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THE LOOKING GLASS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEENAGE YEARS

Three candid narratives by young
Muscovites on their recent youth.

Sergei, 20

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately enough, I cannot tell you an exciting story, like that of a repentant drug addict. Mine is simple and quite ordinary. As long as I can remember, I have always believed in God. The idea that some people needed logical or any other proofs of His existence seemed strange and absurd, it has always been obvious to me.

I first learned about the gospels when I was nine, honestly speaking, from a Baptist comic book. I owned one and liked it very much. It was about the life of the Savior. Around that time my father became Orthodox himself, and read the Bible to my sister and me every night before we fell asleep. He explained to us how he understood this or that paragraph and what the Holy Fathers said about it. I didn't acquire any definite Christian knowledge from either the Baptist booklet or our family readings, I just enjoyed them. Later, I remember my sister and me asking, and later even demanding, that our parents take us to be baptized, which they finally did, in 1995.

Only one of my early attempts to live like a Christian remains with me from those times. I had a special set of toys for children of my age then. They were my treasure, I played with them all the time. Once, my cousin came to visit. He saw the toys and exclaimed: "Oh aren't they first-rate! Could you give them to me? Please!" Suddenly, I remembered the Lord's words: "Anyone who asks something of you, give him." And I said: "Yes, you are welcome to have them." I was very, very sorry to give them away, but I wanted to keep the commandment.

Then for some years everything connected with the faith was forgotten. I went to church sometimes with my father, but it was harder for me. My heart, quite naturally, was purer and more open at 9 than at 13, when it became a problem to perceive spiritual subjects.

So, by the time teenage changes began for me, I hadn't been to church, prayed or fasted for a long time. I had some thoughts, though, of this being wrong. Getting into trouble now and again, I prayed to God, promising to become a proper Christian if He would help me. That is, I understood that a believer wasn't just a person who believes in God but one who lives according to his faith. Every time, the help I asked for happened (and miracles did happen; I even got used to it) I thanked God, feeling quite happy, or maybe even forgot to thank Him, and continued to live like before.

At 14, I gradually became aware of myself as a personality and difficulties began to afflict me. Once I quarreled with my friends, rather badly. They all turned away from me and I found myself alone. I was in real, almost agonizing grief, having no one to share it with. One wouldn't tell such things to his parents. I was overwhelmed by loneliness; it pressed me down as if it would crush me.

Just then, the church closest to where we lived started a Sunday school, so my mother and sister went there to study, and so did I, out of loneliness. I don't remember a single word, despite the fact that I attended those classes for a year and a half. It simply felt good to be there. Sometimes, wanting consolation, I stayed for the service after class.

The problem with my friends was finally resolved. They came back to me, but I continued to go to church, and not only on Saturday night but also to liturgy on Sunday. I remember Great Lent that year well, because it was a turning point. Someone told me that I should receive Holy Communion but I didn't understand what it meant, "to partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ." On Lazarus Saturday I put on my best clothes and went to Communion.

Later that day I had to do a lot of work at home, cleaning the flat for Pascha. My uncle came to see us and asked: "How are you today, Seryozha?" I answered rather rudely: "Working, that's how I am." And he said: "You've just taken Communion so you need to be very careful as to what you do and say today, dear." Suddenly I felt as if struck by lightning. In an instant I clearly saw that I had partaken of something I had never experienced before. My uncle's words caused me to understand that I had met with sanctity and was unworthy of it. My rudeness, which I had not noticed before, now stood out clearly in front of me. Repentance? Yes, it was repentance but also an acute sense of having come face to face with God.

From then I went to church more often and more consciously. My confessions became serious and thorough. After six months I was asked to serve in the altar which I had thought of as the least accessible place for someone like myself. I prepared myself carefully by going to confession and Holy Communion, feeling as if I were nearly a monk. I gave up as sinful all my worldly books, music, watching TV, gave away all my cassettes. Instead I began to teach everyone around me how to live, or rather, how not to live. I never spoke about living with God, but about not doing wrong. I thought of Christian life as self-denial rather than as something positive. Going out to have fun was now below my dignity. I was particularly strict with my family.

