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The Transgressions of Gerasimos Avlonites

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Abstract

Gerasimos Avlonites (fl. 1752-1773; often referred to as “Erasmus of Arcadia”) was an Orthodox Christian leader of Crete who traveled in northern Europe and Britain in the mid-eighteenth century. He performed ordinations of Protestant clergy, though he did so in Greek following Orthodox customs. Based on documentary evidence that has come to light in recent years in British and European collections, this essay paints a complex picture of a native of Corfu and a subject of the Latin and Catholic Republic of Venice, exiled from his ecclesiastical see in Ottoman-dominated Crete, who brought his own pietistic sense of Christian unity to his interactions with European Protestants who were also evolving a pietistic sense of Christian identity in the mid-eighteenth century. I raise the question of whether, in addition to being expelled from Crete by Ottoman rulers, Gerasimos may also have committed some specific infraction of discipline that forced him to leave Greece. The essay points to a conjunction of conflicting cultures to show how Gerasimos transgressed conventional cultural, political, and ecclesiastical boundaries.

Introduction

Empires collide, and amid the flotsam and jetsam of imperial struggles are human beings forced into exile. The Mediterranean islands of Greece in the eighteenth century found themselves trapped between the waning imperial power of Venice to their northwest and the Ottoman Empire to their east. Crete, once a possession of Venice, had been conquered by Ottoman naval forces in 1669. Amid the exiles from that island in the eighteenth century was a Greek Christian leader who described himself, using the Septuagint version of Psalm 102:7, “like a lone sparrow on the rooftop.”

1 Numbered as Psalm 101:8 in the Septuagint. The citation appears in a letter from Gerasimos Avlonites to Swedish Lutheran Bishop Johan Engeström dated 17 July 1769; the text and a negative image of the letter are given in Börje Knös, “ἘισκΕψη Κρητικου Ἐισκουστη Σουηδια τον ιζ Ἀωνα’” (“Visit of a Cretan Bishop to Sweden in the Eighteenth Century”) in Κρητικα Χρονικα 3:1 (1961-2) 63-64.
This Orthodox Christian, Gerasimos Avlonites, befriended and became dependent on Protestant European Christians as he traveled in Holland, England, Sweden, and Switzerland. The eighteenth-century English Methodist leader John Wesley met him and knew him by his Latin identity as Erasmus, Bishop of Arcadia in Crete. Wesley’s appreciation for Gerasimos’s ordination of his assistant John Jones and Wesley’s seemingly contradictory disavowal of Gerasimos’s ordinations of other Evangelical leaders have been well documented. But Wesley’s interaction with Gerasimos spurred Methodist speculation well beyond the documented events, including the demonstrably false rumor that Gerasimos had secretly consecrated John Wesley as a bishop.²

The narrative of Gerasimos Avlonites provides a distinctive instance of interaction between Eastern Christian and Protestant leaders in this period. John Wesley was but one of a number of European Protestant leaders who interacted with Gerasimos Avlonites or in Latin, Erasmus Aulonita. Gerasimos left a trail of evidence of his interactions with European Protestant leaders in Holland (from 1752), in England (1762-1764/5), in Sweden (1768-1769), and in Switzerland (1772-1773). We will see that throughout his documented career, Gerasimos would be a pious Christian transgressor, a regular crosser of national, cultural, and ecclesiastical boundaries.

These “transgressions” might go some way towards resolving the most critical question raised about Gerasimos, even from the 1760s, the question of why an Orthodox leader would violate Eastern canonical precedents to ordain non-Orthodox clergy. That he was indigent and dependent on his Protestant hosts is very clear. Did he surrender his commitment to Orthodox practices simply to secure support from Protestant leaders? The evidence considered here cannot probe Gerasimos’s internal motivations but it does illuminate his interactions with Protestant leaders, including his irregular activity in performing ordinations on their behalf. It depicts a complex web of cultural and ecclesiastical forces that impinged on him as an Orthodox leader, a subject of the Catholic Republic of Venice, an exile from Ottoman-dominated Crete, and a displaced traveler to Europe.

² The current Wikipedia page on Gerasimos Avlonites states as a fact that Wesley was consecrated as a bishop by Avlonites: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erasmus_of_Arcadia (accessed 13 February 2014), and see the extended quotation from this article in the conclusion below.
whose unique background and travels led him to cross cultural and ecclesiastical boundaries.

The most comprehensive study of Gerasimos to date was that of A. B. Sackett, published in 1971-1972. Sackett was aware of Gerasimos’s presence in Holland and Sweden as well as in England, though he was not aware of Gerasimos’s activities and correspondence in Switzerland. As Headmaster of Kingswood School in Bristol, Sackett had access to one of the rare copies of the English (1762) printing of a book entitled *Petra tou Skandalou*, for which Gerasimos had composed an introduction. Sackett’s awareness of this work let him realize that “Erasmus” signed his name in Greek as Gerasimos Avlonites.

Simply recognizing his name as Gerasimos opens up much more information about him than the Latinized name “Erasmus.” For example, Orthodox scholar George Tsoumas wrote in 1952 that the Patriarch of Crete had written to inform Tsoumas that, “in spite of our research the name of Erasmus is not found in the [episcopal] catalogues of Crete.” The Latin name “Erasmus” was not likely to appear there, but the common Greek name Gerasimos did appear in lists of bishops: the current web page of the Archdiocese of Crete lists four archbishops with the name Gerasimos in the period of Ottoman domination. One of them, Gerasimos II (Gerasimos Letitzis), was the Archbishop of Crete in the period 1725-1755 when Gerasimos Avlonites traveled to northern Europe and England.

New evidence about Gerasimos has surfaced since the time of Sackett’s article, more than doubling the number of texts that we have from him. A CD-ROM collection of materials held in the Central Library of Zurich relating to the Swiss Reformed pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater contains images of six letters in mixed Greek and Latin from Gerasimos to Lavater. They reflect the same handwriting and the same Greek style as earlier letters that Gerasimos wrote, and include some

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4 George Tsoumas, “Methodism and Bishop Erasmus,” in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 2:2 (1956), 73.


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clues about Gerasimos’s life prior to his travels in northern Europe, for example, an adjective describing himself as a native of Corfu. In addition to two previously known letters written by Gerasimos in Sweden, I have identified a third letter, addressed to Swedish Lutheran Bishop Petrus Filenius in 1768. My editorial studies of John Wesley’s letters in the 1760s have brought to light a number of documents that refer to Gerasimos, including unpublished manuscripts relating to him in the Methodist Archives at the John Rylands University Library in Manchester.6 My collection of texts related to Gerasimos (a separate document, “A Dossier of Texts relating to Gerasimos Avlonites”) includes eleven texts composed by him and ten other texts relating to him.

