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Athens in Pieces: The Happiest Man I've Ever Met

What is it like to be a monk? I spent three days in Greece's revered 'Holy Mountain' monastery to find out.



By **Simon Critchley**

Mr. Critchley is a philosophy professor and author.

Athens

In the nearly three months I've been in this fascinating city, I've met plenty of rather high-spirited people. But it was not until I visited the monastery at Mount Athos in northeastern Greece that I encountered the happiest person I've ever met.

I'd traveled from Athens with my friend Anthony Papadimitriou, who had very kindly arranged the trip to the Holy Mountain, as it is called here. We share an abiding interest in monasticism, although neither of us is fully monkish in our habits.

We had been on the road since very early in the morning when we left the port of Ouranopoli, the City of Heaven, in a small white and orange boat with a captain named Yorgos. The only way of approaching the long rocky peninsula of Mount Athos is by water, and it requires a special permit. I had it in my hand, stamped with the seal of the Holy Mountain, with four handwritten signatures. Anthony told me that the monks had checked out my credentials and noticed somewhere online that I was described as an atheist, which is

not exactly true. But apparently that was better than being Catholic. On my permit, it read "Anglican," which made me smile.

To understand contemporary Greece, and what connects it (and fails to connect it) with antiquity, you have to consider the Orthodox Church, which still has considerable ideological power over Greek life, for good or ill. Christianity is the connecting tissue in the body of Hellenism, for it is here that religious traditions and, most important, the Greek language was preserved. Mount Athos, the spiritual epicenter of Orthodoxy, is an entirely self-governing monastic republic, with its own parliament. Legally part of the European Union, Athos is an autonomous state with its own jurisdiction, like the Vatican, although the monks would not appreciate that analogy: The Orthodox Church has still not forgotten the Catholic sacking of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.

The monastic tradition on Athos goes back to the 9th century A.D., although the continuous

Christian presence is much older. Athonite legend has it that the Virgin Mary traveled to Athos with St. John the Evangelist and liked it so much that she asked Jesus for it to be her garden. Happy to oblige his mother, Jesus agreed. And since that time, the only female creatures allowed on Mount Athos are cats, who are abundant in the monasteries. The mother of God was apparently the only woman to be allowed in her garden.

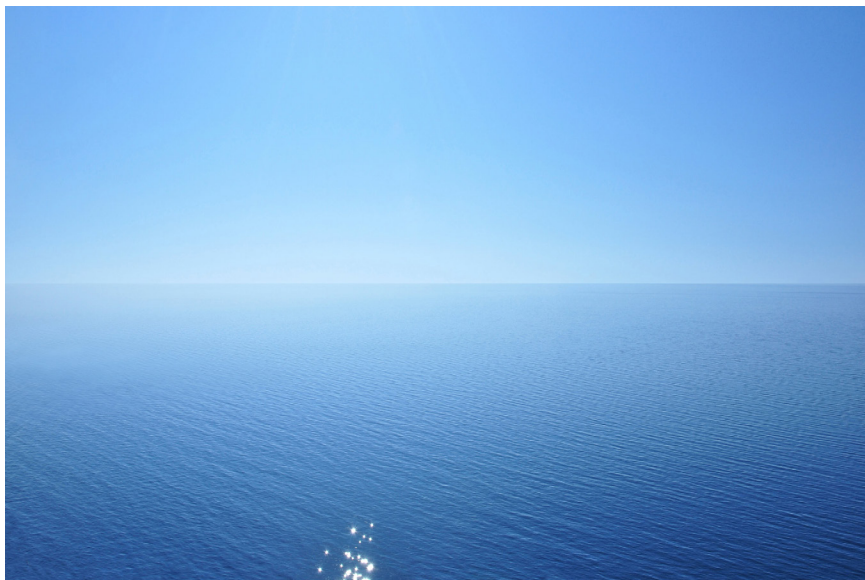
We were going to spend three days and two nights in the monastery of Simonopetra, or Simon's Rock, founded in the 13th century. The fact that my name is Simon rather amused some of the monks to whom we were introduced.

Simon was a hermit who lived in a cave, a five-minute walk downhill from the monastery. Inside a tiny chapel, a few rocky steps took me up to Simon's cell. It was tiny, cold and bare. He'd had a vision in a dream of a monastery on the rock in front of his cave and then had the audacity to build it. As one monk said to me, this is the world's first skyscraper. An improbable-looking 10-story building is somehow wrapped around a huge rock

with the church at its center. It has been burned down on several occasions, but then rebuilt with great effort. Inside is a bewildering array of staircases, a labyrinth that leads down to the monastic library (there is no elevator).

