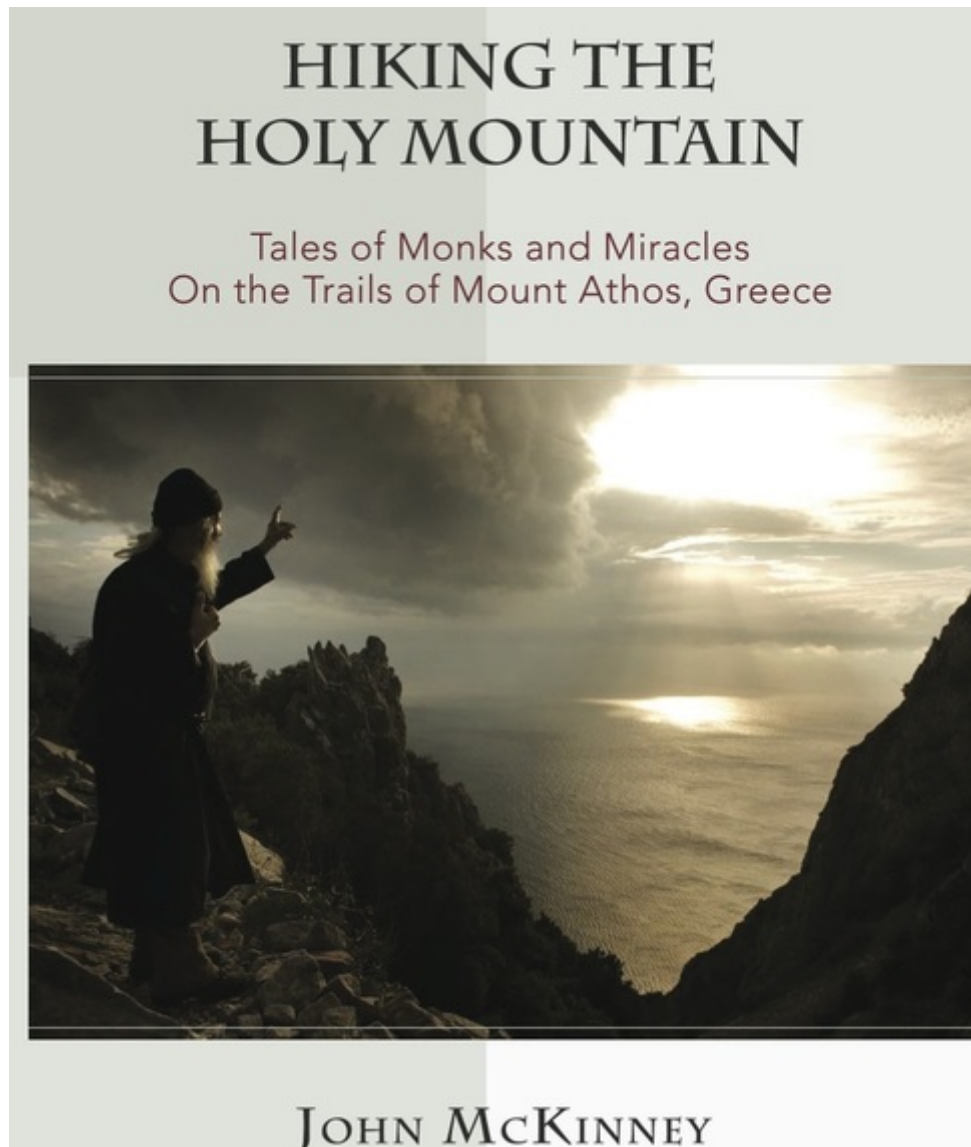


## **A Review of John McKinney's Hiking the Holy Mountain: Tales of Monks and Miracles on the Trails of Mount Athos (John G. Panagiotou)**

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Sometimes a book defies categorization or description for that matter. John McKinney's *Hiking the Holy Mountain: Tales of Monks and Miracles on the Trails of Mount Athos, Greece* does those things and more. At first glance, one would think that this yet another mundane (and even boring) hiking guide to a remote locale. Yet, I can tell you that this work is not such a thing.

The southern Californian McKinney may have started out wanting to write about

hiking a remote peninsula in northern Greece for its aesthetic natural appeal, but what he ended up with was through that experience finding a life journey which became entwined with the faith of these monks on that remote northern Greek peninsula. What started out to be another book on hiking the outdoors became a spiritual odyssey into self-discovery for the Los Angeles Times columnist John “The Trailmaster” McKinney.

# HIKING THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Tales of Monks and Miracles  
On the Trails of Mount Athos, Greece



JOHN MCKINNEY

McKinney begins his book fittingly with a quotation from the Roman Catholic monk

Thomas Merton, "It is perhaps true that Athos is out of touch with our times, for more than any monastery in the Western world. But precisely because of this it has much to teach us, since our salvation consists not in keeping up with the times but in transcending them." (McKinney, vi) It is precisely this antiquity with which McKinney links his experience and that of his son's given the fact that we live in the digital age in which we see "icons" of the present age such as the iTunes icon (a music note in a circle) and Facebook icon (a plain white F on a blue background).