They didn't dare even think of switching on the TV. My sister grudgingly obeyed and we even had conflicts. I didn't see it was wrong on my part, although there was an indefinite feeling of something being not quite right. I didn't have a priest I could really talk to, which of course wasn't good. I needed someone who would have kept me from wandering off in such an odd direction.

Now, looking back, I see that being so strict in my case had a side effect: I isolated myself from other people. For example, I let everybody know about my fasting, instead of quietly keeping it to myself. I also had a very strict attitude to morning and evening prayers. I thought it was sacred, taboo, to change even one letter or to add a word of my own. Later, at 16, I began to relent – not that my zeal was wearing off, but temptations of various kinds made me more humble and easier to deal with.

I should have entered a seminary after school but I wasn't settled about it. I even invented ten reasons why I didn't want to be a priest, for example, "I don't like praying for long periods," "I wouldn't feel right about serving at people's homes," or "I cannot imagine myself listening to confessions." So I decided to enter a medical institute and become a doctor. I studied half a year to pass the entrance exams, until suddenly all my ten "cons" against the priesthood turned into "pros." I don't remember exactly how it happened, just that I went for practical advice to a priest who had himself previously been a doctor. He said: "So, since you are to enter a medical institute, I'll tell you about the exams." And he did.

He didn't say a word about being a priest, but when I returned home, I found the decision already in my mind, as if it had been an apple ripening on a tree above my head and at some point just fell into my hands. Everything changed suddenly. My parents didn't believe when I first told them, but as time went on, they became convinced that I was serious. Some of my friends said, "Your parents must have greatly influenced your choice." No, my parents never even suggested that I go to church. On the contrary, it was usually me who said, "Let's go." Their point was to let me decide for myself. Being church-goers themselves, they didn't drag me to church, urge me to pray, or even talk about the faith at home. It was all up to me. And I'm grateful for this because otherwise I wouldn't be in church now. They wanted me to act out of my own will, to get the treasure of my own experience. They understood how much greater the value of experience was than that of prompted actions. I know it wasn't indifference or heartlessness on

their part, and I was always grateful that even in hard times, they didn't try to tell me, "Go to church."

I would like to say to other young people that if we see that everything around us is shallow, the sooner we find what is true, deep, and real, the better. The spiritual question "Where do I belong?" should be answered as soon as possible when you are young. I'm convinced that if you are truly looking for an answer, you will find what you want. If you are sincere in your search for the meaning of life, the answer will come. God attends to every human heart, He stands waiting and wants to give faith to everyone. But He cannot do so without our asking because He never violates our free will.

If life seems empty and one cannot see meaning even in God, it may be because faith has to grow in your heart. You need to go where the faith is, that is, to church, to try and take part in what the Church offers. There are instructors, the priests, and if you aren't inspired by one, you can go to another. As our Moscow writer, Deacon Andrei Kurayev, reminds us, even Winnie-the-Pooh said that if you want muse you must go to the place where muse comes. To acquire faith one needs to go where faith is.

You ask what stood in the way of spiritual life in my teenage years. Mainly that I lacked human care in church. How badly I wanted a priest to take care of me, to talk to me, to be kind and considerate, to reach out to me. Not just say "do this, don't do that," as many confessors do, but to explain things, to discuss them with me. It didn't have to be emotional, what I wanted was understanding and a compassionate attitude. When a teenager comes to believe in God and His Church, he really needs a loving father – not only God, but also a priest to run out to meet him, like the prodigal son was met by his father. If anyone needs special attention in church, it is the teenager. He is expecting this attention, longing for it, but he can never ask for it. Having life experiences and many trials behind him, an adult can drive away the shyness, but the teenager is still afraid of many things. If he is treated lovingly and with care he will stay in the Church.

Certainly, the priest should be aware of the realities of teenage life, their complicated world, but even the simplest, loving priest can find the way to a teenager's heart. This is what I wanted at that age but of course it is up to the adults if they can give it or not.

