

## **Holy Mountain: a universal presence and a heavenward orientation ( Metropolitan of Mesogaia and Lavreotikis )**



[English](#)

Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia

The spiritual influence of Mount Athos is indisputable and certainly stems from the fact that many men have attained holiness through their secret ascetic struggles there. In recent years many pilgrims have found peace of mind and repose on the Mountain, together with spiritual guidance and support.

The higher one rises, scientists tell us, the weaker the force of gravity becomes, the less one feels the pull of the earth, the looser one's connection with it becomes, the easier one can shrug off its pressures and demands, the lighter one becomes.

The closer, too, one feels to heaven, which, though so vague, is so real and so desirable. Although less tangible, it seems more real than the earth. The higher one rises, the clearer the air becomes, the sharper one's hearing, the broader the horizon, the closer one draws to the truth, and the truth is more convincing than reality.

Of all the holy sites in the Orthodox world, Mount Athos is the place where for over a thousand years the monastic life has been lived in its most absolute form. The

passing centuries may have stamped their 'worldly' influence on the Mountain; even there men may display their weaknesses or even passions, which is only natural, and modern 'civilisation' may have done its damage, but in an inexplicably mystical way the Mountain has retained its blessed character, the constant and unique evidence of its grace, its rare and singular spiritual strength, and its dynamic relationship in space and time with the Lord God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Its philosophy of life has not been jeopardised by wrong choices, has not been harmed by a bad process of modernisation, and has not been corrupted by the times or by men, whoever they may be. Its truth endures.



It is like a rock which problems like changing political influences, the immoderate use of technology, tourism, parochial views, inter-monastic feuds, rivalries and even hatred, and all kinds of hostile forces only succeed in briefly washing over or moistening the surface of, without in the least disturbing its inner core.

There is something that does indeed protect it. Perhaps it is its monastic diversity, perhaps it is its enduring quality, perhaps the naturalness of its monastic expression, perhaps its treasures, relics and splendour, perhaps the abaton<sup>1</sup> and its administrative autonomy, perhaps its ecumenical character, perhaps the care and protection of the Mother of God, perhaps its special grace. Despite its

theocratic character, after eleven centuries of glorious existence Byzantium fell. Athos, on the other hand, is now in its fourteenth century of life but it moves at the pace of the world to come and gives you the impression that it is a place which is 'not of this world' (John 18: 36), one whose relationship with time is like that of its surface with the air and whose 'citizens dwell in heaven' (Philippians 3: 20).



'A rich mountain, a firm mountain' (Psalms 68: 15)

With its slender connection with ephemeral and worldly things and its attention constantly focused on lofty matters of the soul, the Holy Mountain seems to embrace the whole of mankind and to possess a gaze that can see beyond the limits of time and reason. In geographical terms, the Mountain is situated in Greece but it does not belong to her.

Perhaps it is that part of Orthodox life which best emphasises the catholicity and universality of the Church. Its monasteries include a Russian, a Serbian and a Bulgarian foundation. There are two Romanian sketes<sup>2</sup> and monks from distant countries and civilisations, such as Peru and Colombia. Within its geographical borders God is worshipped in numerous languages and a wide variety of cultures and traditions find expression here: there is a marvellous, well-balanced diversity. Nothing in all this obstructs the unity of faith, the catholicity of the Orthodox spirit, the universality of the Church's witness.

On the contrary, all of this proves that the Word of God is not restricted by



language or confined within borders, and is not stifled by different forms of cultural expression or perhaps even different religions. It is an interesting fact that only a third of the members of the 'Friends of Mount Athos' society in England are Orthodox. The number of non-Orthodox writers recording their admiration of Athos and their sense of its mystical power is increasing all the time. The Mountain moves all people.



Here space and time acquire another dimension and perspective. One's relationship with earthly, ephemeral and perishable things is an entirely perfunctory one. Concepts like 'money', 'property', 'wealth', 'investment', 'entertainment', 'competition' and 'interest' completely lose their importance. Here only the most essential worldly concerns are allowed to occupy one's thoughts. The soul opens itself up to heavenly things. Here the main focus of interest is eternity and God's kingdom. The purpose of history is not to serve as an object of worship but to build the foundations of the present. The future is not seen as a way of relieving suppressed emotions but as a way of transforming the present. The whole of time is held within its embrace. Athos follows the Old Style Calendar knowing

that it is wrong but without being bothered by the fact, believing that it is a system that works well for it. Even the Byzantine cycle of daily time, which is so cumbersome in practice, seems to have a good reason for existing here. The Mountain lives in its own time. It has escaped the most pressing demands and defeated the most powerful oppressors.

Time is not binding. Tradition is not restrictive. The liturgical rite is not a shackle. National identity and language do not count for everything. Education is not a privilege. There is no discrimination. Comparisons are avoided. The most important thing is being constantly in God's presence and embracing the whole world.





