



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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SURVEY OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

How do you relate to your unbelieving friends and relatives?

Sophia Borisovna, 24, Barnaul, Altai-Siberia

Eight years ago I used to send Orthodox literature to my friends and relatives who were not yet baptized, and I also tried to talk with them about Orthodoxy whenever we were together, but I no longer do this. I see greater changes taking place when I invite them to come for a visit and they spend time with my family. An Orthodox Christian household speaks for itself. Raising children, saying prayers together naturally, everything has its own effect. Most of my friends and relatives are baptized, but not all go to church. They are all well-educated and have moral ideas about life which I would call Christian, but they themselves don't see the need to be Orthodox.

When many of my relatives come for a visit they expect that my husband and I will try to talk to them about Orthodoxy, but we don't. We just try to live our Orthodox Christian family life. Within a day or two, or even a few hours, they often begin to ask questions themselves. There is no need to force the subject.

Some of our non-Orthodox relatives and friends are afraid of the outward parts of the faith – of the long prayers and keeping fasts, for example, but

this is almost always because they have never tried. Last week my uncle came for a visit and he didn't realize that we were fasting because the food I had prepared was nourishing and tasty. In fact, he didn't notice until evening that he hadn't had meat or dairy all day. Many people have these ideas about how hard it is to fast, but if you simply show them rather than talk about it, it is much easier.

I pray for all of them, of course, and trust in God to help with the rest.

Maria Petrovna, 43, Moscow

In my family almost everyone is a non-believer. I am surrounded by unbelievers and I never speak to them about the faith, although I used to very much in the past. Now, I have come to think that they don't yet have whatever is necessary to see the spiritual world. For them to see divine reality would be equal to creating spiritual eyes, the eyes that they don't have, and I cannot create even a small physical eye. Only God can do this. Also, to testify by my life to God's truth, I would have to be perfect. Since I am not, I only try to keep myself from being proud that I am a Christian. I try not to think that I have something that I must transfer to them, to enlighten and educate them. Indeed, I believe that such thinking is perilous for my soul. It is up to God to change them. I have tried to set my mind upon a more modest task – to learn from them whatever good characteristics they have.

The other thing is that it is too shallow an idea to divide people into believers and non-believers. When I live side-by-side with non-believers, I don't see myself as an absolutely believing person. I think that we are just at different stages of disbelief. My stage is a lighter one, theirs is a graver one. It is very important not to think that I know more, and am more advanced than non-Christians. They feel it and become furious, and they are probably right.

There is the example of my grandmother, who was perfectly sound in mind. She was a strict materialist, but only during the daytime. At night, she rose from her bed, went to the door of the flat, opened the door, and stood there talking to someone for two hours. She thought that we didn't notice. When I asked her, "Granny, what are you doing there?" she said, "I am airing the flat." We never saw anyone – they were visible only to her, and she consciously talked to them – whether they were good or evil we

don't know, but they were from the unseen plane. My point is that many atheists and materialists have quite queer unmaterialistic ways and habits. I know this for sure.

My mother was a well-known professor of biochemistry. She worked all of her long life and was a self-made woman. She thought that there was a God, but in general she was not in favor of the Church, although a few times I managed to persuade her to receive the sacraments. She worked hard earning money that she never spent, trying to save it for our future. She finally fell badly ill at the age of 78. The doctors said that she wouldn't live for more than a month. In the four years that followed we took her for chemotherapy twelve different times. It was torturous for all of us. She would almost die, and then come back to life, over and over again. I felt as if I were dying and coming back to life too. A few days before she actually died, she said, "Masha, I have lived a life that hasn't been my life. I should have lived a different life." I had an impression then that the four years of suffering had been allowed just to let her see this and say those words. In a few days she died.

Long before she died, and even on the day of her death, she was also in communication with some awful beings, invisible to me. They tormented her, she said. After she died, I felt so bad. I cried and cried all the time, and a heaviness pressed upon my soul. By this heaviness, I knew that these awful beings continued to torment her in the other world.

