

Αλευθεροι

PHOTOGRAPH BY YANNIS KONTOS—GAMMA



Two jobs: Eleftheroi's hit album, "SOS"

RELIGION

The Rock Star Monks

Greece's best-selling band sparks a spiritual revival

BY OWEN MATTHEWS

AS A BLOOD RED DAWN BREAKS over the hilltop monastery of Trikorfo in central Greece, a bearded young monk wearing a black robe emerges from prayers and heads to the monastery's small farm. Working fast, Father Panteleimon, 28, cleans the pigsties and feeds the goats. He is in a hurry, because that afternoon he has an appointment in Athens at his other job: starring in a pop video as one of Greece's hottest rock singers.

Panteleimon and 14 fellow monks make up Eleftheroi, or "The Free," a rock group whose two CDs have stormed the Greek charts and sold more than 150,000 copies. The monks sing catchy, classic rock songs about the dangers of materialism, technology and globalization. The video for one song, "Tsipaki," or "Little Chip," shows a gold-painted man implanted with a computer chip; the lyrics warn, "I am a little chip which will lead you to slavery ... The Internet and information have consumed you." "It's good to see that priests can think about the same things that we do, that they're not formal and out of touch," says Katerina Panayides, a 21-year-old college student. "It's music that makes you think, not empty like most pop."

Their popularity signals a major revival in spirituality among Greece's Internet generation. More and more young people are showing an interest in the Greek Orthodox Church—despite the fact that it is one of the country's most conservative institutions (and has criticized Eleftheroi to boot). During the



'Music that makes you think': Two of the rockin' Fathers, David (left) and Panteleimon

last five years applications from young men have surged for the monastic communities of Mount Athos, the heartland of Greek Orthodoxy, where females—even, notoriously, female animals larger than hens—are banned. The number of monks has swelled from 1,500 to 2,200 during the last few years.

Many of the monks display a distinct nationalist spirit, heightening their appeal among the young. Last year 50,000 young people joined a rally in Athens—partly organized by Orthodox Church leaders—to protest erosion of Greek identity by the European Union. That's the kind of turnout that Greece's Communist Party, the fad of a generation ago, would have envied, says political analyst Georgios Smyrnos. "Young people feel that modern Internet culture is not giving them a spiritual dimension, or a separate cultural identity as Greeks," he says. When the pope visited Greece in April, thousands of Orthodox monks, priests and faithful—including members of Eleftheroi—turned out to protest the arrival of the "arch-heretic" Eleftheroi leader Father Nektarios Moulatsiotis and other priests have also been involved in protests against the IMF, the EU and the euro.

Wherever they go, the members of Eleftheroi are increasingly being treated like the rock stars they've become. A moody New Wave-style photo of Panteleimon, Nektarios and Avvostinos, the group's computer wizard, has appeared on the cover of several Greek music magazines (including Metal Invader) and as a centerfold in a women's housekeeping

magazine. And they are mobbed when they venture into town. "Kids give us the thumbs up when they see us in McDonald's," says Father Christodoulos, 22, a member of the brotherhood. "They say, 'Hey, it's the rocking monks!'"

Not everybody is humming along. The Orthodox Church has blasted Eleftheroi's singing as "scandalous" and "unseemly" and officially censured the group, condemning their activities as "incompatible with the dignity of the priesthood." "[Nektarios's] way is absolutely not the Orthodox way," says Father Gabriel, a monk at the ancient Ossiass Loukas monastery. "People don't want the church to be modern—they want it to be a rock which stands against the currents of the world." In response, Nektarios resigned as abbot of Trikorfo last month and declared his community of rockers an independent brotherhood, outside the formal control of the church, though they remain ordained priests. "Christ told his Apostles to be fishermen of men's souls," says Nektarios, who carries a tiny Nokia mobile phone in his robe in case his agent calls. "And to catch fish you have to get your bottom wet ... There are some 80-year-old bishops who don't understand that."

They won't deter Eleftheroi. The group plans to record more albums and expand its Web site (no contradiction with their anti-technology message, says Avvostinos; Godly Internet sites are OK). But even if their success fades, Panteleimon won't fret. "When I stop being a pop star," he says, "I will still have my goats."