1. The Background of Gerasimos Avlonites

Although no documentary evidence has surfaced from Gerasimos’s life prior to his coming to Holland in 1752, his writings from that time on give important clues about his earlier life. His letters describe himself as Kerkyrios, i.e., from Corfu. We can surmise that he was born between 1690 and 1700 (guessing very roughly) on that island, which had been dominated by Venice since 1401.7 His Greek writings, including the spelling of words reflecting iotacistic pronunciation, show that he grew up there as a native Greek speaker, and the family name Avlonites suggests a descendant of one of the important families of Corfu.8 Corfu was a possession of Venice throughout his lifetime, and one of his letters expresses concern about the dissolution of “the Most Serene Senate” of Venice, indicating that he

7 Gerasimos’s two letters to Johann Kaspar Lavater, dated December 16 and 18, 1772, have the phrase ὁ κερκυριος as part of Gerasimos’s name and title. This denotes a native (probably, or at least a resident) of Corfu (Κέρκυρα). In the period between 1401 and 1797, Corfu was dominated by Venice, whose naval forces fortified Corfu to guard the entrance to the Adriatic and thus the naval approach to Venice itself. The island withstood Ottoman naval attacks and sieges in 1537, 1571, 1573 and 1716.
8 That he was a native Greek speaker appears in his spelling of Greek words that reflected the influence of iotacism, the tendency to pronounce the letters upsilon (υ) and eta (η) and the diphthongs omicron-iota (οι) and epsilon-iota (ει) with the sound associated with the letter iota (ι). Gerasimos’s spelling in his letters frequently reflect this tendency, utilizing these vowels and diphthongs interchangeably. So, for example, the letters often have the verb ending –η in place of –ει or the noun ending –οις in place of –ης. A native Greek speaker would have made these substitutions naturally; a person trained in Greek from textbooks would have much more likely spelled the Greek words in standardized forms as the textbooks gave them. On the family name Avlonites, see Andrea Marmora, Della Historia di Corfù (Venice: 1672), 312.
traveled through Europe later in life as a Venetian subject, consistent with his identity as a native of Corfu.\(^9\)

Gerasimos’s writings reveal that he had been schooled in the traditions of Greek Christianity including familiarity with the Septuagint text of the Old Testament and the Byzantine received text of the New Testament.\(^10\) The complex relationship in Corfu between Catholic bishops and their Orthodox Greek local clergy also made it urgent for educated Orthodox leaders to know the language of the Venetian latinocracy. Gerasimos acquired enough Latin to be able to compose letters in the language, though he seems to have been uncomfortable translating the scriptures into it.\(^11\) It is possible that he received his Latin learning in Italy; a younger contemporary from Corfu who became an Orthodox bishop, Nikephoros Theotokis (1731–1800), had been educated at Bologna and Padua.

The relationship between Catholicism and Orthodoxy in Corfu was a complex one during the centuries-long period of Venetian domination. Catholic bishops presided over the church hierarchy but Orthodoxy continued to be practiced by the Greek-speaking people of the island. Catholic bishops utilized local Ortho-

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\(^9\) An undated letter from Gerasimos to Johann Kaspar Lavater involves a request for Lavater to be in touch with an ambassador (consul) to inform the ambassador of Gerasimos’s whereabouts. The letter is cryptic, but it states that Gerasimos urgent request resulted from the dissolution of “the Most Serene Senate” (serenissimus senatus), almost certainly a reference to the senate of Venice. Every instance I have searched for references to the expression serenissimus senatus and every instance I have found of this expression in Latin refers to the senate of Venice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This shows that Gerasimos was traveling as a citizen or a subject of the Republic of Venice, and that is consistent with his identity as a native of Corfu, a Venetian possession through this period.

\(^10\) Gerasimos cited the Septuagint (LXX) text of the Old Testament, though with a few small edits that suggest that he was recalling it from oral memory. Similarly he used the New Testament generally according to the Byzantine received Greek text, altering passages from it as well as the Septuagint to fit the sense of his own sentences. He used a number of distinctive expressions from the Greek New Testament, for example, the term ἄγαθη to refer to a dinner to which he had been invited, the term πανήγυρις from Hebrews 2:22 to refer to a “sacred festal gathering” (this was a gathering in which he had ordained clergy), and he concluded almost every Greek letter with the term ἐρρωσό, “be strong” (or “goodbye,” Acts 23:30) which appears in the Byzantine received text of the New Testament at this verse, but not in all manuscript versions of this verse.

\(^11\) In Latin letters, he switched to Greek to quote New Testament passages, for example, switching to Greek to quote II Peter 1:3, “having been given all that is needed for life and godliness from Christ,” a verse he used as a heading for many of his letters, or the word ἐρρωσό, “be strong” or “goodbye” (see the previous note). I have not identified any Biblical quotations in the Latin portions of his letters. His introduction to Petra tou Skandaliou quotes John 13:35 from the Byzantine received text, but the Latin version on the facing page is directly translated from Greek and does not correspond to the Vulgate.
dox leaders identified as archpriests or protopresbyters (*prothiereus*, *protopapas*, or *protopresbyteroi*) who carried out pastoral functions on behalf of the bishops. Eventually, one archpriest was identified as “The Great Protopapa of Corfu,” the highest-ranking Orthodox official on the island. In several of his letters, Gerasimos used an abbreviation (*pro*-) in association with his own name that appears to be for the title protopresbyter, indicating that he was a high-ranking church official within the Orthodox community. His education, including his knowledge of the scriptures and early Christian literature in Greek, was consistent with that of Orthodox leaders of his age.

At some point, we might surmise well before 1750, Gerasimos went to Crete. Like Corfu, Crete had been ruled by Venice. The episcopal see of Arkadia (Arcadia in Latin) associated with the city of Heraklion (*Candia* in Latin), had been reestablished as a Latin episcopal see under Venetian rule. Ottoman naval forces conquered Crete in 1669, as a result of which the episcopal see of Arkadia was reestablished as a Greek Orthodox, though the Catholic church retains a titular see of Arcadia, a relic of the Venetian period in Crete. The Orthodox see is

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13 Gerasimos’s letter to Swedish Lutheran Bishop Engeström stated, “I have in Stockholm a letter from the Island of Crete [forwarded] from the city of Amsterdam, that I should return to my province.” Similarly, John Newton’s letter to John Wesley of April 1764 referred to him in this way: “there is in Crete a man, the Bishop of Arcadia,” and John Wesley understood that Erasmus (Gerasimos) was “the bishop of Arcadia in Crete.” A letter defending Gerasimos’s ordinations in the *St James’s Chronicle* in 1765 refers to him as being from Crete and also “from Turkey,” referring to the broader Ottoman Empire; an unsigned letter in the *St James’s Chronicle* for 7-9 February 1765, p. 4.