Also, I very much needed a church alternative to what I had left in the world: good company, having fun, parties, trips, things to do together, but activities that suit the age. For example, I'm not sure it's a good idea to

send a 15-year old girl to help in an old folk's home.

As I see now, a boy must be brought up with the idea of responsibility for the life of his future family. This will allow him to live a happy life. It is the manliest of all the manly ideals.

I am married now to an Orthodox girl, and this autumn, God willing, I will be ordained as a deacon. I ask your readers to pray that God's will be done for me.

Victor, 23

In our family mother was baptized first and then my sister and me. I was 11 and from that time mother brought us up Orthodox. Little by little, I made my first steps in the faith. I didn't quite understand why I should go to long services, but enjoyed the atmosphere there, the sweet smell of incense, the singing, the many other children; it was a real community. This romantic perception is still with me; it hasn't faded away. Coming to church for an early service, I stand contemplating the thin sunbeams flowing through the narrow windows of the cupola and just feel at peace in those quiet moments.

At the age of 14 or 15, I went through some problems wishing to be independent but the problems were more or less mild, perhaps because by that time I knew many church people. There was a monastery I went to where I worked in obedience to the abbot, a really wonderful man. The brethren were friendly and prayerful. Their spirit, the way they saw the world, appealed to me and helped me look at myself with a greater awareness than most boys of my age. The monks never forced me to do anything against my will. My personality developed and unfolded there. We were more like friends; everything I did was voluntary. Helping them in their construction work was new and exciting and I learned a lot.

Some boys at school knew I was Orthodox and laughed at me a little, others respected me for my faith but had no real interest in it. They looked at me objectively, at the person I was, and didn't care about my beliefs. There were no problems or religious argument. When they swore, drank and smoked in my presence, I took a neutral position and never interfered. They, in turn, didn't reproach me for being different because they understood it as a healthier way of life, not more.

Then there was mother's care for my soul. Mother is very logical and

democratic and has a rational approach to everything. If she asked me to do something she always explained why. Her requests were well-grounded, and I remember accepting her reasons even as a teenager. Even when I didn't want to go to church, I went so that she would feel my moral support, that she would be happy, and to avoid hurting her feelings, because I saw her very serious attitude to spiritual life.

Church life with fasting, praying and long services was very hard the first few years and I confess it is rather hard even now. We read our morning and evening prayers together, my mother, sister, and myself. Mother was trying to lay a foundation for our future independent spiritual life, and it worked out as she planned, but how hard it was for me as a teenager. It seemed as if my body and mind were bound by laziness. I knew all the prayers by heart, but it was boring to say them over and over again without adding or altering anything. I couldn't see why it had to be the same every time. Later, however, it began to get lighter. I read books on prayer with explanations of the words and then saying the prayer rule even seemed interesting. Fasting was less of a problem because mother didn't introduce it all at once. She made it stricter every year and finally we arrived at fasting by the church canon without even fish during Great Lent. The fact is, whether we wanted it or not, she just stopped cooking non-fasting food and being unable to cook for myself, I had to eat what she gave us.

At 16, I began reading Orthodox books. *The Lives of Saints* by St. Dimitry of Rostov attracted me, though their style is quite peculiar, like fairy tales. What amazed me was the saints' heroic standing in the faith and I wondered if anything of the kind was possible in our own times. I liked the heroic aspect. I read the Holy Fathers as well, feeling a special spiritual closeness to St. Theophan the Recluse, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, and St. Ignaty Bryanchaninov. St. Ignaty has interesting writings on the subject of death, about paradise and hell and life after death, although, of course, these things can hardly be studied by rational means. I read other sources too. For example, I appreciated writings by the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. Although not all of his ideas are Orthodox, those about hell and the state of the soul seemed quite sound. All of this gave me food for thought. I read literary classics at that period too, nearly all of Dostoyevsky and many of our other Russian writers.