'I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?' (Psalm 121: 1)

The first thing that can be said about Athos is that it is a mountain, and in a notional sense at that. It is a high point. It represents a life that consists of an uphill struggle, that can be enjoyed 'in a state of spiritual exaltation', that involves a 'heart which contemplates the heavens' and seeks the 'one who dwells on high', the Almighty. It is an interesting fact that in the Orthodox tradition there are four hagiographical allusions to mountains on which revelations took place.

On Mount Sinai Moses received the Ten Commandments, the expression of God's will. Moses spoke with Him, heard His voice and saw Him from behind (Exodus, chapters 19 and 20).

On Mount Carmel the Prophet Elijah prayed and God heard his prayer and answered it. Elijah felt God's presence and experienced the manifestations of His power (I Kings, chapters 18-20).

The Mount of Olives was the scene of the Lord's ascension into heaven. Christ deified human flesh and 'took sinful human nature upon himself and offered it up to God the Father', thus revealing a glimpse of the glory and honour of human nature (Acts 1: 12).

Finally, on Mount Tabor the Lord revealed as much of His glory as could be borne by human nature and emanated His divine light (Matthew 17: 1-8).

The Mountain is a place where God reveals His commandments; it is a place for a practical way of life, a place where patience, humility and love prevail, a place where man can clothe himself in divine raiment. It is a place where 'nature is constantly constrained and the senses ceaselessly imprisoned', a place of extreme, unceasing and persistent askesis<sup>3</sup> and submission.

It is a place of prayer and signs. Prayer is unceasing, and in the cases of many monks extensive and long-lasting. At sundown the ascetics begin their all-night vigil, the coenobites take over with nocturns, in the morning the Divine Liturgy is celebrated, and during the day the Hours are performed by the monks in the course of their duties or while in their cells; during the times of quiet and pious chatter the repetition of the divine meanings of the Jesus Prayer can be constantly heard on numerous lips. Tongues pray; the architecture of the churches underscores the intensity of the prayers; the daily routine, the long services, the hearts of the monks are all imbued with the sweet melody of prayer.

The Mountain reveals the extremity of human situations. It is moderate in its discreet character but also displays a divine extremeness – though without foolish

extremes – in its absolute and uncompromising lifestyle and philosophy. The daily vigils, the absence of a comforting female presence (even in pictorial form), the customary obedience, the life devoid of personal choices emphasises the naturalness of the ‘supernatural’ state. The Mountain is a place where the majesty of human nature is displayed. It functions as a kind of training ground for achieving deification. ‘The angels’ ranks were awed by thy life in the flesh’, chants the Athonite world, in honour of its father, St. Athanasios of Athos. Human limits are pushed to their utmost. Here saints like Gregory Palamas become beholders of divinity. Saints like Maximos the Kafsokalyvitan cast off their earthly gravity and appear to fly. Saints like Nikodemos Hagioreites express their intelligence as light, while their knowledge assumes the character of revelation. Saints like our modern-day saints Païssios, Ephraim and Elder Joseph the Hesychast combine rigorous discipline in their lives with grace, like the old elders in our ascetic literature. Saints like Kosmas the Aetolian or Fathers Sophronios and Porphyrios, also from our own time, draw strength from Athos’s springs for a few years and then become lifelong reformers, preachers and theologians of worldwide renown.

But the Mountain is not only a place for man’s spiritual glory. On all of the four mountains mentioned earlier God’s presence is marked by the appearance of a cloud. On Mt. Sinai as a ‘dense cloud’ which Moses enters, sensing but not actually seeing the Lord (Exodus, chapters 16, 19 and 24). On Mt. Carmel the ‘cloud’ breaks the silence of the heavens and brings forth rain in a miraculous manner (I Kings 18: 44). On the Mount of Olives, the Mount of the Ascension, the Lord ‘was taken up into a cloud’ and carried off to Heaven (Acts 1: 9). Finally, on Mt. Tabor ‘a bright cloud overshadowed’ the disciples and the voice from the cloud saying ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased: listen to Him’ shows that God the Father was present there with them (Matthew 17: 5).

The Mountain lives within a cloud of God’s graces. Sacred relics emit a sweet fragrance, holy icons exude myrrh, events take an unexpected turn, expectations are exceeded, rare surprises occur, God works with a power greater than the force of natural laws and logic. You enter the cloud of Athos as a visitor and, like Moses, you discover the tablets with God’s commandments in your hands. You find it easier to observe them. You are surprised by the presence of the cloud and are startled by the ‘sign’ of God’s grace flowing down like rain. You are struck by the cloud’s mystical character and ‘fall on your face in great fear’, like the disciples on Mt. Tabor. You behold the cloud and hear the voice of God the Father within you. You sense its intangible divine majesty and ‘gaze up at heaven’ like the Apostles on the Mount of Olives and you ‘return’ with great mystical ‘joy’.





If the Mountain of God's presence illuminates with its apocalyptic visions, the cloud of the divine mystery fills the heart with the humility of uncreated grace. On the Holy Mountain you experience miracles, you perceive holiness, you are illuminated by whatever you can see, you are nourished by whatever lies within your reach, you have the 'same mind that was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2: 5).

