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*Papadiamandis in Athens, 1908.*

# GREECE'S DOSTOEVSKY: THE STORIES OF ALEXANDROS PAPADIAMANDIS

A long-hidden literary treasure of Orthodox Greece, the early twentieth-century writer Alexandros Papadiamandis has often been called “the Greek Dostoevsky.” Like his Russian counterpart, Papadiamandis gave a realistic view of contemporary lives nourished with the rich springs of Orthodox spirituality. Here, Dr. Andrew Herman Middleton interviews Dr. Anestis Keselopoulos, professor of Ethics, Pastoral Theology and Orthodox Spiritual Life at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and author of *Greece’s Dostoevsky: The Theological Vision of Alexandros Papadiamandis*, soon to be published in English.

RTE: Dr. Keselopoulos, will you begin by telling us about Alexandros Papadiamandis, and what first drew you to his work?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Papadiamandis made a great impression on me when I was introduced to his stories in grade school. At that time “The Gleaner” particularly touched me – the story of a grandmother and her grandchildren who are preparing to celebrate Christmas. I remember being especially impressed by the character of the priest. Many years later, after I returned from post-graduate studies in Oxford to my hometown of Halkida, I spoke about Papadiamandis with one of my childhood friends, Nikos Triandaphyllopoulos, the editor of the best edition in Greek of Papadiamandis’ complete works, published in five volumes by the Domos Publishing House. I was teaching high school at the time, and it was a good opportunity to read the entire corpus of Papadiamandis’ works.

There was a significant bibliography dealing with the literary value of Papadiamandis' works but no one had approached him theologically, and during this period of reading I realized that this man might have been the greatest theologian of nineteenth-century Greece. He expressed a very pure understanding of theology, an experiential theology derived from the liturgical life of the Church.

RTE: How had that come about?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: From his earliest days he served beside his father, Adamantios, who was a priest on the island of Skiathos. Interestingly, his father was also a spiritual descendent of the Kollyvades movement. The "Kollyvades" monks had been persecuted on Mt. Athos because of their teachings regarding frequent communion, the memorial services, and so on, and some of them had taken refuge on Skiathos. One of their number was from Skiathos and this monk's father gave him a large piece of land on which they built the Monastery of the Annunciation, which still exists. The monks had a great influence on the whole ecclesiastical life of Skiathos and inspired the islanders to keep church life as their center. Papadiamandis always spoke highly of these monks, one of whom – Elder Dionysius – was the last representative of the Kollyvades Movement and his own spiritual father. The elder lived in a *hesychastirion* dedicated to the Prophet Elias on Skiathos.

For centuries, the Church was at the center of peoples' lives: culture, politics, family, and profession. This is the Orthodox conception. It was only after the Bavarian occupation of Greece that the cultural influence of the West came in, particularly through Protestant missionaries to Greece, who tried to establish a different spirit.<sup>1</sup> Papadiamandis was traditionally Orthodox.

RTE: He was reared in this milieu?

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Note: One of the most difficult periods for Orthodoxy in Greece began after the liberation of Greece from the Turks, when in May of 1832, the "Protecting Powers," Britain, France and Russia, who had aided Greece by annihilating the Turkish fleet at Navarino, signed a treaty recognizing Greece as a sovereign state, but under protectorate status. Otto of Wittelsbach, the seventeen-year-old son of King Louis I (Ludwig) of Bavaria, was chosen as the first King of Greece. Because Otto was still a minor, the treaty determined that until he came of age, the country would be ruled by three Bavarian regents, and the army would be composed of mostly Bavarian officers and men. The period of the *Bavarokratia* was tragically unsuccessful, for the regents were indifferent to the customs and traditions of the Greeks. The government imported Western European models of education as well as legal and church administration, and Protestant proselytizing, with little regard for local conditions. In 1833, legislation was passed which ended the traditional authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and even ecclesiastical affairs became subject to civil control.



