

# ***IGNORANCE AND APATHY:***

The Background of Religious Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices  
of Young Russian Evangelical Converts  
in the Greater Moscow Area

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

**A. General Introduction** - Much of the Western evangelistic effort among Russian youth has resulted in nominal joiners rather than true disciples of Jesus Christ. Part of the reason for this result is that many evangelists trying to reach this group have not taken the time to discover much about the religious context of these young people. The purpose of this research is to inform Westerners (and perhaps some Russians as well) regarding the central religious beliefs, understanding, attitudes and behaviors that form the background of the young Russians that they are striving to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The results of this study could help Christian workers in Russia to utilize approaches that take into account the Russian youth context, with the effect that there will be more solid, fruitful converts in the new churches.

**B. Background** - I began asking questions about Western evangelistic efforts in 1993 as I gained personal experience in following up after Western evangelistic campaigns in various Russian cities. Many hundreds of conversions had been reported at the end of these campaigns, but my informal research revealed that a minute number, if any, of those who had "made decisions" were in the churches. I also observed churches that had been planted in Moscow. Every Sunday a number of people supposedly made decisions for Christ, but very few of these people stayed in the church. This was a special problem with Russian youth, among whom, apparently, a new subculture was developing – one that was not so open to the gospel as the young adults who had experienced communism first-hand. The new youth were easy to talk with, but hard to reach deeply. Westerners didn't seem to be sensing this difficulty well enough, and very few people were questioning their basic assumptions about evangelistic methodology. Uncontextualized messages and methods continued, and many initially interested Russian youth were not brought into the fold. *This new generation of Russian youth needs to be studied more carefully so that their perceptions regarding life and religion can emerge and be dealt with by those attempting to communicate to them regarding the gospel of Jesus.*

**C. Research Approach** – As suggested above, the purpose of this research was to discover the central biblical and cultural issues that have affected the true reception of the gospel in Russia. I sought, through a series of individual interviews, to discover and describe the factors that Russian youth themselves identified as those which characterized their religious orientations prior to hearing the gospel and its call on their lives. In my research, I was most interested in hearing young Russian people describe how they used to believe, think, feel and act in the religious sphere prior to coming into contact with the gospel. I was trying to answer this basic question: What kind of "soil" is found among Russian youth, into which the gospel seed is being sown? This question was answered by Russian converts themselves as I interviewed them and sought their personal testimonies of their lives prior to hearing the gospel.

**D. Research Boundaries** - I tried to confine my study to ethnic Russian young people, male and female, who had become Christians between the ages of 14-25, and who are now active parts of Western-planted churches. There were no other social boundaries within the above limits. I looked only for those that did not grow up in Christian families, and who had come to Jesus Christ in the 1990's (although I was more selective concerning those who had been converted very recently – I required pastors or leaders to be confident that there was good evidence of life transformation in brand-new believers to be a part of my research group). I did a total of 40 interviews of young men and women within these parameters.

**E. Limitations of Findings** – The results of this qualitative study may not be able to be generalized beyond the particular boundaries mentioned above. Young Russians from areas remote from Moscow may not share all the characteristics of Russian youth within close reach of Moscow. The research may be subject to other interpretations than those I offer, but sought to let Russian youth speak for themselves as much as possible, minimizing my own personal interpretations beyond that which is self-evident. There could be several other specific responses to each question that I did not discover in my interviews, but the chances are low that these would be common, since my 40 interviews represent a significant sample of this population.

**F. Other Introductory Notes**

1. This is a qualitative research study, and not quantitative. That is, I was not looking for statistics to prove the proportions of young Russians who had this or that view. The value of the research is in displaying something of the variety of responses a Christian may encounter in communicating with Russian young people. A youth worker will benefit from being prepared to respond to each of the quotations found in this paper.

2. Only a sample of the quotes possible under each section have been inserted into this paper. Much more could be said about each point, but I have selected the key ideas that I discovered in my research.

3. Many of the young people have negative things to say about Orthodoxy and Western religion. These are their own opinions, and they are not speaking for anybody but themselves when they make these comments. Nothing in my questions was designed to suggest any expectation of positive or negative attitude by the young people.

4. The reader should keep in mind that each of these Russian youth later converted to evangelical Christianity, mainly through Western influence. Certainly this fact is going to color some of their attitudes. However, I pressed them to recall their attitudes and beliefs prior to coming in personal contact with the gospel through Westerners, and to attempt not to "read back" into their prior experience anything that was actually a product of understanding and attitudes gained by exposure to the gospel.

5. The interviews were conducted in Russian or English, depending on the ability of the young person. For those quotes in English, I have edited the interviews for grammar, and at times for word usage, and have rearranged some cumbersome sentences in order that the final result be readable and clear. The translation of the interviews in Russian is partly that of my interpreters and partly my own.

6. In order to protect the identities of the young people I interviewed, I have used a code for each person. The code consists of four parts: (1) A 2-digit number for the age of the young person at the time of the interview, (2) One letter for gender, male or female, (3) A 2-digit number for the year of conversion of the young person (as near as could be recalled or estimated), and (4) One letter for religious background: A = Atheist, O = Orthodox, J = Jewish, and M = Moslem. (It must be noted that these are not always easy to assign – many young people defy categorization here. The issue point is their family background, and the closest identifier was chosen if there was some question). Thus the code (16F98O) would represent a 16-year-old girl who was converted in 1998 from an Orthodox background.

