell asleep and seemed to be holding in her hands the child still in her womb, and a person of greater than human shape and form appeared to be addressing the infant by the name of Thecla (There was a Thecla of much fame among virgins.) After doing this and invoking her as a witness three times, he disappeared from sight and gave ease to her paint so that she awoke from her sleep and she saw the ream realized. That, then, was her secret name. It seems to me that the one who appeared was not so much indicating how the child should be named, but foretelling the life of the child and intimating that she would choose a life similar to that of her namesake. (*Life of Macrina*, 1967, 164)

Thus, in her mother’s vision, Macrina joins the ranks of martyred saints while remaining a valued member of her own bloodline. For their own benefit, the family appropriates two other famous saints at their own relatives: first, Gregory Thaumaturgus who Basil (one of the Cappadocian sons) claims as his “spiritual father” by invoking his grandmother’s connection to the saint along with a connection to the saint’s homeland of Pontus; and secondly, the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia whose construction of a shrine (where her family would eventually be buried) defines her sponsorship and creates a connection with the Martyrs in a “material way” (Limberis, 2011, 136-7). Thus, with their political status and aristocratic wealth, blend the
boundaries between consanguineous and adoptive kin by claiming holy men and women as part of their own lineage.

In these monastic communities, this adoption of hagiographies as part-and-parcel of one’s own familial history actually mirrors the naming traditions. Though perhaps not as blatant as the Cappadocian adoption of “saints as relatives and relatives as saints,” the nuns in much the same way adopt hagiographies through this tradition of receiving a new name. At Timiou Stavrou, as a feature of its particular Typikon, each Sister upon entering the community after her given novice period (usually lasting 1 to 3 years) gives Gerontisa one or two names she has in mind. Those suggestions, written on small pieces of paper, are then placed together with a number of names Gerontisa has chosen. Prior to the tonsuring ceremony, the Sister draws from the heap and then, for the first time hears her name spoken by Gerontisa.

This naming process is interesting for a number of reasons. First is the conscious cultivation of a sisterhood by the monastery’s rule that each Sister must choose a name of a woman, but even more that each be a saint who is not very well known: Nicodemus, Methodia and Marcella. Thus, again, to take the road less traveled. Along with her own ‘naming story,’ Sister Erini illustrated another recurring feature, the degree of providence that often weaves itself into these ceremonies. One of the most memorable is the story of Sister Marcella.

When I left the monastery in the community’s truck to be driven down back towards Loutraki, though curious and anxious to hear Sister Marcella’s story, I began to question the timing of my inquiry; as her enthusiasm grew with her own narrative and thus, her foot growing heavier on the gas pedal, I found myself gripping onto the seat wondering if I would make it to my yiayia alive. Nevertheless, her story is a good one. Upon becoming a novice, at her naming ceremony, Sister Marcella heard Gerontisa announce her monastic name. Suddenly, her mother
in the pews began to weep. Unbeknownst to her at the time, her mother’s emotional response was due to the family’s history with the name. Living near a seaport as a young child, Sister Marcella accompanied her father on his fishing port. Shortly, the waters became rough and the young girl and her brother were thrown overboard. Praying fervently, her father remembers seeing St. Marcella save his drowning children from the waters and return them back to safety on his boat. Upon returning home however, the father told only his wife what he had seen and to that day, humbled by the event, the mother had prayed reverently to the saint.

Such a story, one of many I heard at Timiou Stavrou, inscribes this naming process with a sense of fate. Perhaps less thrilling, the tonsure ceremony of Sister Tetiani also involved a mother’s tears and a family history. Though her mother always desired to name her daughter Tetiani, her father insisted on Natalia. Much to the mother’s surprise since she had never told this to her daughter, Sister Tetiani had chosen the name because she had always really liked it. Her mother cried at the ceremony and they found out that her mother always wanted to name. In this sense, the donning of a new name in this transition into a new life is naturalized by echoing the naming of a child and gifting of a namesake.

However, not all instances of renaming provide continuity from one life phase to the next, and also boast such sentimentality. When speaking of her tonsure ceremony, during which she received her new name “Theonymphi,” Sister Theonymphi recalls her father’s initial negative response to her choice to become a nun. Why was he so disappointed? She would no longer have his grandmother’s name; therefore, his disappointment springs from a breaking of sorts of the tie between Theonymphi and her paternal great-grandmother. At the end of the ceremony, before filing out of the Church, each attendant approaches the nun — as if wishing well a bride and groom — and says, “May you be pleasing to God and to man.” Her father,
waiting until everyone left the Church, expressed his disappointment. Thus, this monastic name change speaks to the emotional ties associated with names in the context of familial ties. Discussed later in Chapter 5, in spite of his initial disappointment, Sister Theonymphi and her after actually became much closer when she joined the monastic community, which echoes other nuns' experiences with reconciliation with family after their ordination.

III. PERSONALIZED ALTARS

To whatever extent a monastic's perfected divestment of familial relationships may be admired in the traditional doctrine, it is not a standard that nuns or bhikkunis thoroughly pursue. In all three communities, cultivation of nuns' personal devotional space hints at a spiritual life more deeply informed by familial connections. Most bhikkunis, in their individual kutis, construct personal altars of sorts for meditation and their personal practice. Mimicking each woman who chooses her own area of the woods on the 100-acre property, yet perhaps on a smaller scale, within the bhikkuni’s monastic kuti and laywoman’s tent, a privatized realm is sculpted. When I accompanied Ven. Suvijjana to the kuti of a bhikkhuni who would be returning to the hermitage after a trip from another community, I could not help but notice little polished stones near the fire stove with small inscriptions on them such as "generosity" and "peace," along with a mala at this created sacred space.

At the Abbey during a medicine meal, Rev. Renee — whose gentle disposition complemented her affection for animals — described her altar in her room where she places the small bodies of dead insects and critters whose lives deserve recognition since they are all "sentient beings." Equally encouraged for lay practitioners, such altar spaces, which are used for offering merit or one's meditation practice, possess particular symbolic characteristics: a cup of water represents both the stillness and flow of meditation; flowers embodies an attractive but
fleeting phenomenon; a candle stands for the light of wisdom that dispels ignorance and fear, while illuminating what needs to be done; incense symbolizes the resolve to training since insight alone is not enough; and also a statue of a Buddha.

Echoing this valuing of maintaining a personalization of one’s practice, many of the Sisters brought a few personal items such as icons. Sister Theonymphi told me quite humorously that, as if a fan enchanted by a superstar, she swiped a large poster of the Theotokos following the lay community’s “garage sale” of sorts on behalf of the monastery. Since the Mother of God is her most beloved religious figure, this poster serves as the heart of this devotional space along with other icons in her cell.

A more recent addition to the sisterhood, Sister Maria described her icons and quite striking is the naturalness with which she describes the significance of one in particular: “My son has the same one at school so we pray in front of the same icon, so see, you don’t give [our ties to family] up entirely.” For this embrace of spiritual tools that are rooted in family connections, Sister Maria is not a one-time offender of the Typikon rules. In fact, each day she uses the komboskini, which unlike the prescribed self-made one for monastics upon ordination, that her daughter — Sister Theonymphi — made for her when she became a monastic four years ago. These components of Sister Maria’s individual practice foreshadows not only the ambivalence in dissolving bonds with family, but also one’s specifically between a mother and her child that the latter section of this Chapter and Chapter 5 chronicles in more detail.

IV. CULTIVATING FOR THE WORLD

With her canones, which is her personal program of daily prayers developed by her and Gerontisa and ideally, along with unceasing repetition of the Jesus Prayer, a Sister offers the merit of her practice on behalf of the world. As a means to foster contemplation, this “prayer of
the heart is at the core of the monastic training. Using a style of language associated with warfare, many of the early and late writers of the Philokalia, described the prayer as a “weapon” for combating the passions (Cunningham, 2012, 195).

In the PBS special on Mt. Athos, clips depict monks working with their lips moving almost silently other than a persisting hum of their “unceasing” prayer. However, similar to the model of abandoning family ties professed by the monk, such an ideal is not realized. In each of the three communities, I never encountered a nun who felt she had enough time to practice; however, this does not translate into a desire to be any less engaged with others beyond monastery walls. As I spoke with Gerontisa, she cross-stitched a cover to be used for the Epitaphios for Pascha (Easter) this year, during which she would normally say the Jesus Prayer with every stitch. “There is a part of me that wishes I could be more like Mary instead of Martha and I think that would be so nice to have a menial job picking olives and I could just say the prayer all the time but I also have to be satisfied where God has placed us and sanctify that place.” In fact, before arriving at Agion Panton, Gerontisa and Sister Theonymphi requested with a few others to found a monastery in the city to work with the poorer communities, however the bishop advised them instead to go to Agion Panton.

At times, the audible clicking of the komboskini between the nuns’ fingers provides a tempo for the repetitious verse of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” In the final volumes of the Philokalia, those spiritual writers “induces as state of continuous “mindfulness” of God” (Cunningham, 2012, 196) for spiritual writers whose works appear in the final volumes the Philokalia express the prayer’s role in the hesychastic practice.

17 Insert story of Mary and Martha.
18 With more visitors, the Agion Panton monastery experiences unique struggles. And Gertontisa explained, “So, in many ways, it’s harder to cultivate isihia but it’s where God placed me at this point but maybe one day I will go - I always say that if I am ever given the blessing to retire, I am going to the desert in Mt. Sinai.”
Especially with the encouraged deep breathing and gazing toward the heart and navel, described by Gregory Palamas in the *Philokalia*, the supplication becomes the nucleus of a psychosomatic means of prayer (Cunningham, 2012, 196).

Along with the komboskini, personal prayer is often paired with *metanoia*, which is a reverent physical bowing that is made by making the sign of the cross with the right hand and either bowing at the waist and knees until the hand touched the ground on its final downward stroke or lowering the whole body onto the knees and bowing down fully until the forehead touches the ground. Thus, along with the encouraged focus on the breath and navel, there is also a more palpable use of one’s body in monastic training, which echoes that of the *vipassanā* meditation at the hermitage.

Writing in the late 13th and 14th centuries, Theoliptos of Philadelphia described the bridge built between the individual praying and the divine: “Such are the characteristics of true mindfulness in God. Prayer is the mind’s dialogue with God, in which words of petition are uttered with the intellect riveted wholly on God. (Cunningham, 2012, 196) Therefore, this ideal of continually repeating the Jesus Prayer translates to an uninterrupted dialogue with God.

Though this dialogue may be initiated on an individual, as Gerontisa explained, this prayer possesses a greater power when universalized since “in [the Orthodox] faith, [it is] believe[d] prayer supports the whole world.” Thus, monastery prayer resonates a radiating influence even under a hue of humility: “Without prayer, the world would end. In a way, with our meager, weak prayers, we are not only supporting ourselves but offering something to humanity to.” Quite similarly, the bhikkunis pray for “all sentient beings.” Time and time again, during the *dana* offering when Ayya would give thanks on behalf of the community, she would ask if the donor wished to transfer that merit to a particular individual. Therefore, each day at
noon provided a reminder for the aspirational shift to offering one’s practice to the universal rather than any particular individual community. When one of the Dharma Creek Sisters asked for “the success of her son’s new business,” Ayya smiled, nodding in polite acceptance and then provided slight ‘editing’ when she delivered the actual prayer: “Maybe for whatever to come that will give him a prosperous future.”

Similar to this endearing anecdote about Ayya’s correction, monastics attempts to resolve the tension between private practice and ties to the world. However, this ideal to universalize one’s merit, whether cultivated through prayer or meditation, is muddled with dedications to particular persons, especially family members. Regarding this movement from a nuclear family to a larger spiritual one, Gerontisa admits “the whole world is our family,” yet allows parents and families to be “attached” to monastics, “rightly so, but we try to love everyone with the same love that we love the family we were raised in too.” However, her later comments acknowledge prayer’s usefulness for nuns to addressing those particular relationships. When tracing the morphing of her own relationships with siblings, she normalizes the transition by comparing it one choosing marital relations and a family:

Life and a family changes things. No matter what decision you make. I’m not going to be the same with my brother as we were in high school, but there is still a closeness on a different level because when you pray for people, when you are living the spiritual life, you can feel close to them and offer a lot of love to them.