*Papadiamandis' ancestral home in Skiathos when it was used as a warehouse. It has now been restored and houses the Papadiamandis museum.*



*The church of St. Elissaios in the old Plaka quarter of Athens, where St. Nicholas Planas celebrated and Papadiamandis was chanter, before it was pulled down at the end of the second world war.*

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Yes, in a fully Orthodox world. Papadiamandis was born in Skiathos on March 4, 1851. He was one of eight children, four of whom died, leaving him and three sisters. His Greek biographer, Fr. George Rigas, relates two blessings surrounding his birth on the Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas, the second Sunday of Great Lent. He was born during the singing of the Canon to the Trinity in the Midnight Office before Matins, which was regarded as a very special blessing. A second sign of the remarkable life he would lead took place during his baptism on Bright Monday. When Fr. Nicholas, the priest baptizing Papadiamandis, poured the oil into the baptismal font, it flowed into the form of a cross. Fr. Nicholas was amazed and, as if uttering a prophecy, said, “This child will be great!” And this truly came about.

Papadiamandis spent his childhood in Skiathos, afterwards going to Halkida and Piraeus for high school. Later, he started classes at the School of Philosophy at the University of Athens, but never managed to finish his studies. The main reason, I believe, was his disappointment with the level of education, but also because his family was very poor, and his sisters each needed a dowry to marry. The only solution was for him to stay in Athens.

In these early years, there were already people who realized his gift as a writer. He worked for two newspapers in Athens... one was *Ephimeris*, which simply means “Newspaper,” the other was *The Acropolis*. His most popular stories were first published in these papers and he wrote according to the festal cycle. Before Christmas he would write and publish a Christmas story; before Pascha, a Paschal story; in August, a story for the Dormition, each as a preparation for the feasts.

Athens had a population of about ten thousand people at that time, and Papadiamandis felt out of place there. He wasn’t happy with the culture of Athens, which had been heavily influenced by the presence of the Bavarians. He called it the “New Babylon.” He did, however, find a spiritual island there, the little church of St. Elissaios in the Plaka quarter, in the center of Athens.<sup>2</sup>

RTE: Where Papa Nicholas Planas served?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Church of St. Elissaios: This church, in the Plaka quarter of Athens, was pulled down in 1943 by its owner during the German occupation, but has been recently reconstructed from much of the original stonework found on the site through the initiative of the Greek Papadiamandian Society. Miraculously, the altar stone was found intact under the rubble. Vigil services began in 2005 and are now held there regularly, much in the same manner as they were in the days of Papa Nicholas Planas and Papadiamandis.

<sup>3</sup> St. Nicholas Planas (1851-1932): Athens priest whose zeal for the divine services led him to serve liturgy daily for fifty years, without a break. Canonized as an Orthodox saint in 1992, the best English-language biography is: *Papa Nicholas Planas: The Simple Shepherd of Simple Sheep*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001.

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Yes, and that is where Skiathos' "other Alexandros," the writer Alexandros Moraitidis<sup>4</sup>, also attended church and chanted. Papdiamandis was the chanter on the right side of the church and Moraitidis was the chanter on the left. It was a very spiritual environment. Elder Philotheos Zervakos<sup>5</sup>, as the young layman Constantine, worshipped with this community and later spoke about the spiritual and liturgical life there with great admiration. Papdiamandis benefited greatly from this community. He was nurtured by it and also gave back to it, but not in a self-aggrandizing way.

RTE: Was his spiritual life an element in his deciding not to marry?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: It seems to me that his priority in this early period was to earn money to help his sisters marry. This was the reason, initially, that he didn't start a family, but another likely reason was his own character and goals. I suspect he wanted to live like a monk in the world. But, this is a mystery; we don't really know.