7. This paper is the first of four papers on four separate topics regarding Russian youth. When completed, the next three papers will cover: (1) Their experience of the evangelistic process, (2) Their experience of conversion, and (3) Their evaluations of Western evangelism in Russia, with their suggestions for improvement of the approach of Westerners.

## II. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

### A. Personal Beliefs and Understanding

**1. The Existence of God** – Belief in the existence of God has a complex history among the youth of the Soviet Union and Russia, and that complexity continues today.

**a. Atheism** – The atheism of the Soviet Union, as it reached the youth, was rarely a studied position. It was rather a presupposition, accepted without much question. Starting from the time of Perestroika, this presupposition was first questioned and then disestablished. As a result, unquestioned atheism was the starting point mostly for children of the 80's, and is seen less and less among children of the 90's.

Communism is built on a presupposition of materialism, and this was the accepted dogma. "The last time I remember asking questions about God was in kindergarten, when I was about three or four years old. Somebody authoritatively told me, 'There is no God.' And I believed them, and it seems to me that after that I never questioned whether or not there was a God." (27M91A) Young people don't speak about any elaborate apologetic that was constructed to bolster this atheism, other than a dogmatic presentation of evolution as fact, and the curious "proof" discovered in space: "In school they told me that there was no God, because, 'The astronauts have gone up into space and didn't see God, and so there is no God – you ought to believe this.' So I believed it." (27M92A)

For many youth, then, belief in God simply was not an issue to consider or discuss. "It was kind of accepted in our family that there is no God. But nobody talked about it at all. We never even considered the option of the presence or absence of God. We would never mention it. Life simply didn't include God." (26F92A) Belief in God was considered "an old viewpoint" (27F95A), not to be taken seriously by modern people.

The "received dogma" of communism would not have had such effect in Russia apart from the attendant pressures masterminded by the communist party. Not only was materialism taught, but alternative viewpoints were ridiculed and opposed. "I heard one boy in school, when I was about 13, tell everyone that he believed in God. And everybody laughed." (29F92O). Children of Russian Baptists felt great pressures in school, and this tended to squelch any casual interest in God that might exist among the others. Adults were controlled also by a desire to protect their positions: "My parents were not so much communists in their belief – it was more of a natural adjustment for them. They were not convinced of the ideology, but used that ideology because it was taught to them. If my Dad did not go the communist way, then his career would come to an end." (25F93A) Youth in such households rarely raised the question of the existence of God.

In anticipation of later papers, it must be said that this atheist vacuum was an ineffective barrier against the gospel after Perestroika. One could even say that it made possible much of the movement to God that happened in the early 1990's.

**b. Orthodox Theism** – Although there were many young people in the 80's that had at least a secret belief in God's existence due to the influence of Orthodox believers in their families, Orthodox theism spread rapidly only in the 90's, when "everybody talked about the fact that God exists. You could hear this on TV, and everywhere. It was no secret. (23M98O)"

Orthodox theism in Orthodox families, like atheism in communist families, tended to be passed down dogmatically, without much explanation (if it was passed down at all). Many will say something like, "My grandmother told me about God, so I believed that there was a God." (13F99O) Others would just pick up this idea by certain actions of those in

their families. "I remember my grandmother made the sign of the cross on me when I went to sleep one time, and said, 'Now you are going to sleep calmly.' When I had nightmares at night, my mother would give me examples of prayers to pray so that I could go to sleep. Things like these made me think." (22M94O) And, if a family practiced any Orthodox traditions and went to church at least on occasions, the assumption of God's existence had more to bolster it.

However, it should not be assumed that Orthodox theism was always passed down to young people in such families. For example: "My mother was from a strong Orthodox family, and she had some beliefs about God. She attended an Orthodox church at least once a week, sometimes twice. But she never read the Bible, and in fact didn't own one. She thought that she was a real believer, since she went to Orthodox services. And she wanted her baby (me) to be baptized, and they did it in secret at night. But I personally didn't have any beliefs about God, because my mom never actually talked to me about God." (22F95O) So even among many Orthodox families, the youth did not become theists. Much of Russian belief in God has tended to be a private matter. "My grandmother was a believer, but she didn't tell me anything about God." (15F99A) As a result, many youth from Orthodox families had a vague notion of God without any understanding. "I believed in God, but I didn't know how to apply this to my life, or what it meant. I just had a feeling that God existed." (15M99O)

**c. Other Theistic Beliefs** – The two other dominant minority religions in Russia are also theistic – Judaism and Islam. It is rarer to run across such young people, but the few that I interviewed expressed similar realities to that of Orthodoxy. Their families had a general belief in God, but this was not discussed much at home. Two girls from Islamic backgrounds presented similar perspectives: "My parents are from a Muslim background, but they only held to some of the traditions and customs." (22F98M) "Being a Muslim didn't involve anything from a religious tradition." (28F91M) One Jewish Christian said about her background, "My family was Jewish, and my dad was strongly Jewish, but the rest of us thought like, 'Well, I guess we have to go to synagogue today.' I knew a little about God, but not very much." (19F92J) The only other Jewish person I interviewed was raised as an atheist.