14 The Latin place name *Candia* denoted the Cretan city that in Greek is Heraklion. This term appears in Gerasimos’s letter to Lavater dated January 4, 1773, in the title *Episcopus Arcadie Candiae*, literally “Bishop of Arcadia of Candia,” which seems to indicate that the diocese of Arcadia was under the metropolis (archdiocese) of Heraklion. Since 1962 this metropolitan see has been known as the Metropolis of Gortyn and Arcadia; see the web site of the Metropolis: http://www.imga.gr/ and the historical materials at http://www.imga.gr/new/istoria.html (accessed on February 15, 2014). There are at least two places in Greece called Arcadia. One is in the Peloponnesus and another in Crete. Given the explicit reference to Crete as well as the reference to *Candia* above, Arcadia in Crete has to be the one associated with Gerasimos. His printing of a book entitled *Skandalon Tou Petrou* (1762) has his title as “Bishop in Arcadia” in Greek as well as Latin.

15 Κνος, “Επισκεψη Κρητικου Επισκοπου στη Σουηδια του ιζ’ Άιωνα,” 60.

now incorporated into the Metropolitan see of Gortyn and Arkadia. Gerasimos consistently identified himself as the bishop of the see of Arkadia though he occasionally used an abbreviated title “protopresbyter of Arkadia” as well as his title as bishop.¹⁷

Crete had been under Ottoman domination for at least half a century in Gerasimos’s time. Christian activities were severely restricted in Crete in this period. A history available on the web site of the Metropolis of Gortyn and Arkadia suggests that in this period, such ecclesial functions as ordinations had to be carried out elsewhere, perhaps in Constantinople.¹⁸ This means, among other things, that records of episcopal ordinations are not likely to be found in Crete. Sackett had been told that such terms as “archpriest” or “protopresbyter” were used by Orthodox bishops under Ottoman rule to mask their identities as bishops. Although this would go a long way towards explaining Gerasimos’s simultaneous use of the terms “protopresbyter” and “bishop,” I have found no documentation for the claim that Orthodox bishops concealed their identities under these titles.

At some point prior to 1752, according to his account, the Ottoman rulers of Crete forced Gerasimos into exile.¹⁹ It is understandable that he would have fled to Corfu and/or Venice, perhaps to Venice by way of Corfu. But why he then embarked on a trip to Northern Europe, where he obviously had no means of support, is not at all clear. One would have thought that Orthodox leaders would have honored and reassigned him to another diocese. It does raise the question of whether he was for some reason considered irregular and thus not supported by Orthodox leaders after his return. My own best guess—and it is strictly that—is that he was a canonically ordained Orthodox bishop who had nevertheless fallen afoul of the Orthodox church hierarchy for some reason and felt compelled to leave the regions where Orthodoxy prevailed. This might explain his irregular activities among Protestants, including ordinations he performed for them. That is to say, his transgressions may have included more than simply crossing national,

¹⁷ The signature of his letter to Charles Wesley of 1764 shows him as “protopresbyter of Arkadi.”
¹⁹ This is stated in his letter of July 17, 1769 to Swedish Bishop Engeström cited above; in Knös, “Ἐπισκεψη Κρητικου Ἐπισκοπου στη Σουηδια τον Ιζ’ Άιωνα”, 63-64.
cultural, and ecclesiastical boundaries. However, I have found no specific evidence naming infractions of Orthodox canons he might have committed.

It is clear that Gerasimos Avlonites came to northern Europe and England bearing a complex identity as an Orthodox native of Corfu, a colonial subject of Catholic Venice, and an exile from Ottoman Crete. He spoke and wrote Greek as his native language, but his letters show that he could transition into Latin in the middle of sentences, an instance of codeswitching typical of colonial subjects. He came to Protestant Europe bearing the signs of colonial cultural and religious conflicts and negotiating his own distinctive path between them.

2. Gerasimos in Holland (from 1752)

Gerasimos appeared in Amsterdam in 1752, perhaps having traveled there by way of Venice. Our knowledge of him in Amsterdam comes from Ioannes Prinkos (1725-1789), a Greek businessman and bibliophile who had come to the Dutch city in 1755 and composed an account of the Greek community there that mentioned Gerasimos’s activities among the Greek populace of the city.20

Prinkos wrote that in 1752 the Greek community in Amsterdam asked Gerasimos Avlonites, whom Prinkos described as “formerly of Arcadia” or “former bishop of Arcadia,”21 to celebrate a liturgy. The community received special permission from the government to hold this liturgy for six months, but the permission was extended indefinitely. The permission explicitly stated that doors had to be kept open during the celebration, parallel to provisions of the British 1689 Act of Toleration pertaining to non-Anglican churches. Prinkos’s Chronicle noted that this enabled passers-by to observe the Orthodox liturgy. There seems to have been some thought of employing Gerasimos to act in the role of priest to the Orthodox community in Amsterdam, though nothing came of this.

Among his other literary ventures, Ioannes Prinkos sponsored a German printing of Petra tou Skandalou, or in Latin, Lapis Offendiculi, “The Stone of Stumbling,” a work composed originally by Orthodox Bishop Elias Meniatis (1669-1714) and published after Meniatis’s death in 1718. The work was an extended explanation of the division between Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches from

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20 An excerpt from Prinkos’s Chronicle dealing with Gerasimos is given in N. Andriote, “Το Χρονικό του Ἀμστερνταμ,” in Νέα Ἑστία 10 (1931), 848.
21 The word πρωήν by itself in Orthodox usage can designate a former or retired bishop.
an Orthodox perspective. Prinkos’s Amsterdam edition of the book came out in 1760. Two years later, an edition was published in London that carried the name of Gerasimos Avlonites as the author of its introduction.

3. Gerasimos in England (1761-1764)

Gerasimos apparently traveled to England around 1761 where he oversaw the printing of the book. The London edition of *Petra tou Skandalou* was printed by Johann Christoph Haberkorn and carried the date 1762. Haberkorn (ca. 1720-1776) was a native of northern Germany who had set up a press in London in the 1740s that could print German texts with Fraktur type. He eventually expanded into other European scripts, and that may explain his willingness to take on *Petra tou Skandalou*. 22 Perhaps Gerasimos had been inspired by Prinkos’s success in bookselling to try printing the same work in England.

