

# Preaching to the Scholar Podcast

## Episode 1: The Monk in Us All

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of *Preaching to the Scholar*: the religious podcast for the unreligious. I'm your host, Xan Denker, Religion and Music student at Boston University.

Since this is our first episode, I'd like to introduce some questions that will be guiding this podcast. Firstly, what are religious practices, and what are some similarities throughout different religions of the world? How does spiritual belief manifest in physical habits, such as fasting, meditating, or, praying? And lastly, how can those who don't subscribe to any belief system follow the ideals of a Christian monk, for example? Despite the jargonical nature of these questions, hopefully you're interested in these questions, and you're here because you want to understand what is so appealing about religion. Why have Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and so many more had such a profound effect on society?

Non-believers, stick with me, and you might see the value in learning about religion. I'm not following any agenda to convert you—my interest is purely academic, and I have enough horrifying church stories from my childhood to turn anyone away— but, as I've tried to do myself, you might just be able to see the value in applying some religious concepts to your sinful, secular life.

[*Dies Irae* chanting]

Today we're going to begin our exploration of asceticism and what it can mean to non-believers. Ascetics, for those who might be unfamiliar, can be defined as members of an order, usually religious, who give up bodily and earthly pleasures in order to reach some kind of higher

purpose. This might bring to mind images of Buddhist monks praying on a hilltop, or a Christian monk fasting in the desert. While these are two pretty legitimate examples of asceticism, there are a lot of forms this ideology can take. And, clearly, it spans more than one religion—there are ascetics of nearly every global faith, all with their own practices that you or I would, probably, personally find extreme. But let’s talk about extremity and the purpose it serves.

Saint Symeon the Stylite, (not to be confused with Symeon the New Theologian), lived in the 400s AD, one of the biggest eras for Christian monks. Symeon is probably one of the most extreme examples of Christian asceticism. The Orthodox Church of America tells his story on their website. They say this:

“Saint Simeon the Stylite was born in the Cappadocian village of Sisan of Christian parents, Sisotian and Martha. At thirteen years of age he began to tend his father’s flock of sheep. He devoted himself attentively and with love to this, his first obedience.”

Soon, he began to get into all that Christian stuff:

“When Simeon was eighteen, he received monastic tonsure and devoted himself to feats of the strictest abstinence and unceasing prayer. His zeal, beyond the strength of the other monastic brethren, so alarmed the igumen that he told Simeon to either moderate his ascetic deeds or leave the monastery.

So Symeon decided to leave, and he lived in the mountains for a while and continued his ways. After a dream where angels called him back to the monastery, he returned, but he didn’t stay for long. The website says this:

“After a short while he settled into a stony cave, situated not far from the village of Galanissa, and he dwelt there for three years, all the while perfecting himself in monastic feats. Once, he decided to spend the entire forty days of Great Lent without food or drink. With the help of God, the monk endured this strict fast. From that time he abstained from

food completely during the entire period of the Great Lent, even from bread and water. For twenty days he prayed while standing, and for twenty days while sitting, so as not to permit the corporeal powers to relax.”

So, what does that tell us? Symeon was kind of a freak, yeah. But you have to admire his game. He was literally kicked out of his first monastery for being TOO devoted to God. And he showed signs as a young boy that he would be somewhat of a fanatic-- remember the sheep he tended? It seems like Symeon had this kind of innate ability to completely devote his entire mind, body, and soul to the thing that was most important to him. Later in his life it was God, but first it was sheep! His self discipline clearly wasn't limited to spirituality, but once he found the thing that most appealed to him—God—he was able to ramp up his dedication and self-discipline.

I think most of us have-- or want to have-- something we are fully devoted to. Hopefully, and most likely, that won't involve inflicting severe bodily or emotional harm to yourself. But I think the core of Symeon's appeal, and that of other ascetics like him, is the way he put aside pleasure on earth for the eternal salvation he believed he would meet after death, in God's Kingdom. Fortunately, for those who consider themselves atheists or agnostics, or just anyone who doesn't look to the afterlife, that future salvation doesn't just have to mean Heaven.

Basically, there are two reasons I think asceticism is important even in the modern era. First, we can certainly apply the structure of asceticism to the thing or things that drive us; I'm a musician. Sometimes I skip social events, sleep, or other responsibilities in order to practice my instrument--foregoing a lot of temporary pleasures in the hopes that one day, I will be able to do something meaningful. And lucrative. I think that methodology is pretty straightforward. People like Malcolm Gladwell have written entire books on that. But the other reason practicing asceticism can be super beneficial is, it's a way to escape the world.

In his monastic rule book, St. Benedict tells the monks that the way they act must be different from the way the world acts.

And that doesn't just apply to the medieval monks-- the same goes for any time period. Especially the one we're in. Before Corona hit, the world was already kind of eating a shit sandwich. But the thing is: so was the world of the medieval monks. In the words of my writing professor, "Everyone was afflicted." Life was pretty terrible, objectively. But monks retreated into the desert, refusing to amongst all the chaos, devoting themselves to something greater.

With everything going on in the world today—how much more specific can I be?—it's important that us non-spiritual people, those of us who don't find comfort in a higher power, are able to find some kind of peace. Ironically, that might just mean adopting some of the most stringent religious practices out there. Even though it may seem foreign and intimidating, I think we owe it to ourselves to give it a try.

Thanks for listening to today's episode of *Preaching to the Scholar*. Join me next week as we explore the significance of sacred art, music and architecture for those without belief. And remember: just because you don't believe doesn't mean you can't benefit.

[Outro music- Down to the River, recorded by Apollo's Fire]

#### Works Cited

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