**d. Non-monotheistic Beliefs** – Among many Russians is a general idea that there is some higher power, but it is an impersonal power. "I thought that there was some kind of supreme mind, but I didn't think it was specifically God." (20F94A) "I thought that there was maybe some higher force or something." (32F92A) "I thought that there is something – not a person, but a power." (19F96A) This is definitely a minority viewpoint among the young people I interviewed, and even those that held to this viewpoint did not believe it strongly or with any degree of specificity.

**e. Practical Atheism** – This category is one that I am using as a catch-all for the most common perspective on God that I have run across among youth. Some young people from each of the above categories also fall into this category, so it is not an exclusive division as are those discussed above. In addition, it seems to be the most dominant perspective on the existence of God among young Russians today. It can be summarized in the statement given by one young man: "I thought that God existed, but I didn't think that this had any relationship to me. He exists and that's it – what did this have to do with me?" (17M99O)

For most of the young Russians I interviewed from the new generation, God was largely irrelevant to life. "I heard about God many times, but I thought that He was sitting up in Heaven far away, and he didn't bother me and I didn't bother Him. He had nothing to do

with me, and I didn't need Him." (15F99O) Although belief in God was a very important step for children of the 80's, it has become an uninteresting issue for many modern youth. The step to theism, by itself, has not brought them to any particular desire to relate to God, even if they knew how. "I believed that there was a God, or that there was some kind of power greater than man, but I never thought that there was a way to have a personal relationship with Him. But I didn't really think much about this." (15M96A) Along with many others, I call this view "practical atheism," because the young person who has such beliefs lives and acts as if there were no God, even though he or she will admit that God exists.

Another form of practical atheism to which young people have been exposed is found among even professing Orthodox Russians. Many will claim to be Orthodox, without a notion of what this entails by way of religious belief. "My mother says she is Orthodox. But if you ask her if she believes in God, she says 'no.'" (17M96O) Many who call themselves Orthodox also believe in astrology, reincarnation, and many kinds of Eastern pantheistic teachings. But, true to form, even these beliefs don't seem to be held very deeply, in a way that changes lives.

**2. The Nature and Character of God** – A few common beliefs about what God is like can be implied from some of the quotes of the previous section. But in this section I will go into much more detail regarding those beliefs. Most of these comments come from those who expressed a belief in the existence of God, but not all. Although those who had been atheists would normally say something like "I didn't have any idea what God was supposed to be like," (19F96A) others had picked up an idea of the supposed nature of God from the Orthodoxy that was evident all around them.

**a. Proximity** – The most typical comments regarding the nature of God surrounded His supposed distance from man. "I only knew that God was in Heaven, very far from me." (23F96A) "God was really distant and mysterious." (19M95O) Some believed this because of their personal lack of contact with God. "It was hard for me to understand how God could be with me all the time, if I could never see Him, hear Him or feel Him. I wondered about this." (15F99A) Others identified the source of this belief in their impressions of Russian Orthodoxy. "I tried to figure out what God was supposed to be like in Orthodoxy. I went to an Orthodox church, because I wanted to find out what they did there, and what kind of God they worship. I got the idea that it was a very distant God." (32F92A) "I live in an Orthodox country, and we believe that God is somewhere and you can't reach him." (19M97O)

A few young people explained the Orthodox practices that gave them the impression of a distant God. "God was far enough away that you had to pray to Him through the saints." (21F93O) "You are supposed to pray to God, but it is better to go to saints and ask them to pray for you." (32F92A) The idea that one must go to God through a human mediator was ingrained in many of the youth. "I would have never thought that you could approach God on your own, because I think that most Russian Orthodox people (or at least I thought so at the time) go to the priest, and he would tell them that they had to memorize a prayer or something. You couldn't really approach God on a personal basis." (23F92A) This view was summed up by this comment: "All people say that I am too sinful – God won't pay any attention to me." (29F92O).

In spite of this remoteness, most were quite aware that God is omnipotent and omniscient, and thus sees and knows everything about you. "I knew that God was all-powerful, and that He was looking over our lives." (13F99O) But this closeness was not generally seen as a comforting fact. "When I did something bad, my mom usually said that

was not good, because God sees everything – 'So you'd better behave well.' But that's all I was told about God." (19F92J)

**b. Strict Judge** – Several of the young people summed up their belief regarding God's character in the idea of one who punishes. "I knew that God was going to punish sinners." (23M98O) "I thought of God as a very strict judge." (29F93O) "I knew that God punishes when you do wrong things. My mother told me that." (21F96O)

