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Abstract

The tragic period of the Civil War and Cold War in Greece generated much poetry of lasting value, mostly from the Left. The poet T. K. Papatsonis (1895–1976), a figure with (among Greek poets) an idiosyncratic political and religious perspective, produced a response of quite a different kind: an 'instant poem' written *ira et studio* as soon as the show trial of the Hungarian Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty (1949) was concluded. The present discussion provides a reading of Papatsonis' unusual poem within its Cold War context, with attention to its allegiances and its possible contradictions.

Keywords

Cold War, Joseph Mindszenty, T. K. Papatsonis, Hungary, Modern Greek poetry

This paper was given at the University of Ioannina in 2017. I am grateful to the expert Dr Vasilis Makrydimas for discussion, though he is not to be held responsible for any defects in the exposition. I hope that it will, even in the present form, be of interest to a readership in central Europe, and that it will honour the contribution of Professor Růžena Dostálová.

T. K. Papatsonis (1895–1976) is one of just a handful of Roman Catholic literary artists of modern Greece (the jurist and poet Georgios Tertsetis; the novelist, diarist, and theatre director Konstantinos Christomanos; and, if you like, the *rebetika* singer Markos Vamvakaris), and his religious affiliation has been the source of critical puzzlement or equivocation. I shall confine myself here to saying that I am not persuaded that Papatsonis was (or at least was for long) a Greek Catholic (a so-called Uniate) and that his affection for the Orthodox East need imply that he lived somehow between the Eastern and Roman obediences. Papatsonis might seem to be, in essence, a devotional poet – not merely in his general spiritual emphasis, but in the strict sense: in his copious use of Western (and sometimes Byzantine) texts and devotions such as the Breviary, the Roman Missal, the Litany of Loreto, and so on. That path of apparent quietism and other-worldliness could hardly have been more clearly signalled than by the earliest of his collected poems, 'My Rosary' (1914). Yet in the terrible decade of the 1940s Papatsonis, like other Greek poets, raised a voice in protest against the Axis and other tyrannies. One topic which would provoke his passionate and immediate response was the imprisonment and show trial of Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty in Budapest, from December 1948 to February 1949, which immediately became a *cause célèbre* across the world, the subject of saturation coverage in the international press. It would also inspire poems, among them the Australian poet Vincent Buckley's 'In the Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom' (1953).

In his own poem, 'Lament of a Greek over the Martyrdom and Sentencing of Joseph Mindszenty' («Θρῆνος ἑνὸς Ἕλληνα γιὰ τὸ μαρτύριο καὶ τὴν καταδίκη τοῦ Ἰωσὴφ Μινδζέντυ»),[1] Papatsonis responded to hot news with a voice that burned with outrage. Like Yannis Ritsos' *Epitaphios* (1936), Papatsonis' poem reacts with immediacy to a political event, drawing on newspaper coverage, while at the same time situating its own oppositional stance in a longer view of history and a broader allegiance.

What makes Papatsonis' poem unusual is that it revolves around a sense of the distance between Greek responsiveness to world events – at a time when the horrors of the Civil War in Greece itself might have seemed all-consuming – and his own Latin Catholic background; which might by some have been felt to call his Greek credentials into question. Furthermore, this is a poem which – unusually, for a Greek poet of stature – adopts an intransigent posture against

1 T. K. Papatsonis, *Ἐκλογή Α', Ursa Minor, Ἐκλογή Β'*. Athens: Ikaros, 1988, 314–318. References to this poem are given by page numbers in brackets in the text; translations are my own.

Communism: Th. D. Frangopoulos' 'For the Cadets of the Alcázar' (1975) is another distinguished example. Drawing on a strange blend of news coverage, historical fact (or supposed fact), polyglot allusion (notably in the William Blake epigraph to the poem, and in the German saying which brings it to a close), and devotional material, Papatsonis here responds to history as it unfolds and unveils himself – in this poem – as a true Cold Warrior.

Yet critics hitherto have, it seems to me, rather smoothed away the confrontational aspect of Papatsonis' poem. Alexandros Argyriou (2009), for example, while clearly esteeming the poem, bases that esteem on a sense that its note of protest is a mild, even a muted one; Kostas Myrsiades (1974), for his part, too readily reads it as a plea for universal brotherhood, rather than dwelling on its more partisan aspects. In both cases, the critic prefers to quote rather than to comment. In the present paper, I shall seek to unpick some details of this challenging poem, face honestly some of its problems, and draw on contemporary sources to place it in its early Cold War context.

'The Lament of a Greek over the Martyrdom and Sentencing of Joseph Mindszenty' – the very title gives us the poet's stance; and at the foot of the poem the date '9, February 1949' makes it clear that the poem's notional time of writing – or at any rate completion – was the very day after sentence had been passed. (As with some of the dates that go with Seferis' poems, we need not take this to be literal truth about the date of composition.) The poem then appeared in *Nea Hestia* on 1 March 1949: instant publication, we may term it. This is a poem whose claim to authenticity rests in part on its claim to be an eyewitness to history: though not physically present, the poet situates himself as one who has, so to speak, held out a handkerchief in the direction of the martyr and allowed his blood to soak into it. But who was Mindszenty? In the brief summary that follows, I shall draw mostly on contemporary sources that pull together newspaper coverage that Papatsonis had evidently been following closely; but I also draw on some later assessments.

Joseph Mindszenty lived from 1892 to 1975, and Papatsonis' sense that he was a close contemporary is important, quite aside for his inherited respect for the princes of the Church. And Mindszenty was a prince in a special sense, having been Prince Primate of the primatial see of Hungary, Esztergom, since 1945: he was, in Papatsonis' eyes, as we shall see, the true source of political legitimacy in that country. Born Josef Pehm, of Swabian extraction and with a minor noble title, he later Magyarized his name and was ordained priest in 1915, rising through the hierarchy in a turbulent period to be consecrated Bishop of Veszprém in the tragic year 1944. His stance against the Nazi-supporting Arrow Cross movement led to his arrest late in that year, but the steady consolidation

of what styled itself a people's régime in Hungary after the conclusion of hostilities led to ever greater confrontation with the Church over education policy in particular. The sequence of events is described clearly – though not of course neutrally – in *Four Years Struggle of the Church in Hungary,* a book whose issue he ordered in 1949. Though his policy was deemed incautious by some of the clergy, Mindszenty, encouraged by the fiery Cardinal Spellman of New York and by Pope Pius XII, programmed a confrontation with the Hungarian government – a confrontation covered in slow motion by the world press – and achieved what he had sought: world attention on what he saw as an apocalyptic confrontation between the Church and the false gods of Communism.

Having predicted his arrest in a pastoral letter to his clergy in Advent 1948, the Cardinal was arrested emerging from his private chapel on 26 December 1949 and snatched from the embrace of his aged mother. Kept in close confinement and subjected to more than eighty hours of interrogation in a standing position (contemporary claims about the use of drugs have been the subject of dispute), Mindszenty appeared at his trial a broken man, and the authenticity of his confession was widely questioned, notably by international legal experts. The substance of his confession, as often with show trials, contained the clearly false (such as the claim that he sought the restoration of the Habsburg dynasty) with the plausible (that he had asked the Americans not to return the Crown of St Stephen to Hungary under its current rulers). Condemned to imprisonment, amid international outrage, the Cardinal was released just briefly in 1956, and thereafter lived most of his life in the United States Legation in Budapest. By the end of his life, from 1971 in nearby Vienna, he had in the eyes of many become a relic of the past, an embarrassment to the papacy of Paul VI, who relieved him of the See of Esztergom in the cause of promoting *Ostpolitik*. Later historians speak of him as 'an honest, brave and narrow man' or as 'brave but arrogant and rigid', and in the most recent history of the Cold War in Hungary, he is scarcely mentioned; which does seem very odd. Yet if we go back to 1949, we find him painted in vivid colours, colours Papatsonis vigorously applies in his own poem.

The poem's title clearly positions itself in a tradition: a dirge (though in a male voice) in honour of an irrevocable past. In part, *threnos* here evokes the laments for the Fall of Constantinople, with the same sense (so the end of the poem) that a glory has departed the earth, or at least one of the historic cities of Christendom. But it is also of course a reference to a contemporary genre of high modernist Greek lament which will be alluded to systematically in the long and complex section (316) referencing modern elegies for Aris Velouchiotis and others, as I shall discuss in due course. The apparently redundant specification, 'of a Greek', will be taken up aggressively later, as we shall see. The reference to

'martyrdom' is puzzling, except when we reflect that, in Papatsonis' view, the Hungarian government 'seeks to deprive [Mindszenty] of the martyr's crown and glory', which must accordingly be supplied by poetry.

The subtitle is more slippery. Blake's well known statement from plate 77 of *Jerusalem*, 'Devils are false religions' is taken (as Blake's statements so often are) out of context, so as to suggest that satanic false religions today stalk the earth. The identification of Communism as an apocalyptic religion was to be crystallized by Norman Cohn in 1957 in his study, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*; Papatsonis draws perhaps more conventionally on a strand in Catholic Cold War propaganda which – to be fair, sometimes faithfully reflecting propaganda from the other side – depicts Communism as a perverted Christianity. This can be seen in a rhetorically heightened form in the Anglican clergyman Peter Hammond's compelling but far from objective commentary on this period in Greece, *The Waters of Marah* (1956).

The whole of the long first section (314–315) is taken up with a beautiful evocation of an idyllic Hungary, rooted in its rural identity, which has now been lost: the Danube's waters have turned black, just as the landscape in Elytis' *Lay Heroic and Funeral* changes with the death of the fallen second lieutenant. Papatsonis, who evidently had happy memories of his honeymoon in 1932, part of which he had spent in Hungary, begins and ends the passage with scenes from a Budapest made sacred by its great Catholic figures and treasures of the past:

> *The hand that scattered blessings has been removed;*
> *and the Amethyst that sealed the metal ring*
> *has been hidden away, that treasure, in a dungeon.*
> *Margaret Island is now home to foxes,*
> *there where loves once tenderly disembarked*
> *to sit beneath the foliage.*
> *It was an evil omen, that the crown had grown crooked,*
> *who knows where it lies buried now?*

First, the incorrupt Hand of St Stephen (István) of Hungary (c. 975–1038), who Christianized the country at the start of the second millennium, and the Crown supposedly deriving from him. (Art historians place it some two centuries later.) Then Margaret Island (known also as Hare Island), named after a royal daughter (1042–1070) who renounced all to become a religious. And then, at the end of this passage, the great Matthias Church of Buda, standing high above the city:

And when the holy days came and the bells rang out
and dressed in his gold and roseate vestments
the great bishop would process
from the church of St Matthias, holding the Host,
they would run and kneel at his feet, in a great swelling wave,
all of his faithful, to receive
in his passing the supreme benediction.

None of these elements are without contemporary resonance. St Stephen's Hand was returned by the Americans in 1945, so that it could again be part of the annual procession on his feast day, 20 August, and Mindszenty wrote to his flock: 'This Hand, which showed us the way for over a thousand years, is home again; it is light in the darkness.' The Crown, however, was still in American keeping, in Fort Knox, Tennessee (here called 'a dungeon'), until it was restored to Hungary by President Carter in 1978. By contrast, Margaret Island is now, Papatsonis writes, 'home to foxes' (with an echo of Psalm 62: 'they shall be a portion for foxes'), dishonouring St Margaret of Hungary. It is worth noting that her canonization, by Pius XII, had taken place as recently as 1943. The Matthias Church, too, is a modern creation, renamed in the late nineteenth century, and rebuilt in an overdone Gothic style, to commemorate that other great king, Matthias Corvinus (1443–1490), with whom the poem ends.

In between these urban settings we see the primordial world of the Hungarian plain, depicted in bright hues evocative of the pastoral poet Kostas Krystallis, and of course of Kostis Palamas' *The Gypsy's Dodecalogue* (1907):

A sea of gold your wheatfields.
The winged creatures harvested the grapes from the vines.
Young women played laughing at the gathering in
as they shook the fruit from the plum-trees.
Your unsaddled sturdy horses, ranging
free, would chase another over the plains.
And when the summer nights would fall
starry, after the harvest of the wheat, new silver,
in a heaven-sent rain, would scatter from the moon,
a blessing from heaven, a moon
whose best-loved thing was to wander
over an earth that showed forth such bliss.
And when the winter nights would fall,
and the high-pitched, startling voices would catch fire

('o haystack of blessings!'),
the labouring folk in the burgeoning peasant homes
would hold their dances to the seductive sound of fiddles,
and the Gipsy women would come to dart their arrows at the dancers.

This passage picks up the image of Mindszenty, in all of the Catholic (or sympathetic) literature of the period, as a true son of the soil: 'one could see him in a simple long black cassock pushing the plough into the soil to dig a deep furrow, driving the oxen, or swinging the scythe to cut the golden wheat, the Hungarian's staff of life.' Such is the idealized and implausible depiction of the Cardinal in another work from 1949; and it fits descriptions elsewhere of the Hungarian soil as a Eucharist. On Papatsonis' part we can see that it provokes the poem's one allusion to the Byzantine liturgy, the 'ὦ, καλῶν θημωνία!' which is taken from Matins of Holy Monday and which darkens the atmosphere of the poem accordingly (314).

The gypsy dances and the 'astonishing high voices', by contrast, evoke two great artists of the recent past: Kostis Palamas (who died during the Occupation in 1943) and of course the composer Béla Bartók (who died in American exile in 1945). From today's perspective the mention of the gypsies might also be said to be tactless, given that Mindszenty had written: 'We seek in vain and do not find the place where the Hungarian hides his sorrow, but the gypsy's fiddle has struck its note of carousing gaiety.' (315) The sufferings of the Roma people under the Nazis, like those of the Jewish people, evidently affected the Cardinal less than those of his own Magyars. That Papatsonis is unaware of this must be seen as a blind spot.

All this peaceful world is changed by the single line: 'That bishop they have now shut up in a dungeon.' (315) And a glance down a historical vista that follows this bleak phrase is both natural and in one sense puzzling:

Even when the Ottomans threatened the iron gates
no such shame was there, never was seen such a calamity.
For years, for ages, the tribulations had been over.
As if men were now at peace.

Natural, because the Greeks and the Hungarians share the experience of Ottoman conquest; natural, too – even if questionable – because the language of Orientalism has been so readily used of the Communist enemy, including in Mindszenty's own writings. But puzzling, because how on earth can it be said, in 1949, that the tribulations were over? The best understanding I can find, in the

context of the passage, is that Papatsonis is casting his mind as far back as the persecutions of Diocletian, or even of Nero, in a trope we find in the encyclicals of Pope Pius XII. At any rate, the Cardinal is here presented as a second Christ, atoning for the sins of the world in language going back to St Augustine but also quoting from the newspapers of the day:

> *'Today he hangs on the tree.' Today once again*
> *the horned one and God stand by his side.*
> *Today he is made the deposit for the payment*
> *even unto death of a debt he never owed,*
> *there in a closed-in cave, the just lion.* (315)

The fifth section of the poem turns its sights on those who carried out the crime:

> *They say they care for the people. It is out of love*
> *for the people, they say, that such goings-on take place.*
> *And an entire people has flooded*
> *a whole new Danube with its tears,*
> *tears that fall only by night. Because by day,*
> *well, eyes must seem dry,*
> *lest they be spied by the crucifiers and gouged out.*
> *Because by day they must seem wild*
> *and hard like the apostle*
> *when he made his denial, in fear and trembling,*
> *with that 'I know not the man.'*
> *But dry eyes are to be feared.*
> *And desiccated bodies too. And wild*
> *countenances. For the people! All for the good of the people!*
> *Foolish and blind ones, have you then no sense*
> *of how the people lament and whom they hate?* (315–316)

On the one hand, this is a voice of invective against the régime and against the apostate people that accommodates itself to it, denying its Catholic identity as Peter had thrice denied Christ. On the other, it seems to acknowledge the contradictions that a tragic time forced people into. Here it is interesting to compare a later Greek poem, from 1956, Titos Patrikios' 'Rehabilitation of László Rajk', the prime minister executed in 1949. There, once again, a Greek poet's conscience, this time from the Left, is pricked by the story of a Hungarian martyr. At any rate, the passage of Papatsonis' poem ends with a curious and

violent image, as the people's soul, like a burst pomegranate, a clot of working blood, oozes through the bars of the Cardinal's cell to kiss his bishop's ring (316).

Here, on that note of Christian and filial *agape*, the poem might naturally end. But Papatsonis has more to say; and, here especially, Argyriou's sense that Papatsonis' outrage finds only mild expression seems strange. For the poet turns, rather aggressively, to distance his hero and his poem from a catalogue of five counter-examples, which demand to be quoted in full (316–317):

But then you'll tell me, what has all this to do with you,
these events in foreign parts? I will tell you:
everyone's been penning elegies,
the first, on the demise of Velouchiotis,
a second, on the imperishable glory of Andalusia,
Ignacio Mejías the bullfighter,
a third, on the unjust slaying in his youth
of a hypothetical second lieutenant and betrothed,
a fourth, on a rotting frigate,
sunk by a torpedo, on a lonely shore,
a fifth a dithyramb for a hero of double
mould, of Romiosyne and of Venezuela
– so then, I too am led by my heart to weep
today, after my own fashion, for an imprisoned hierarch.

The first poem alluded to here is Ritsos' 'Glory's Postscript' («Τὸ ὑστερόγραφο τῆς δόξας»). Papatsonis coopts and overturns many of the tropes used there of Aris Velouchiotis in 1945 to give what he considers a true form of Liberty, Λευτεριά. In particular, he wishes to counterpose the Cardinal to the old priest in Ritsos' poem 'Aris Velouchiotis' who blesses the insurgent with a Gospel book from 1821; he wishes to deny Ritsos' claim that Aris 'hangs there like a robber' 'by exhibiting a worthy example of Christ-like demeanour to the reader'.

It is against Ritsos' often compelling use of Christian language and imagery, not least in the divided Forties, that the Catholic poet most violently rebels. But he also by implication reacts against the growing cult of Lorca on the Greek Left, through translations by Kyrou and others – for Papatsonis, a lament for a bullfighter, Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, seems a trivial theme for Lorca to have chosen. Going further, he also detects (unfairly or not) a lack of authenticity in a trio of major long poems: Elytis' *Lay Heroic and Funeral for the Fallen Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign*, Seferis' *Thrush*, and Engonopoulos' *Bolivar*.

This is a fairly breezy dismissal of a whole cluster of poems which have now attained canonical status – a status still out of reach of Papatsonis' Mindszenty poem, and probably even of his *Ursa Minor*. An unsympathetic reader might detect simply a feeling of rivalry here and a sense that the slightly older Papatsonis feels upstaged by a younger generation. But perhaps what the poet is also reacting against is what he sees as a sort of nostalgia or fatalism in these other examples, a failure to see that – to quote the book cover referred to earlier – there is ongoing an 'implacable war of Communism against religion and the spirit'. In that sense, Papatsonis' poem is perhaps more militant than Elytis', at any rate. Furthermore, Papatsonis had voiced in his famous 1948 essay in *Nea Hestia* a note of caution about nationalism in poetry, and he must, as a Roman Catholic, have felt a certain sense of isolation as a result of the war years and suspicions about the loyalties of the Catholics of the Cyclades during the Italian occupation. In speaking up for Mindszenty, Papatsonis perhaps has them in mind also.

As his poem surges towards its end, it calls out on the Cardinal for his benediction, reaching beyond his own flock (317):

If somewhere in the depths of your being,
annihilated Man of martyrdom,
your Eminence Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty,
there burns still some flame, however diminished, from the candle
that just the other day, at Candlemas, you could not bless,
yet managed to light, in secret,
to illuminate the darkness of your honourable fetters,
– say then a prayer for us,
as we do for you in your martyrdom!

The form here comes perilously close to that of the Litany, in which each saint is called on with the phrase *ora pro nobis*. The Cardinal in his cell has missed the great Feast of the Presentation – common to East and West, which seems a significant olive branch to a culturally Orthodox readership – but he must take courage from St Stephen, son of Queen Sarolt, who gave his people true freedom. He should remember the Crown of Hungary, the source of all political legitimacy and also a bond, through its two physical components, between East and West – the inscription on it from the Emperor Michael VII Doukas dates from just one generation after the Great Schism of 1054. Above all, the Cardinal should think of the heroes of the Faith, and in particular of St Peter, rescued from his cell by the angel in chapter 16 of Acts. The Angel that appears here is

Michael, in those days evoked with fervour after every low Mass in the Leonine Prayers: 'Holy Michael Archangel, defend us in the day of battle.'

Papatsonis' poem ends with an arresting and deliberately disorientating German element:

> *At which point, like King Matthias,*
> *who having been a pattern in life,*
> *was called upon in death by a People's Voice,*
> *which like a Conclave thronged around the corpse*
> *to proclaim him the Just One – so then we too, with a single voice,*
> *will cry out the same truth of you:*
>
> *'König Matthias ist todt,*
> *dahin ist die Gerechtigkeit!'*
>
> *Dahin ist die Freiheit!* (318)

On the one hand, the Cardinal's death, when it comes, will make him a pattern for those who come after. Even the peasants so heavily taxed by him exclaimed on the death of Matthias Corvinus: 'King Matthias is dead, there goes justice with him.' The saying is first recorded in Hungarian just a generation later in 1510–1520, and it reflects a tradition that Matthias, like Stephen before him, wandered disguised among his people distributing alms. Papatsonis quotes it in German (the language of the ruling class of old Budapest) and then exclaims: 'Dahin ist die Freiheit!' The reasoning is compressed and may be glossed thus: 'Just as King Matthias died, yet left behind him a vision of justice, so too Cardinal Mindszenty in his psychological death leaves us all a vision of Liberty.'

In other words, for Papatsonis, the Greek language and the Greek people have no monopoly on Liberty, as one might perhaps surmise from the Greek poems with which he contrasts his own. (Ritsos and Elytis are perhaps most open to an attack of this kind.) Even German, the language of the recent oppressor of Greece and indeed Europe, possesses it; even a prince of the Western Church, towards which Greeks have an ancestral antipathy, may be the incarnation of it. This is truly a defiant ending to the poem, disjointed though in some ways it is.

For questions do remain about the poem's structure, and they are not necessarily connected to the fact that it is an openly inflamed poem, written *ira et studio* and tracking the daily news in real time. It is true that the rival poems to which Papatsonis alludes are themselves marked by elusiveness of structure and looseness of transition; but doubts may persist about how integrated is

the blend of different sources to which I have drawn attention here. Though a poem of high seriousness in seeking to dig beneath the immediate response of the news headlines to veins of sacred and secular history beneath, Papatsonis' is an uneven production, lacking the concision of, for example, Geoffrey Hill's powerful twelve-line poem 'Christmas Trees' (1978) on the martyrdom of the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But then Hill had the advantage of retrospect.

My discussion has been taken up with interpretation of this poem in its own terms, terms bound up with a strong sense of the Church Militant. But a word about its afterlife will not be out of place. When putting together *'Εκλογή Β'* in 1962, Papatsonis clearly felt it important to include the topical poems of the sequence 'Of the Race and of the Martyrs', even though some of them – notably the well-meaning doggerel of 'The Wrath I Sing' («Μῆνιν ἀείδω») – are poetically unrewarding. In the case of the Mindszenty poem, in an interview of 1965, Papatsonis speaks of the adverse reactions it provoked. Of these reactions I have not had sight, but presumably they embraced critiques, both of the poem's political stance – for the Church and against the Left – and of its adversarial position against other Greek poets of the time. And yet, despite the fact that the book-length studies by Argyriou and Myrsiades give the Mindszenty poem some prominence, it seems to have fallen out of the discussion of Greek Cold War literature: Angela Kastrinaki's (2005) excellent discussion of the literature of the 1940s finds no space for the poem. In a way, this reflects the disappearance of Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty himself from a very different world's collective memory.

My title asked whether Papatsonis was a Cold War Catholic. The answer, viewed from those divisive days of 1949, must be that, for good or ill, the poet was both – at this period, certainly – a zealous son of the Roman Church and, when provoked beyond endurance, a true Cold Warrior.

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