The London printing of the book did not give the name of the book’s author (Meniatis), but carried a brief introduction in Greek and Latin signed by “Gerasimos Avlonites, Bishop in Arcadia.” Gerasimos’s introduction appealed for Christian unity in love, setting a tone that can be perceived in his later letters. It began with an extended quotation from a letter of Isidore of Pelusium and continued with an exhortation to mutual love and understanding. This introduction hardly seems appropriate to a work that delves into immense detail about the medieval rift between eastern and western Christianity. 23 It reflects a pietistic perspective grounded in the Orthodox tradition, emphasising the need for love between divided Christians, an argument similar to the case that Gerasimos would later make in a letter to Charles Wesley. 24

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24 Ms. letter of Gerasimos to Charles Wesley in the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, dated 30 May 1764, identified as MARC “DDCW 6/84”. There also exist two ms. translations of the letter in the ms. scrapbook held by JRUL as “MAM MA 1977/502”, items 15 and 16.
In coming to England, Avlonites encountered a church culture that had been fascinated with patristic Christianity and with subsequent eastern Christianity since the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{25} A series of episodes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had explored possibilities of union between Anglicans and various groups of Eastern Christians. For example, an attempt had been made to establish an Oxford college for the training of Greek clergy, and a group of Non-Jurors had sent proposals for union to Eastern Christian patriarchs in 1716.\textsuperscript{26} Gerasimos also came to England at a specific moment when Evangelical Anglicans were finding it very difficult to secure curacies for Evangelical candidates for the priesthood,\textsuperscript{27} a situation in which Evangelicals could see Gerasimos’s advent as a providential opening of an alternative route to ordination.

At some point between 1762 and 1764, John Wesley met Gerasimos in London. In a letter to the printer of the \textit{St James’s Chronicle} published in February 1765, after controversy had broken out over ordinations performed by Gerasimos, John Wesley wrote a brief description of his earliest encounter with Gerasimos.\textsuperscript{28} According to his chronology, their initial meeting would have been in 1763 or 1764. In this period, Wesley typically spent the winter months in the London area and was there between November 6, 1762, and March 8, 1763, and then again between October 1, 1763 and March 12, 1764,\textsuperscript{29} so his first meeting with Gerasimos would have been in one of those periods, and more likely in the former period (1762-1763), since his account stated that he had assisted Gerasimos to return to Holland.

The account he gave of Gerasimos’s poverty suggests that the printing enterprise had not helped him financially. A rare copy of the London printing of \textit{Pet-
ra tou Skandalou ended up in the Library of Kingswood School in Bristol; Gerasis-
omos likely gave this copy to John Wesley as a way of thanking Wesley for his as-
sistance. Gerasimos’s poverty would later be pilloried as evidence that he could
not have been a bishop, though it may well have appeared to John Wesley as a
sign of the primitive Christian simplicity that Wesley had prized from his early
years.30

John Wesley’s letter in the *St James’s Chronicle* about his original meeting
with Gerasimos went on to state that Gerasimos subsequently ordained Wesley’s
assistant John Jones and then one of the Methodist preachers, Lawrence Coughlan.
The ordination of John Jones occurred prior to March 1, 1764, when John Wesley
wrote to Charles Wesley indicating that, despite Charles’s objections, John would
permit Jones to serve as his assistant at the Lord’s Supper on the following Sun-
day. If there is any doubt that this referred to Jones’s having been ordained,
Charles Wesley’s endorsement of the letter summarizing its contents has “ordain-
ing J.J.”31 The ordination of Laurence Coughlan, to which Wesley referred, oc-
curred after Wesley’s departure from London on March 12, 1764, and correspond-
ence from the summer of that year indicates that at some point in that spring,
probably prior to March 28, Gerasimos had ordained Thomas Bryant, another
preacher in connection with John Wesley.32

The issue of ordination in 1764 came at a crucial point in the relationship
between John and Charles Wesley. From 1757 Charles had refused to itinerate and
this led to a lasting rift between the two brothers. Charles and John had both
agreed on the use of Methodist classes, bands, and societies, committed to follow-
ing the “General Rules” that they had published in 1743. But Charles grew increas-
ingly uncomfortable with lay preaching, which was ruled out by the twenty-third


31 A letter of John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 1 March 1764; ms. in the Methodist Archives at the
John Rylands University Library in Manchester identified as “DDWes 3/23”; cf. Telford, ed.,

32 This comes in a reference in the *Journal* for March 28, 1764 which seems to refer to controversy
in the Sheffield society over Bryant’s wearing a gown, which was taken as a sign of ordination,
in the pulpit; cf. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journal and Diaries* (Bicen-
n. 33. A letter from John Wesley to Sarah Moore of 5 July 1764 seems to refer to the same con-
troversy in Sheffield and mentions Bryant by name: a ms. at Emory University Woodruff Li-
brary, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, John Wesley Collection, box 1, no. 43; cf.
Article of Religion, and with itinerant preaching, which was arguably contrary to the Act of Toleration of 1689.\textsuperscript{33} Gareth Lloyd has shown that this conflict eventuated in two forms of early Methodism: John Wesley’s increasingly separatist movement that favored the use of lay and itinerant preachers, and Charles Wesley’s “Church Methodists,” who sought to remain in canonical conformity to the Church of England.\textsuperscript{34}

John Wesley’s use of John Jones to officiate at the Lord’s Supper led immediately to controversy within the Methodist societies. On March 13, 1764, an Anglican clergyman who also served as one of the Wesleys’ assistants in London, John Richardson (ca. 1733-1792), wrote to Charles Wesley urging him to come to London to deal with the crisis that followed from Jones’s officiating.\textsuperscript{35} Richardson included with this letter an essay enumerating “Reasons against Dr Jones’s Officiating as a Clergyman” originally addressed to John Wesley.\textsuperscript{36}

Richardson pointed out that questions had been raised about the authenticity of Gerasimos’s identity as a bishop and whether Gerasimos was fleeing from some scandal in his own country. Even if Gerasimos was a legitimate Orthodox bishop, Richardson reasoned, ordinations he performed would still not be recog-


\textsuperscript{34} Gareth Lloyd, Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 227-233.


\textsuperscript{36} A ms. copy of the document in the same scrapbook of materials on ordinations in the Methodist Archives, the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, “MAM MA 1977/502”, following Richardson’s letter referred to above.
nized canonically in the Church of England. Richardson pointed out, further, that officiating without a valid ordination might incur a fine of £100 per celebration according to the Act of Toleration. He appealed to John Wesley to wait about allowing Jones to officiate until after John had consulted with Charles; John Wesley does not appear to have responded directly to Richardson’s concerns.

If the ordinations provoked opposition among some Evangelical leaders, however, they piqued positive interest among others. In April 1764, in the very week of his own ordination as a deacon, the Calvinistic Evangelical minister John Newton wrote to John Wesley to say that the Countess of Huntingdon was interested in securing the services of Gerasimos for “the creation of a new ministry,” that is, for ordaining some of the preachers in connection with her to begin a new succession of ordained ministry. Newton seems to have been unaware of the fact that Wesley had already been in contact with Gerasimos and that Gerasimos had recently been in England. Newton’s letter suggests that by April 1764, rumors of Gerasimos’s willingness to perform ordinations was circulating in Evangelical circles and drawing considerable interest.