The third quote gives some insight into the kind of judgment expected from God by many youth. It was not so much an eternal judgment that they normally conceived, but an earthly one. "I got the idea from Orthodoxy that God is a very harsh person who is watching you to see if you do something wrong, and that He would punish you and your children, and maybe your whole family." (32F92A) Thus again, impressions of Orthodoxy helped form their opinions: "One time I went into an Orthodox church with a friend. And my first feeling was that God is very strict, and that everybody is afraid of Him – because all the people in the church seemed to be afraid." (17M99O) Some saw God's character in very negative terms: "I didn't think of God as loving and caring, but as very cruel, and who punishes people for their misbehavior and for the bad features of their character." (21F98O) One young woman remembers how this view affected her mind as a child: "When I was very small, I very often thought that when I want to do something wrong, I should just close the door and windows so I couldn't see into the sky. This was like God looking at me – and I tried to hide." (23F96A)

There is a more minority view of a forgiving and loving God, but these views tend to be combined with the idea that He was far off. Thus His love and forgiveness came from a distance. "I would definitely tend to think that He was more of a forgiving and loving God than He was a jealous God – but He was probably far off." (23F92A) One young man, who said that he had seen God as good and willing to change his life for the better, also added, "My religious views were not typical." (22M94O) Another said, "I didn't think that He was a fierce and bitter punisher *like others thought*." (15M96A, italics mine). And another who saw God as forgiving saw this forgiveness in less than relational terms: "The basic principle was that you could sin, and then come confess the sin (in church), and now you don't have that sin anymore. God is going to forgive you." (19F99O)

**c. The Great Helper** – All who grow up in Orthodox surroundings are aware of prayer in one form or another. A common understanding of God is that His main role is to answer the prayers of those who need help. "I thought that God was there to help, and He knew everything about you, and He is someone you go and pray to, sometimes through the saints." (21F93O) Often God's giving, however, was tied to people being good, and was also seen as a way to self-centered ends. "I thought about God as someone who could help you to get what you want. If you really ask Him for something, then he will help you, especially if you are good, and don't do anything wrong – then He will help you for sure." (22F95O) Others judged God as unconcerned when their prayers weren't answered, or when things were not going well in their lives. "God was doing what He thought was good, but which was not necessarily in my best interests. And I thought that I knew what was in my best interest. So I would pray, and things would not turn out as I wanted, so I thought, 'Well, He just answers when He wants to.'" (19M95O) "When I did well in my life, I would think that God was good and kind and loved me. But when bad things would happen with me, I would think, 'Well, see, He doesn't exist,' or that He didn't care about me and was just out to make my life bad." (15F99O)

**3. The Identity and Work of Christ** – Among Russian youth the name of Jesus is almost universally known. Several facts of his life are common knowledge. And yet there is very little understanding of who He was or what He did.

**a. Atheist Ignorance** – Those who grew up in atheist households, especially in the early 1990's had very little knowledge of Jesus. "In school we had our own musical using the music from 'Jesus Christ Superstar,' but the story was completely different. So I heard the phrase 'Jesus Christ Superstar,' but I had no idea about who Jesus was, or how he was connected to religion." (25F93A) Others knew more, but saw Jesus as simply another historical figure. "I knew that Jesus was a man who was born in Israel and did many good things for people, and died after 33 years of living on earth. He was crucified. And that's all I knew." (22M94A) Others connected Jesus with Orthodoxy, but with little comprehension. "I had seen these pictures of Jesus, but I didn't really understand who He was. He was just an icon, a face in a painting, and He had something to do with church." (21M96A) Still others even doubted His existence. "I thought that Jesus was simply a man, or maybe even a myth, and that people were mistaken about who He was when they thought He was a real person." (15F99A) "I thought it was maybe like a legend." (15M96A)

**b. The Person of Christ** – The common understanding among non-atheist youth of the person of Christ, at least on the surface, seems to be very biblical. But it usually amounts to very superficial knowledge. "I knew that Jesus was God's son, and that He was God, and believed so because I was taught this by my mom. But I had no comprehension about Him whatsoever." (19M95O) "I knew that He was God's son, who was born on the earth and was crucified, and that was it." (22F95O) In other words, they knew the surface facts without comprehension of the meaning. Through Orthodoxy has come to most Russian youth a generally biblical theology of God, but few know anything beyond the bare facts. "I'd heard about the Holy Trinity, but it was something that I obviously couldn't comprehend. I probably thought that Jesus was just another name for God." (23F92A) "I had heard that God has a Son. That's all I knew about Jesus." (17F96O)

**c. The Death of Christ** – Notions of the meaning of Christ's death on the cross show even less understanding than those about His person. His death is known by almost everyone. "My understanding of Jesus was the picture of Him on the cross." (19M95O) But very few had any positive viewpoint of what He accomplished. "I didn't know why He was crucified. I thought it happened because He was caught by these evil people, who wanted to crucify Him, but that's it." (22F95O) "My mother told me the story of Jesus. I was very sorry for Him. And I didn't understand how they could crucify a person for nothing." (21F96O) "I knew that Jesus had... died on the cross, and that's it. I didn't know what He died for, but I knew He died." (19M97O) Even those who had more facts about the reason for His death rarely understood what they had heard. "I knew that Jesus had died for our sins. But there was no explanation of what this meant. It was just, 'He died for your sins – poor Jesus.' I didn't know anything beyond this." (21F93O) "I knew that Jesus was the "Savior," but I didn't know what that meant." (29F93O)

**d. The Resurrection of Christ** – Knowledge of the resurrection of Christ had been kept alive by the tradition of saying to everyone at Easter, "Jesus is risen," to which the response is, "He indeed is risen." For some, this was their main exposure to Jesus. "I only heard the name of Jesus during the Easter holidays, when people would say that Jesus is risen." (21F93O) "The resurrection was just part of the story that I heard. I don't remember if I believed it or not. But I remember that Easter celebrated the resurrection of Christ."