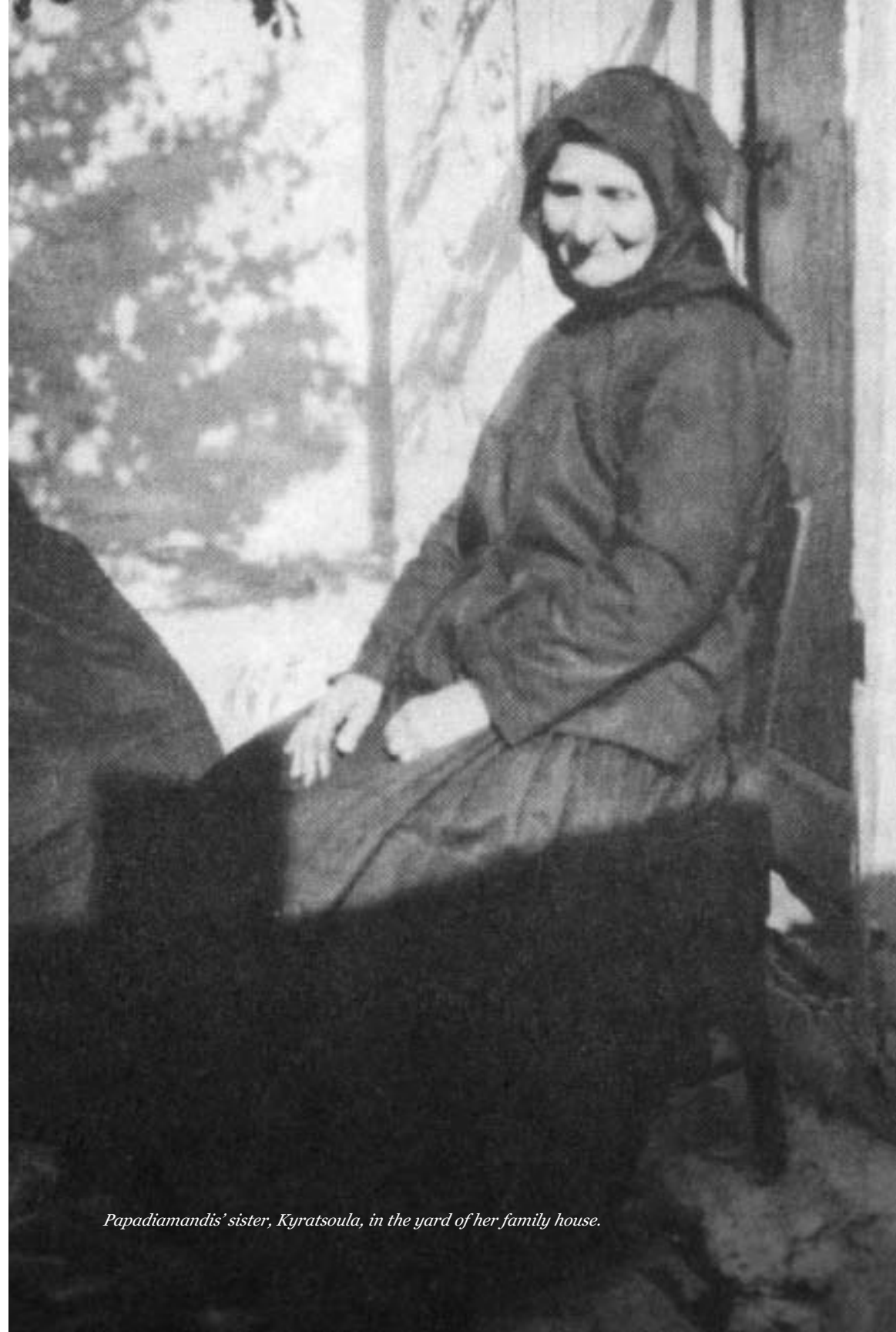
RTE: Nonetheless, he was able to transmit this authentic Orthodox world-view through his novels and short stories?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: I think he was the most successful writer in this regard, not only in his descriptions of priests and religious people, but also through other characters who might seem a little strange. Although they are society's outcasts, they have the Church at the center of their lives. This is Papdiamandis' great gift, the value of his writing. He was not sentimental in his piety, but understood that the Church is open to everyone and should include everyone. Many of his heroes are sinners who feel the burden of their sin, but who also have the spirit of repentance.

Do you remember the story, "Meditation on the Feast of the Dormition"? Here Papdiamandis writes about Frangoulis Frangoulas, a sinful man who had failed at many things in life, but who was genuine and repentant. This is the great thing about Papdiamandis. He wasn't trying to provide a religious meditation or profound ideas; he was a realist. This is the Orthodox approach.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandros Moraitidis (1850-1929): A journalist, prose writer, and teacher from Skiathos. As a contemporary of Alexandros Papdiamandis, he was known as "the other Alexandros." In 1929, he received the monastic tonsure with the name Andronikos, and reposed the same year.

<sup>5</sup> Father Philotheos Zervakos (1884-1980): Greek abbot of Longovarda Monastery on the island of Paros. He built two monasteries and twelve churches, and was a highly respected spiritual guide.