Then it turned out that she had saved her entire life and left my daughter and me ten thousand dollars. For us this was an unimaginable fortune. We could live on it for years. The money was at her sister's, and mother had never told us anything about it. Sometime after my aunt told us about it, her flat was robbed and the money disappeared. I went to my mother's grave in tears, and said, "Mama, do you see? The result of your life has been destroyed. You worked for us but we haven't received your money and never will. Does it mean that you lived in vain?" I felt desperate, but then suddenly, everything changed. I felt very light. It was so unexpected. At that moment I knew that the awful beings had stopped tormenting my mother's soul, five months after her death. The false result of her life, the money, no longer existed for us, and probably God had accepted the true desire of her life: me, a daughter who loves her and tries to pray for her. I understood that my mother had at last received the knowledge of divine things, not in this world, but in the next. It was God Himself who gave her this knowledge.

How could I have influenced her to come to God during her life, if such trials and sufferings were required to change her soul? These things are very deep, and it is not up to me to change another person's soul. Of course, I pray for them all.

My husband is the grandson of a priest. His father is a believer, although he drinks a lot and everyone tries to correct him. He drinks and repents, and then drinks and repents again. He is now over 80. His son, my husband, is orderly and normal, but his soul is as if sealed shut. I feel that he has no spiritual eyes. Other non-Christians often think, "Well, maybe there is something there (meaning God and the spiritual world) but my husband is completely devoid of any mystical feeling and blasphemes with incredible ease. I never talk to him about the faith now. If he does something terrible I just say, "That was very indecent," and that is all. I think that his soul is simply blind and that it is up to God to open his soul's eyes someday. It will probably be through other people and not through me, if it is His holy will to do it. Still, I see God's hand over him because, despite all this, he often comes out of bad situations by a kind of miracle, as if his grandfather, who was a priest, is praying for him.

As for my twenty-year-old daughter, I took her to church every week as a child and a teenager. Now she doesn't want to go. She says, "I don't feel anything in church, it is no use. I just watch the people around me." But I still take her with me, because I feel that I couldn't cope with the huge problems we have with her health – she is terribly anorexic – if she didn't go to church. I take her there using a mother's authority, because I am the one who has to help solve her many problems. I probably missed the chance to help when she first went into the hospital as a teenager, because my mother was dying in another hospital, and I couldn't care attentively for them both. God will have to touch her in His own way, as well.

On the other hand, there are some souls that are extremely susceptible, for whom one word can be enough to change them. Once, when my daughter was a little girl she was playing in our apartment's yard in a sand pit. Another girl who was also playing there did something very bad. I couldn't help but reproach her. "Don't do that, or God will punish you." She said, "Why will God punish me? How? I don't want Him to!" And I said, "When you play in the sand pit and do something wrong, your mother will spank you. She won't spank any other child, and God also punishes only those whom He considers to be His own children. He doesn't punish those who

are strangers to Him, and who don't want to know Him." This little girl often followed me around afterwards, and was soon baptized and became my goddaughter.

Even with the difficulties in my family, something always happens to make me sure that God knows and watches over us. Just a month ago my little dog had puppies, but the birth was very hard and she became paralyzed and was close to death – she was laying on the floor and couldn't move, hardly breathing. I have some oil from the tomb of Vladika John Maximovitch, whom I love very much. I anointed the dog with the oil, and as soon as I did, she sprang to her feet completely well. If God has such love and care for such a small creature, surely He will also care for the human souls that He has made in His own image.

Although I have all these sorrows, I am at peace, and even more than that I am happy. These trials have given me something very valuable – they have taught me to have peace of mind under any circumstances. I know that God's will is over everyone. He will open a person's eyes when He thinks it is the proper time. I can only pray.

Evgeny Antonievich, 26, Kurozskoye

I became a Christian at 20. My parents are like many people in Russia. They never denied God and the Church, but they could not quite see what one needs them for. They had a hard time with me as a teenager and were always afraid of new troubles, but after being a crazy rock group fan, I had an experience of God. They thought I would replace the photos of rock musicians over my bed with icons and become crazy again, and they watched me apprehensively. Soon they saw that I was becoming what they wanted, more understanding and more responsible. They liked it and began to see God and the Church as the only protection from me. When I once came home drunk, my father said, "God does not allow this." "That's right, Papa," I said, and I never drank again. My behavior became easier for them.

By and by they got used to the church atmosphere in our fl at because there was joy in it, there were new horizons. God made me be tactful with them. I never allowed them to worry that my health might be "ruined" by fasting, as the atheists promise every believer. I tried not to insist that I should fast when I saw that they were worried. I never explained anything

about the faith to them, no dogmas, nothing, because I was sure this would sound strange. I tried to see myself as they saw me, and if I knew that something troubled and annoyed them, I tried to act in a different way. At first they said to me, “Look at the Americans, they believe in God, but they don’t do all these extra things. They are moderate and not at all crazy.” (This is a popular belief in Russia about American faith). “Yes, they go to church sometimes, but in general they lead a normal life.” In order not to frighten my parents, I tried to look like a reasonable American, even at the time when God’s grace first touched me and I was on fire with my faith. Then, they began to go with me on pilgrimages, to church, and even began to pray at home. Now we live in church, and I think that my parents are happy to be there.

Irina A., 61, Moscow

I think that my husband loves God, but indirectly through me. We were already married and had a son when I first thought about God. When I was a little girl I loved my friends immensely, but often they betrayed both me and our friendship. They obviously did not need the great love that I had for them and they were unable to return so much love. Then when I grew up and had boyfriends, the same thing happened again and again. Not a single young man wanted to be loved so much, not to mention to love someone that way himself. But love poured from my heart, and I continued searching for someone who had enough space in his heart for it, and this turned out to be only God. The more I loved Him, the more love I received from Him, and that was exactly what I wanted.

I was married before I came to that realization, but not because I fell in love with my future husband. I was just sorry for him and gave into his begging, and he always felt it – he knew that I was not in love with him. I was young and interesting, I had many admirers, and I shone like a precious stone, while he was always in the shade, waiting for my attention. An unwise priest, God forgive him, told me when I got baptized, “Leave your husband. Why should you live with a pagan?” But the very idea seemed wrong to me. I began to go to church, and eventually discovered that my attitude to my husband was sinful. For me he was a background, a guarantee of stability, but I selfishly ignored his needs for unity, for real family warmth and

devotion. He started to drink and he drank heavily for several years. Then, I began to think about “us,” meaning him and myself, instead of only me. (I already knew then that God does not like the word “I,” but when you say “we” it pleases Him.) I prayed for him hard every day, and tried to make him happier because I truly repented of having neglected him. I also prayed that he stop drinking, and I had molebens served for him almost every day. When I couldn’t go to church I asked my friends to go there and pray for him. He felt the change in my attitude, and – what a miracle – he did stop drinking. There was such one such episode: usually twice a week he went to a banya with a huge quantity of beer, and brought the empty bottles back – he’d drunk them all. Once I came home in the evening and saw no bottles although it had been his regular banya day. “You have not been to the banya?” I asked. “Yes, I have,” he said. “And where are the bottles?” “There are no bottles,” he said. He had stopped drinking.

I understand now that he had gotten what he wanted – a good family life and his wife’s love and attention, and needed no more alcohol. He does not consciously realize that God has to be thanked for it, but subconsciously he feels that my faith brings happiness to him. He lives in the warmth of God’s grace that comes from the Church through me. At first he objected to having icons at home. I was even afraid that, being hot-tempered, he would throw them away, or break them, but then he even began to prompt me to pray and go to church. Once he said, “It is such a great church feast, and you, a Christian, are at home and not in church.” Or when our son served in Chernobyl, after the nuclear disaster, he said, “Please go pray for him – he phoned and said he has an airplane flight today.” My husband has not been baptized, he does not go to church, but he has gotten used to my blessing him when he leaves, and now he asks to be blessed. All of his life he has had fits of anger during which he roars and crushes everything around him. I used to be very cross with him for it, but now I forgive it completely. After each fit (they are rare now) I just show that I am sorry for him, and he apologizes and is very sorry for the anger. I think we have a real family now. Despite our sins and imperfections, we love and care for each other. I pray for our son, but his wife is dissatisfied with him. “He is too good and too honest to do business and earn big money. Imagine, he cannot deceive his partners – with this attitude, you cannot succeed.” I know it is at least partly because of my prayers that he cannot do wrong, but I can’t stop praying for him can I?

Inna Valerievna, 36, Moscow

There aren't any non-believers in our family, but we have some unbelieving friends. The challenge with being friends with them is to avoid sins that are normal behavior for them, but are unacceptable for Orthodox Christians. When I was very young, I thought that if my behaviour was impeccable people would see that it was because of Christ and turn to Him, but soon I realized that impeccable behaviour was impossible for me. More than that, my every sin looked so much uglier in their eyes, because I was a Christian. Then I limited my missionary attempts and tried to conceal the fact that I was Orthodox, so that no one would turn away from Christ after seeing me. But somehow, the fact of my faith always came up. Finally, I gave up completely. I thought "Yes, I am a sinner, and my friends are sinners too. Christ died for all of us, and as to the faith, we are almost equal. Their disbelief is just another kind of sin and that is all." When I looked at the problem from such an angle, something changed for me. When friends consciously or unconsciously tempt me – for example if they offer me a piece of meat during Lent, I no longer feel that I am a martyr when I refuse. I try to say what I actually feel: "If I were not Orthodox, I would swallow it with the plate." (I know it sounds funny but for me the struggle can be awful.) Probably my friends sense my struggle and my regret, and that my feelings at least are sincere and elementary. Perhaps it is because they feel my faith through this pitiful struggle, but their desire to tempt me does in fact diminish.

Recently, a friend offered me to watch an erotic video film with her. I said, "I would like to very much, but I am Orthodox and nothing can be done about it." In saying things honestly, my problems with my friends have been resolved. They feel my struggle and I don't have to hypocritically pretend that it is not there. In this situation I did not have to distance myself from her, because I knew that in principle, looking deeply at myself, I had something of the same desire to watch it as she did – at least I knew that I wouldn't mind. Knowing that I was making an effort for a more dignified choice made her a little ashamed.

The problem with having unbelieving friends is solved for me by not putting up a barrier between myself and them. Then they are not annoyed and let me do what I want. Probably they see the mechanism of my faith and no

longer feel it to be alien to them – sometimes they even sympathize and try to help me in my struggle.

I can also learn virtue from them. They all are good people, better than me. (Perhaps they were born into a better moral level.) I have one friend who has two little girls, and a husband who is not faithful to her. He often doesn't give her the money he earns for the children, so she has to look for it in his pockets when he is asleep, and then only take a little bit so that he doesn't notice. Everyone tells her, "Leave him at once. It is too humiliating," but she says, "It is easy to divorce him, but first I want to try to build our family, to save the father for the children." She patiently continues to feed him with the best she can find and does not allow the children to make noise when he is resting. I am sure that it is not woman's weakness that makes her do so. She is patient and forgiving and she loves her bad husband with Christian love. By the way, he has become a little better now, and I say this without exaggeration. For me she is a Christian. Although she does not go to church, she does not deny God, and she has been baptized. She is another lame Christian like me, and I hope that she may say a few words to God in my favor at the Last Judgement. ✱