(21F94A). For many, the resurrection of Christ had become just a set of words to say on a certain day of the year, and young people didn't seem to take the issue much to heart.

#### 4. The Afterlife

**a. Atheist Perspectives** – Many of the youth of the 80's grew up with the assumption presented to them in school, that this earthly life is the only life there is. "I was an atheist, I believed in evolution, and that when you die, you die. That's it." (27M91A) The materialist assumptions of this group were often accompanied by both ignorance and apathy regarding the issue. "I didn't have any idea of life after death." (32F92A) "I never thought about what would happen after I died." (21F94A) "I didn't think about what would happen after I died – I wasn't interested in this issue." (21M96A)

However, along with those that assumed the atheist line with little thought were others who spent much time thinking about this issue. "The question of life after death was interesting to me all of my life. I would think, 'How can it be that you die, and then there is nothing – you just 'turn off?' I was told this, and so I accepted it as normal, but I would still try to imagine this, and would wonder how it could be possible." (26F92A) The interest in the afterlife of such people was not necessarily for personal application. "I researched some into the afterlife. I thought about it, and would study it, but I never considered myself dying and becoming something or going somewhere. It was just general information that I was going through." (21F93O).

For most of the atheist youth, however, the issue of death was a very emotional one. The most common reaction was one of fear. "Sometimes while going to sleep I would become fearful of dying, because I felt that there is nothing after that. You just lie in the grave with the worms – I had this very picture in my mind. It was a fearful thought." (22M94A) The fear that was felt was not related to God's judgment, but to the fact that the other side of death was not understood. "When I turned fifteen or sixteen I started thinking all the time that I was afraid to die, because I didn't know what was next. The unknown area of death was threatening to me at times. And I couldn't even fall asleep sometimes, I was so scared. I didn't have any concept of Heaven or Hell really – just the unknown. And I was afraid to step over the line. But I knew that I would one day." (27M92A) Others had a feeling of doom, but not associated consciously with God: "I was afraid about death. I thought that something terrible would happen, and I did not think there would be something good after death. But when I thought this way, I didn't know anything about God." (20F94A)

The other common emotional response to death was depression. "By the age of fourteen I started feeling a sense of depression over the senselessness of life, as far as the world seemed to me to be. I was simply to die, and nothing would change. Did it really matter if I had ever lived? These questions were heavy for me." (29M92A) "Whenever thoughts of death and beyond would come to my mind, and I wondered about that a lot, that's when I would get the most depressed. I didn't know what would happen after death. And I would look at my life as something like a Xerox copy of my ancestors lives – I'm born, and then I go to school, go to college, start working, get married, get a family, then grandkids, and then you eventually die. But that was like a vicious circle, and you can't get out of it, and there is no point and no purpose in life." (23F92A)

Communism tried to provide meaning to life in purely altruistic terms. "When I was an atheist and a communist, they taught us that the purpose for your existence is the good of the future generations. That is, for your children and grandchildren, and this perfect society that is going to exist in the future. The thought was that we are temporary anyway,

and there is nothing after death. And since this is so, the only meaning to life is to live so well that the future generations would live better." (28M92A) But for those who were deeply questioning life after death, such perspectives were empty. "When I was sixteen I was watching TV, and a Russian writer was talking about life in general, and the good life, and he asked, 'Do you want to live forever?' And I said to myself, 'Yes, I do!' So I turned up the TV. Then he said, 'Well, be a good person, and your grandchildren will talk about you. You will live on in their conversations.' And I was thinking, 'That's baloney! It doesn't give any reasonable answer.' It didn't answer my question at all!" (27M92A)

It is apparent that remnants of Orthodoxy lived on in shadowy forms in the minds of many of even the most convinced communists. One young woman was atheist, and grew up in a strong communist family, and yet had this to say about death: "I believed that the soul still existed after death, because my grandmother had died, and my mother was saying that she hadn't just disappeared, but had continued on, and was somewhere to be met with. My mother's belief was not so much religious as it was a belief in 'mystery' and in some kind of mystique of life. Rather than seeing that this matter just dies out, and a person just disappears, the idea was that she was still somewhere, somehow." (28M92A) The comments of another young woman illustrate the strange mixtures of beliefs that were often present in some atheist Soviet families: "I was hoping to go to heaven because of my good works. But it was just a hope – I definitely didn't have any assurance, and didn't really know the truth. But Heaven and Hell were known by everyone, and everyone knew that Heaven is good and Hell is bad. They were kind of like two terms that were thrown out regarding life after death, in case you were wondering about it. But it was more like a statement with no meaning behind it – especially in communist times, when there *couldn't* be any meaning behind it." (23F92A) Although there was no knowledge of God in her family, she still had hopes of Heaven. The words of another young woman from an atheist family state what so many said about the question about life after death: "It was better not to think about it." (23F96A)