*Papdiamandis' sister, Kyratsoula, in the yard of her family house.*

Most of his work consists of short stories like “Meditation...”, but he also wrote three novels and many newspaper articles. His collected works in Greek are in five volumes: the first consists of the three novels, the second, third, and fourth volumes contain his short stories, and the fifth has his articles, as well as some of his hymns. His hymns include a supplicatory canon to St. Antipas, who is the patron of dentists, and one for St. Dionysius of Mt. Olympus. This fifth volume also includes four poems, each dedicated to one of the four miraculous icons of the Theotokos on Skiathos.

RTE: How do today’s Greek readers receive him?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: I think there’s a difficulty, even among Orthodox Greeks, in approaching Papadiamandis. The main difficulty is not that his language, idioms, and so on are difficult for people, but that his spirit is foreign to most of contemporary society. We have distanced ourselves from the Orthodox spirit of vigils, daily services, liturgies, vespers, and the ascetic spirit, mentality, and *phronyma*<sup>6</sup>, which are expressed in Papadiamandis’ stories and are part of the Orthodox approach to life. Now in Greece we have the spirit of wanting an easy and comfortable life, as in much of Western Europe.

RTE: What do you see as Papadiamandis’ relationship to other Greek writers who wrote in a similar Byzantine-Orthodox genre?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Many Greek writers have had a great influence on Christian ecclesiastical life, and two who are particularly close to Papadiamandis are Photios Kontoglou<sup>7</sup> and Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis<sup>8</sup>, who came after him. As we mentioned earlier, there was also Alexandros Moraitidis, the “other Alexandros,” also from Skiathos and a contemporary of Papadiamandis. Papadiamandis was the example to follow. He was the pioneer.

RTE: What are your own favorites among Papadiamandis’ works?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: That’s a very difficult question to answer because Papadiamandis’ corpus is very rich. Some of my favorites include “A Village Easter,” “The Easter Chanter,” “The Wedding of Karahmet” and “The

<sup>6</sup> *Phronyma*: In Greek, mindset or character. It also suggests upbringing and how this affects the development of character.

<sup>7</sup> Photios Kontoglou (1895-1965): Twentieth-century Greek iconographer and author on sacred art, who was in the forefront of the Byzantine iconographic revival.

<sup>8</sup> Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis (1908-1993): Greek painter, prose writer, and poet.

*The church of St. Anastasa the ‘Disenchantress’, Skiathos, another setting of some of Papadiamandis’ island tales.*

Unchurched.” “The Unchurched” is a little-known Easter story, not widely read, but deeply Orthodox. All of these were set on the island of Skiathos; in fact, all of his stories are set either in Skiathos or in Athens. One of the most important of his Athenian stories is “Without a Wedding Crown.” Have you read it?

RTE: Yes. In fact, I translated it into English.

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Good. The end of this story is very beautiful, as is the ending of “The Wedding of Karahmet.” In this story, Seraino (Karahmet’s first wife and the story’s heroine) was mistreated but accepted her difficult lot with faith and patience. Some years after her burial, her bones are exhumed according to Greek custom, and those present smell a “subtle fragrance” coming from them. This is a great witness that God sometimes gives to show that people’s lives have been pleasing in His sight. Only someone with Papadiamandis’ gift could express the profound and beautiful truth of ordinary lives in such a way.

Papadiamandis was a very sensitive person who understood the struggle of the weak and of those abandoned by society. He wanted to show how the Church offers real answers to the problem of human suffering. In “The Unchurched,” the priest and parishioners do everything they can to bring a man who, for thirty years, has lived far from human society, back into the community and the Church. I like this story very much because it reveals the real pastoral interest that the Church has for its lost sheep. Governmental and social institutions may have forgotten about these people, but the Church never forgets them.

Papadiamandis also wrote three novels: *The Immigrant*, his first, *The Gypsy Girl*, and *The Merchants of the Nations*. *The Murderess*, which is his best-known work in the West, is something between a novel and a short story, but, to me, this is not the story that best expresses Papadiamandis’ spirit.