At the end of May 1764, Gerasimos wrote to Charles Wesley from Amsterdam hoping to alleviate some of the latter’s objections to an ordination Gerasimos had performed. The letter has little substance beyond Gerasimos’s plea for brotherly love and his observation that the service in which the ordination was performed was not “anything shameful, but rather a love feast” (agape). An endorsement to the letter in the hand of Charles Wesley states that the letter and its postscript have “neither sense, connection, or grammar.” It is certainly the case that this letter makes less sense and proves much more difficult to translate than later ones.

The letter was very non-specific. Gerasimos simply pleaded for Charles’s understanding and affection as a Christian brother not to reject Gerasimos’s acts. In this respect, the letter echoed the preface that Gerasimos had composed for the English printing of *Petra tou Skandalou*. A postscript to the letter revealed Gerasimos’s intention to return to Greece, though there is no evidence that he ever did. The postscript also shows Gerasimos asking Charles Wesley for assistance in his travels, and this illuminates how Gerasimos became dependent on the hospitality

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37 John Newton, letter to John Wesley dated 24 April 1764; ms. in the United Methodist Archives at Drew University identified as “1647-3-2:144”.

38 The ms. letter of Gerasimos to Charles Wesley dated 30 May 1764 referred to above.
of Anglicans. He begged Charles to consider that his poverty “has not been an impediment for me, but is the greatest height of virtue,”39 consistent with the profession of an Orthodox monk, from whose ranks candidates for Orthodox episcopacy were drawn.

Gerasimos’s signature in this letter was in Greek cursive as contrasted with the non-cursive script used in the rest of the letter. In signing the letter, he did not use the title “Bishop in Arcadia” as he had done in his introduction to the English printing of Petra tou Skandalou. Sackett thought that the term he used in the signature was an abbreviation for protopapa or prothiereus, both terms used to describe a local (Greek) “archpriest” who had been employed during the period of Venetian Catholic domination of Crete as well as Corfu to carry out pastoral functions on the part of a (Catholic) bishop. My own reading is that the abbreviation is for protopresbyteros, literally, protopresbyter or “archpresbyter,” but another roughly equivalent term to “archpriest.” Gerasimos’s self-identification as a protopresbyter in this letter is somewhat mysterious in that he elsewhere identified himself as a bishop. He signed other letters as a bishop and in fact he signed one later letter with both titles simultaneously. It is possible that he occasionally lapsed back into writing his signature as he had done when he was a protopresbyter.

On November 19 and 24, 1764, Gerasimos ordained an Evangelical preacher known only by the initials “W.C.”40 For this one occasion, there exists a translation of the letters testamentary that Gerasimos wrote out as evidence of the ordination.41 This document indicates that Gerasimos had ordained W.C. as subdeacon and deacon on November 19, and then as priest on November 24. It is customary among Orthodox churches to ordain a man as subdeacon and deacon on the same day and then as priest a few days later. In this respect, Gerasimos followed the custom of Orthodox churches, though his willingness to ordain non-Orthodox

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39 Ibid., in the postscript to the letter.
Protestants on this and other occasions transgressed the canonical bounds of Orthodoxy. It is also clear that Gerasimos conducted all of these ordinations in Greek. As we will see in his interactions in Sweden and Switzerland (following), he consistently acknowledged the validity of the ministerial orders of Protestant churches, addressing a Lutheran bishop as bishop and a Swiss Reformed deacon as deacon. He seems to have continued to function as an Orthodox Christian in his own practices such as the ordinations he performed, though he was willing to extend these ministries to others whom he recognized as fellow Christians.

By the end of 1764 Gerasimos had performed a number of ordinations for preachers associated with the Wesleys and with the Countess of Huntingdon, that is to say, with both the Arminian and Calvinistic branches of the Evangelical revival. A crisis was growing within the Wesleyan societies in response to these ordinations that also reflected the diverging ecclesiologies of John and Charles Wesley. Early in January 1765, one of the preachers ordained by Gerasimos, James Thwaytes (Thwaites), wrote to Charles Wesley asking for Charles’s mercy and offering to resign his orders if John Jones would do likewise. Poor Thwaytes certainly did more to hurt his cause with Charles Wesley than to help by appealing to the example of John Jones, apparently unaware that Charles had already disavowed Jones’s ordination. Thwaytes’s nearly illegible masterpiece of invented spelling (“As you will be apprised by this poast of sumthing which will displeas you…”), headed by a date out of sync with the New Style calendar that had been introduced eight years before, scarcely impressed Charles Wesley, whose endorsement took Thwaytes’s letter as an admission of guilt: “Thwait cnfess / Jan 6 1765.”

Thwaytes apparently knew at least what was coming. On the morning after he wrote (or dated) his letter to Charles Wesley, John Wesley convened a group of the stewards and preachers in London and they declared together that they could not recognize ordinations performed by Gerasimos, with the unstated exception of John Jones. Wesley gave the rationale in a letter to his brother Charles dated 11 January and later prepared a summary that was published in the St James’s Chroni-

cle on February 5. His account to Charles was somewhat fuller than the briefer account in the *St. James’s Chronicle*:

On Monday morning I desired the preachers and the stewards to meet me.- It was then inquired,

1. Can James Thwayte, B. Russen, Rd. Perry, James Satles, John Oliver, and T. Bryant, who have bought an ordination in an unknown tongue, be received by us as clergymen? No.

2. Can we receive them any longer as preachers? No.

3. Can we receive them as members of our Society? No.

And this I ordered to be signified to each of them immediately.45

John Wesley’s carefully crafted rationale still allowed for John Jones’s ordination. His objections were 1) that the ordinations were performed “in an unknown tongue,” whereas Jones understood Greek, and 2) that the bishop required a fee for the ordinations; Jones’s ordination was apparently done as a favor to Wesley. Charles remained unimpressed and again his endorsement of the letter revealed his unwillingness to accept the grounds his brother had laid out: “Jan. 11. 1765 / B[rother] expelling his Witnesses because ordained by J. Jones’s ordainer.”

Controversy over the ordinations spread rapidly. On January 20, John Richardson wrote to Charles Wesley in Bristol. His letter stated that John Wesley had asked Gerasimos about the possibility of John’s being consecrated as a bishop by Gerasimos.46 This seems to be the principal basis of the frequently repeated rumor that Gerasimos secretly ordained John Wesley as a bishop. But according to

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44 Joseph Sutcliffe’s ms. history of Methodism (ms. in the Methodist Archives in the John Rylands University Library identified as “MA 1977/514”) described a gathering on Monday Jan. 7, 1765. Telford gave a transcription of Sutcliffe’s account of this meeting (in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:290).