Here, private holy power connects one to the wider world. With this, Gerontisa suggests that rather than prayer in monastic training becoming a less specific and particularized form of supplication, it in fact translates into greater depth and breadth.

Similar to the material altar spaces in section III “Personalized Altars,” prayer life bares the same balance between private and communal practice and the familial ties that often linger. Along with the clicking komboskini and back-bending metanoia, the physical spaces in the
Timiou Stavrou chapel (See Image 7) create separate alcoves that, as I glanced around during services, provided pockets of privacy into which sisters retreated. Often Sisters tilted their heads downwards and seemed to withdraw inwards, and whether this indicates mere exhaustion or lack of sleep, there is a clear withdrawal inwards that characterizes a nun’s attendance of service as also deeply personal. This carving out of a personal “sacred space” echoes the “ritual construction” of space described by Eliade and echoes the hermitage bhikkunis who lay claim to their own isolated corner of the forest for their distinctive rituals.

For Sister Maria, echoing this particularity in appeals to God and more specifically the prayer of a mother characterizes her continuity in the role as mother through her prayer. The following Chapter, “Ambivalence Towards the Womb and Ties to the Mother” will explore the relevance of motherhood that provides for continuity between lay and monastic life rather than rupture.
Ambivalence Towards the Womb and Ties to the Mother

For this shadow of a son's love for his mother comes from the leaves of that tree with which our parents first clothed themselves in that damnable nakedness. — St. Augustine, Letter 243

In response to the Typikon’s prescription for nuns to “abandon parents,” Sister Theonymphi attempted to naturalize the demand by comparing it not to a violent “cutting off” of past relationships but rather a distancing from family just as when one enters a marital relationship. Nevertheless, as the previous Chapter demonstrated, familial relationships often inform spiritual development rather than exist separately from one’s experiences; a nun’s consanguineous and adopted kin blend and intertwine. Since “one’s mother is generally one’s earliest object of attachment, as well as the focus of a lifelong and intimate personal relationship,” this familial tie in particular becomes the focal point of great ambiguity and complexity for an ascetic’s “display of detachment” (Ohnuma, 2012, 29).

Though in different contexts but sharing similar concerns, there exists an ambiguity in both Greek Orthodox and Theravada Buddhism surrounding the maternal body, whether concentrated in the womb or in the breasts, as a body that represents an exclusive love and mortality. Grappling with this ambivalence towards the mother’s body, fundamental texts in both traditions — Augustine’s letter to Laetus, the Philokalia and St. Helia’s vita, along with the Buddha’s praise Sariputta and Moggallana in “Ten Great Disciples of the Buddha” and the Karaniya Metta Sutta, which all Theravada monastics memorize as novices — attempt to resolve this ambiguity through “virginal motherhood” or in other words a perfecting or spiritualizing to biological motherhood by universalizing it. Specifically, such tensions surface in two maternal

bodies of the respective traditions, Mary or the Theotokos ("God-bearer") in the Greek Orthodoxy and the Buddha's birth mother Maya. However, in conversations literally "sitting around the table" with the sisters of Agion Panton, how they interpret and internalize the Theotokos’ role is significantly different and specifically reorients her womb in the human and therefore, a more accessible realm.

Though the Sisters and bhikkhunis encourage this "metaphorical use of mother-love" (Ohnuma, 2012, 15), however women in all three communities reveal how the attachment with one’s mother is often never wholly abandoned. For both the mother and child in the spiritual life, there are three ways in which complexities arise: when the memory of one’s mother is engaged, in the process of mothering one’s own mother and in the sacrifice of a mother, whether the dedication of her child or in her own pursuit of asceticism. In narratives inherited from these traditions or real stories gathered from the nuns I encountered, the following sections will explore these avenues that are complicated by motherhood.

I. VIRGINAL MOTHERHOOD

Milk of the faith and milk of the dhamma.

Writing as a concerned friend, Saint Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. writes to his companion Laetus and concerned for the latter’s spiritual progress after noticing that he is “carried and dragged by [his] cross instead of carrying and dragging it” (Augustine, 2005, 169). Adhering to the cross by being “crucified and pierced by the nails,” one can therefore claim control over it; however, “with your members loose and free, you might not be able to carry if it resists you” (Augustine, 2005, 169). As representative of the temporal flesh and mortality, one’s biological mother sits at the crux of this allusion to the cross and Laetus’ criticism. Ties to one’s biological mother represent a particular love at the exclusion of others:
After all, by the very fact that a certain woman is your mother, she is of course not mine. Hence this is something temporal and passing, just as you see that it already belongs to the past that she conceived you, that she bore you in her womb, that she gave birth to you, and that she nursed you with milk. (Augustine, 2005, 166; emphasis added)

As Augustine writes, love from a mother “already belongs to the past” or in other words, has been inscribed in a history exclusive to that child, who in this case is not Augustine but rather Laetus; therefore, there is no “common claim” to the mother. Thus, this “manifestation of selfish attachment” at the focal point of Laetus’ critique of biological motherhood echoes that which is also condemned in the canonical Buddhist texts; since “desire, attachment and clinging [are] all negative emotion in Buddhism that keep one bound within the ream of samsara,” mother-love becomes the opposite of the Buddha’s capacity for universal love (Ohnuma, 2007, 98). Thus, since maternal love comes at the exclusion of others (“she is of course not mine”), it interrupts the all-shared and communal spirituality emphasized in Orthodoxy’s koinonia and the Buddhist Sangha, which is foregrounded and further intensified in the three ascetic communities in my study. In the latter section of this passage, with the cutting repetition of “you,” each stage of mothering such as conception, pregnancy, delivery, and later nourishment, is laced with ill intent and equally induce “sluggishness” (Augustine, 2005, 170) into the spiritual practice.

However, Laetus does suggest an alternative to the troublesome mother figure: “Mother Church,” who is also the mother of the biological mother and therefore, bests the latter. This hierarchy is ingrained in what their respective bodies produce: the permanent and ceaseless nourishment of the divine body of Mother Church surpasses the transient bodily womb and milk of the biological mother. With St. Augustine’s imagined substitution of Mother Church for the biological mother, the earlier stages of biological motherhood are spiritualized and made perfect. Unlike the maternal womb and breast milk of the biological mother, Mother Church conceived “both of you [mother and yourself] from Christ; she has been in travail for you with the blood of
martyrs; she has given birth to you into everlasting light; she has fed and feeds you with the milk of faith; and, though she prepares more solid foods, she sees with horror that you want to wail like small children without teeth” (Augustine, 2005, 168; emphasis added). Thus, in Eliade’s terminology (discussed earlier in Chapter 2), the Mother Church partakes in “sacred time” rather than the temporal time of the biological mother.

Again, just as the family ancestry is spiritualized, so is the teaching of the mother since it is made Dharma; similar to the “everlasting” inheritance from the Mother of the Church, here the Buddha’s nourishment in The Life of the Buddha also surpasses a mother’s in its superiority in time: “For I fed you the milk that quenches thirst for just a moment / but you fed me the dharma milk that is perpetually tranquil” (emphasis added). Inscribing oneself into the family line of the martyrs (“blood of the martyrs”) echoes the efforts of the Cappadocian family who claimed holy men and women as their own kin. Quite closely, this “milk of the faith” echoes the “milk of the dharma” offered by the Buddha to his stepmother Mahapajapati who deems it a nourishment of higher quality than the milk she offers from her own breast to the Buddha. Section III “Mother of One’s Own Mother” will explore the attempts of St. Macrina to mother her mother Emilia and to coop the latter into her sisterhood, which isometric with the Buddha as mother of his own mother.

With the mother figure now made a “common claim” and made accessible to all fellow devotees, Augustine emphasizes the now equal access to the divine inheritance of heaven: “But insofar as she is a sister in Christ, she belongs to you and to me and to everyone who is promised the one heritage in heaven and God as Father and Christ as brother.” Just as the mother in Augustan terms threatens Christian love and “the promised one heritage,” a mother’s particular dedication to a child interferes with the Buddhist ideal of “equanimity.” In response to my
questions concerning the seeming transcendence of the particular love that characterizes motherhood for a higher-quality equanimity through monastic training, Ayya T explained that one strives for a middle ground through training:

On the one hand, compassion is a natural response of such deep love to sorrow and pain, and on the other, sympathetic/appreciative joy to joy. In the balance point of the middle, and passing through both, is equanimity, it is a very deep depth of love that passes through absolutely everything without wavering. It is equal to all, rejecting no one or anything. Thus it is safe, secure, steady and deeply, completely trustworthy.

With this ideal stability in mind, a mother’s devotion to their particular child leads to instability rather than the stability and impartiality idealized. Each tradition therefore similarly seeks to alleviate the ambivalence towards mother-love’s particularity and intensity by diffusing it to everyone, thereby fulfilling the Buddhist universal love and Christian love.

**Learning to love like a mother.**

This “metaphorical use of mother-love” is engaged particularly in monastic training for Sisters and bhikkunis alike. Part of the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism, the *Sutta Nipata* describes “loving kindness” as an intensity comparable to a “mother [who] would guard with her life her own son, her only son.” (Ohnuma, 2012 15) Similarly, the “Ten Great Disciples of the Buddha” praises Sariputta who “like the mother who gives birth in that he awakens in the mind the desire to seek the Way” and Moggallana who “like the mother who rears the child in that he cultivates the mind to go seeking the Way.” Thus, their begetting is at once likened to the generative powers of mother, but then made superior in its birthing of *buddhamind*.

Motherhood as paradigm defines the training of the bhikkunis at the hermitage as Ayya T explained: “The Buddha commended his foremost disciples for being like mother and midwife working together in facilitating rebirth in the Holy Life for those who came and took refuge with
him.” In fact, all Theravada novices memorize the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, which describes the cultivation of “good will” and specifically, references the sacrificial element of motherhood:

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate a limitless heart
with regard to all beings.
With good will for the entire cosmos,
Cultivates a limitless heart (*Karaniya Metta Sutta*)

Again, the power of a mother’s particular love for “her *only* child” (emphasis added) is recognized, but then made perfect once becoming a “limitless heart.” Furthering the anxiety towards the biological mother’s body that bore a particular child, the final two lines of the *sutta* declare that “one never again / will lie in the womb.” Thus, a negative valuation of biological motherhood persists in this preference of spiritual mothering. In *Ties that Bind*, Reiko Ohnuma traces this process of the valuation of mother-love, which speaks to both traditions:

Despite this positive valuation of mother-love, however, a closer consideration of the above passage (and others like it) will reveal that mother-love, when used in this way, is really a double-edged symbol that simultaneously succeeds and fails. Both its success and its ultimate failure hinge on its particularity or exclusivity — that is, the fact that it is love for one particular person. On the one hand, it is precisely because of this particularly that mother-love is able to reach the intensity that makes it such an appropriate metaphor for the Buddhist virtue of loving-kindness. (Ohnuma 15)

When relocated in the Greek Orthodox tradition, this double-edged character of mother-love proves an apt metaphor for Christian love, which Gerontisa.

Echoing this hierarchy of spiritual fruit over physical child in the Buddhist texts, the rebellious stance attributed to St. Helia in her *vita*, though the saint was most likely a “fictional character, presented a distinctive point of view concerning virginity and the position of women” (Salisbury, 1991, 74). Written by St. Theodora in Spain in 398, this *vita* draws from the language of St. Jerome’s works on virginity, marriage and the role of women, but reappropriates his perspective. In the “Vita Sanctae Helia,” the brazen Christian woman rejects her mother’s
traditional urging for her daughter to marry. Then, the hagiographer then uses Jerome’s arguments for the celibate life to make concrete the connections between “spiritual fruits” and the physical nature of childbirth: “God is my farmer. If in this little clod of earth of my body he wishes to plant virginity, shall I resist his labors? For no one can resist the power of the omnipotent farmer” (Salisbury, 1991, 79).

