

Migratory and Monastic Spaces:  
Examining the Conditions for a Happy Life

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*This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*

*/s/ Alice Maiden*

My research for this seminar will depart from traditionally religious and historical questions related to Mt. Menoikeion and consider the monastery in a more abstract way: in terms of place, as a unique space in which a community of people commit to spend their lives. The nuns live a life guided by routine and program, working within their community to sustain their community—working in a different way, economically and socially, from “normal” society. Within this design, the nuns do not live a necessarily relaxing life, but they live a “beautiful life.”<sup>1</sup> Although so much of their happiness is rooted inseparably in discussions of religion, I’m going to examine about how many important aspects of their lives, and what makes them meaningful, can be explained in non-religious terms. The goal of this kind of reasoning is related to the monastery’s ongoing mission of hospitality, because in this paper, I want to compare the monastery to another community in Greece that serves as a somewhat unlikely and certainly very different comparison: refugee camps. There’s a question surrounding refugee camp design and management that might seem intuitive, but actually doesn’t have a clear answer: what is it that we owe refugees? Is it a place to sleep and food to eat, as the nuns have offered us as Princeton students visiting each year? Or something more? Hospitality and beauty aren’t necessarily what we look for in living a happy life, so what is it we look for? And more importantly, what should we, based on the answer to that question, seek to provide others who seek refuge in Greece and in states around the world?<sup>2</sup> I propose that this question can be considered by looking at the social aspects of this monastery which make it a meaningful place for nuns to live—ritually, for the duration of their lives, and in somewhat isolation—and the social aspects of a refugee camp which make the same ritual, long-term stays, and isolation unbearable.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a conversation with Sister Macrina.

<sup>2</sup> Benhabib, Seyla. “The Morality of Migration.” *The New York Times*. 29 July 2012.

This kind of questioning can show what our priorities might be in managing the 60 million displaced persons around the world; because in the end, a significant portion of aid money goes to processes and facilities that keep refugees fed, housed, and clothed, but still leave so many suffering psychologically, unsatisfied, frustrated, and hopeless.<sup>3</sup> Refugee camps across Greece have varying degrees of comfort—while some refugees sleep in tents, others have containers specifically for their families, with electronics, places for worship, decorations, and gardens. Some camps are in parts of Greece with beautiful views and vibrant towns. Yet, even in those most-comfortable camps, most refugees are unhappy, growing frustrated and anxious to the point of mental breakdowns and suicide. There is no one cause for what drives psychological distress in a refugee camp. But it is interesting to consider the effect of different environments like a refugee camp—ones that are isolated, routine, and for a sometimes-long-term stay—on mental health, and what makes some communities livable and some torturous. With an influx of people with no state to call a safe home, what do you offer first? Can you find inner peace and address psychological distress despite the isolated camp structure? Camps share some social features of monastic life, and I want to look at what might drive happiness or frustration within this structure as a way of discussing what refugees need—besides food, water, and shelter—to be treated with dignity. Because for refugees who are deeply unhappy, it not necessarily the case that they are unthankful for the hospitality that they receive, I think; but rather that we often look in the wrong places for what they need.

To begin, we can compare a refugee camp in Greece to a monastery in terms of three factors: isolation, the long-term nature of one's stay, and ritual. The goal is to identify some

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<sup>3</sup> Masri, Lena. "I feel like my life is empty": Refugees suffer from mental illness on Greek islands." *ABC News*. 20 March 2018.

sources of happiness and of dissatisfaction that is shared by nuns and refugees alike based on the similarities and differences in their experiences.

Both communities are unique in that they involve limited movement from their communities, and limited interaction with other communities; and typically, this interaction is one of hospitality, not one of communal work between parties. For nuns, they are isolated from the community in that they have limited movement outside the monastery on a daily basis (although they may leave at times, they do not do so regularly, and so cycle through the same scene to their lives every day) as well as on a lifetime basis (when entering, they commit to life in that community until their death, including being buried in that site).<sup>4</sup> They have limited relationships with friends and family outside the monastery, who are able to visit them, but with whom they do not share a life or constant communication. In other ways, though, they are not isolated: they are connected to the larger community through their hospitality and mentorship of laypeople, and by the community's support of the monastery.<sup>5</sup> Even aside from opportunities for outside connection, though, the life of relative isolation within their community is one that they have chosen to enter and follow, and which leads to a fulfilling life.

