

«IF I HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED IT, IT DOESN'T EXIST!»

Atheists, it seems, are finally coming out of the closet. Books, open letters, magazine articles and talk shows are providing a public forum for what is still the least respected «religious» movement or coalition in the country. According to a recent article in the New York Times, the Secular Student Alliance now has some 146 chapters in colleges across the country, and the numbers of people who claim no religious belief just about doubled in the past two decades. In my arch-conservative home state of South Carolina, it jumped threefold. A local math professor at the College of Charleston has founded and presided over a recently formed Secular Coalition for America. And in reaction to the spate of license plates in this state that shout «Jesus saves!» and «God loves you!» he has paid the DMV for the privilege of sporting one that reads, «In Reason We Trust.»

From billboard signs on I-26 to enthusiastic meetings of non-believers in senior citizen centers, increasing numbers of South Carolinians are displaying their distaste for the right-wing Christian fundamentalism so prevalent here (think «Bob Jones University,» which, by the way, has a small but valuable collection of ancient Orthodox icons). What is happening from the Carolina low-country to Spartanburg and Greenville is spreading across the nation. It appears to be more of a sociological and philosophical movement than a genuinely (anti-)religious one. Whatever, it's gaining ground. And the only thing that will lessen its impact is if its adherents become overly silly, like the U.S.C. student group of «Pastafarians,» devotees of «the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.» Their aim, of course, is to poke fun at what they consider to be the naïve convictions of everyone from Evangelicals to defenders of Intelligent Design. But their message tends to drown in farce.

I have to admit I feel a certain sympathy with and for these people. What they are rejecting almost always has nothing to do with God as he is known and experienced in the worship and overall life of the Orthodox Church. Members of other Christian confessions can surely say the same, insofar as they have retained and continue to cherish a vision of God and his work in the world that derives from Scripture and other components of Holy Tradition. The God the atheists despise, scorn and spurn is one that (as J.B. Phillips pointed out years ago) is «too small.» He, she or it is either a «god of the gaps,» whose stature decreases with each scientific explanation of heretofore unfathomable phenomena; or a benign and feckless, cosmic Santa; or — worst of all — a demonic divinity of wrath and impulsive judgment, what people sadly and erroneously think of as «the God of the Old Testament.»

Sunday morning in this part of the world is surfeited with pop-evangelists, banging Bibles and decrying other people's sins in very loud voices. They do so not only from pulpits, but more effectively and more annoyingly from radios and TVs. Try to get a five-minute synopsis of the news as you drive to church, and you're harangued by «Dr.» so and so, «noted Biblical scholar,» who never got past the ninth grade yet rakes in a fortune in «love money» each year from his gullible listeners. We also have our «mega-churches,» which thrive by entertaining their casually clad Sunday morning «worshippers» with bad music and a theology aptly described by H. Rich-

ard Niebuhr as based on «a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross» (The Kingdom of God in America). Then there are the proponents of a «gospel of prosperity,» who preach a God of the Market who leads men-with-portfolio into a kingdom without taxes, through the ministrations of a Christ without a conscience.

If these are the «gods» of the popular imagination, then, like Socrates, lots of us Orthodox are atheists too.

To be frank, we Orthodox in this country are in rather a mess. Each of our jurisdictions is plagued by one thing or another, from financial mismanagement to sexual impropriety, and from corrupted ecclesiologies to clericalism and religiosity. Our demons are legion. Yet those demons situate themselves mostly on the level of administration, from the parish to the national Church(es). Stronger than any of these is the extraordinary treasure of Orthodox theology and liturgical life, which, if we allow it to, structures and sanctifies both our time and our space, from day to day and throughout the year. Despite the personal sinfulness we are so painfully aware of, that makes of our life a constant struggle and genuine ascetic discipline, we have been granted a knowledge of God that renders moot any sort of atheism, any tortured doubt about the «existence of God» or his presence and purpose within the world — within our world.

Certainly we pass through moments of doubt and inner rebellion against the Object of our faith. Yet most of the time that dark experience dissipates when we spend a few minutes in quiet prayer, or stand for hours in a magnificent liturgical service, or give away a child through the wondrous sacrament of marriage, or sing funeral hymns by the open casket of someone we love. It dissipates when we extend a genuinely compassionate hand to those in need, whether that need be material or spiritual. It dissipates, too, when we look into the face of another person, possibly the anonymous soul who stands next to us most



Sundays at the Divine Liturgy, and see, for the first time, the beauty and depth of someone who lives in and for God.

If I am not at least a passive atheist, it's not because my faith is particularly strong (it's not), or because my commitment to charitable causes is what it should be (it's not, either), or because of the fact that I've studied a little theology. It's because I've been blessed to see holiness — authentic divine beauty — in the faces of other people. It's because their life was such a powerful witness to the reality of the God of boundless love and compassion, that my perverse inner movements toward «atheism» slid into oblivion.

If today's atheists, made such by fad or by conviction, could know and experience the God all of us have the capacity to know, they would fall on their knees and shed tears of joy. This is not romantic wishful thinking. It's not evangelical exuberance. It's a simple fact, based on a reality so well expressed one time by a sister in a Catholic monastic commu-

nity: «God,» she said, out of the well-spring of her own knowledge and experience, «has placed in the inner depths of every person an insatiable longing for himself!»

The God who fulfills that longing is the God who has brought all of us into being, who has sacrificed himself for us out of his inexhaustible love, and who continues to embrace us and to lead us into an eternal and glorious communion with himself. He is the God who, as those license plates insist, «loves us!» From the depths of his heart he strives to bless and to save all of us, without exception. All of us, and perhaps especially those who — because of painful experiences with clergy, or because of hypocrisy on the part of Christians they knew, or because of the heavyhandedness of those who would browbeat them into a fictitious conversion experience — profess themselves to be materialists, secularists, pastafarians or atheists.

Written by the Very Rev. John Breck



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