Shrewd in her word choice as “God is my farmer” echoes the Christian declaration “God is my father,” the hagiographer produces a work that dignified rather than “conjure[d] up disgust” for the womb and “the ability to be fecund” (Salisbury, 1991, 79). Though, as Joyce S. Salisbury argues, the work is radical in its argument for yielding a vow of chastity to produce spiritual fruits rather than the biological fruits of traditional marriage, it still perpetuates this spiritualization of motherhood as superior – spiritual and metaphorical childbirth over the bloody and biological childbirth.

Also within this tradition, the Philokalia, written by the father of the Eastern Orthodox ermetic fathers between the 4th and 15th centuries, similarly reappropriates “virginal motherhood” or “virginal generation” (Harrison, 2012, 261), specifically in order to encourage spiritual fruits rather than physical fruits. Repurposing motherhood, the writers equate Christ’s birth to their own giving birth to Christ spiritually; since spiritual virtues are not “passing,” they are deemed “supremely positive” in comparison biological, which cannot overcome the vicious circle of mortality — “coming to be and passing away.”

In On Virginity, Gregory of Nyssa places true childbearing abilities (“truly a mother”) in the spiritual realm, and accessible to “brother[s] and sister[s] and mother[s]” alike:

Birth comes not from blood, nor from the will of man or the will of the flesh, but from God only (cf. John 1:13). And this occurs when one conceives through the aliveness of the heart the incorruptibility of the Spirit and gives birth to wisdom and justice and holiness and redemption. For it is possible for everyone to become truly a
mother of these [virtues], as indeed the Lord says somewhere: "The one doing my will is my brother and sister and mother" (cf. Matt. 12:50, Mk. 3:35). (Harrison, 2012, 257)

Especially in the lives of monastics, such virtues described in On the Beatitudes 4 of "wisdom and justice and holiness and redemption" may be practiced by "everyone" as mother-love is universalized. Thus, to bring forth acts of virtue is to give birth to Christ spiritually; these sentiments are echoed by Sister Theonymphi who explained that for her, controlling her passions is enough of "bearing spiritual fruits."

Through language, this "virginal motherhood" attempts to transcend the polarity between men and women. The Greek word ἀνενναιω, meaning "to bear" or "to beget" is used for both the Father and the Mother of God, and thus posits a direct correlation between the Father’s begetting of the divine Son in eternity and the Mother’s birthing of Jesus in the human flesh (Harrison, 2012, 258). Therefore, Mary’s motherhood is not only feminine and instead, it becomes symbolically masculine as well. In A New Testament Decalogue 6 in the Philokalia, the early Greek patristic writer Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) explains that just as a Christian is called to become a bride of Christ (Harrison, 2012, 259), the nomer "Mother of God" is uprooted from the feminine womb and adopted by the church fathers. Quite similarly, when Ayya T explained the praise of the Buddha for his disciples who served as "mother[s] and midwi[ves]," she asserted that "this holds true for both the leading male and female monastics"; therefore, this spiritual mothering in the Buddhist tradition too is incorporated by men and women alike.

II. MAYA, MARY AND THEIR MATERNAL BODIES

With its focus on the Buddha’s biological mother Maya, the Mahamaya Sutra describes the Buddha visit to his mother in the Trayastrimsa heaven where Maya was reborn as a deity. His visit extends the entire monsoon season, which is of a significance that Chapter 6 will return to in
the context of Aranya Bodhi’s vassa. Encouraging a return to the memory of one’s mother, Maya advises the Buddha to draw from “[his] compassion for the mother who gave birth / to him,” and therefore, she makes it quite clear that “mother-love is the foundation for the Buddha’s love” (Ohnuma, 2007, 104). Quickly, this episode transforms into a scene of simultaneous suckling and sermonizing in Trāyastrimśa heaven, during which Maya breastfeeds her adult son, while he teaches her the dharma. Even further, the Sutra inscribes this exchange with great particularity since it is a period of time as “eons without number during which he drank no other milk than from her” (Ohnuma, 2007, 112).

However, such as positive valuations of a mother’s particular bond with her child, specifically expressed through the body, coincide (however inconsistent) in the tradition with literature that subordinate Maya’s autonomy as a nourishing mother. Made explicit through the treatment of her womb, which is divorced from her and transformed into an entity “primary and autonomous, [while] the woman [becomes] absent or peripheral” (Ohnuma, 2012, 73), this reorienting of maternal power to the womb rather than Maya herself surfaces in the Digha Nikaya (“The Collection of Long Discourses”), which is grouped into three vaggas, or divisions. In the second vagga, Maya peers at her womb, “just as if a pure and genuine lapis lazuli jewel, beautifully cut into an octagon, clear, bright, flawless, and perfect in every way, were strung on a blue, yellow, red, white or orange thread.” As Ohnuma delineates, this crystalline quality wholeness characterizing the womb insinuates that Maya contributed very little; thus, it is not the mother who is venerated but rather the space that her son inhabits.

Echoing this balancing act between veneration and subordination towards the capacity of the maternal body to nourish, which is made obvious in references to Maya’s breasts and womb, a similar ambivalence surfaces in the body of the Theotokos – even within the same community
– in the iconography of the monastery’s sacred spaces, conversations with the nuns and hymnographies sung during daily services. In the guest dining room at Timios Stravros, where I would eat my three daily meals, an icon depicting Mt. Athos with the Mother of God, the Theotokos, hung on the far wall. Standing upon the holy mountain with its many monasteries, similar to in the athonite icons described by Graham Speake, the Theotokos raises one hand in prayer, and in the other, holds a staff that identifies her as an ephor, or one of the overseers of Athos. Thus, she is at once a figure of authority and a founder of the holy land, but also a member of an excluded population; this striking inconsistency then throws into question the role of this mother.

Both The Philokalia (φιλοκαλία, meaning “love of the beautiful”) which is a collection of texts centering on practicing virtues and spiritual living in a monastery, along with the Homily on the Annunciation by St. Nicholas Cabasilas, which is used by the Sisters of Agion Panton, share the same answer of “virginal motherhood.” Wielding the Theotokos as a paradigm and reappropriating her biological womb as specialized and untouched, these texts characterize bearing spiritual fruits and virtuous acts above and beyond the significance of physical fruits. With this scheme, “real” mothers are limited in terms of spiritual fruits by virtue of their affection for their particular child, whereas virtues of motherhood are “made perfect” in the pure, ascetic life. Mothers are thus dispossessed of their motherhood and a memorialized womb distinguished from and made superior to the commonplace uterus. However, how the actual women of these communities interpret and internalize the Theotokos and where the place her womb in relationship to their own complicates a wholly negative valuation of the biological mother’s body.
The Unseeded Womb.

The title of Theotokos is particularly important because it defines the reason why Mary is honored; as the Mother of God, she “is revered not in her own right, but because of her relationship with her son” (19). Sung on the first five Fridays during Great Lent, recommended to me for further study by Gerontisa Foteini, the Akathist Hymn and Small Compline praise the Theotokos and quite poignantly, her womb. It bears and carries: “you who carried earth’s foundation painlessly in your womb”; “for you carried in your womb the Way of life”; and “who carried in your womb the healer of the human race” (The Akathist Hymn and Small Compline, 1992).

Even further, without a doubt, the Homily grants her authority as the “author” of Jesus’ plan for humanity: “For the Virgin was not like the earth, which contributed to the creation of man but did not bring it about, but merely offered itself as a matter to the Creator and was only acted upon and did not do anything. But those things which drew the Artificer Himself to earth and which moved His creative hand did she provide from within herself, being the author thereof” (Cabasilas) Thus, her womb is not mere soil to be seeded; this power “within herself” alludes to the maternal body and the uterus that houses and holds. Using language associated with architecture, she is described as having “constructed a dwelling-place for Him Who is able to save and fashioned a beautiful house for God — and one that would be worthy of Him. The King could not find any fault with His palace” (Cabasilas). Thus, not only does this text give her control over her decision to house God since “God did not descend until the Virgin sought to learn the manner of her conceiving and...[waited to see that] she accepted the invitation,” but this self-determination and “consent” distinguishes her from Adam whose rib was taken in his sleep (Cabasilas). Therefore, she is removed from the “economy of the Incarnation as one who had been conscripted like some puppet” (Cabasilas).
Nevertheless, the claim that "she belongs to the order of creation," or even Graham Speake’s "[she is] the model of cooperation between God’s purpose and human freedom" (Speake, 2002, 19) do not adequately capture the divinity of her maternal body; it is special in that it remains untouched even after the childbirth process. Specifically, the Third Stasis describes a womb pure and untouched: "The new creation revealed the Creator by showing himself to us whom he created, sprouting up from an unseeded womb, while preserving it just as it was, unspoiled, so that beholding the miracle we might extol her" (The Akathist Hymn and Small Compline, 1992). In the subsequent praises, "Rejoice, O Bride unwedded," echoes this "unseeded womb"; neither are acted upon and both remain in a pure state. Therefore, even amidst this praise of her consent given as a participant, her womb is made exceptional and so too is her motherhood. Even though she may "intercede with [Jesus]...to enroll [her] servants in the book of life," this mother's womb serves as her means into the holy family, but since it is not wholly human, she surpasses biological mother. Since her maternal body is the reason she is included (remember "bearer of God") in this holy realm, her womb is memorialized in its untouched state; it is not recognized as a wholly human womb, but one specialized and untainted.

However, the reception by and interpretation of the womb of the Theotokos by the real women of Agion Panton deviates significantly. While discussing First Epistle of Paul to Timothy 2:15 ("Nevertheless, she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith love and holiness and self-control.") with the Sisters, there was a very clear connection established in the minds of these women to the Theotokos and to her body in particular. Sister Theonymphi said:

The Panagia is very important in our view of salvation...Panagia is 100% human and conceived in the same way as all of us were, which is important because then when Christ comes into her womb, he is not coming into some special case. He is coming into a womb like we all have [gesturing around the table]. We are all
conceived in this fallen way, everybody is so he came and saved humanity by entering the womb of a real human being. Rather than adopting the “virginal motherhood” of male writers, these women affirm this holy womb as entirely human and distinctly in relation to their own female bodies. Thus, their interpretation dispenses with the Theotokos’ womb as divine metaphor and instead, values its particular biological and human qualities.

II. MEMORY OF THE MOTHER

Similar to the interpretation of the Theotokos’ womb, there is a difference in what a traditional text expresses and how these contemporary women interpret these ideals within their own communities. In this light, narratives in both traditions testify to the power of a mother’s particular love for a child, but also monastic’s particular experience as a child or as a mother. In the Abhidharma pitaka, the Buddha ascends to Trāyastriṃśa heaven to be with his mother “to repay the kindness of his mother...” and instead, values its particular biological and human qualities.