45 John Wesley, a letter to Charles Wesley dated 11 January 1765; a ms. at Emory University Woodruff Library, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, John Wesley Collection, box 1, no. 47; cf. Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:287-8.

Richardson’s account, the idea was found impracticable because Gerasimos insisted that an episcopal ordination according to Orthodox canon law required three bishops to be present, and Richardson stated that the scheme did not come to fruition.

In late January the question was posed by a writer in the *St James’s Chronicle* as to whether John Wesley would disavow the ordinations performed by Gerasimos. Wesley responded in the February 7 issue of that *Chronicle* by giving a summary of what he had already written to his brother Charles, namely, that the six preachers who had received ordination in a foreign language for a fee could not be received as clergy, as preachers, or as members of the Wesleyan societies.47 Wesley’s statement still allowed him to acknowledge the ordination of John Jones.

John Wesley’s brief statement in the *St James’s Chronicle* was preceded by a spirited and well written though unsigned letter in defense of the ordinations performed by Gerasimos, in opposition to John Wesley’s disavowal of them.48 The Greek bishop, this anonymous author pointed out, was none other than the “successor of that very church St. Paul ordained Titus into—Crete.” The author repeated the story—told to him directly by John Jones, he claimed—that John Wesley had sought episcopal consecration (the term used in the Church of England) by Gerasimos, but Gerasimos refused, citing the same rationale as Richardson had given, namely, that ordination of a bishop according to Orthodox canons would require the participation of three bishops. The anonymous writer took Gerasimos’s refusal in this matter as a sign of the bishop’s integrity with respect to his own church’s canons. Even though the participants did not understand Greek, he reasoned further, they knew very well what was happening in the service, and the fee the bishop requested was “for his exigences [sic] only.” The letter confirms the rumor that John Wesley himself had sought episcopal ordination from Gerasimos, like the letter from John Richardson to Charles Wesley cited above, and that the proposed episcopal ordination/consecration did not come to pass because of Gerasimos’s appeal to Greek canonical traditions. The letter also reveals that it


48 An anonymous letter dated 6 February 1765 published in the *St James’s Chronicle* (Feb. 7–9, 1765), 4.
was in fact the most Evangelical and independently-minded clergy and preachers who supported Gerasimos’s ordinations.

John Wesley responded to the anonymous author, whom he referred to as “an hat-maker in Southwark,” in the next week’s issue of the St James’s Chronicle by giving the account of his first meeting with Gerasimos related above.49 Wesley’s principal concern in this was to justify his dismissal of the six preachers mentioned on the grounds of their not understanding the language of the ordination service and their paying a fee for their ordinations. Although he called into question the anonymous writer’s source for the rumor that Wesley himself had sought episcopal ordination, Wesley did not explicitly deny the claim in his response.

The controversy over Gerasimos’s ordinations reached such a pitch that at some point in the year 1765 a play entitled Diotrephes and Stentor was published in London, entirely devoted to poking fun at Gerasimos. The inscription of the play is dedicated to “Erasmus Aulonita / Stiling Himself / Bishop in Arcadia,” it addresses Gerasimos sarcastically as “your lordship,” pilloried his poverty which seemed to the author of the play to be entirely inconsistent with the appearance of a bishop, and in a footnote (since when did plays have historical footnotes?) accused him of falsely pretending to be the author of Petra tou Skandalou.50

The play envisions Diotrephes, the John Wesley character, sending his assistant Stentor, representing John Jones, to be ordained by the Greek bishop and to inquire whether Diotrephes himself could be consecrated as a bishop. When Stentor goes away, he thinks, “A bishop! a bishop! how charming the sound!” And further,

Then I can make my Stentor a bishop too, and then we can make others, and then who knows but a few of them together may make me an archbishop, and then the Pope himself—stay—Pope did I say! Why may not I be a Pope! Pope, Papa, is a harmless word, it is only Latin for Father, and why not Pope of the Methodists, as well as Father of the Methodists? For this I am... 51

He breaks into song.

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50 [Anonymous], Diotrephes and Stentor: A New Farce, Acted near Moorfields (London: 1765).

51 Diotrephes and Stentor, p. 5.
O what pleasures will abound,
When I am a bishop found;
O what Flattery
At the Foundery,
When I am a bishop found!

Stentor returns with the sad news that the Greek bishop, “says he can’t do it, unless three bishops were present…” Stentor also warns Diotrephes that he will be liable for a £100 fine if any of his preachers were to be ordained by the Greek bishop and officiated at the Lord’s Supper. Whoever the author of the play was, he was certainly aware of the very specific issues that had been discussed in the Methodist societies regarding Gerasimos. But by the time the play came out, Gerasimos had returned to Holland.

4. Gerasimos in Sweden (1768-1769)

There is evidence that Gerasimos subsequently traveled in Sweden and Switzerland, and his correspondence from these countries shows his relationships with Protestant leaders in those countries and further illuminates his relationship with Anglican Evangelicals. He had presumably returned to Amsterdam late in 1764 or early in 1765. He appeared four years later traveling in Sweden, where he was in contact with leaders of the Swedish Lutheran Church. On August 13, 1768, he wrote to the Petrus Filenius, the Bishop of Linköping, requesting assistance for travel to Stockholm.

His request must have been somehow granted, because he addressed a letter to the president of the Church Council of Stockholm March 29, 1769, indicating that he was preparing to leave for Europe, and requesting a letter of reference and access to horses and carriages for his travels. Dr. Börje Knös researched the archives of the Church Council of Stockholm, where he found this letter, and also

52 Ibid.
53 A letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Petrus Nicolaus Filenius dated August 13, 1768; manuscript letter in the Linköping Public Library (Bibliotekarie Linköpings kommun) with identifications “Brev 83” and “Petrus Filenius (E005/Br 22).” I take the date in the conclusion of the letter to be 1768, though the last digit, the Arabic numeral “8” is ambiguous because the top loop of the “8” is open, making it look like “4.” But Gerasimos was in England and Holland in 1764. Many eighteenth century manuscripts have the Arabic digit “8” with the upper loop open like this.
found that the Church Council decided to hold an event to raise funds for Gerasimos.

Despite this, he was still in Sweden two and a half months later when he wrote to Swedish Lutheran Bishop Johan Engeström on July 17, 1769. The letter to Bishop Engeström reveals more about Gerasimos and his background than any other of the letters. Gerasimos wrote to the Lutheran bishop to indicate that he had received a letter from Crete recalling him to his own country. He described himself, utilizing the Septuagint text of the Psalm 101:7-8 (102:6-7 in English versions), “I am like a pelican in the desert, like an owl of the desert, like a lone sparrow on the rooftop.” He gave an account of the political and military situation involving the death of the Ottoman ruler of Crete that led to his being recalled to the island: “Thanks to God I have in Stockholm a letter from the Island of Crete [forwarded] from the city of Amsterdam, that I should return to my province.” He thanked the bishop for his kindness and sent an especially warm remembrance of a church official (praepositus, perhaps the dean of the Cathedral), who had recently died, and sent greetings to this official’s widow.