McKinney's journey begins in the book by recounting his childhood growing up attending St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Los Angeles. Amidst all of the "Greek experience" of attending Divine Liturgy, Sunday School, and youth group activities, he tells us that he had a spiritual void and remained quite secular for most of his life with the Greek Orthodox experience having no more than at best a sentimental relativism to him. He was a nominal Greek Orthodox at best and even more of a skeptic.

Within that context, it is interesting to read of his incomprehension why anyone would leave the comforts "of the world" to live an inconvenient life of ascetic austerity on a mountain. All of this would be exacerbated by the Athonite ways of being on the Julian Calendar, reckoning time on a clock by Byzantine time, waking up at 2:45 am for church services, eating simplest meatless meals, and laboring at menial tasks around the monastery grounds while repeating all of the above day after day. Yet, within this routine of simplicity, he would come to be impressed and influenced by the interesting personalities of the monks who inhabited the twenty official monasteries and the multitude of other sketes (monastic communities, but not strictly an official monastic community).

In reading through McKinney's book, it is more than a travelogue of hiking on a northern Greek peninsula which is sprinkled with monasteries. Rather, it is a spiritual chronicle of the journey of a man from a place in his life typified by secular religious nominalism into a vibrant encounter with the Divine. The author sees the world through an existential lens during its opening story narrative and gradually through a course of perceived miraculous events retools the author's vision into a transcendental perspective.

To be sure, McKinney in this book gives tips on hiking the Holy Mountain of Athos. He even gives details about Athonite cuisine which is non-red meat, non-poultry meat, and non-pork. Foods on their regular dietary menu include gigantes (giant beans); in fact, he dedicates a whole chapter entitled "I Love Gigantes." These, however, seem peripheral to the essence of the literary work itself. This work is

more a spiritual journal more than anything else.

McKinney sees Divine Providence as the architect of who had been placed in his life during this trip to Mt. Athos. Whether it be, the various monastics or a fellow pilgrim such as the pious Spiro, he is affected to the very core of his being by this experience. McKinney sees the Hand of God in the placing of these certain individuals in his life to redirect his path as it were.

McKinney relates eloquently about the images of sacred art that he at one time approached with aesthetic appreciation, but would later come to view them in transcendent terms. An example of this is his description of the breathtaking thirteenth-century iconographer Manuel Panselinos' frescoes in the Protaton Church in Karyes which is the oldest church on Mt. Athos. In it in particular is Panselinos' "Resurrection of Christ" iconic wall mural. McKinney writes, "Particularly mind-blowing is the way he painted the Resurrection. Jesus stands atop the broken doors of hell, its capacity to imprison souls now demolished; the keys to hell are wrecked. Looking way more powerful than any commando who's kicked down a door to a terrorist stronghold and rescued hostages. Jesus leans forward to take Adam and Eve by the hand to lead them, to lead all humanity, out of the abyss."

In spite of McKinney's very limited Greek language proficiency skills, through the help of interpreters and basic human communication, he comes to understand the spiritual significance of "The Garden of the Virgin Mary" as Mt. Athos is known since no woman is said to have stepped foot on the peninsula in over a thousand years. Thus, Mt. Athos remains dedicated and devoted to the veneration of the Virgin Mary.

The author is also impacted by the accounts of personal holiness on the Holy Mountain. He is told of the story of the life of the Elder St. Paisios who died in the early 1990s. MaKinney writes about St. Paisios, "Elder Paisios became known on and off the mountain for his piety and wise counsel. He became a beacon of light for those in spiritual darkness, and legions of men walked down the trail to his hermitage to see him. By day he received the suffering men, counseled them on their mental, physical and spiritual illnesses, their broken marriages, their addictions to drugs and alcohol. He gave advice, emptied them of their pain and sorrows, filled them with hope and love for God. By night he prayed, long spiritual vigils that left him only two or three hours of sleep. Along with his full-time counseling practice, Elder Paisios made metal icons of the Theotokos. He gave these icons of the Holy Mother to visitors as a blessing and wrote books of wisdom,

compiled into thick treasuries of his work.”

These are not the only transformations which take place in the life of McKinney. An Athonite monk would prophesy to him that if he prayed to St. Anna the Mother of the Theotokos that through her intercession to Christ that the McKinneys would be blessed with becoming parents of a son whom they should name Daniel. Through a series of seemingly Providential events through the gift of adoption that is exactly what happened.

McKinney’s book is at times long in the details of his perception of Athonite experience and how that impacted his life. Yet, it is precisely in that painstaking detail that we find the value of this work. As I previously mentioned, this is more of a spiritual journal more than anything else. It is well-worth the time it takes to read it whether one is an Eastern Orthodox Christian or not. It really speaks to the place of an ancient expression of Christianity and how it relates to the ever-changing complexities of modern-day life. I recommend this book to be added to your worthwhile reading list.

I close with McKinney’s own words, “We can find the Holy Spirit in a prayer, at the top of a mountain, or at the center of an icon. The Holy Spirit leads us, and we follow, on the trail between earth and heaven. The saints, the holy men and women in the icons, are our trail companions, our friends who help us along the way. They show us that we never hike alone.”

**Source: [theorthodoxchurch.info](http://theorthodoxchurch.info)**