Somewhat similarly, refugees often have limited access to outside communities; many cannot work in cities outside the camps, whether through official restriction, language barriers, difficulties in transportation based on the geographical distance and obscure locations of refugee camps (they are so often on the outskirts of cities in Greece, not within walking distance—or sight—of the local community), or barriers created by employers.<sup>6</sup> They are not wholly isolated, though; they have the opportunity to form long-term relationships with Greeks and volunteers

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<sup>4</sup> From conversations with Sister Macrina.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Based on UNCHR profiles of refugee camps in Greece and reporting in refugee camps around Athens and Lesbos in summer 2017.

from around the world who enter the camps as volunteers and become part of their ritual interactions and form communities.<sup>7</sup> This is a relationship of hospitality, with volunteers providing services and subsistence to the refugees. In Skaramagas camp, a number of volunteers from a variety of organizations come on a long-term basis and return multiple times to volunteer, and form friendships and mentorships with refugees. In Moria, Greeks have set up kantinas outside the camp walls, forming long-term friendships with the refugees. One kantina owner in particular that we interviewed last summer, Katerina, used to just serve Greeks in the summertime; but she worked at Moria years ago, and has been working year-round ever since. She's made friends with residents in the camp who have come back to visit her even after leaving Moria.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the nuns sustain relationships with the community and their families and friends outside the monastery, even though their routines are fundamentally separate and overlap in a limited way. The nuns sustain friendships and relationships, especially ones in which they offer help through hospitability, service, and advice.

The key difference in the distances and connections that refugees and nuns each maintain outside their community is that the ways in which the nuns are isolated from the rest of the world is within their domain of choice. This might be complicated by different notions of agency in monasticism—one is called to life in a monastery by God, rather than necessarily choosing that life for oneself<sup>9</sup>—but nevertheless, the nun willingly enters a monastery and adopts this lifestyle of quasi-isolation. The refugee is subject to this state of isolation upon arriving in a host country, perhaps choosing to engage with locals and volunteers within their access, but not being able to choose to engage with the community outside the boundaries of restrictions on their movement.

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<sup>7</sup> Based on reporting in Moria camp in Lesbos in summer 2017, and interviews with Greek kantina owners and refugee camp residents who visited the kantinas.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Based on conversations with Sister Macrina.

They may break their isolation, but only within the design of a system and space of a refugee camp to which they are confined.

Next, let's examine at the extended length of refugees' and nuns' stays in camps and monasteries. When nuns commit to a monastery, they commit to stay in that place for the length of their life, unless they have a reason to divorce themselves from monasticism, for which they have to give their word to God, or to leave that monastery, for which they have to receive the blessing from the Abbess.<sup>10</sup> They live out the length of their lives in this one location, building their community in strength and in small numbers and maintaining their home and place of worship. While such a long-term commitment can be difficult, as the Vice Abbess and Sister Macrina explained, in conditions of hardship and in moments of weakness—at times when it seems “against human reason”—it leads to a “beautiful life,” as it is testament to their strength and devotion to their spirituality to maintain their commitment to Christ and their monastic community.<sup>11</sup> The lifelong nature of their stay contributes to the familial nature of the monastery, bonding them together as sisters and with God.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the long-term nature of a refugee's stay in a camp can create the opposite effect: one of uncertainty, anxiety, and violence against others and oneself. While some refugees, especially in Skaramagas camp, form long-term friendships and relations among one another—forming communities in which they had daily routines of fishing and swimming, making friends for whom they cared and with whom some started makeshift businesses<sup>13</sup>—these ways of adjusting for the long term have a backdrop of uncertainty about the future that makes it impossible to be comfortable and settled in a camp as if it is a home. If one does happen to settle

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<sup>10</sup> Based on conversations with Sister Macrina.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Reported in summer 2017 in Skaramagas camp outside Athens.