On the other hand, I was also fond of science fiction, about beings from other planets with a higher level of development than ours on earth. I thought that perhaps such beings had also been created by God but we just didn't know

anything about them. I imagined all the conscious living things in the Universe as one big family in which some members hadn't yet met one another.

The fact that the Orthodox do not accept this possibility didn't make me feel that the thoughts were sinful. I told myself that the Bible spoke about the creation of the earth and heaven. Heaven is the angelic world, but in Russian the word also means "the heavens," our physical sky, which we still know rather little about. I remembered that Christ came to save the entire Universe, whoever might live in it. I tried to talk about this to different priests but they ignored or avoided the subject, saying that I should think of more practical things because these were of no use for the salvation of one's soul. As I grew older the interest for science fiction weakened and disappeared, and I turned my attention to other things.

If you ask me what age seems better and easier to me, the teens or the twenties, it is by all means the latter. You are free, independent and can live as you like. I'm 23 now. I study foreign and ancient languages at a linguistic institute: English, French, Arabic, classical Greek, and Latin. When I have time I plan to learn Coptic, Syrian, and Babylonian. I will probably work as a patristic translator, to study, translate and edit works by the holy fathers of different nationalities.

Katya, 24

I was brought up Orthodox by my father who always gives himself over to his new ideas completely, just plunging into them with all his might. This is how he tried to explain Orthodoxy to us, his family, but if explanations didn't work, he just made us live according to his newly-acquired faith. I was 11 or 12 at this time, and he forced once, twice, a dozen times, and then I began to see that my soul really needed spiritual life. After church services you fly out in quite a different state, don't you? "With wings on your back," as people say. So, I became interested in Orthodoxy and began to read. Books are very important, but they have to be good ones: the Lives of Saints, writings by the Holy Fathers. There was a book called "Father Arseny," about a priest who witnessed all the trials of 20th-century Russia, suffered with his people, and lit the warm light of faith in many hearts. This was an exciting, lively narrative. The life of St. Seraphim of Sarov also left a deep impression. The saints seem to be close to you, you feel drawn to them.

As for the fasts, services, and praying, there has never been any problem here at all for me. Fasting was the easiest. Reading long canons when you are 11, 12, 13, 14, and don't understand them well was a bit harder. Even now, reading them before Communion, I discover something new each time. Father used to give me books to read and that helped.

Even as a young teenager, I noticed what kinds of people came to church. There are babushkas who know that the Lord can take them any time, and people in need and in trouble, and I'm glad they have found their way to church. This is normal and good, but I especially noticed other kinds of people: exquisitely dressed well-to-do women and successful businessmen. I would think to myself, "They have excellent jobs, families, healthy children, they have whatever they want in the world and no obvious reason to turn to God, but there is something that brings them to church." From this I understood that it wasn't true as some say, that religion exists just to console simple people.

My spiritual father also influenced me immensely. We happened to buy a piece of land near a half-ruined village church and built a dacha on it. Father helped restore the church, so we became good friends with its priest and went to services and confession there. He became my spiritual father. He had worked in film-making and was a well-educated man with good knowledge of the world and life. He could talk about anything. We had much in common, though I was only 13 then.

But he did too much of a good thing, I'm sorry to say. I know this for sure. I understand now that my life was miserable at that time because I always felt morbidly guilty. Whether I took a step, uttered a word, looked at something that attracted my teenage mind, or did almost anything at all, I felt as if I'd committed a sin. It was unbearable and I think that if he hadn't suggested such an attitude to me I would have been much happier and not any less Orthodox. I saw sin in trifles that aren't even worth noticing, and I regret losing the best of my teen years over this.

Also, I was terrified of the idea of death. I understood that we won't live forever and that life is given to us for a purpose, but hearing every day of the end of the world, of the persecutions, torture, and hunger awaiting every Orthodox Christian at the end times when evil powers take over the earth, made me cry from fear, real tears. I was only 15, but I didn't want to make any plans for the future. If we were all to die soon, how could I think of having children some day? It was all too awful.