**b. Orthodox Perspectives** – Compared to atheist youth, the beliefs of most young people from Orthodox families included a more settled conviction about the existence of life after death. However, their understanding of Heaven and Hell was limited. "My beliefs about Heaven and Hell were really foggy. I was scared, though, because I had heard enough about how there is going to be a judgment day. I was really scared about that, and I didn't really know what to do about it." (19M95O) The theme of judgment was on the minds of many of these young people. "I knew that when I died I would have to answer to God." (23M98O)

These same young people had no assurance of their destiny after death. "I knew about life after death, but didn't have an answer to what would happen to me." (13F99O) "I knew that there was life after death, but I always had a question where I would go, to Heaven or to Hell." (15F99O) How these youth understood the requirements for entrance into Heaven will be discussed below.

There was a group of Orthodox youth who had confusion about the issue of life after death, much as atheist youth often confused materialism and belief in the afterlife. One Orthodox girl displays that confusion: "I believed that there would be something good and something bad after death. It was just logical. I would also think that maybe there would be nothing after death – but then I would calm myself with the idea that there is Heaven or Hell. It was better to know about Heaven and Hell than to know nothing, which scared me. At times I would think that maybe I was going to Heaven, but at other times I thought there would be nothing at all after death." (19F99O)

**c. Other Religious Notions of the Afterlife** – After the opening of the iron curtain a great flood of varying teachings entered the Russian public sphere. Along with various Christian teachings came non-Christian teaching as well, and many young people began to read and absorb these teachings. "At first I didn't think that anything would happen after death. Then after reading some literature I thought that my spirit would go on living, and that I would just fly around in the air. The book I read was about telepathic power. I also read other books about psychological energy and things like that. Many people read these books. They are for sale everywhere, and you can check them out in libraries. Even young people read them." (17M990) "I read some magazines where it was written that some people, in moments before they died completely, would see a long, dark corridor with a light at the end of it. So I thought, 'Why not? Maybe there is something after death.'" As young people would talk together, they would begin to spread these ideas among themselves. "I had many friends at school who would talk about life after death, and about having different lives after death (reincarnation). I thought that something would happen after death, but I didn't know exactly what it was." (15F99A)

One interesting factor to consider when young Russians come into contact with Eastern religions is the potential to acquire a false sense of security about death. This was true for one young Russian man: "When I learned that I am not just a body, but a spirit and a body, and that there is life after death, and when I learned some Hindu and Buddhist materials, I became pretty confident in my afterlife existence. I was actually relieved that this whole material setting was the least that was true – it was not the real foundation for life, and that I was going to be existing afterwards. And all of the other religions apart from Christianity were pretty optimistic about your afterlife. So until I learned about my sin and judgment and Hell, I was pretty much optimistic about the afterlife." (28M92A)

**5. The Way to Heaven** – Young people from an atheist background had very little understanding of the way to Heaven, because they generally weren't asking themselves this question. (This didn't stop some of them from looking on from the side and having an opinion, however, as will be seen below). But even Orthodox young people confessed that they didn't really understand what Orthodoxy taught on the subject, and came to their assumptions about this topic informally.

**a. Good Works** – Personal merit was a common factor in most answers to the question of how to get to Heaven. "I thought that I would have to earn Heaven by doing good deeds." (29F930) "The way of salvation was to do good things and earn your way to Heaven." (19M950) Some had a foggy notion that there were just two ways – doing good works or doing bad works. "I thought that a person would get to Heaven based on his works. Even my parents said this: 'If you will be good, and will help others, you will be with God in Heaven. But if you are disobedient and do bad things, then you will go to Hell.' They actually used this idea to scare me." (15M96A)

**b. Weighed in the Balance** – A more complete idea of merit, given the presence of known sin in people, is that of comparing one's good and bad works. This was for many a matter of very relative comparison with others: "I was hoping that I would go to Heaven after I died, but I didn't know much about it. I figured that I was a good person. I did some bad stuff, but not as much as others. If you do good things, you go to Heaven." (19M970) For others the comparison was of one's own life: "I thought everything would be weighed out before God, and that my good things would be better than my bad things, so I would go to Heaven." (15M990) It was also important to be able to discount "little" sins: "The way of

salvation was being good, and trying to do everything right, as far as you could. If you had little lies, that's okay – probably God would never see it or something." (22F95O)

**c. Fulfill Church Duties** – Other young people just made the assumption that they needed to do what everyone else seemed to be doing. "My grandmother didn't tell me how I could go to Heaven, so I didn't know. But I thought that if you would just go to church, this would make you clean before God." (13F99O) A fuller understanding of this idea was gained by a former atheist who was seeking God in an Orthodox church: "My idea about salvation after going to an Orthodox church, from what people told me, was that ... it was better to be in some kind of relationship with God, to please Him. You are supposed to pray to Him, but it is better to go to the saints and ask them to pray for you. They never used the term 'salvation,' actually – at least I didn't hear it. To go to Heaven you had to please God, which meant going to church regularly, placing candles in front of icons, praying to those icons and to the saints, going to communion and confessing your sins before communion." (32F92A)