Today there are 65 monks in Simonopetra, mostly Greek; we met French monks and new arrivals from Lebanon and Syria, as well. On Athos itself, there are around 2,000 monks, mostly living communally in monasteries, but there are others living in very small communities called sketes, each with three or four monks. Some 30 or so live alone as hermits. I was intrigued.

It was late on our first day there that I met Father Ioanikios. He was a very handsome and physically fit man, probably in his late 60s, with the clearest eyes, olive skin and a long white beard. He briefly introduced himself to me and said: "Tomorrow you and I will go around Mount Athos. We will see the chestnut forests. You're from New York?" I said yes. "Ah, New York. I used to live there." And with that he shook my hand warmly and disappeared.



The only way of approaching Mount Athos is by water.

The next day, after getting up at 4 a.m. for church (which lasted for three and a half hours) and a modest lunch around 10:30, Father Ioanikios took me for a ride in his Toyota four-wheel drive (pretty much the only cars I saw on Athos) and told me his story.

He was Greek, but also an American citizen, and had studied mechanical engineering at New York University in the late 1970s before getting a master's degree in economics. He used to live on 32nd Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues. He got a really good job with Mobil Oil in New Jersey and used to commute back and forth. "Back in

those days, I used to drink a little and go out," he said. "You know that club that people went to ... "Studio 54?"

"Yeah, I used to go there all the time."

"Did you ever meet Donald Trump?" I asked.

"Trump? That guy? Forget it!"

He was set: living in Manhattan in his mid-20s, single and with a good job and clearly having a ball. But he told me that in his bedroom, he had a small icon of the Virgin Mary, to which he always used to pray before go-

ing to sleep, even when he'd had a little too much to drink. Then, in the early 1980s on a trip to see his family in Greece, he visited Simonopetra because his grandmother's brother had been a monk there. He visited the cell of an old and very sick monk who knew his relative well. The monk couldn't speak and could barely move. But Father Ioanikios told me that this wordless encounter stayed with him when he went back to New York. "The old monk had such life in his eyes. Such love," he said. He couldn't get the experience out of his mind.

He returned to the monastery on a second visit and then decided to give up his New York life and become a novice. That was in 1984. He became a monk in 1987 and has been there ever since. When one becomes a monk, there is a second baptism. So Christos became Ioanikios, after a Byzantine saint from the 9th century.

Ioanikios is not an intellectual or a theologian. He is a practical man, in charge of some of the business operations of the monastery, building projects, road repairs and buying gasoline for the cars, a procedure he explained

in some detail while driving. He talked fondly of a JCB mechanical digger that he had bought and about what kind of concrete was required to fix the road after snow and storm damage during the winter. But he is a person of deep and convincing faith. He told me that he frequently prays in the forest because he feels comfortable there. "It's the Garden of Eden," he said. Looking out of the window at the forest, mountains and blue sea, I sighed in agreement.

When I asked him more closely about his decision to become a monk, he simply said that when he came to Simonopetra he felt called by God and had responded to the call. Not all are called by God and not all who are called respond. But he did.

The first source of disorientation in the monastery is caused by time. Athos follows the old clock of Byzantium, where the day begins at sunset. According to our vulgar, modern time, matins begin at 4 a.m. and last for three and a half hours. But monks get up much earlier, around 1 a.m. The father told me that some of the younger, keener monks often get up at 11 p.m. to extend their



The flag of the Greek Orthodox Church.

devotions. There is at least one hour of Bible reading, one hour reciting the Jesus Prayer or the Prayer of the Holy Mountain (“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” repeated rhythmically over and over again) and one hour of prostrations. The amount of prostrations depends on your age and physical ability, but there should be at least 120; some monks perform up to 2,000. This rather put my Pilates classes into perspective.

After the morning service, monks can nap for two hours. This is followed by a short service of 30 minutes, then lunch, the main meal of the day, at 10:30.

Meals in the refectory are taken in silence and one can eat only when the head of Simonopetra, Abbot Eliseus, rings the gold bell he has beside him. When a second bell rings, it is permitted to drink either water or a sole glass of sweet red wine from their own vineyards. Meal times are fast, about 20 minutes or so, and you have to eat quickly. Throughout the meal, a monk reads aloud from a text; during my stay there was something about Julian the Apostate. Then the bell rings, everyone stops eating and they file silently out.

After lunch, there is four hours work, which often ends with an-

other hour's prayer. After vespers, which lasts for 90 minutes or so, there is a modest dinner, also eaten in silence, and then two hours of free time before sleep, reading or talking with brothers. The whole cycle repeats, with its ritual variations, every day, with no vacations, no breaks and no Netflix bingeing, until your death. The cassock that the monks wear under their robes has a skull and crossbones at the bottom to remind them of mortality. As the monk Evagrius of Pontus said, the monk should always act as if he were going to die tomorrow.