in, they might express apathy and hopelessness about the future, imagining they might remain there forever and never experience freedom outside the camp. If one does not settle in, even when surrounded by some components of a long-term community—family, friends, businesses, activities, education—many refugees report an anxiety about constantly waiting for their future to be determined which undermines their daily experience of this long-term stay.<sup>14</sup> That the length of the stay is unknown is what seems to make the long-term nature of the stay so psychologically distressing. For instance, one refugee in Moria whose parents had the ability to move on to Athens, but who chose to stay behind with her, grew anxious and suicidal. In the length of time it takes to process cases with nothing to do while she waits, according to ABC News, she has grown sad, angry, and irritable, getting into fights with her parents over small things often. “Once I leave here there’ll be a future for me, but as long as I’m here there’s no future,” she said.<sup>15</sup> It is not necessarily only the length of the stay that creates anxiety, but rather the uncertainty about the length of the stay that makes it impossible to plan for the future or feel in control of one’s life plan. As another example, consider the many unaccompanied refugee children of Idomeni camp an hour north of Mt. Menoikeion, which closed a couple years ago but housed hundreds of children without guardians in tents. According to a report by *The Guardian*, some refugee children would take the life-threatening risk of crossing the border alone, with no food, money, support, or plan; such a choice was an act of moving forward, though, and an act of taking control of one’s own future rather than simply wait for time to pass.<sup>16</sup> One of the most important conditions for a fulfilling life is to have control over one’s future.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Farhat, Jihane Ben, et al. “Syrian refugees in Greece: experience with violence, mental health status, and access to information during the journey and while in Greece.” *BMC Medicine* (2018) 16:40.

<sup>15</sup> Masri, “I feel like my life is empty.”

<sup>16</sup> Townsend, Mark. “The refugee children of Idomeni: alone, far from home but clinging to hope.” *The Guardian*. 7 May 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Janotík, Tomás. “Empirical Analysis of Life Satisfaction in Female Benedictine Monasteries in Germany.” *Sciences Po University Press*. *Revue économique*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (janvier 2016), pp. 143-165.

Even when surrounded by family, uncertainty and lack of agency can drive a family in a refugee camp apart during a long-term stay in one place rather than bringing them together, as such lifelong commitment does for nuns in the monastery. A key difference is, again, the control that an individual has over their length of their stay. While, again, this sense of control is attributed to spiritual figures for nuns rather than themselves as individuals, who are instead obedient to a calling or presence of God, they do have control over their stay by choosing to embark on the spiritual journey, choosing to remain after the novice period and the engagement period, and choosing to stay for life if they are accepted, which is largely dependent on their ability to work with and adapt to the community, which is within their power to try to do. Even in their earliest novice stage, they begin this journey with the intent to make a lifelong commitment, not a three-year commitment; the goal is to stay in that monastery for life.<sup>18</sup> In this way, a monastic life spent in one place is an act of control, of planning for one's future, and of following the life plan most suited to the individual. On the other hand, the length of one's stay in a refugee camp is a continuous testament to their lack of control over their life: they are subject to the international system of which they are part, with an inability to plan for life after the camp, not knowing if they will remain, move forward, or be deported with each passing day. So, even the acts of long-term settling are necessarily at odds with the camp environment, which is, by design, temporary, industrial, and not suited for long-term life. One cannot work on building their community when they are not sure whether the members will stay; one cannot work on maintaining their environment when they live within a template of another power's design; one's life projects like work, education, and activities for pleasure cannot be pursued with connectivity and growth when one cannot plan with absolute certainty beyond the next few

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<sup>18</sup> Based on conversations with Sister Macrina.

days, or months at best. People do, in the face of uncertainty, often pursue life projects: they start businesses, learn languages, sustain communities, and continue their education.<sup>19</sup> These are acts of agency within a system in which they lack control, with varying degrees of success in addressing the psychological distress of life in a refugee camp. It might not necessarily be the length of the stay itself that creates such unrest, but rather the degree of control one has over the choice to remain there.

Finally, relatedly, we should consider the presence of ritual and routine in the monastery and in a refugee camp. One might think that it is the quality of doing the same thing every day, cycling through the same routines and rhythms, which makes life in a refugee camp unbearable. Oftentimes, it might be; but consider the presence of routine in a healthy life. For nuns, following a program each day contributes to their happiness, allowing them to accomplish goals for the monastery and live a life of commitment and constancy in their spiritual and monastic duties. Ritual strengthens their community bond and individual strength to obey the monastery and the Orthodox faith. Their choice to commit to a life guided by ritual leads them to a beautiful, fulfilling life.<sup>20</sup>

Ritual has a somewhat similar and somewhat different presence in a refugee camp. Rituals of religious worship offers, to some religious persons in a refugee camp, the same ability to express their commitment to their spiritual belief despite physical discomforts it might cause. Open Democracy reported in 2016 that in Idomeni camp, on Ramadan, a significant number of adults and children fasted, despite their already limited resources of comfort, rest, food, and water.<sup>21</sup> Some aspects of ritual worship had been disrupted—boys could not be circumcised with

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<sup>19</sup> Based on reporting in refugee camps in Greece in summer 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Based on conversations with Sister Macrina.

<sup>21</sup> Saunier, Véronique. “Preparing for Ramadan in the refugee camps.” openDemocracy. 3 June 2016.

the lack of doctors, and men could not pray daily without the ability to wash effectively in the makeshift mosque—but “fasting during the Ramadan period is the only ritual over which they [could] have some control.”<sup>22</sup> Medical staff and NGOs adjusted their schedules accordingly to provide for refugees to receive food before sunrise and medical treatment at night; MSF advised their employees to not try to convince someone not to fast, and to show understanding and be patient for fasting people who might be stressed in the harsh conditions.<sup>23</sup> As Open Democracy reported, “by observing Ramadan, refugees are clawing back an element of their own agency.”<sup>24</sup> When rituals are disassociated from a life that refugees can control, though—for instance, when the ritual becomes waiting in food lines to receive meals rather than providing for themselves—it often leads to frustration and dissatisfaction, and the feeling of an empty life. Ritual, cyclical life in a refugee camp might sometimes consist of similar features as that life in a monastery—people might pray, eat, learn, and work within their communities according to a rhythm each day—but when such a ritual is controlled by a system of which a person did not willingly partake, and subject to the whim of a state such that a person might be deported or removed from that community any day—even rituals which express a degree of agency likely do not lead to the same psychological comfort and fulfillment as in a monastic community or everyday life.

For all of the ways in which one’s life in a monastery and a refugee camp might be similar—living in a detached community guided by ritualistic actions for a long-term stay in one location—the absence of agency in the life of a refugee makes the very features which might lead to a happy life of a nun into a source of distress and emptiness for a refugee. While there are many sources of trauma and dissatisfaction one can name, a lack of agency is certainly one of

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<sup>22</sup> Saunier, “Preparing for Ramadan.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

them, reflected both in the reports of refugees in camps of varying levels of comfort as well as in the official response by NGOs and governments towards what they provide for refugees. For instance, one program implemented in the past couple years is that which allots refugees—including those in Schisto and Moria camps—a certain amount of money per week with which they can purchase their own groceries and cook their own food.<sup>25</sup> This, Schisto reported, led to a rise in satisfaction among residents, who were able to at least have control over an element of their life as compared to a life waiting in lines for food.<sup>26</sup> Many residents of Moria talked about how the amount of money was so little that it only afforded a couple of minor purchases each day, but never enough to sustain every meal or create a long-term plan of savings—but still, this amount of money allowed them to spend time and purchase food and drinks in the kantina shops, and so at least participate actively in the activity of talking with friends and listening to music in a café, and having a burger and a beer instead of the small, watery meals they had in the camp.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, monastic life does seem guided by a feeling of a lack of agency over one's individual life, and rather prioritizes obedience to a communal life and spiritual project larger than oneself. Still, however, the choice to remain in that ritualistic life and location is an act of agency that distinguishes monasteries as communities which offers its members fulfillment and joy if their values align with the values of Orthodoxy and the community in the monastery. Even within that obedience is a choice to fight urges to leave at times, and a choice to commit to sacrifices in remaining faithful in one's marriage to God. The same cyclical nature of life in a single place could either be psychologically beautiful or horrible depending on one's choice in the matter to live a certain life plan.

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<sup>25</sup> Based on reporting in refugee camps, including Schisto and Moria camp, in summer 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Programs that instill a degree of agency within life in a refugee camp have shown success in making life more fulfilling, suggesting perhaps that autonomy and control is an important thing to prioritize in planning to host and eventually relocate refugees either back to their homes or to a new country. The significance of this idea is that a lack of agency isn't something that always photographs well: some look at established refugee camps that look like cities and call its inhabitants lazy and ungrateful to live a life of dependence in such an environment long-term. Some look at the containers which refugees have decorated and create a cute news story about people making a home anywhere. But such a cute news spot does not reveal the internal struggle, and hospitality in offering subsistence does not necessarily lead to happiness.

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