**d. Final Confession** – Some mentioned placing their hopes on being sure to make a final confession of sins before dying. "I thought that if I would have time to confess before my death, then I would go to Heaven. That is, if I would confess, at least there was a chance that I would go to Heaven." (19F99O) "The most important thing to do is to confess before you die. When someone gets real sick they get the priest, and it is important to confess your sins to the priest, and they would pray for you, and maybe God would have mercy on you and you would go to Paradise." (32F92A)

**e. No Assurance** – The common thread running through all ideas about Heaven was that there was no way to know for sure if you would make it. "My mom told me that if you will be good enough here on earth, you will go to Heaven, but she told me that nobody knows for sure. But you can hope, if you don't do anything wrong here." (22F95O) "They believed that you never knew if you are going to Heaven or Hell." (32F92A)

**6. Self Estimation Before God** – Given the beliefs these young Russians held regarding the nature of God and the way to Heaven, the next interesting issue relates to how these same young people evaluated their own character, and how that related to their standing before God.

**a. Atheist Morality** – Russian youth of the 80's had the possibility of living moral lives in accordance with communist ideals, and some considered themselves to have attained such a life. "We were brought up in a good way, so I was a decent guy, a communist, seriously getting ready for exams, and trying to be my best. I was pretty worldly and materialistic in terms of my lack of faith, but not in terms of moral license and worldly pleasures." (28M92A) "I had some convictions that I was a good person. I was raised in a good family to be a good person and do good things, and just be good in general. And I was really proud of myself for being a good girl." (32F92A) Furthermore, there were those who lived less than moral lives, yet still considered themselves to be okay. "I was not a bad guy, to my way of thinking. I drank sometimes, but I worked hard and honestly. And I wasn't a fighter, but was even a peacemaker. And I had never been on drugs or anything. I was trying to be a good kid, though I messed up sometimes." (27M92A)

Contributing to the ability of atheist youth to approve of their own character was the fact that their concepts of morality did not come from religion. "I never thought about my position before God. It never occurred to me that it was important." (21F93O) "I was mainly following my own rules and principles that I had set out for myself, by watching my parents' example, because I thought of them as good people." (23F92A) With this kind of human

starting point, it was easier to have a sense of personal goodness. "The way that I thought about what was right and wrong was whether or not my parents approved it, and whether or not I did what my teachers expected from me. And I wanted to do what they expected from me. And I was pretty obedient to my conscience. So I would never have thought that I was a sinner, but a good person. I lived by what other people were telling me. And hardly ever did I try to make my own decisions. It was easier to live that way, doing what others command you to do." (19F96A)

For some atheists who had begun to seek for God, their initial feeling about themselves was not self-condemning. "Even while I was seeking after God, I was still really proud of myself, because I was still a good girl, though I was getting the idea that I was not perfect." (32F92A) "At the time I started visiting a church, I still thought that I was not a bad man. After all, I was willing to learn something about God." (29M92A)

Other atheist youth did not think of themselves so highly, but this was not connected with religion. For some it was not even connected with conscience. "I didn't feel that I was a good person, but I didn't feel guilty about it." (18F97A) Others had secret battles with conscience. "I thought that I was a bad person. However, everyone else thought that I was good. But I knew my own thoughts. It would happen that I would do something, and then my conscience would torment me." (20F94A)

**b. Orthodox Self-Righteousness** – There exists a kind of complacency in the hearts of many Orthodox youth, who don't have much of a notion of sin. "I thought that everything was okay between me and God." (13F99O) "I considered myself to be a good person. I didn't feel guilty." (17M99O) This goodness was commonly the absence of anything real bad in one's life. "I thought that I was good enough to go to Heaven, because I never did anything really wrong. Sometimes I lied to my mom, but I thought that they were just tiny lies, and not so important – so I was good enough. I didn't worry about it." (22F95O) Small sins tended to be overlooked in the conscience of such young people. "I would feel guilt when I did something wrong. Sometimes when I was feeling really guilty I would want to go to my mom about it, and sometimes I didn't. But time helps, and in two days I would completely forget about it. Then it was like, 'Okay, it was such a tiny thing anyway.'" (22F95O)

It was possible for some young people to conclude that their goodness precluded a need for God in their lives: "I considered myself to be a very good person, because I didn't smoke, use drugs or kill anyone. So I was good – I didn't need any salvation or help from God." (21F98O) Others would feel that their small amount of religion was all that was really needed to keep them okay before God. "I was thinking that I was pretty good. I never did anything completely wrong. I was raised in a good family, and could even be called a believer, since my mom told me that if I prayed to God then you are a believer, and you go to church, so you are good enough." (22F95O) Some would even feel self-inflation over minimal religious obedience. "There is one thing that I used to think about with great pride. There was some kind of religious holiday, and my mom told me, 'This is a big religious holiday, and you should not fight today.' And that is when I had the greatest temptation to get into a fight at school – but I didn't. So I was cheering myself over this." (19M95O)