What struck me during my stay at Simonopetra was the constant emphasis on monasticism as a living experience, as an unbroken continuity of tradition. In the case of Athos, that means at least 1,000 years. In this place, every day without exception, the rituals have been followed. Monasticism is not a theology; it is a way of life. Abbot Eliseus told me that there are two foundational monuments in Greece: the Acropolis and Athos. "But one is dead and the other is living," he continued. "One is an idea, the other is a living experience."

Toward the end of our little road trip, Ioanikios looked at me with his clear eyes and spoke quietly: "It is hard being a monk. Man was made for something else, to make a family. And we have chosen a different life. This is only possible when the energy comes from God."

"What is that energy?" I asked.

"It is hard to describe, but you could call it grace." He paused. "When you experience it, it's like you have no enemies. You know what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Love your enemies,' and you think that's a crazy thing to say. How can that be? But when you feel that energy, you feel supported, and it feels like the most obvious thing. You feel only joy and happiness." He repeated the word "joy" three times. "For me, this life is hard, but I feel that joy sometimes when I'm singing."

Let me tell you about the singing. For, truth to tell, I heard Ioanikios sing at vespers before I spoke to him and had remarked on the strength of his voice. I watched him lead his fellow monks for at least 11 hours during my three days in Simonopetra. On either



In Athos, the day begins at sunset.

side of the church, there were groups of about 10 monks clustered around a lectern chanting, in a constant movement of call and response, from one side of the church to the other. With subtle harmonies and occasional deliberate discord, the voices flowed back and forth, complementing and counterpointing each other. Nothing was staccato. Everything was movement and overlapping lines. I have listened to recordings of Byzantine chants, indeed by the choir of Simonopetra itself, but they don't even begin to get close to how it felt in the church.

During the service, some of the

monks' faces that I had seen and talked to were transformed and elevated by song. It is impossible to describe what it was like to be there, but the sheer duration and intensity of the services had a powerful effect. I was in church for about 13 hours during my stay, including a five-hour vigil for the Virgin Mary on Saturday evening. There is an absolute seriousness to the monks during the services, but none of the usual clerical piousness. There was much coming and going during the service and quite a lot of talking among the monks, which seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Once I had got to know Ioanikios, he came

over to me a few times during a break in the singing to ask how I was doing or tell me what was happening (“This is the dance of the angels,” he said, as the golden candelabra swang back and forth overhead. “All of heaven is dancing”). Then he would go back to his chanting.

Everything felt loose and completely relaxed. Here were participants in a ritual who knew exactly what they were doing. There was no judgment, hushing or disapproval of an outsider like me. The scent of myrrh hung heavy in the air from the swinging incense burner that functioned like a percussive accompaniment for the chanting. It was heady. And Anthony and I were only a few feet away from some of the monks as they sang. There were no sermons and no attempts at contemporary relevance. One had the impression that everything was song.

I have never seen a church seem so alive. At certain points in the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, it felt as if the whole church was glowing gold inside as the sunlight began to come up in the morning light. The physical discipline of the monks was hard to compre-

hend. They stood for hours on end without moving, twitching, fidgeting or biting their nails. No one drank anything or looked thirsty. At other times, all the candles were extinguished and there was a low droning chant in darkness. Toward the end of the five-hour vigil, around midnight, I noticed one or two stifled yawns, but nothing much. By this time, the monks had been awake for at least 24 hours. At the end, Ioanikios looked as fresh as a daisy. I was shattered, hungry and thirsty (I hadn’t eaten since the previous morning and had only a few hours’ sleep). But I felt such a lightness. Before we left Athos, Ioanikios showed me his office in a ramshackle building at their tiny port of Daphne. He has dreams of transforming it into a spiritual center for pilgrims. He gave Anthony and me small, hand-carved wooden crosses and placed them around our necks. He also gave me some prayer beads and told me to repeat the Jesus prayer. He said it would help dispel any worries I had in my mind: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” He repeated the words. “Keep saying the words, and your cares will disappear.”



The cross is the most sacred symbol of Orthodox church.

“Don’t forget us,” he added in leaving. “And come back every year. You are our friend now.”

I took off the cross after getting back to Athens late in the evening. I was back in the profane

world. And back with my stupid philosophical distance and intellectual arrogance. But my time in Athos was the closest to religious experience that I have ever come. I wonder if I will ever get so close again.

Simon Critchley is a professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research and the author of “What We Think About When We Think About Soccer” and the forthcoming “Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us.” He is the moderator of The Stone.

This is the seventh installment in an eight-part philosophical tour of the ancient city by the author.