A long time ago I was approached by a young student. Very hesitantly, but with the intensity of someone who is determined to find out something, he declared that, although he was an atheist and found it hard to believe, he very much wanted to find faith. He had tried and searched for years but all to no avail. He had talked with professors and educated people but his thirst for something serious was not satisfied. He heard about me and decided to share his existential need with me. He asked me for a scientific proof of God's existence.

'Do you know anything about integrals or differential equations?' I asked him.

'Unfortunately not,' he replied, 'I'm an Arts student.'

'What a shame! I knew a proof like that,' I said in a deliberate attempt to be funny.

He felt awkward and fell silent for a while.

'Look,' I said, 'I'm sorry I teased you like that but God is not an equation or a mathematical proof. If He was, then all educated people would believe in Him. You

know, there is a different way of approaching God. Have you ever been to Mount Athos? Have you ever met any ascetics?’

‘No, father, but I’m thinking of going. I’ve heard so much about it. If you tell me to, I’ll even go tomorrow. Do you know any well-educated person I could meet?’

‘Which would you prefer: a well-educated person who would confuse you, or a saint who might wake you up?’

‘I’d prefer a well-educated person. I’m afraid of saints.’

‘Faith is a matter of the heart. Try talking to a saint. What’s your name?’ I asked him.

‘Gabriel’, he replied.

I sent him to an ascetic. I told him how to get there and gave him the necessary instructions. We even drew a sketch-map.

‘You must go and ask the same thing,’ I said. “‘I’m an atheist”, you must say, “and I want to believe. I want some proof of God’s existence”.’

‘I’m afraid, I’m too shy,’ he replied.

‘Why are you afraid and shy of the saint when you’re not afraid or shy of me?’ I asked him. ‘Just go and ask him the same thing.’

A few days later he went, and he found the ascetic talking with a young man in the yard of his cell. Opposite, four other young men sat waiting on some logs. Gabriel gingerly took his place amongst them. About ten minutes later the elder finished his discussion with the young man.

‘How are you, boys?’ he asked. ‘Have you had a loukoumi?<sup>4</sup> Have you had a drop of water to drink?’

‘Yes, thank you, father,’ they replied with conventional worldly politeness.

‘Come here,’ he said to Gabriel, picking him out from the others. I’ll get some water and you take this box with the loukoumia. And come closer so that I can tell you a secret: it’s okay being an atheist, but to be an atheist and have an angel’s name, well... It’s the first time I’ve ever come across anything like that.’

Our friend almost fainted with shock at this sudden revelation. How did he know his name? Who had told him about his problem? And what did the elder want to say to

him?

‘Father, can I have a brief word with you?’ he uttered in a faint voice.

‘Look, my son, the sun is going down: take the loukoumi, have a drink of water and go to the nearest monastery for the night.’

‘Father, I’d like to speak to you, if that’s possible.’

‘What is there for us to say, my child? Why have you come?’

‘On hearing this question I immediately felt a huge weight off my chest,’ he told me later. ‘My heart began to overflow with faith. My inner world began to glow. My questions began to be solved without any logical arguments, without any discussion, without any clear answers. All the “ifs”, “whys” and “maybes” were banished at a stroke, leaving only the “hows” and “whats”.’

What the knowledge of educated men was unable to give him he gained from the kind allusion of a saint, who had completed only four years at junior school. Saints are very discreet. They operate on you without an anaesthetic and there is no pain. They perform a transplant without cutting you open. They raise you to lofty heights without using the steps of earthly logic to get there. They plant faith in your heart without tiring your mind.





‘Inviolable and God-trodden mountain’

The Holy Mountain is a training school of the heart, a place of healing for the inner man. It raises you up to spiritual heights which cannot be reached even by the most modern balloon of worldly reasoning. Here Grace expresses truth in unexpected ways.

The basic question on the Mountain is not whether God exists. This question seems to have been decisively resolved a long time ago. Neither is it whether our God is better than other people’s gods. Here ‘our’ does not have a possessive sense – as

in the phrase 'God is mine' – but the sense of a child selflessly wishing to join its father – 'I am striving to become His'. All efforts are directed at partaking of God's divine nature (2 Peter 1: 4), at making the most of our kinship with Him, at gaining a sense of His presence, of learning the benefits and ways of experiencing Him.

The Mountain's value does not lie in its individual charismatic monks, however many or great they may be. Its majesty is concealed in the fact that it is a resting-place for God. Just as, for reasons that remain unknown to us, in some icons that depict exactly the same figure as others God works in different ways, and imparts a special grace to some that He does not give to others; just as amongst His twelve beloved disciples the Lord had a favourite; just as from amongst all His peoples He selected His 'chosen people'; just as He performed the miracles that revealed His glory only in certain places like the Pools of Bethesda and Siloam, so too does He select certain places in His creation to be special expressions of His grace. The Holy Mountain is the Mountain of God.

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Translator's notes:

- 1 The regulation forbidding the entry of women to Mount Athos.
- 2 Skete (plural sketes): a small monastery.
- 3 Spiritual exercise or training.
- 4 A piece of Turkish delight, a traditional hospitality offering on Athos.

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