

IS «Orthodox Faith» MANIPULATING OUR MINDS?

Interview with Boris Kriger, the Editor of «Orthodox Faith» with comments by Father John Jillions, Associate Professor at Saint Paul University's Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, a former Dean of the OCA Ottawa Cathedral.

Nadezhda Lyakh: Before asking my questions, I will try to give you an idea of my faith, my philosophy and the reasons I believe in it. You may possibly find many of my thoughts naive, but I assure you that all of them are absolutely sincere. I am a skeptic about religion. While I do not reject any information related to the faith and God, I am not able to place faith in anything blindly, without a thought. I admit that at the current stage, the assumption of the existence of God is the most probable and it most easily explains the origin of the Universe and everything in general. My views were affected by Boris Kriger's book «The Uncertain Universe», this newspaper, and, of course, a number of other factors. But when it comes to the Bible and faith in Jesus Christ (which is a more specific belief)—I have doubts. Who is the author of the Bible or the Gospels? Of course I know: the Scripture is considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. If so, why is it full of contradictions? (I do not mention the contradictions between the Old and New Testaments deliberately—these are obvious and explainable.) Yet even the Gospels contain a number of evident contradictions. I have one explanation for myself: this good and clever book was actually written by humans—and for humans. Not by God or the Holy Spirit. And while I fully agree with one part of such contradictory propositions, I can never agree with the other. (By the way, it is mostly the case with the «Orthodox Faith» newspaper—if you excuse my plainness! I think «Orthodox Faith» newspaper manipulates the readers' minds...)

Boris Kriger: People often think that divinely inspired books are no different from any other books and can be judged as a creation of a human mind. In many cases, critics use the quotations out of their context, have little knowledge of primary sources and are totally unfamiliar with the Holy Fathers' interpretations. This approach leads to creating one's own conception of the Holy Scripture that is far from the actual one. It is this false conception a person is fighting with, considering him—or herself to be successful in analyzing, criticizing and even interpreting, in his or her own way, the God-inspired texts.

It is obvious that this self-deception leads the person to make a self-satisfied conclusion that something is wrong with the Old and New Testaments and they contain so-called contradictions. This releases the person from having to follow them. Since these books are faulty, they are not divinely inspired.

In order to avoid this unfortunate aberration, one should follow the texts of these very books. We should start learning and even reading the Holy Scripture in a humble way and abandon the «judge» position. The Gospel according to St. Matthew says: «Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you.» Do you like to be wrongfully judged? Or blamed for what you have not done or said? Or misunderstood? Do you like people making premature conclusions ignoring your actual words and feelings? Or taking



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your phrases out of context, making fun of them, distorting them, and successfully arguing against something that you did not say at all? Just imagine you were treated like this. A nightmare, isn't it? Is there any person, especially a prideful one, who would endure such derision? And it is pride that makes us judge people and things. The Gospel teaches us to treat others like we want to be treated. So how can we treat the Gospel itself like this? Saint Ignatius Bryanchaninov wrote about reading the Gospel: «God has opened His will to a tiny fleck of dust that is a human! You are holding the book that contains this great and all-holy will. And you may accept or reject the will of your Creator and Savior, just as you like. Your salvation or your death is in your hands: so decide how careful and wise you should be. Do not play with your eternal destiny!»

Thus, you should get rid of this guise of a judge prior to reading. Address God with your prayer so that He gives you the sense of His Word. Be humble and thoughtful when reading the holy texts, refer to their interpretations from the Holy Fathers—and you will not find any contradictions in them. Moreover, they will put us on the right path that will save us both in our earthly and future live. Any other approaches are mere sacrilege. Venerable Barsanuphius the Great taught: «Do not try to interpret the Scripture yourself, for this is a serious danger for those who are weak in their faith. It is insane to talk about the Scriptures from one's own point of view.»

Fr. John Jillions. First of all, I must say that Boris Kriger and his team have done an amazing and inspiring job with this newspaper in its various languages. His energy level is staggering, and surely grace must uphold him through the many trials and tribulations that such an effort represents. How many people must have been reached in these months! So my first comment is «Thank God.»

I think this is great that Boris is ready to engage with even critical questioners like Nadezhda. But I am very conscious that there are different styles of argument and this one won't work with everyone. In general there are different approaches and styles of Orthodox Christianity and the state of our Orthodox world rightly proves that no one size fits all. I don't differ with Boris on many substantive issues, but there are questions about the kind of Orthodoxy being presented. There are many good points in this interview, but there is a tendency to be too categorical and authoritarian, reflecting none of the freedom of debate and questioning that took place within the Church or even within the New Testament, let alone within contemporary Orthodoxy. «Orthodox Faith» may not be «manipulating our minds» but sometimes it does present a rather heavy-hand-

ed, one-sided picture of Orthodoxy.

Questions are legitimate. Questions are at the heart of scripture. The Psalms are full of questions, most famously Psalm 22, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?». The Theotokos had questions, and «pondered these things in her heart.» St Thomas had questions, and we lift them up on the very day of Pascha, showing that we are rooted in an evidence-based faith, not blind faith.

Boris Kriger: I completely agree with Fr. John, that some questions are legitimate. So, what are these contra-

dictions you are talking about?

Nadezhda Lyakh: What contradictions does the Bible contain? I am sure you have noted them yourself! «Honour your parents...» (Well of course, it could not have been otherwise!) But then: «Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.» I do not believe Jesus Christ could have said or preached anything like that. I believe in the Merciful God.

Boris Kriger: According to the first commandment, God is the most important aspect of our lives. The second commandment supports this, forbidding us from creating idols. It is clear that the fifth commandment teaches us to honour our parents; however, should a conflict arise and the parents be in our way to God, not letting us reach Him—God should take precedence. For He gave us life, love, the family... He can let us lose all our beloved ones. How silly, naive and ridiculous it is to idolize a creature of God, while moving God Himself to the background of one's conscience and memory. This is what Jesus meant. Moreover, there is no way He could have said anything else about it. Just imagine a phrase like «Love thy mother more than God!» This way everything would have collapsed, as a mother, no matter how precious she is, is nothing but a creature of God. A mother may be mistaken, while God can never be.

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk wrote: «God is our highest benefactor. All kinds of welfare belonging to the person have been given by God.» Those who are weak in their faith separate themselves from God, as if God were a kind of a neighbour, as if something could occur without His knowledge. Any conflicts that we have with our parents, children, brothers or sisters are allowed by God in order to foster our souls, so that we learn to be humble and placid, while preserving our faith and love for God. God should always remain the foremost; He should be the essence of our lives. What are the other «contradictions» you have found in the Bible?

Nadezhda Lyakh: Here is one more example. It is about the punishment... in the fourth generation or so. Is this God's mercy?! Or is it nothing but one of the Church's manipulations? «Behave this way—and you will be happy. But if your deeds are wrong—**not only will you be punished, but all of your descendants up to the**