My mother was very, very kindhearted. Very good mother. So therefore we, her children, grew up without that and I think that makes a great impact. Sometimes, I tell my friends, my mother was so kind to me. My mother extends love to all, but particularly the youngest one and I think that spoiled me a little. As a villager, the mother she usually carries her child on her shoulder, so me too, my mother used to carry me. My mother was so kind towards me that I became a little aggressive. So while I sit on my mother’s shoulders, I hold my mother’s two ears and when I want to go this direction and that direction go like that. If mother not follow that way, then I cry and my legs do that [kicking motion]. So, I really feel a certain amount of my warm-heartedness originally comes from my mother. (8 May 2011)
Looking back in this way, the Dalai Lama’s credit to his mother enacts a sort of matrilineal inheritance of spiritual character. Even further, shared by Professor Steven P. Hopkins of Swarthmore College during my sophomore year, His Holiness invoked the memory of his mother’s particular body, specifically her nipple and suckling at her breast, during a talk at Emory University talked about his recent memories of his mother’s nipple, and suckling at her breast\(^2\). Male monastics still invest great importance in the less perfected body of their own mother, one “that is [less] precious and breasts filled with [less] heavenly food” (168).\(^2\)

Similarly, but perhaps less graphically, the women of these communities value memory’s of their mothers as spiritual motivators. Each evening at the hermitage, the lay and some of the nuns would gather in the yurt for evening metta service. Defined as “loving-kindness,” metta is also known as maitri or altruistic love; in this particular style of meditation, we chanted: “May I be happy. May I be free from stress and pain. May I be free from anxiety. May I be free from oppression. May I be free from trouble. May I look after myself in ease.” Then, directly afterwards, this good will radiates outwards towards others as the verses continue: “May all living beings be happy. May all living beings be free from animosity. May all living beings be free from oppression. May all living beings be free from trouble. May all living beings look after themselves with ease.”

\(^2\) This anecdote about His Holiness the 14\(^{th}\) Dalai Lama from 2011 was shared by Professor Sarah L. McClintock, an Associate Professor of Religion at Emory University.

\(^2\) In a recent interview with British journalist Cathy Newman (23 Apr 2013), the Dalai Lama who is a self-proclaimed feminist and spiritual leader of Tibet, said “I would be pleased if my successor was female...I think [it would be] good because you see, biologically, female[s] have more potential to develop affection or love to other. Some scientists, they tested two person, one male, one female looking at one sort of movie. Female [was] more sensitive: response is much stronger. So therefore...now we are 21\(^{st}\) century...female have more potential so should take more active role regarding promotion of human compassion.” In response, Newman wrote in her article, “Let’s leave aside for a moment the obvious problem with sweeping generalizations. Last time I looked, women didn’t have a monopoly on compassion.” Rather than making sweeping generalizations about women’s capacity for compassion, this thesis instead seeks to understand how individual and particular contemporary spiritual women grapple with aspirational characteristics of their tradition’s doctrine and their own personal ties to family.
Introduced to me first by Ayya Sobhana, this cultivation of *metta* draws directly from the experience of a mother’s particular love. As a lay woman, while in rehabilitation and learning meditation and particular, *metta* practice as a component of her recovery, Ayya was taught to imagine three individuals: someone you love, a neutral person and then a difficult person. Then, in meditation, one imagines each individual as an infant in your arms, “rocking them back and forth.” In a later interview with Ayya T, she described this visualization practice to cultivate “loving-kindness” described in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (referenced earlier in “I. Virginal Motherhood”), which is memorized by most Theravada monastics as novitiates. Though the *Sutta* itself communicates an anxiety to the biological mother (“one never again / will lie in the womb”), Ayya explains that to develop “this practice of deep altruistic and unbounded *metta*, as a healing and liberation of heart and mind” requires invoking memory. For any person, whether or not she has ever been a biological mother, “having been a child, somewhere in them has the sense of the love that is like the mother’s love for her most precious and only child.” She continued, “Sometimes we have felt this with someone or something else. Or sometimes we haven’t felt it actualized, but we know and long for it. The remembered sense touches into and opens it up.” In this sense, the “remembered sense” or the memory of one’s particular mother — whether as child or mother, provides the inspiration for loving-kindness; it “touches into a quality, or group of qualities, that all of us have within us — the mother and child within — the pure heart of love, and liberates it.”

Especially for Ayya, the particular memory of her relationship with her birth mother informs her ascetic life and specifically, how she conceives of her role in the wider interreligious dialogues. In 2003, when preparing for a presentation at monastic interreligious dialogue gathering called “Bodhisattva Path / Christ Path,” a memory of her mother’s music records
surface during her meditation:

Then, I remembered sitting in my family living room with my mom’s record, Simon and Garfunkel: Bridge Over Troubled Water. We would listen and sing along [starts singing]. And I just kept thinking about that in terms of Buddhism and the bodhisattva path, how do I understand this. I decided that was my presentation, ‘Bridge over troubled water’ and after my three year retreat I had decided to go ahead and who lay themselves down for other people — to be the bridge for other people to walk over like that.

Therefore, when Augustine writes that “the best and divine teacher [Christ] rejected the term “mother,” which they had reported to him as something private and personal to him, because it was earthly, in comparison with the close relationship of heaven,” he fails to capture the way in which contemporary ascetics engage their own specific memories of motherhood, whether as givers or receivers.

Even further however, Augustine’s assertion (“the best and the divine…”) disregards his own particular relationship with his mother Monica who has served as a spiritual companion. In fact, his profuse praise of his mother’s kindness even in her relationships with a vicious “mother-in-law” and a “violent” husband (Augustine, IX, ix, 162) resembles the hagiobiography of Gregory of Nyssa for his sister Macrina22. From the beginning, Augustine’s account frames his mother’s distinction in terms of her incorporation of motherhood into her spiritual life: “…my mother was with us, a woman in sex, with the faith of a man, with the serenity of great age, the love of a mother, the piety of a Christian” (Augustine, IX, iv, 155). As the motivator for his conversion, later in Book IX, the mother-son pair ascend into higher spiritual states in unison: “Rising as our love flamed upward towards that Selfsame, we passed in review the various levels of bodily things, up to the heavens themselves, whence sun and moon and starts shine upon this

22 Similar to Macrina in Gregory’s writings, Monica’s childhood is similarly truncated by her responsibilities to “mother” others: “As a result she was given charge of her master’s daughters…By this kind of teaching and the author of her commands he moderated the greediness that goes with childhood and brought the little girls’ thirst to such a control that they no longer wanted what they ought not to have” (Augustine, IX, xii, 160-161).
earth” (Augustine, IX, x, 164).

In fact, recalling the power of laments and death rituals to intimate continuity in particular relationships that I discussed in Chapter 2, Augustine’s reaction to his mother’s death reveals similar tensions between aspirational and theological ideals and the attachment to particularities acted out in human lives.

I closed her eyes; and an immeasurable sorrow flowed into my heart and would have overflowed in tears. But my eyes under the mind’s strong constraint held back their flow and I stood dry-eyed. In that struggle it went very ill with me...But in this very fat the childish element in me, which was breaking out into tears, was check and brought to silence by the manlier voice of my mind...but I knew what I was crushing down in my heart” (Augustine, IX, xii, 166-7)

When his mother is buried, he “pour[s] forth” prayers rather than tears. Prior to her death however, it is Monica’s request to her two sons that echoes the last words of other mothers such as Macrina’s mother Emilia and her affirmation of her prerogative as a biological mother on her deathbed, and also Theodora of Aigina’s request for specific burial rites (both of these mothers discussed in “Sacred Bonding: A Mother-Daughter Pair” in this Chapter). To Augustine and his brother, Monica instructs: “Here you will bury your mother...Bury this body wherever it may be. Let no care of it disturb you: this only I ask of you that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be” (Augustine, IX, xi, 165-6). Though her request casts off the importance of where and how she is to be buried, the latter is undermined by the fact that this request is made to her sons and she asks to be fastened to their memory “wherever [they] may be. Borrowing the expression of Reiko Ohnuma and her discussions of mother-love in Indian Buddhism, Monica is certainly not campaigning for cutting off of any such “ties.”

III. MOTHERING OF ONE’S OWN MOTHER

This section’s subheading, the “mothering of one’s own mother,” entered my scholastic vocabulary in an early conversation with Professor Steven Hopkins while discussing the
traditional iconography of Eastern Orthodox churches and specifically, my own parish in New Jersey. Just above the back of the nave, an icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos is a token illustration of efforts to as Jesus is depicted just above her on her deathbed holding a small child clothed in white representing the soul of his mother the Virgin Mary.

To return again to the hagiobiography of Macrina, this Cappadocian leading lady adopts the role of mother, first for her brothers but even more acutely for her own mother. When her brother Peter was still young, Macrina “took him almost immediately from his nurse’s breast and reared him herself and led him to all the higher education, exercising him from babyhood in sacred learning so as not to give him leisure to incline his soul to vanities” (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 172). Through similar language, the narrative emphasizes Macrina’s ‘becoming mother’ since her own preference to bequeath the spiritual knowledge (“higher education”, “sacred learning”) echoes her mother’s earlier eagerness to teach Macrina not “in the secular curriculum” which was “shameful and altogether unfitting” but instead the “Scriptures...Psalms” (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 165).

First and foremost, Macrina adopts her mother’s responsibilities in practical terms, and specifically the four sons, five daughters and tax payments to three governors; with her “remaining time she furnished food for her mother from her mother from her own labor, and, in addition, she shared in her mother’s worries” (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 167). Therefore, along with literal nourishment, Macrina nourishes her mother emotionally and psychologically by “shar[ing] in” and partaking in her mother’s suffering and adopting those anxieties as her own. This bearing of another’s suffering echoes what Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi spoke of in their definition of sisterhood.
Thus, as a "sharer of her mother's toils, taking on part of her cares and lightening the heaviness of her grief" (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 167), Macrina also mothers her mother spiritually and tries to co-op her mother into her spiritual sisterhood. Becoming the Gerontisa of her biological mother, Macrina "provided her mother with an impressive leadership to the same [ascetic] goals...drawing her on little by little to the immaterial and simpler life" (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 167). Thus, there is a reversal of sorts in the earlier paradigm established in the narrative when "the older woman [Emilia] cared for the young woman's soul and the daughter for her mother's body" (*The Life of Macrina*, 1967, 167). In fact, Macrina's gifting of spiritual nourishment as 'mother' speaks across traditions as it echoes that of the Buddha whose spiritual teaching surpasses the bodily nourishment from his mother who admits

Well-Gone One, I may have nourished your physical body,  
by my faultless dharma-body was nourished by you.  
For I fed you the milk that quenches thirst for just a moment —  
but you fed me the dharma milk that is perpetually tranquil. (Ohnuma, 2012, 166)

Therefore, as Ohnuma writes, ordinary mothers “pale in comparison” to the true mother who is the Buddha himself (Ohnuma, 2012, 166).

Standing along the main aisle in the single row of chairs in the Timiou Stravrou chapel, I noticed at the left, an older woman who would shuffle in – morning and night – into a chair in the row for laity opposite me. Though at first I assumed she was merely a visitor or lay friend, her particular relationship to one of the Sisters became more explicit. At the end of services, or often if she needed to excuse herself, the older woman would begin to shuffle out with her back arched and cane in hand. However, though she would whisper assurance that she could do it own her own, her daughter each time would withdraw from the service and tend to her mother. Once, when the daughter did not notice her mother desiring to leave a bit early during an evening service, she turned to me for help. Offering my arm out and garbling a few Greek phrases to
communicate my willingness, the weight of her hand on my forearm seemed at once to make corporeal this tie to one’s mother.

Though I cannot attest to the spiritual mothering between this Sister and her elderly mother since circumstances did not allow time to speak with them, the mother-daughter pair in practice together at Agion Panton complicates this “mothering of one’s own mother.” To foreshadow how the real-life narratives deviate from these traditional hagiographies, similar to the interpretation of Theotokos’ womb as human rather than divine, Gerontisa Foteini and Sister Maria’s interpretation of Jesus’ relationship with Mary, specifically when he is on the cross, is similarly nuanced.

Looking down at his mother and his disciple John, “then [Jesus] told the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (John 19:27). Referring to this moment, Gerontisa describes that Jesus signifies that he gave her to us, to the world – so she became the Mother of everyone at that moment and if you look at the Platetera in the Church, her hands are always like this [held open]. Christ is there too, but she is not like a mother normally protecting a child and hanging on to him. Her hands are outstretched to us – she is offering herself and her child to us, which I think is an amazing thing – and we can imitate that? We try.