RTE: How would you compare Papadiamandis to Dostoevsky, another deeply Orthodox writer, or to Tolstoy?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: In Dostoevsky, and to a lesser extent in Tolstoy, we find a similar *phronyma* to that found in Papadiamandis, the same spirit of asceticism and repentance. It is very Orthodox to recognize your personal failure, your personal nothingness, while recognizing at the same time that



*Dr. Keselopoulos (center) talking to the now Bishop of Halkis, Chrysostomos, with Metropolitan Kallistos Ware on his right, after the consecration of a church on the island of Evia.*

God exists and can redeem everything. In Dostoevsky we have sinners, disappointed and disillusioned people, but always, above and beyond the sins and disillusionment, is the great power of God, waiting for our consent to amend every failing and lead it to a resolution.

RTE: Both Papadiamandis and Dostoevsky were realists, weren't they? They didn't try to romanticize life.

DR. KESELOPOULOS: That's right. They also differ from western authors who often like to discuss ideas somewhat disconnected with actual life. As I said earlier, Orthodox writers focus on reality, not on abstract ideas.

RTE: During his lifetime, were there people who recognized Papadiamandis' work? Did he achieve any measure of fame?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: Yes. Contemporary poets such as Malakasis and Sikelianos<sup>9</sup> spoke highly of him, as did later poets such as the Nobel Prize winners George Seferis<sup>10</sup> and Odysseas Elytis<sup>11</sup>. He became famous through his newspaper stories, but, how to say – he had no relationship to money. Other people became wealthy from Papadiamandis' writings, but he died in poverty, and it was only after his death that editions of his works were printed. Although he was well-known, Papadiamandis was a very humble person. He even refused to attend a banquet given to honor him... a princess came, but he didn't.<sup>12</sup>

RTE: To conclude, how well known is Papadiamandis outside of Greece, and what do you feel he can offer the West?

DR. KESELOPOULOS: I'm not sure about America, but in recent years there have been translations of his works in Europe, such as his story, "The Murderess," and others. I've also heard that some of his stories have been translated into Chinese and Japanese. There is also significant interest

in Papadiamandis at the University of Birmingham in England, through a professor of Greek origin who teaches at the Department of Modern Greek Language and Literature.

There are many admirable aspects of western culture and society, but one of its greatest problems is secularism, where people are distanced from the Church and organize their lives according to their own logic. Papadiamandis offers his readers another way – a vibrant life in the Church, and substantial relationships with other people and with God. ✚

Dr. Keselopoulos' book on the spiritual and theological dimensions of Greek writer Alexandros Papadiamandis will soon be available in English as *Greece's Dostoevsky: The Theological Vision of Alexandros Papadiamandis*. Other works by Dr. Keselopoulos include *Passions and Virtues According to St. Gregory Palamas* (St. Tikhon's Seminary) and *Man and the Environment: A Study of St. Symeon the New Theologian* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press).

Our interviewer, Dr. Andrew Herman Middleton, is a former student of Dr. Keselopoulos, and a past contributor to *Road to Emmaus*. He is also the author of *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit*. Dr. Middleton is presently translating Dr. Keselopoulos' work on Papadiamandis into English, and will publish *Greece's Dostoevsky* through Protecting Veil Press in late 2008. ([www.protectingveil.com](http://www.protectingveil.com).)

9 Militiadis Malakasis (1869-1943) and Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951): Twentieth-century Greek poets.

10 George Seferis (1900-1971): Greek poet, writer and diplomat, first Greek recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1963), later Greek ambassador to Turkey, the Middle East, and Great Britain.

11 Odysseas Elytis (1911-1996): Greek poet and writer, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1979).

12 "[In March 1908] the Parnassos Literary Society held an event in his honour under the patronage of Princess Maria Bonaparte; typically, Papadiamandis was not present and spent the evening dining with the family of his grocer friend." (Biographical Note, p. xii, *The Boundless Garden*)





*Adrianou Street in downtown Athens.*



*The quayside at Skiathos, with the old coffee-shop in the foreground on the left.*



*Old Athens from the hill of Areopagas with Mount Lycabettus in the background, 1897.*



*The Kastro, the old citidal of Skiathos, which was often featured in Papdiamandis' stories.*



*Young women of Skiathos in their traditional costumes.*



*A Skiathiote mother with two of her children.*



*A wedding in Skiathos.*



*The marriage procession through the streets of Skiathos after the wedding.*



*The central market of Athens on Athinas Street.*



*A feast day celebration in a well-to-do Athenian home at the turn of the century.*