If his claim to be a bishop had caused him any embarrassment in England, he doggedly persevered in signing his name with the title of bishop. The letter to Filenius was signed “Erasmus Aulonita, Bishop of Arcadia in Candia,” the letter to the president of the Church Council of Stockholm was headed, “Erasmus Aulonita, a Bishop of the Greek Church,” and he signed the letter to Bishop Engeström as “Erasmus Aulonita, Bishop of Arcadia of Candia.” Consistent with his relationship to Protestant leaders in England, Gerasimos acknowledged the Swedish Lutheran bishops Filenius as well as Engeström as fellow bishops.

5. Gerasimos in Switzerland (1772-1773)

It is not known whether Gerasimos was able to return to Crete as the previous letter indicated he intended to do, but three years later he was in Basel and there was in correspondence with a Reformed pastor of Zurich. He addressed six letters to Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), who had been ordained as a deacon in the Reformed (Zwinglian) Church of his native city, Zurich, in 1769. Lavater

55 The letter referred to above of Gerasimos to Bishop Engeström dated 17 July 1769; in Κνός, “Ἐπισκεψη Κρητικου Ἐπισκοπου στη Σουηδια τον ιε Άωνα,” 63-64.

56 Ps. 101:7-8 LXX (102:6-7 in English versions).
was an anti-rationalist intellectual, a poet, and a writer on physiognomy, a fashionable pseudo-science that attempted to discern personality by examining people’s faces.

An undated letter from Gerasimos to Lavater may have been written before or after the other dated letters. Two issues that appear consistently in other letters do not appear in it: an issue about an Old Testament that Lavater had promised to Gerasimos, and an issue about a serious illness that had afflicted Lavater’s wife’s. The undated letter seems to request Lavater, whom Gerasimos claimed as his only friend, to send a note to “the Most Excellent Consul” on his behalf. The letter begins in Greek but switched to Latin for the first sentence of the body of the letter. In this letter Gerasimos referred to the dissolution of “the Most Serene Senate,” a reference to the governing body of Venice consistently called by that title in Latin documents of the eighteenth century, revealing that Gerasimos had been traveling through the previous two decades as a subject of Venice, consistent with his being a native of Corfu, a Venetian possession.

Gerasimos’s first dated letter to Lavater, dated December 16, 1772, seems to have been occasioned by an invitation to a dinner to which Gerasimos referred by the biblical term *agape*, “love feast.” This letter was principally in Latin but with a few Greek expressions. Gerasimos indicated his reluctance to come because of the embarrassment caused by his clothes and his beard. One surmises that the dinner invitation was cancelled due to the illness of Lavater’s wife, because a letter two days later written entirely in Greek expressed Gerasimos’s distress at learning of her illness, “There is great sadness and unceasing pain in my heart concerning the illness of your excellent lady and wife.”

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57 Letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Johann Kaspar Lavater, undated; in *Briefe an Johann Caspar Lavater 1741-1801*, series 1463, fiches 10-11, item 150.


59 Letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Johann Kaspar Lavater dated 18 December 1772; in *Briefe an Johann Caspar Lavater 1741-1801*, series 1463, fiches 10-11, item 145 (the first two letters are out of chronological sequence in the microfiche edition).
The next letter, eight days later on December 26, continued Gerasimos’s expression of concern over the illness of Lavater’s wife. A postscript to this letter indicates that Lavater had apparently promised Gerasimos a copy of the Old Testament that he had not received. This became an obsessive issue for him in ensuing letters. Two days later Gerasimos fired off another letter asking again about the Bible (apparently the Old Testament) that, he claimed, Lavater had promised but not sent to him. His preoccupation with receiving a copy of the Old Testament from Lavater continued a week later, in a letter of January 4, 1773. The impression given here is of a very cranky old man, scarcely apprehending the crisis that Lavater’s wife’s illness may have caused. The last dated letter has a mysterious reference, “My sister greets the lady your wife…”

Gerasimos’s reference to “My sister” could be an innocent reference to a woman known to both Lavater and Gerasimos. But Gerasimos had consistently referred to the wives of his associates as “sister.” He referred to Lavater’s wife in two earlier letters as “my sister,” and he had referred to the wife of the dean of St Peter’s Cathedral in Malmö, Sweden, as “the most noble lady, our sister.” In this case (January 4, 1773) he wrote, “My sister greets the lady your wife with the kiss of love.” I have to wonder if Gerasimos was in fact married, so that “My sister” referred to his own wife. There are no references to a wife or any other “sister” in the other letters. It is entirely speculative given this singular reference, but taking a wife (if true) would not count as his only transgression of Orthodox ecclesiastical polity.

Conclusions

Gerasimos’s letters to Lavater are the last words we have from him. Whether he died in Switzerland, or returned to Greece, or continued as an itinerant men-

60 Letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Johann Kaspar Lavater dated 26 December 1772; in Briefe an Johann Caspar Lavater 1741-1801, series 1463, fiches 10-11, item 147.
61 Letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Johann Kaspar Lavater dated 28 December 1772; in Briefe an Johann Caspar Lavater 1741-1801, series 1463, fiches 10-11, item 148.
62 Letter of Gerasimos Avlonites to Johann Kaspar Lavater dated 4 January 1773; in Briefe an Johann Caspar Lavater 1741-1801, series 1463, fiches 10-11, item 149.
63 The letters of 26 and 28 December 1772 referenced above.
64 The letter to Bishop Johan Engeström of July 17, 1769, referenced above.
dicant, remains unknown. The letters reveal the complex matrix of cultural and personal factors that impinged on him and go some way towards accounting for his puzzling, seemingly contradictory behaviors, especially with respect to the ordinations he had performed in England.

Gerasimos’s correspondence consistently shows that he had befriended British and European Protestant leaders, and his pleas for assistance in the letters show that he had developed dependent relationships with them. The charity he received from them may have seemed like the fulfillment of the mutual love he called for in his letters. He had no trouble recognizing Protestants as fellow Christians, including acknowledging their sacraments and ministerial orders. Gerasimos recognized Filenius and Engeström as fellow bishops, he acknowledged Lavater’s ordination as a deacon in the later letters in Switzerland, and he referred to the Reformed Church in Zurich as his brethren in “the church of God” or “the church of Christ.”