**c. Orthodox Relative Righteousness** – Other youth influenced by Orthodoxy, who did not lead such morally upright lives, often found a means of justifying themselves by comparison with others who were worse than they were. "I watched my friends doing evil things, and I also took part in some illegal and sinful things. But I also thought about God, and kind of tried to do my best to be better. And I thought that I was not evil, because I was

kind of better than they were. I didn't really act as evil as they did. I understood that I was doing wrong things, but I felt that I was not really that much spoiled with sin." (22M94O) "I knew that I did bad things – I was into drugs, alcohol and smoking. It wasn't that I felt 'guilty' but I knew it was wrong. I wouldn't have wanted my parents to know what I was doing. Still, I figured that I was a good person. I did some bad stuff, but not as much as others." (19M97O) Part of the problem was the tendency to define "sinner" only as a person who did atrocious things. "I thought of myself as just a bad person, and didn't think in terms of 'sinner.' I didn't understand what 'sinner' meant. I thought that sinners were just those people who killed and things like that." (15F99O)

**d. Orthodox Unworthiness** – Another class of Orthodox youth were well aware of their own unworthiness before God. "I understood clearly that I was a sinner. I understood this too much, in fact." (29F92O) "I felt that my position before God was miserable." (23M98O) Some had come to this opinion by personal experience of the severity of God's law. "I was absolutely not worthy. I did not feel that I was obedient to my conscience in what I did know, but I tried. I tried to be good according to what my mom would tell me regarding what was good and bad. I would try, and most of the time I would fail." (19M95O) For some young people, there wasn't even the possibility of contact with God, so far was He from them. "I thought that I was this little person that had no meaning or purpose before God." (15M99O) "I thought, 'God is too holy, too far away, and too big to be interested in me and to receive me.'" (19M95O)

**e. Orthodox Escape Hatches** – Some young people kept a vain idea in the back of their minds about how they would get right with God some time. "I thought, 'I'm not as bad as my friends, and I believe in God, so some day God is going to justify me' (because I tried to do better). I did some good things as well, and thought that this might also justify me. I knew that I was doing wrong, but I knew that God was going to forgive me if I stop. I was naïve. I would think, 'I'm going to stop all this, and not do it anymore.'" (22M94O) "I kind of thought that if things didn't work out with my boyfriend, then I would go to a monastery. But my way of life was bad, even worse than my friends, so I would think this way but it didn't interrupt my sinning. It was even worse. So these were just empty thoughts and foolishness." (19F99O)

**f. Orthodox Unbelief** – It should not be assumed that every Orthodox young person had a religious orientation in the matter of his or her conscience. "I didn't think about what kind of person I was before God. My conscience was not based on religion, but was just based on how I was brought up by my parents." (21F96O)

**g. Resulting Personal Expectations for the Afterlife** – Although the most common hope of Heaven among young people was vague and unreflective, there were a few who counted on their goodness to gain them admittance to Heaven: "I thought that I would go to Heaven, because I was good." (21F98O) Some others hoped against all appearances: "I was afraid, thinking that I would be going to Hell. But at the same time I hoped that maybe God would forgive me somehow." (23M98O) Still others didn't think about punishment after death at all. "I didn't think about punishment in Hell. I just thought that if you do something bad in this life, you will receive something bad in this life." (21F96O)

Finally, many with guilty consciences expected that they would be going to Hell. "I wanted to go to heaven, but it seemed to me that I would go to hell, since I wasn't a very good child." (15F99O) "I didn't know anything about salvation. I knew about Heaven, but I don't remember if they talked about it in church. After my (Orthodox ) baptism I wanted to

live properly, but I didn't know how, and my life became worse and worse. And when I understood what I had done after I sinned, I already understood that I was going to Hell." (29F92O) "The way of salvation was to do good things and earn your way to Heaven. I knew that I could not do this. It just didn't work – I had tried." (19M95O)

**7. The Bible** – A wide range of opinions regarding the nature of the Bible are found among Russian youth. Naturally, some of the attitudes and understanding of young people have been influenced by historical situations in Russia, as we will see in this section.

**a. General Ignorance** – Before Perestroika, very few people in Russia had their own Bibles. "Even after the fall of communism we didn't have a Bible. I was born during the time of persecution, and the Bible was not all that common a book." (19M95O) "I never saw a Bible, and we never had one in our home." (21F92A) "I never saw a Bible until I turned 18." (27M92A) Due to Russian literature, most everyone knew about the Bible, but their knowledge was very limited. "Sometimes I would read some literature, and there I would find the words, 'the Holy Scriptures,' or 'the Gospel,' or such words as 'God' or 'Jesus Christ,' 'saints,' and some things about monks. But it didn't mean much to me. I didn't know what the Bible was, actually, or what was the difference between 'Bible' and 'Holy Scripture,' or 'Gospel' and 'Bible.' So I had this confusion." (29M92A) "I knew that there was a holy book called the Bible, and that the story of Adam and Eve was contained in it, and something about God and Jesus Christ, but that's probably as far as my knowledge of the Bible went." (23F92A) "I didn't really think about the Bible, because nobody told me about it, and I didn't really know what it was." (22F95O)

For many young Russians after Perestroika, the only exposure that they had to the Bible was through television broadcasts and new children's publications. "The first 'