

How Monasticism Testifies to God's Reality (Amir Azarvan)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Over the years, I have become acquainted with various logical arguments for the existence of God – some I find more convincing than others. Of course, the strongest evidence comes from direct experience, for God is a person to be mystically encountered, not an abstraction to be logically deduced. This should not be taken to imply that logic has no role to play a role in one's spiritual life. On the contrary, logic can be used to convince someone that such an experience is worth pursuing in the first place.

The strongest argument for me – an argument not normally used to evidence God's reality – happens to be a simple one: the existence of monasticism. I begin with a very simple proposition: man inherently desires pleasure. If this is correct, then the fact that so many men and women have throughout the centuries spent their cloistered lives shunning earthly pleasures points, in itself, to the reality of a superior, otherworldly pleasure capable of satisfying this intrinsic desire. "To be a monk," wrote St. John of the Ladder, "is to know ecstasy without end." The institution of monasticism would not likely last very long otherwise.



Or consider certain texts, written by and for monastics, that speak of extraordinary spiritual phenomena. Skeptics can certainly fall on the assumption that these writers were motivated by the desire for fame or some other worldly gain. However, such an explanation is belied by the very nature of their monastic vocation, which involves the renunciation of all worldly pleasure. Indeed, those whom the Church holds up as examples worth emulating are not those who conceitedly showcase their spiritual gifts to lay people or fellow monastics, but rather those who humbly conceal (or even deny) these gifts, or reveal them solely for the purpose of benefitting others.

Furthermore, if accounts of such phenomena were concocted, one would think that they would occupy a prominent place in these texts. Yet one quickly notices that the purpose of these writings is not to prove the existence of the spiritual realm, but to counsel monks on dealing with this evidently taken-for-granted reality. Thus St. Anthony the Great teaches: "When, therefore, they [i.e., demons] come by night and wish to tell the future, or say, we are angels, give no heed, for they lie...Sign yourselves and your houses, and pray, and you shall see them vanish." Similarly, in the event that the spiritual seeker sees a "light or some fiery form," St. Diadochos of Photiki advises him not to "accept such a vision," for "it is an obvious deceit of the enemy."

Through such writings, the lay – and unintended – reader is provided a glimpse into

the secluded world of those who speak quite casually of phenomena that strike us as incredulous.

"...How may I hide this fire which warms my soul? How shall I hide the Lord's mercies in which my soul delights? How can I hold my peace, with my soul captive to God? How shall I be silent when my spirit is consumed day and night with love for Him?" - Saint Silouan

Finally, I have never found a satisfying explanation for how the saints could so fervently express their love for a purely imaginary god. To be sure, a talented writer can easily enough weave a fictitious love account (as the multibillion dollar romance novel industry attests). But it seems to me that the most credible love tales are those inspired by the author's actual experience of love. As American author, Mary McCarthy, once remarked, "the great novelists have in common 'a deep love of fact, of the empiric element in experience.'"

But does the desire for fame motivate them to contrive a relationship with an imaginary being? If so, then why do they run from fame as if it were the plague? Pursuing notoriety in the world by removing yourself from it is just about as sensible as moving to Seattle to escape the rain.

Of course, one can claim that these mystical lovers are simply crazy. But such a lazy dismissal would fly in the face of scholarly research suggesting that monastics enjoy higher psychological well-being than the secular population, and that religiosity in general is associated with positive mental health outcomes.

I confess that not everyone will find this line of argument terribly convincing. The reader's verdict may partly depend on his or her prior views. One who is already sympathetic to theism might find this argument persuasive; one who is on the fence might be willing to at least take a sort of Pascal's Wager upon hearing it; and one who has firmly concluded that God is a myth might find this argument absurd. This essay is less of an apologetic piece aimed at the most ardent religious skeptic, and more of a personal reflection that, I hope, will reinforce one's faith, or bring one closer to it.