There were other things not allowed, like reading Shakespeare, for example or opera, or plays. My spiritual father said: “Your mind is still childish, you don’t yet grasp the true meaning underlying all those works of art, music and literature. It will harm your soul. You will form a wrong idea of life.” I understand now that he was trying to protect me, that he knew the world and worldly ideas, but it was overdone.

So coming to confession every Sunday, I spoke of all these petty things, feeling absolutely bound up inside. My brother even stopped going to church after looking at all this from his own point of view. He does go now, getting up early himself without anyone waking him, but he is very independent in choosing his friends, occupations, and way of life.

I think we should tell our children and teenagers, “God looks at you, you have a guardian angel protecting you. If you do wrong it will come back to you.” I like the idea that God does not punish people for their sins, but that the wrong they do itself causes them suffering later. Just as we say, “Don’t step there, or you will fall down and hurt yourself,” there is cause and effect in the spiritual world.

As for my friends and classmates, with close friends I wanted to share my inner life, to give him or her a spiritual book to read. My friends saw that I was a normal girl, popular in our neighborhood, a teenager like any other, but at some point on Saturday afternoon I would have to say: “I must go because I need to be in church tonight.” That made my friends think: “She is just like us and yet she knows something we don’t know. There must be something in church that attracts her. What is it?” It was like me wondering about those well-dressed women in church.

When my friends made blasphemous jokes I felt ashamed even to have been there to overhear them. I would think, “It’s silly to stand up now and leave, but on the other hand, the person who hears is somehow taking part.” So sometimes I even tried to stop the jokes because it was unbearable to feel like a traitor, a Judas, but I always took care that I didn’t do it with superiority or arrogance.

The best way, I think, is just to ignore such talk. If the other person was psychologically stronger than me, and I felt pressured in my words and thoughts, I preferred to avoid such people altogether. Also, have you noticed that if you make a stupid joke and the person you are talking to doesn’t say anything, that there is an awkward silence and it makes you aware that you’ve blurted out something wrong? If you stay silent after a blasphemous

joke it will have the same reaction, although, in some situations you need to be firm and make the person understand he has done wrong.

As I said, though, these were very difficult years. Now, my father says about his own behavior then, “I was a fool, I made many mistakes, and deprived you, my children, of your childhood. I over-exaggerated the role of trifles and missed the things that really needed to be emphasized.” He really was a tyrant. I remember asking him, “How are you going to enter paradise with such an attitude to us?” He would come home from church after talking to priests, pale with anger, his face convulsed with aversion if he saw the TV set switched on, or music playing, or if we were wearing something he didn’t approve of, or there were some non-Orthodox neighbors in our flat. He showed his dissatisfaction in all the nonverbal ways you could think of. He also saw divine signs everywhere in daily life. “This is not by chance,” he said several times a day. Sadly, he gave himself over to those who guided him spiritually without thinking, as if he had decided: “Take and mold me into anything you choose.”

When I was 16 or 17 I began to understand this was wrong and asked him: “What example are you setting us of a kind, virtuous Christian life? Where is your love for your neighbor?” He saw what I meant, but pretended he didn’t. I’m married now and I live with my husband, but mother says that every morning on coming to breakfast my father begs everyone at home: “Please, please forgive me. I did many things wrong.” What helped me at that time was that my mother was full of common sense. She saw him objectively and knew that he was passing through a stage in his spiritual life, that it would be much better afterwards, and she always told me so. Even in those difficult years, I could discuss his attitude with her and that was just precious.

Perhaps I wasn’t a typical teenager. I did argue with my parents and showed dissatisfaction, but I never, even under the hardest pressure, threatened to leave home, to go to live in the street, or anything like that. Only once I said: “I’m so tired of all this, I’ll go live with babushka.” Somehow I was always sober-minded.

As I see now, I didn’t really understand that priests were human beings as well, and could have a personal motive in doing or saying something. It is not nice to see such things as a teenager. Some priests try to convince you that their understanding of life is the only correct one, and they try to make everyone around them see life in the same way, but I think that only God really knows a human soul. I told myself at those times that the One I come to church to worship is God Himself.

A wonderful Greek priest once said: “Just turn to God and take care what you do. You needn’t collect demons in cups.” There is a deep meaning for me in these words. Of course we need spiritual fathers who we can come to if we face a problem, but I hate booklets and discussions like, “Do Christians Need Sports?” Why on earth? Don’t we need to be healthy and strong? Or, “Do Orthodox Girls Need Fashions?” Do you remember how exquisite and dignified our empresses looked, taking care of the smallest details of their dress? Even Grand Duchess Elisabeth Feodorovna, who is a saint, had a Paris designer make the pattern of her monastery’s habit. Overly pious people say: “A girl must think only of serious and spiritual things.” But what wrong is there in her buying herself a new skirt? Of wanting to look nice? All of these “must nots” are so petty, so absolutely unnecessary, like trash in your mind.

I’ve seen families suffer because of these attitudes. If the wife doesn’t want to look nice because she is being “Orthodox,” the husband will often look in a wrong direction whether he wants to or not. Of course there is love, and that is the most important factor, but we are still human, so why put temptations in each other’s way, if we can avoid it? I’ve seen people bring “holiness” to the point of absurdity.

Going back to the pressure I experienced from my father and my spiritual father, you ask why it didn’t turn me away from the Church. Well, I knew God was not to blame for the adults’ mistakes. I always distinguished between people and God.

But let me also talk about what inspired me as a teenager. Although he was mistaken in some ways, my spiritual father always spoke vividly, giving examples to illustrate everything, and much of what he said was simply good advice. Now when I’m about to make a choice those examples help me. They come up when needed. When I was young, I was blind and just listened wide-eyed to all that was said to me, answering, “Yes, yes, yes.” Later, I learned to analyze.

What I am very grateful to my father and spiritual father for is that they tried so hard to show me the way, and particularly for instilling in me the idea of purity. By the age of 14, I already knew and understood that a girl (a boy too) should keep themselves pure for their future husband or wife. This is something I never doubted. If your fiancé doesn’t want to wait until after the wedding, ask yourself if you really need such a person. I didn’t announce this position publicly, of course, I just knew what I wanted and what I didn’t want in my life. A priest once said: “If you ask God to give you

your other half, He will not leave the prayer unanswered, but if you decide to solve your problem as the world does, He will step back and let you live as you have chosen.” I have always known that one must stick to the Ten Commandments. I’ve always drawn the line between doing really wrong and all the rest of the temptations, mistakes, concessions, and compromise.

What remains with me after all these years in church, after all the mistakes, the re-evaluations, after seeing many “truths” blow up like soap bubbles? Perhaps it’s the Orthodox notion of shame and conscience. It turned out to be a foundation for me, after all. One must listen to one’s conscience, this is for sure.

I am 24 years old and married now, and I can only say that there are joys and problems in being both 14 and 24, but they are of a different kind. The joys and the sorrows change, and it is always both interesting and difficult.

For example the problem of spiritual justice is still very acute for me. There are so many unjust situations in the world. From my own experience, I did my best to get married in a Christian way, have a Church wedding with no physical relations before it, because I didn’t want to be ashamed afterwards. Seven months after my marriage I became pregnant. I was very happy, but in the sixth month I lost the baby with terrible, almost fatal consequences. It was a miracle that I didn’t die. At the same time my mother fell critically ill, and we didn’t know if she would survive, and then my father fell terribly ill as well. At such times you try to believe that trials are sent to you for a purpose, but it seemed so unbearable, that I really began to doubt that this was God’s will. But who knows where such an attitude can lead, and how far you can go along this way?

To be just, I have to say that although I cannot have children, I have a very loving husband. We have been married for four years and when it was finally understood that I would survive, the doctors and nurses told me: “Yours is the best situation possible under these circumstances. We’ve seen so many husbands leave their wives with similar problems.” So in the end, I have always trusted that whatever God does He does for the best. ✚