Thus, this gifting of one’s mother and in essence, becoming a guardian of her, informs Gerontisa’s spirituality and the mother-love to which she aspires. Even though she does recognize the mother’s “special love for her child, which we honor and respect,” this scene for her recognizes a “gifting of one’s mother to the world.”

With this interpretation of Jesus as universalizing his particular bond with his mother, it is the biological mother Sister Maria (mother to Sister Theonymphi) who interprets the scene
radically different and as an affirmation of the intense and particular love between mother and child. She said: “Christ and the Panagia had a history and what did he do when he was on the cross? He is making sure his mom is getting taken care of. So, [this connection with Sister Theonymphi as mother and daughter] needs to be there but it cannot define who we are now.” Thus, for Sister Maria, rather than a universalized love, the particular recognition by Jesus of his mother is incorporated into her spirituality. In light of the Sisters’ varying interpretations of the same scriptural passage, though St. Macrina and St. Theodora may suggest naturalness in this mixing and mingling of mothering and asceticism, these ideals do not necessarily come to fruition in how these real women interpret their own tradition.

IV. WHOLLY TO THEE

A Mother’s Stakes.

For Theonymphi, her father’s reaction, although perhaps different, echoes the eventual reconciliation and now pride of Sister Theoktisti’s parents. However, in regards to Sister Maria’s decision, he holds her to different standards even though the couple is divorced. “Forthcoming” in his character, Theonymphi’s father has been honest with her: “[My dad] sees my mom in a different light than me because she (or had) responsibilities that he feels she turned her back on by making the decision to come and try out the monastic life.” Such deserted responsibilities center on family, and Sister Maria’s “two other children, a grandson and elderly parents”; even though Theonymphi too possessed familial connections with brothers and sisters, along with her father, her choice as a mother is judged more harshly. Thus, motherhood — whether for mothers or daughters — as it would seem, presents stakes for entering the renunciant life that are unique to women. This ‘ethics of motherhood’ complicates a woman’s pursuit of asceticism and therefore, characterizes her choice as abandonment.
Deciding to join RM Jiyu Kennett at Shasta Abbey when his daughter was 8, Rev. Jisho traced the tension in his paternal obligations: “Well I didn’t have custody of [my daughter], she was with her mother and she would just come for visits sometimes. You’d have to ask her how difficult it was [laugh]. I don’t think I was that good of a dad. I loved her, but in terms of being able to spend time with her, it was really difficult.” Bringing his daughter with him to Throssel Abbey in England where he was placed as a resident teacher, with the construction of a new ceremony hall, the strain of balancing spiritual children and his own seemed too burdensome:

So, one day I was going to take her out to see a local castle, it was pouring with rain and I told the monks not to work outside in the rain. I went off and we had a day out together and they were still working outside when we got back so it was like I spend time with her or deal with what was going on in the monastery.

In spite of Rev. Jisho initial wariness when he left his daughter, his continued detachment was eased by his wife’s custody and some comic relief — looking back, he reflected on his daughter’s independence, graduation from high school at 17 to pursue studies at Smith College and he joked, “Perhaps it worked to her favor.”

Thus, similar to Fr. Iakovos with ties to one’s family, men may be no less susceptible to such feelings of guilt, however there is less leniency afforded to and a more pronounced criticism of mothers in the doctrines. In the following two sections, “Mothers of the Past and Present” and “Closure and Continuity,” will consider whether or not contemporary women pursuing ascetic lives embrace these expectations; how do these “real” bhikkhunis and Sisters grapple with the expectations to “see one’s children through” before transitioning to ascetic motherhood as nuns?

As if to provide direct commentary on this ambivalence towards motherhood in the religious life and a mother’s sacrifice, Irish writer Colm Toibin reimagines the perspective of
Mary in his book The Testament of Mary. Along with his unorthodox suggestion that Mary struggled to understand Jesus as the son of God, Toibin also suggests Mary’s desire to “alter [and] ease her son’s fate.” It is this distance “between the ideal and the real” of a mother’s sacrifice that my fieldwork seemed to expose; when humans undertake these religious ideals of renunciation of family, especially women, there are negotiated realities.

Mothers of the Past and Present.

*The heavenly trumpet calls you, a soldier of Christ, to battle, and your mother holds you back. She is clearly not a mother of the sort that the Maccabees had, nor one like the mothers of Sparta, of whom it was recorded that they roused their sons for the conflicts of war much more persistently... — Letter 243*

Though St. Augustine is assertive in his preference for a mother wholly unattached to one’s child, his own narrative (as discussed earlier on page 102) overflows with his particular attachment to his mother and his struggle to enact the closure he so preaches. Thus, it is unsurprising that a mother’s sacrifice of her children for the child’s ascetic pursuits or her own is fraught with complexities — is it to be lauded and praised or is it unnatural and disturbing? In *The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers*, perhaps it was her usual virtuousness and piety that elicited Anna’s “exceedingly sorrowful” response to the inability to bear a child in the *vita* of St. Evphrosyne of Alexandria (*The Lives*, 1991, 424). This mother of St. Evphrosyne, along with her husband in 410 A.D., engaged in ascetic practices through vigils, fasting and almsgiving with the hopes of begetting a child. Desperately, Anna calls out to her Lord saying, “Lord of Sabbath, if Thou wilt look upon Thy handmaid and grant me a child, I promise to dedicate the child wholly to Thee!” (*The Lives*, 1991, 424).

However, it is not until her husband entreats a holy elder dwelling in a monastery that St. Evphrosyne is born. The hagiobiography documents not the mother’s raising of the child, but the father’s spiritual nourishment: “Now Paphnutius, acknowledging his daughter on the fruit of
prayer, nourished her more with virtues than with material goods and perishable foods. He explained the Holy Scriptures to her and she advanced in observing every commandment of the Lord" (The Lives, 1991, 424). Thus, the hagiobiography seems to place more value on the father’s efforts, but it is the mother’s appeal to God that comes first and she first offering up of her child as spiritual fruits. Thus, this offering up of one’s physical production may be considered a perfecting of biological motherhood in how it transforms that child into a spiritual gifting.

On the final evening of my visit to Ayícov flúv'urrrv, I accompanied the Sisters to a fundraiser thrown in their honor by the parish of The Cathedral of St. Paul in Hempstead, NJ. After much anticipation, I finally met not only the spiritual father of the Sisters, Fr. Gerasimos Makris, but also his mother Stella. Throughout his spiritual career as a priest-monk, Fr. Gerasimos chose to live with his mother and thus, their relationship seems to disobey traditions of “breaking off family ties.” Though I had heard a great deal about Fr. Gerasimos’ mother from the Sisters, meeting Stella A classic Greek mother, vocal and spirited, Stella, echoed the mother of Evphrosyne of Alexandria in her willingness to dedicate her children to God: “If I could have ten children and give them all to God, I would! Working for God is the greatest gift!” After assuring me of her own willingness, she quickly proceeded to encourage my own: “In whatever way you choose, make your life work for God.”

What is striking here is Stella’s conception of her own role as mother. For her, bearing children to then gift them to pursuits of the spiritual life is the work of God. Though monastics may bear forth spiritual fruits through their efforts on this battlefield of asceticism, does such a reconciliation of motherhood and spirituality necessitate such extreme sacrifices of gifting one’s children to monastic life? In the transition from lay life to monastic life, in which one bears
spiritual fruits rather than physical ones, the narratives of these contemporary nuns suggests a continuity rather than closure on their maternal roles.

Closure and continuity.

At the hermitage, Ayya Sodinna and Sayalay both surprised me with their declarations that, if given the chance would not have had their children since such lives were dukkha (suffering). However, characteristics of each of their relationships with their children, along with two mother-daughter pairs in the Orthodox tradition — St. Theodora of Aigina and Theopiste, and Sister Theonymphi and Sister Maria — suggests the more delicate dance required to navigate the intersection of maternal responsibilities and religious pursuits.

At Shasta Abbey, two monks whom I interviewed were both biological mothers and now both in the 50s and 60s, the first being Rev. Amanda who took the lay precepts with her husband while monks babysat their 1 ½ year old near the property. Although she and her husband would joke about becoming monks when their daughter grew up, Rev. Amanda eventually made the decision on her own since her husband had changed his mind. However, she did wait until her daughter left high school for college that she felt unburdened by the responsibilities to raise her child.

Echoing this postponement of renunciation for the sake of one’s children, Rev. Serena described her own sense of abandoning her only child as a single parent:

Well my daughter was not pleased at all. I had to come here knowing that it might be possible that we might be estranged. We had always been very close, because she didn’t understand at all. My master, whenever he had a trip in the bay area, he would take me with I’m and it would be a chance for me to see her. And so he worked really hard to make her understand that I was accessible and if anything ever happened to me, I would be taken care of. And that she’d never be shut out if I was sick. She could help take care of me. Now she actually calls, she and her family. They come here, but it took some time. She was 23 when I came here and she is almost 39 now. (emphasis added)
Here, the mother’s accessibility to the child and the child’s own responsibility for her mother, or in other words, to “mother her own mother.” Even if Rev. Serena’s risk of being “estranged” from her daughter may seem to echo the ideals of pursuing asceticism even at the cost of family, her and her teacher’s efforts to heal and reinscribe the bond between mother and daughter is telling.

A similar potential and effort to heal familial ties, especially with one’s children, characterizes the narratives of Sayalay (Sy) Santacari. In early 2008, Ayya T and Ayya Sobhana met Sy Santacari at the Santi Forest Monastery in Australia; later, Sy Santacari traveled to Burma where she ordained as a Burmese-tradition 8-precept thilashin nun. Welcomed to the hermitage by Ayya T and Ayya Sobhana, Santacari arrived in the U.S. and joined the hermitage community in June of 2012 with the intentions for samaneri ordination (which took place on September 2, 2012). When she was laywoman, Sayalay experienced a mental breakdown in the midst of working as a single mother of three children and attending school and later, was diagnosed with clinical depression. After drawing from her earlier experiences with meditation however, her doctors eventually declared her mentally fit.

Yet, it was her initial discovery of vipassanā meditation, and later pursuit of the practice in Australia, that brought radical change as it “shook her world and changed everything.” Since the practice gave Sayalay the “insight to be able to see cause and effect for what she does that causes problems and what she does that causes good things,” it also helped her to better evaluate her strained relationships with two of her three children. Thus, the practice of her monastic training has given her the “beginnings of wisdom” to return to and then rectify the particular relationships of her lay life. In the experiences of Rev. Serena and Sy Santacari, there is a clear coupling of efforts to rectify familial ties with one’s spiritual pursuits. For Sister Theonymphi,
her relationship with her father improved when she became a nun and the two now speak on the phone at least once a day or once every two days.

Also at the hermitage, Ayya Sodinna’s experience with motherhood suggests a continuity between her lay and monastic life. Even though Ayya, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, considers her identities as a laywoman and a bhikkhuni as entirely separate, her role as mother blends the two. Raised in Sri Lanka and in the Theravada tradition, Ayya explained that “even as a laywoman [in Sri Lanka], [she] lived a sort of Buddhist life.” Interestingly, her relationship with her mother and the latter’s death served as the catalyst for her more focused religious life. Though a married woman with two children, changes in her life such as becoming a vegetarian and others that accompanied her spiritual pursuits were practiced independently of her family.

Even though initially her children disproved of their mother’s choice to become a bhikkhuni, her husband agreed to her choice. Ayya explained that “when you read The Therīgāthā, you might think, all those entered the Order entered because of a problem, but that’s not true. In my case, I had done my duties, finished my duties and it was time to look after my own salvation.” However, despite her efforts to distinguish herself from the women of The Therīgāthā, the closure she describes in her motherhood places her alongside mothers such as Theri Vasitthi who goes mad when “afflicted by grief for her [dead] son,” but whose motherly intense and passionate attachment are healed at the site of the Buddha: “All grief have been cut out, eliminated, ending in this way.” Though a sense of psychological torment and the element of death are lacking in Ayya Sodina’s narrative, there is still a sense of being unburdened from maternal responsibility.

Regardless of what she may suggest, there is a persisting tie to her children. When Ayya Sodinna visits her children and grandchildren, though her stay is characterized by particular
limits such as her own room, specific meal times and withdrawing from certain family activities, she does continue to nurture her children spiritually as a maternal figure. Offered dana by her sons’ friends and chanting the paramita, this reciprocity is a portal for her children’s spiritual lives and just as Ayya said, “[My children] consider it a blessing.”

Though belonging to a different tradition, Sister Maria shares Ayya Sodinna’s gradual conversion to the renunciant life and more specifically, ultimately came to her decision after seven years. She said, “I realized I didn’t feel comfortable saying not to God anymore.” At first, Sister Maria seems to espouse the same sense of relinquished parental duties, however she acknowledges a persistence: “I think that it was what was appropriate use gave me these children so of course, there is responsibility but that responsibility — the worldly responsibility part of it is done — in heart and in mind, they still have me.” Raised Catholic and converting to Orthodoxy upon meeting her husband, Sister Maria finds it impossible to separate her biological motherhood from her life as a nun since “it is through her children that she came to the church.”

In fact, she believes her mothering changed more “by virtue of my kids becoming adults than by my coming to the monastery.” Though she admits that the “worldly mother duties,” which is the phrasing used in my interview question, such as visits on birthdays change, she still continues to pray for her children just as she did when she was “in the world.” Described in Chapter 4, Sister Maria’s komboskini is inscribed with her particular relationship to Sister Theonymphi since her daughter made it for her once the latter was tonsured. Thus, her daughter pervades both the psychological and physical dimensions of her prayer life.

However, Sister Maria’s candidness in her integration of her maternal duties into her ascetic life rather than a substitution of one for the other is not unique. Perhaps it is merely a factor of my intimacy with the nuns at Agion Panton, having lived with them in the second floor.
of the five-bedroom building that served as their living quarters, nevertheless the Sisters unabashedly held onto familial ties. Some of the nuns would talk to family members at least once a day. In the community however, Sister Maria’s decision to join her daughter’s spiritual family and thus, to become Sister Theonymphi’s spiritual sister is a testimony to the complexities of blood and adopted ties in monastic commitment. For these two nuns, such ambiguities and difficulties are already present in their names; Sister Maria’s monastic name (Maria) was Sister Theonymphi’s name before she became a nun, hence the running joke during my stay: “Maria squared.”

V. SACRED BONDING: A MOTHER-DAUGHTER PAIR

All of the complexities with transition from blood to adopted families and ambivalence towards the maternal body come to a head in the mother-daughter pair I met at Agion Panton. Just two weeks or so prior to my stay at Agion Panton in March of 2013, I scribbled anxiously in the margins of the hagiography of St. Theodora of Aigina and her daughter Theopiste who also served as spiritual sisters in the same monastic community. Oftentimes, Sister Theonymphi addressed Sister Maria as “Mom,” oftentimes following up with, “Oh, I have to stop doing that,” while others times continuing unacknowledged. Though brief, this navigation of titles and naming reflects a deep-seated ambivalence towards an ongoing detachment from identity as mother or as daughter of a mother. In many ways, the narrative of this mother-daughter pair intersect with and deviate from the Lives of the Spiritual Mothers duo.

With the death of her first two children, Theodora’s husband requests that the two “dedicate [their] daughter, who remains among the living, to interceded on [their] behalf” with God (344). Though she expresses joy once “free and unhindered to become a nun” when her husband dies unexpectedly (345), her entrance into the monastic community is marked by her
motherly instincts. Similar to the hagiography of St. Euphrosyna whom the devil tempts with “the love of her father,” this temptation of particular love is reframed in the mother-daughter context: “The devil envying, observing Theodora’s great spiritual strides, south to slackened her zeal. He attempted to entrap her by his artifices at every turn. His scheming and testing, however, came to naught. Therefore, he conspired to distract the athlete through her other relationship with her daughter, the nun Theopiste.”

Thus, as the vita continues, mother and daughter share a monastic cell and Theodora “falls for the devil’s trick” and grows “sorrowed and fretted” over her daughter’s condition in “tattered and contemptible rags.” Therefore, Theodora’s worries seem petty since they are focused on her daughter’s external well-being; further, the hagiography insists that it is the mother’s nature that becomes an interruption here as Theodora exclaims: “Therefore, send her to another convent, so my inward parts may not be inflamed at the sight of her; because I am a mother, and according to nature, I love my child.” (350). Rather than something extinguishable, her nature as a mother is biological and unavoidable as her “inward parts” react to her daughter’s austere lifestyle. Thus, the abbess places the mother and daughter under a period of enforced silence in order to free them of the “emotional bonds and the laws of nature” (354); the two succeed and “bore fruit to perfection...they spoke to each other as though they were strangers and foreign to one another.”

Though regarding relationships within the sisterhood more generally, Sister Theonymphi describes a refrain from growing too close to or too “buddy buddy” with a particular sister in order to prevent “jealousies” and any sense of exclusivity from arising. In this light, she echoes this “foreign[ness]” that St. Theodora and Sister Theopiste attained. Similarly, Sister Maria promotes this “foreignness” when she explained that she and Sister Theonymphi only have to
establish a new history — or Ayya T’s modification of “herstory.” However, this change is neither easy nor sought after with a Spartan intensity. As if in direct defiance of St. Augustine’s formulated ideals rejecting particular love — “certain woman is your mother, she is of course not mine,” Sister Maria and Sister Theonymphi exchanged and shared stories about their past (which included a humorous story of Sister Theonymphi’s grade-school Halloween costume gone-wrong, which the mother-daughter shared with me sitting around the kitchen table one evening).

However smooth Theodora and Theopite’s transition into a degree of “foreign[ness]” may seem, it does not correspond to the lived experience of Sister Theonymphi and Sister Maria, who the former describes as still experiencing “growing pains.” Unlike the enforced silence on the mother-daughter pair in Lives of the Spiritual Mother, Sister Theonymphi engages with this particular relationship with her mother and for example, as she confessed to me once, she spent an hour in the monastery van sorting out a disagreement from that morning. For Sister Theonymphi, now her mother’s “spiritual elder,” grapples with “wanting the pity of her mother.” She said, “[I am] tempted to have her be on my team but I think over time it has been easier to stay away from that but that dynamic can be difficult but I can recognize that I am just having a little pity party.” Since for Sisters and bhikkhunis alike, sisters serve as mirrors for one another, when that reflective sister is also one’s mother, difficulties arise. Sister Theonymphi explained: “It’s really not fun to see your parent — who you looked up and who raised you — as human. Not like you put them on a pedestal, well you kind of do, but its not even to that degree. The difficulty is more like just seeing the faults of your parent; it’s so hard. Also, to have them too at you, like your mom has a beef with you or something, it’s very difficult.”

23 (Unfortunately, I had missed the exchange in the kitchen just outside my room since I had been sleeping after my brief fainting spell while transitioning into this interrupted sleeping pattern.)
Addressing her daughter and now, spiritual mother in private, St. Theodora delivers an “unusual command to [be buried] alone” since her relics would be imbued with divine power (360). Thus, similar to the importance of death rituals in the marking of sisterhood in St. Xene, St. Macrina and Sister Ipomoni, this unusual request to be buried alone is further distinguished by a mother’s request to her daughter. However, in this case, the spiritual kin overwhelm the particular tie of the mother and “the general consensus [agrees]...that [Mother Theodora should] rest with those whom she struggled and labored with for the Lord” (361).

Even so, Sister Maria’s association of her role as biological motherhood with a continuity through her prayer life places her within a larger community of mothers in the Greek Orthodox tradition who do the same. It is St. Macrina’s mother Emilia who provides the frame for the narrative; beginning with her spiritual education of Macrina, the plot ends with her prayer life as a mother. As the Gerontisa of her community, Macrina “persuades her mother to give up her customary mode of living and her more ostentatious existence and the services of her maids, to which she had long been accustom, and to put herself on a level with the many by entering into a common life with he raids, making them sisters and equals rather than her slaves and underlings” (Life of Macrina, 1967, 168). Even with Macrina’s attempts to incorporate her mother into her spiritual sisterhood, Emilia declares her particular connection to her two children, Macrina and Peter, in her final moments before death. At the moment of her own passing, she “suitably remember[s] each of the absent ones so that none would be without a blessing and through her prayer entrust[s] to God the two who were with her” (Life of Macrina, 1967, 172). Echoing the final appeal to God by the spiritual mother, St. Xene, concerning her spiritual children, St. Macrina’s mother retains her motherly prerogative. Though universal and “cultivated for the world,” mothers reassert their prerogative through prayer for that child. Interestingly, this
framing of motherly prerogative in fact, bridges the narratives of Sister Theonymphi and Sister Maria with S. Macrina and her mother Emilia.
From Lighthouse to Womb — Receptivity and Reciprocity

Augustine’s Letter 243 to Laetus, explored in Chapter 5, adopts warfare language in his advice to Laetus as “Christ’s recruit, [to] not abandon the camp” (Augustine, 2005, 164). Then, referring to the Lukan tower — “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” (14:28), Augustine describes God’s instructions (“signal”) for followers to “keep watch in the camp, that [they] should build the tower from which [they] may be able to look down on and drive off the enemy of eternal life” (Augustine, 2005, 167). Following directly after, he delivers a warning that the “mother holds you back” and threatens the “foundation of the tower” that you have laid (177), or in other words, one’s cultivated spiritual life.

Lacking in the degree of resistance to the mother figure, Gerontisa Methodia of Timiou Stravrou also offered a similar metaphor of a tower at once removed, but also guiding. Though Elder Paisios specifically describes monks on Mt. Athos, his allusion lighthouses intimates a similar remoteness: “In short, monks are not merely lanterns that illumine city streets that people not stumble, but they are remote lighthouses on the rocks directing the ships of this world with their flashes, and upon the open seas the ships are orientated in order to reach their destination” (Paisios, “Epistles”). Though this sense of guiding through lived example is sound, monastic communities provide spaces of refuge as well. Thus, the monastic purpose may be more appropriately likened to the sizable woven basket that I held while on the Alms Round with the monks of Shasta Abbey. Though donors place gifts inside the basket for the monastics, the basket sustains the possibility to bestow merit upon those who give. Echoing this reciprocity, the nuns of these communities contain and foster these relationships that are fraught with lingering maternal and familial ties, which include their own.
I. A THREE-MONTH, RAINY TRIMESTER

Once a year, in accordance with the Thai tradition and rainy-season, the hermitage transforms into a tightly bound and girdled vessel. Amidst the misty redwoods, the women of the Sangha come together and pledge to a period of deep and quiet meditation. In fact, it was the first time in America that four bhikkunis (the minimum for the retreat or a “complete sangha”) entered the Vassa period together. To enter Vassa as a communal action calls for a further commitment to one's fellow aspirants since as Ayya explained that the bhikkunis' “wandering ceases and [they] stay in one place together for all of [them] who have gathered together for it.”

Traveling is generally discouraged and bhikkunis tend to remain within the hermitage property. Though an ongoing process for the young community, Vassa presents a time for “community building” and for the young community, is an ongoing process. Many of her younger nuns described “the sense of community and harmony that was so precious to them, that they had never experienced before because of so much, in a way, emphasis on the individual.”

Typical means to define community such as eating, chanting, listening to dhamma talks and gathering together for Uposatha and Oposata recitations continue; however, the acknowledgement of this shared disciplined and this sense of bettering these practices during the Vassa period provides a new sense of sharing in the spiritual aspirations.

However, in tandem with the individual and communal practices that usually inform the day-to-day happenings of the monastic community, the intent of Vassa similarly seeks a balance. Recalling the reflections of a few young venerable: “[These bhikkunis] didn’t feel that what was happening [with an emphasis on community] was infringing on their individualism or their individual practice in any way but that they gained a kind of mutual understanding and sense of
supportiveness, time and rhythm with one another that was a sense of communality and community. They said for all three of them, they had not experienced that in such a way before.”

Referenced in Chapter 2, “Spiritual Posse,” on the day of the full moon, the bhikkunis all shave their heads together to delineate this threshold into this three-month communion with one another. On this day before Vassa began, the lay people and monastics alike sat together in the yurt; after reading the patimokkha in unison. While each laywoman recited only 8 precepts to renew her vows, the patimokkha is the basic code of monastic discipline within the Vinaya Pitaka and contains 311 for bhikkunis. After the laywomen left the yurt, each withdrew into the foliage to practice in her own manner. Two hours later, returning from a hike and walking down the gravel decline towards the heart of the hermitage and just outside the yurt, I could hear the hum of voices in unison. Through the glass window of the yurt, the bhikkunis sat in their burnt orange robes and recited with patience the 311 precepts. Their recitation proves a bit more time-consuming in comparison to the single-digit pledge by a laywoman. Nevertheless, the Vassa period welcomes both monastics and laity to partake in the practice as the laywomen mimic the bhikkunis in their commitment to the Dhamma and the Sangha.

In fact, this sort of drawing inwards, sealing off and nourishing of one another is comparable to a womb. Especially during such periods of retreat, Ayya T describes “[herself] very much feeling [the retreat time as] womb time, sheltered, supported, nurtured, nourished and protected, and then reborn once again fresh into the world.” Referred to earlier in Chapter 5 the Buddha himself spends an entire three-month, rainy-season (vassa) retreat up in Trāyastriṃśa heaven, where Maya had been reborn as a deity, preaching the Dhamma for her benefit. Here, the Buddha's resolve to affix himself to his mother echoes St. Macrina who abandons the prospects of marriage and “thrusting aside the arguments of those trying to persuade her, she settles upon a
safeguard for her noble decision, namely a resolve never to be separated for a moment from her mother, so that her mother often used to say to her that the rest of her children she had carried in her womb, for a fixed time, but this daughter she always bore, encompassing her in her womb at all times and under all circumstances" (The Life of Macrina, 1967, 166; emphasis added).

III. RECEPTIVITY: HOUSING THE PARTICULARS

While sitting beside the small monastery chapel after the morning Saturday Divine Liturgy, which had been held in the larger church, I took a moment to jot down some reflections, which included some frustrations regarding the presence and seeming intrusion of the visiting parish priest. Suddenly, the monastery bell rang at the gate and a group of chatty lay people descended with boxes from which pink bows emerged. After asking one of the Sisters about the commotion, she explained that there would be a baptism at the monastery today and even further, the mother of the infant was in fact, the sister of one of the nuns. In this manner, though these siblings had fulfilled the cultural expectations of pursuing motherhood and monasticism, the monastery’s role in hosting the sacrament and here, strengthening the connection between a nun and her blood kin is telling. Before and after the ceremony, the Sisters embraced, along with the rest of the Sisters and friends of the family.

Just the next day, again within the sacred space of the church, the monastery again provided the space for a familial bond to be strengthened with a bit of a twist. During the Sunday morning’s Divine Liturgy, I remained in the pews of the larger church at Timiou Stravrou; yet, I noticed to the right of the altar, the icon from the previous day had been replaced by a new icon, this one of the Παναγιά (Panagia, meaning “All-Holy” and another name for the Theotokos or Virgin Mary). Decorated with jewelry and the τάμα (tama and pl. ταμάτα or tamata. See Image 8.) often found on Greek Orthodox icons, the icon was also encased within a glass box.
However, it was not until a woman arrived with a bouquet of roses that the circumstances grew strange. Entering with her husband, the woman immediately walked directly towards the icon at the front of the nave, placed two bouquets of roses — one red, one white, and then wrapped her two arms around the icon with an all-encompassing embrace. Lingering for about two or three minutes, she tilted her face so as to touch her cheek to the surface; with no one else reacting to this woman’s spectacle of emotion, I tried not to stare.

In many churches, I had witnessed this brand of devotion that flirted with passionate devotion as parishioners kissing icons, leaving flowers and blessing them with incense. Of course, Sunday School had also taught me not to idolize the icons and even though Sister Erini took time in our conversations to discriminate between the inappropriate kissing and loving of an icon in comparison to the more proper προσκυνέω (proskuneo, meaning “to worship), this seemingly excessive display of devotion went unquestioned even with its use of the body to communicate passion. In Michael Quenot’s The Icon, he prescribes a style of behavior around the προσκυνητάριον (proshyrietaria, meaning “iconstand”), which is used for the “immediate veneration of the faithful, who neither kneel nor genuflect upon entering the church; instead they make the sign of the Cross — up to three times, in honor the most Holy Trinity” (Quenot, 1991, 46). Keeping this neat etiquette designated for venerating an icon in mind, there is an obvious inconsistency between aspirational religion and how they live out their religious traditions. After the liturgy, while we waited in the gift shop for chattering laywomen to decide which komboskini or icon to buy, Sister Erini explained that this was a “miracle icon,” and in fact belonged to a rich family history.

Three years ago, the woman had brought the icon to Timiou Stravrou since though it belonged to her family, she attempted to create the “common claim” that Laetus describes in
Letter 243. Bringing the family antique with her, she hoped to “shared its blessings” with the various monastic communities. Delivered with the utmost sincerity, Sister Erini explained the story and it is her words that does justice to the account:

So, at that period, one of her grandmothers, she was a very young girl, perhaps your age [21]. She had this icon in her house for many many years. When they tried to leave and to save their lives, the people just took the relics, icons, only these things and they tried to save this icon. So, that small girl took this icon wrapped in a cloth and brought it with her. She ran with other people who tried to save their lives. They reached the border and tried to find a ship, and with many other people, they found one after a long time. After many difficulties, they reached Athens and they were so tired that they just lied down and slept and were so tired. When they got up, a lady who lay beside the small girl with the icon asked her, “Where is your grandmother? and the young girls replied, “I do not have a grandmother.” The lady explained that she had thought that the young girl and the old lady were traveling together and said, “But I saw an old lady holding this icon, while we were in Turkey before getting on the shift and then during the trip over.” After hearing this, the young girl then understood that the Theotokos made her look like an old woman because Turkish men wouldn’t want to attack her, an old woman or a grandmother. Until the young girl had reached a safe place in Athens, she was made to look like an old woman — the icon has protected her.

For years, those believing in the icon’s continuing power have left family valuables such as earrings, rings, bracelets and watches as offerings. Similar to the traditional τάμα (tama) or ταμάτα (pl. tamata), which are votive offerings in the form of small metal plaques, this jewelry is given to drape the icons with the same intentions. Tapas literally are inscribed with believers’ individual needs and stories since they are most often embossed with illustrations of for example, small body parts for a friend or family member who has broken a limb. Thus, one family’s relic ministers to the very particular needs of others.

Along with the miracle associated with it, how the monastery acquired this icon possesses a comparable sense of mysticism. When the woman brought her icon for one liturgical service, the woman said she heard a voice that said, “I want to stay here” and realized that the icon was telling her that it wanted to be in the monastery. Gerontisa and the Sisters expressed their
willingness, rather their eagerness to have such an old icon with such a rich history, yet the woman agreed to only fifteen days since the icon has been in her family’s possession for so long.

Yet, when Gerontisa offered to provide a life-long home for the icon at Timiou Stravrou, the woman only agreed to 15 days. Later, the Athelphis learned that this woman had brought her icon to a number of monasteries for a day and then, would bring the icon back home with her, yet she never felt the way she did at Timiou Stravrou. After the liturgy, she told Gerondisa that something inside of her tells her to leave it here for some days and then she will return to get it back. Erini explained:

The woman said that she could not live without the icon and that she will only leave it for 15 days. We of course agreed. At this period, she saw the same dream three times. She was working on a big farm and was very tired and in a hurry to finish quickly because this job was very exhausting. She worked quickly because she wanted to finish to go to her house because the icon was there. But while she was working she heard a voice that told her. “Don’t be in a hurry because I am already in my house. Don’t be in a hurry to get me because where I am. I am very happy to be there. I don’t want to leave from there.”

This dream occurred two more times. Around the same time, another occurrence convinced this woman that Timiou Stravrou was the right home for her family icon. When she had taken the icon off the wall, a since around the icon. the sunlight had faded the wall color. Feeling sorrow with this reminder of the icon’s absence, the woman prayed to the icon saying, “Please just do something for me not to see it anymore because it reminds me that you were here and now you left.” Then, the following day, that markings on the wall were gone.

Now, when a nun assumes the third degree of her ascetic practice, which is called “The Great Schema” or μεγαλόσχημος (megaloschemos), her parents typically declare, “I have a daughter at Timiou Stravou.” With this custom in mind, this woman ascribes this same sort of familial analogy with the icon. “Many of these parents get to say they have given a daughter
here, I say that I have my icon here.” Thereby complicating the strict partition between motherhood and monasticism, this woman confuses the boundaries in how she

With this notion of her family icon as an extension of that family tree, the consent given by the icon first in the church – “I want to stay here” and then, in her dream – “I am very happy to be here,” both echo the ‘right family’ that many of the nuns expressed finding. Ἀγία Σκέπη (Agia Skepi, meaning Holy Protection) Monastery in White Haven, PA, which was founded in 1993 by Elder Ephraim who is a former Abbot of Philotheou Monastery on Mount Athos and inscribes a different flavor to his monasteries. After leaving nursing school and before arriving at Agia Panton, Sister Thenoymphi described Agia Skepi where she lived as a novice for some time:

I believe in some ways it was very good to try out a different monastery because I was young and acting on faith and zeal. It’s good too to also see different monasteries because whereas Greece offers a lot of different families of monasteries, here now, we don’t have a lot of different models and not every person fits one mode or one model.

Echoing these sentiments, she described her mother’s choice as well, “[Monasteries] just have their own way. Their own expression. Their own style or something just like every family – so you have to find the right family.” Even further, when the woman agreed to leave behind the icon at the monastery, Erini explained that she asked them to “hold” it, which does not imply dispossession. Especially in light of the reaction of Theonymphi’s father, this coupling of hesitation by one party and feeling suited to a community echoes resonates with the process of this woman’s offering of her icon.

Surpassing the “relative” proskynesis or “honorable veneration” recommended for icons (Cunliffe 1980, 196), this woman’s hesitation to surrender the icon characterize it as a relic from a family lineage. Whereas devotees ascribe to icons for “the time which their due,” the worship of this icon nears latreia which is worship “due to God alone” and possesses significance beyond
time" (Cunliffe 1980, 196). From generation to generation, this icon’s pilgrimage through her family’s hands has generated an honor beyond symbolism and rather for what it is itself – “wood and plaster, paint and coloured stones” of her family’s suffering and toils” (Cunliffe 1980, 196).

It is this housing of particulars, whether this icon as a descendant of her family history or a receptacle for the prayers and blessings of others, that I believe monasteries fulfills. Rather than remote and unengaged, the nuns of these three communities not only uphold and continue to cultivate bonds to blood kin but also facilitate religious experience for others that are thoroughly informed by familial connections. Week to week, this woman returns to the monastery to reinscribe her own connection to the icon and her family’s particular spiritual history; Timiou Stravrou continues to sustain that attachment.

IV. RECIPROCITY: GIVING BACK

Mentioned only briefly in the Introduction, each summer Timiou Stravrou monastery holds an eight-week long summer camp for children, which hosts an average of 100 different children each week. Even more, children come from around the world. Leaving my room, I remember one of the young novices carrying three large cardboard boxes labeled as chocolate croissants and after asking about the dessert delivery in Greek, the Athelphi answered, “It's for the children. We have to get food that the children will like!” Immediately I had a flashback to the dinner I had enjoyed sitting with the sisters in their refectory. Out came the carts of ice cream, as two novices began passing out small metal bowls with a few scoops of either chocolate, vanilla or strawberry ice cream. When a bowl of chocolate appeared in front of the novice across from me, she whispered something in Greek, which I later would realize was a request for a different flavor: strawberry. As her fellow novice returned with a grin and delivered the preferred flavor, an immense smile appeared on the face of novice across from me.
Along with attending services and offering help to the sisters, the children also receive religious education that man of the sisters, including Sister Erini who feels disappointed that schools are beginning more multi-religious education.