As of yet, no evidence has been found to verify independently Gerasimos’s claim to be the Bishop of Arkadia in Crete, though he used the title “bishop” in his introduction to Petra tou Skandalou, and in his letters written in Sweden and Switzerland, typically as part of his cursive signature. As Sackett pointed out, the Greek community in Holland, Evangelicals in England, Lutheran leaders in Sweden, and, we can add based on the evidence here, at least one Reformed leader in Switzerland accepted his claim to be a bishop. 65 On the other hand, John Richardson’s letter to Charles Wesley in March 1764 and the play Diotrephes and Stentor raised questions about Gerasimos’s integrity, as did some subsequent interpreters. 66

The author of Diotrephes and Stentor seems to have had trouble imagining that any bishop could have been poor, scarcely comprehending the situation of a Greek exile from an Ottoman-dominated region who had lived as a monk for decades. It has been argued, further, that an Orthodox bishop simply would never ordain any but Orthodox Christians. But far stranger things had happened in Orthodox circles in the age of The Great Church in Captivity, as the career of Cyril Lu-

65 Cf. Sackett, 100-101.
Gerasimos was exceptional, perhaps eccentric, in that he would befriend Protestants, acknowledge them as fellow Christians, and even perform ordinations for them, yet insisting that specific Orthodox customs be followed in performing these ordinations in Greek. But the story holds together given the nexus of cultural factors that impinged on him as well as his own piety. As indicated above, my own suspicion is that he was in fact a canonically ordained Orthodox bishop who had nevertheless fallen afoul of the Orthodox hierarchy for some reason and functioned from the time he came to Europe in 1752 an independent Orthodox bishop.

This could go a ways towards explaining why he would ordain men outside of the Orthodox Church. The answer may lie not only in the pietistic tone reflected consistently in Gerasimos’s own writings, but also in the intersection of his own piety with European pietistic movements in his age. His own pietistic outlook might well have come directly from his Orthodox context: the eighteenth century was the age, for example, in which the Lutheran Pietism of Halle University had influenced Orthodox clergy trained there, leading to translations of Johann Arndt’s *True Christianity* and other words reflecting Western piety for Orthodox readers. It was also the age in which a distinctively Orthodox form of piety came to expression in a monastic reforming movement that eventuated in the collation and publication of the *Philokalia*, published in Venice in 1782.

Gerasimos’s pietistic tone was consistent with a powerful current in the eighteenth-century world he intersected in his exile. It came to expression in this age in Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in the Pietistic and Evangelical insistence on heartfelt repentance and faith. John Wesley referred to this outlook as “the religion of the heart.” It is possible to understand Gerasimos,

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68 Valdis Mezezers, *The Herrnhuterian Pietism in the Baltic and Its Outreach into America and Elsewhere in the World* (North Quincly, MA: Christopher Publishing House, 1975); Walter Delius, *Der Protestantismus und die russische-orthodoxe Kirche* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1950), p. 37. A Russian (or was it Slavonic?) translation of Arndt’s *True Christianity* was made by Simeon Todorsky, and was published at Halle in 1735: cf. the Catalogue général des Livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 4:421.

then, as an exile from his homeland, forced out by the clash of empires, who found himself at the intersection of his own rich Greek Christian culture and yet another intersecting cultural identity, that of the nascent European culture of heart religion.

Gerasimos’s actions reveal a form of ecclesiology related to this pietistic outlook. Though following the customs of his own tradition, he seems to have envisioned a Christian community that was “catholic” (kath’ holos) in the sense that it was not bound to national identities. He functioned as a bishop of the universal church, and thus he could extend the ministries of the universal church, including his own episcopal ministry, to others. This was just the matter that puzzled John Richardson:

… a Greek bishop (or one supposed to be so), comes into England and exercises the office of ordination, not among his own countrymen, or those of his own church, but among English people and them of the Established Church who have no connexion with, or dependence upon the Greek church.70

Wesley’s acknowledgment of John Jones’s ordination by Gerasimos implied that he and Gerasimos shared an understanding of the Christian community that treaded lightly on the notion of a national church or even of separate denominations as self-contained systems. John Wesley had already treaded on that notion by his itinerant preaching and his use of lay preachers, and he and his brother Charles had parted ways over those specific matters of conformity to the national church.71

When challenged on the matter of his extra-parochial preaching by Bishop Joseph Butler of Bristol, Wesley stated, “Your Lordship knows, being ordained a priest, by the commission I then received I am a priest of the Church Universal.”72 Similarly, when Wesley undertook to ordain clergy for Methodists in North America, he argued that he was not bound to Anglican canons in performing an ordina-
tion that crossed national boundaries. At that time, the Church of England still considered the newly recognized United States to be under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, but Wesley considered the American Methodists to be “at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church.” Wesley and other Anglican leaders who acknowledged Gerasimos’s authority to ordain, then, held an understanding of ecclesial catholicity diverging from that of a national church.

Gerasimos’s pietistic outlook and this underlying ecclesiology best explain why Evangelical groups in the Church of England were attracted to his ministry. One of the small ironies is that the Evangelicals’ desire for episcopal ordination seems to imply a mystical if not at the same time an almost mechanical understanding of episcopal succession. That point of view has persisted in some Methodist circles, intensely concerned since the Victorian era and rising respectability of Methodists in that age about the validity of ministerial orders derived from Wesley’s non-episcopal ordinations of 1784 and beyond. A Victorian-era bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in the USA, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, wrote a spirited defense of Wesley’s “presbyteral” (his term) ordinations and succeeded in getting the AME Church to adopt a formal statement opposing the necessity of (episcopal) “apostolic succession” as well as “religious formalism.”

These Methodist concerns about succession fueled the notion that Gerasimos had secretly consecrated or ordained Wesley as a bishop. This was almost certainly not true: John Richardson and two others indicated that Wesley had indeed asked about episcopal consecration, but all who had any acquaintance with the matter agreed that Gerasimos had refused on the grounds that episcopal ordination in Orthodox (as well as Anglican) usage required the presence of three bishops.

John Wesley seems to have envisioned Gerasimos as a living exemplar of primitive Christianity, literally speaking and writing in the language of the New Testament, reflecting the primitive simplicity and poverty of the earliest Christian

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73 A letter of John Wesley “To Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and Our Brethren in North America” dated 10 September 1784; in Telford, ed., Letters, 7:237-239.

centuries. Gerasimos’s exile combined with the pietistic outlook he encountered in Europe, gave him an impulse to think of the Christian community in a very different way than Eastern Orthodox or European Protestants had thought of it in the past. He transgressed conventional cultural and political and ecclesiastical boundaries, and he transgressed ecclesial canons in performing ordinations of non-Orthodox clergy. He may have transgressed other canons or ecclesiastical customs. His complicated background seems to have fitted him uniquely for his transgressions.  

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75 I want to express my gratitude to Professor Panos Papamichalis of Southern Methodist University for his assistance in translating contemporary Greek materials.


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