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Five Doubting Dudes and the Holy Relics of Mount Mortality



By Marty Kaplan

“Protestant,” I lied, not for the first time, when the Holy Mount Athos Pilgrims Bureau officer asked me my religion.

In January, when my friend Sandy, who was born Greek Orthodox, applied to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs to allow five of us to set foot on the Mount Athos peninsula in June, I’d agreed that putting “Protestant” on the form was a safer answer than the truth — “It’s complicated” — and less likely to be a deal-breaker than “Jewish.” Even so, my surname was enough to trigger a “Really?” from the ministry and gum up the paperwork. And though our written reassurance that this Kaplan was indeed ΠΡΟΤΕΣΤΑΝΤΗΣ resulted in a message that permission would be granted, when the permit official was face-to-face with me at the Pilgrims Bureau in Ouranoupoli, something — maybe my nose — didn’t pass his smell test. So I was asked the question again, and I nonchalantly replied “Protestant,” casually adding “Episcopal,” in the hope that such a detail would somehow make it more plausible, and silently wondering if my ethnic treachery would send me to hell — if I’d actually believed in hell — or whether it was really no more grave a transgression than adding a couple of inches of height to my JDate profile.



For more than a thousand years, Mount Athos, a forested peninsula jutting 40 miles into the northeast Aegean, has been the center of monastic life in the Greek Orthodox faith. Twenty monasteries, and little else, are scattered along its wild coastline. Some are as

large as colleges; some rise from the rocks like the Potala Palace in Tibet. Inside their walls there is an astonishing abundance of medieval icons, mosaics, illuminated manuscripts, jeweled reliquaries, precious metalwork and ancient marble. The Byzantine frescoes in just one of Mount Athos's chapels would be more than enough art to fill a major exhibition in any of the world's museums.

Four days is the longest visit that pilgrims — not tourists — may make. One hundred and twenty are granted permission to enter per day, and all but 10 of them must be Greek Orthodox. There are no hotels, and a maximum of a single night's stay per monastery — arranged through a separate application process — is permitted. No women are allowed to set foot on Mount Athos, a prohibition that the bearded, black-robed monks, some 1,500 of them on the peninsula, say honors the Virgin Mary, who visited there when her ship was blown off course on her way from the Holy Land to Cyprus. Shorts, bare toes and pierced ears are also forbidden.

The trip was Sandy's idea. His 95-year-old father is Greek, and though Sandy was baptized in the Orthodox faith, he would be the first to call himself an atheist. Two of us — Tim, an Englishman, and Adam, half English and half Swedish — are Christian, but only nominally. Geza, whose parents were Hungarian Catholics, is also an unbeliever, and vocally appalled by the historic carnage committed in God's name. I'm Jewish. Though Adam dubbed us five the Mount Atheists, I hesitate to call myself that because of my ineluctable awe at the ineffable, at what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls "the inconceivable surprise of living" — my amazement and gratitude that there is something rather than nothing, an improvised mysticism that nevertheless leaves me religiously way closer to my four secular bros than to someone whose Savior is Christ or whose God is the God of Scripture.

During our visit we were meticulously respectful of the monks' practices, but we still stuck out among the other visitors. I was the only American, and we were the only native English-speakers that we encountered, but I think it was the monks' radar for apostasy, not for nationality, that marked us. At each monastery where we stayed, a monk approached us, looking for spiritual embers to blow on. Father Savvas urged us to reflect on the deeper reasons we had chosen to come to Mount Athos rather than hitting one of Greece's beach-ringed pleasure islands. Father George wrote out a list of books for us to read, memoirs of Protestants and Catholics and lapsed Orthodox who had found their way back to the one true religion. Father Gregory told us of the doubter struck dead on the spot for disbelieving that an icon of the Virgin Mary in the monastery's possession had spouted blood when struck by a knife. Father Vasilios told us of the miraculous power of one of his monastery's holy relics, Saint Marina's hand — still at body temperature after 1,700 years — to raise believers from the dead. He also urged us to turn our backs on the rotten, homosexuality-accepting Sodom and Gomorrah we came from.

All this left us unmoved. If anything, the relics and the miracles and the culture war talk made it more difficult for us to discover the highest common denominator between the faith of the monks and our own ad hoc spirituality. So why, if not for worship and conversion, had we gone there? There was aesthetic pleasure galore, of course, and spectacular natural beauty, and the coolness of parachuting across 10 centuries into *The Name of the Rose*, and the thrill of being among the few to get in. But the real reason we went, I think, was to wrestle with our own mortality.

The five of us have been friends since college. Four of us were roommates. Sandy's brother George was also our roommate, but we lost him three years ago, after a bruising battle with leukemia. In a way, this pilgrimage was a tribute to George, an effort to keep him alive by keeping the bonds among us alive, a sentimental but inevitably futile attempt to transcend his ending by denying our own. The miracle we bore witness to turned out to be the earthly wonder of enduring friendship. The relics we accepted turned out to be ourselves, a handful of 60-somethings, killer backpacking from one monastery to the next and sleeping five to a cell with a bathroom down the hall. If this understanding of holiness was a humanistic heresy, we were glad to be guilty of it.



Sailing to Byzantium — literally enacting the title of Yeats’s poem — had been our original plan; we were going to make our way to Mount Athos in the beautiful wooden caique owned by George and Sandy’s family. But a storm registering eight on the Beaufort scale made us rethink our course. Herodotus tells of 300 Persian ships destroyed by a northerly gale at Mount Athos, and we were in no rush to join them, so Plan B for getting to Byzantium was 24 hours by ferry and car. Despite the change of route, Yeats’s words still apply. “That is no country for old men,” it begins.

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing...*

We traveled to Mount Athos to revel in one another’s company, to savor each moment left to us, to testify to the sanctity of being. We went to Byzantium so our souls could clap hands and sing. If that’s not where God is, I don’t know where else to look.

*This is a crosspost of my column in *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com if you’d like.*

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