When I was young we used to go to Church, the teachers taught us about the celebration for the Holy Father. Now they say that the religious lessons should be about learning about other religions too, not just about Greek Orthodoxy. But, these children know almost nothing about Greek Orthodoxy. We want to teach them about other religions, but this is very bad because it’s too early and small children should first learn about what they should believe and when they get older, then they should learn about other religions and decide. He has a critical mind then, but when he is a very small infant — you must give him milk, you cannot give him meat — you have to give him just milk. (emphasis added)

Thus, spiritual education is likened to the Augustinian “milk of the faith” and the Buddha “milk of the dharma” that possesses a concern for the quality and suitability of the maternal nourishment.

Both Timios Stravrou and Aranya Bodhi place similar emphasis on youth education. Sister Theonymphi has provided the illustrations for the first two books of a children’s series that the community hopes to produce, all focusing on the twelve major feasts days such as Pascha (Easter) or the Annunciation. Addressing the thematic choices, Gerontisa Foteini explained that the Sisters felt some feasts such as The Entrance into the Temple of the Theotokos were underrepresented in children’s education. Also, as an ongoing project in the next few months, the Sisters will be working with the local parish Chapters of the national organization Greek Orthodox Youth America (G.O.Y.A.) to build a prayer trail through the property to provide an environment for practicing hesychasm, which comes from the Greek ἡσυχασμός or hesychasm, which is a “psychosomatic method of prayer” that dates back to Byzantine monasticism. It’s emphasis on “stillness, rest and silence,” along with breathing and posture mirrors the practice of
Buddhist meditation and the bhikkhunis of Aranya Bodhi whose hermitage serves as this similar ascetic landscape.

Along with this emphasis on fusing practice with place, the bhikkhunis also value sharing the Buddhist doctrine, however within a more areligious framework. When Ayya Sobhana explained the laws of *kamma* (Pali form of the Sanskrit *karma*) to “new-age” children in the area, their excitement and enthusiasm in reaction to the Jello she brought to demonstrate the concept surprised her. Quickly she learned from the children that the particular snack food had been relegated to the unhealthy food groups because of its chemicals and dyes. Nevertheless, the three communities share the desire to nurture a void the communities perceive in the transmission of knowledge about their respective faiths. (Not the void in snacks offered by “new-age” parents, but strictly speaking in regards to spiritual education.)

For those unacquainted with the practice of *dana*, it seems quite comparable to charity at first; however, as Sayalay Santechari explained, the “main purpose is the happiness of the donor, the person doing the giving.” It is an act of giving with three points in time, including the anticipation and planning period, the moment of giving and then the memory of the offering. However, it is this midpoint of delivering the gift that embodies the reciprocity characteristic of monastic life. When accepting the gift, bhikkhunis are taught to “silently smile” so that the act does not become a transaction, in which the donor receives gratitude; instead, their giving’s purpose is to get a feeling of giving. Such constraints on the bhikkhunis' reactions are meant for the donor because if they “start gushing and carrying on, it demeans the gift” since “value judgement[s]” may impact the donor.
Maternal Thinking and Reason

In Ties that Bind, Ohnuma describes Sarah Ruddick’s call to transform “maternal thinking” into a nonviolent politics of peace since maternal love has the potential to be selfish and parochial in its extreme, but also to exhibit “passionate loyalties to their children and also [a] personal imaginative grasp of what other children mean to other mothers” (Ruddick, 1989, 177). Within the context of Hariti’s narrative, in which the goddess grants children to others mothers, the goddess’ empathy allows for inherent selfishness to be overcome; however, I propose that these monastic communities of women speak to a particular dimension of Ruddick’s construction of this “maternal ethic” – that of Reason.

When she became a young mother, Ruddick describes her grappling with Reason, which is “detached and impersonal, at best irrelevant to particular affections and loyalties” (Ruddick, 1989, 8). With the “passions of maternity [which are] so sudden, intense, and focusing,” Ruddick struggled to balance the two – “maternal thinking” and “Reason,” and early in Maternal Thinking, she puts forth a question she once posed to herself: “If I could not reject Reason, could I honor Reason differently? If I could no longer serve the Reason I had known, was it possible to reconceive a reason that strengthened passion rather than opposing it, that refused to separate love from knowledge?” (Ruddick, 1989, 9) Answering in the affirmative, these female communities reconceive of “motherhood” in their spiritual practices and creatively adapt familial ties to their pursuit of the divine.

Neither Timiou Stavrou, Agion Panton nor Aranya Bodhi is a space reserved for the “detached and impersonal” characteristics of Ruddick’s “Reason.” In spite of traditional hagiographies and teachings, though also lacking consistency, these women do not wholly reject ties to biological family and memories of their mother. Whereas some in The Therigatha
reproduce male values of motherhood in their transformation from hysterical, grieving mothers to mindful and dispassionate devotees once there is "permanent severance of the mother-child bond" and an "eradication of [the] woman's maternal status" (Ohnuma, 2007, 104), these women in these communities show that maternal love is spiritually potent and embody the continuity of the "different voice" of women, described by many feminists (Ohnuma, 2012, 211).

As I traced importance in the respective communities for communal life and the 'rites of passage' such as name ceremonies, cultivation of personal devotional spaces and prayer lives, the transition from blood to adopted kin is characterized by resonances of familial relationships, especially with mothers. Thus, memories of one's family and one's mother or identity as a mother are assimilated rather than disregarded in ascetic pursuits. In response to scriptures and doctrine, these women creatively adapt and interpret what is written: where there is a memorialized and divine womb (of the Theotokos), these women see a human and accessible one; where there is a universalizing of a mother's love into a metaphorical mother-love, these women see a confirmation of particular love between mother-and-son (Jesus and Mary). Thus, these women are not carbon copies of the doctrines belonging to their traditions. Laments and communal weeping are acknowledged and valued; familial ties bleed into spiritual families; and mothers inform and interrupt spiritual practices. Whether the literal mother-daughter pair of Sister Theonymphi and Sister Maria or the figurative mother-daughter pair of the Greek woman and her family icon, monasteries actually house these very particular relationships for others.

Rather than an uncaged community comparable to a lighthouse that guides from a distance, Aranya Bodhi, Timios Stravros and Agion Panton offer an intensive enclosure for monastic growth, which may be likened to a womb; however these spaces also reciprocate back to lay communities just as a biological womb offers its space to house life. Similar to the *dana*
practiced in the hermitage that exists three points in time (see Chapter 6), for these women, entrance into a monastic community incorporates a past. As Theonymphi said, “[To cut off people] is not really realistic. We come from someplace. We were born in the world. We were both from a mother and a father...We cannot simply put on these clothes and forget who we were...There is pain in the reality of leaving some things behind but it's not like wiping out. I don't even think would be realistic or even possible.”

“Different voice” of women

Looking back to texts of past holy women in The Therīgāthā and The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers to bridge connections with contemporary of these monastic communities, my studies also anticipates the ways in which female monastic life will continue to creatively adapt their traditions and create these pockets of potential for creative expression within traditional frameworks. Noted in Ties That Bind, Ohnuma describes a “different voice” of women that “emphasizes continuity, connectedness, and enduring relations between the dead and the living” rather than “separation, rupture, and transcendence” (Ohnuma, 2012, 211).

While I drove along the Sonoma Coast with Ayya T in the passenger seat and Ayya Suvijjana in the backseat, Ayya spoke of the hermitage’s preservation of the bhikkhuni Vinaya in its pure form:

Our community adheres extremely closely to the patimoka precepts (the bhikkhuni Vinaya). That is one of the unique aspects of this community. We really take that as our base for training. There are those that think that a discipline that is so old cannot possibly be relevant to this contemporary time, then there are those that may not even learn the bhikkhuni Vinaya in its details or even the bhikkhuni patimoka because there are assumptions in some places that it has to be outdated and irrelevant and not beneficial to us in contemporary times or irrelevant or utterly impossible to live with in the modern day west.
Thus, embodying a womb-like receptacle, the hermitage holds and preserves a tradition, while practices an ongoing synthesis of the “essence” of the tradition along with the time period’s “conventions” (see footnote on page 61). Thus, particularly at Aranya Bodhi and Agion Panton, the bhikkunis and Sisters do not accept their traditions as static bodies, but rather scriptures and doctrine to be molded and crafted. As Ayya T explained, “For us too, although we are guided by the Vinaya, it does not touch on all the aspects of our lives. There are things that are going on that are not mentioned in the Vinaya, at least not in their letters and particular, so then it’s up to try to glean the principles and then see how to apply those principles to our contemporary circumstance.”

Thus, with this preservation of the ancient Vinaya in mind, it is worth considering how Greek Orthodox nuns and Theravada bhikkunis may continue to reveal creative ways for expressions of female spirituality that assimilate female roles such as motherhood rather than completely spiritualize them (i.e. “virginal motherhood”). How will these receptive and reciprocating communities continue to inform the spiritual lives of women outside of their monastery gates and of the average ascetic leanings?
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The small chapel at Timiou Stavrou where morning and evening services were held.

Seats for laity, where I sat, in the Timiou Stavrou chapel.

The Pantocrator painted in the dome of the Timiou Stavrou chapel.
(4) Sayalay Santacari outside her monastic kuti at Aranya Bodhi.

(5) Shared altar space inside the yurt at Aranya Bodhi.

(6) [Upper left side of the mountain] Cross-shape foliage believed to be a hierophany at Timiou Stavrou.

(7) Individual wooden chairs, with raised arms, create personal spaces for devotion in the chapel.
In Timiou Stavrou chapel, traditional tamatas, or votive offerings hung on icons.
worship. Moreover, they shall learn perfect discipline in everything, deep and incontrovertible inner obedience, effacement and forgetfulness of themselves and all things, courtesy and delicacy in manner and speech, manifest and natural respect and the silence becoming to saints. They shall be instructed in the cenobitic way of life, tolerating and being tolerated, honouring others and supporting them. Their lives shall be subject to the present Typikon and to the statutes and prescriptions envisaged by it.

During the period of their novitiate, which is "a test of the worth of them and their parents"30, the following shall be assessed:

- Whether there is communion of spirit.
- Whether they can abandon parents, property and their own will and opinions.
- Whether "they are disposed to all humility without shame"31.
- Whether they have stout resistance to bodily temptations and those of the soul and spirit, especially when those are unexpected.
- Whether they love study and value manual labour "and will accept the most humble of tasks"32.

Equally, inquiry shall be made as to whether they are "unstable and quick to judge"33, whether they are afflicted with serious psychological problems which strongly influence their volition or make their personalities immature and irresponsible.

They shall be further tested as to: their capacity for liturgical life, their desire for Christ and the martyrs' spirit, their perseverance in ascetic struggle, their ability to remain indifferent to their thoughts or to overcome them, the purity of their intentions, the ease with which they take to the communal life and their ability to survive without the need for the support of others.

Should any novice prove unable to adapt to the conditions, the
APPENDIX B


Bathing

Therīgāthā XLVII: 112-116

Ploughing fields with ploughs sowing seeds in the ground
feeding wives and children young men win wealth

So why is it that I so pure in virtue following the rule of my teacher:
neither lazy nor proud have still not come to nibbana

Washing my feet I noticed the water
watching it flow from my foot to the ground
I focused my mind tamed bridled like a well-bred horse

then taking a lamp I entered my hut
checking the mat I sat down on the bed

and taking a pin I pushed down on the wick
as lamplight blew out ah my mind was free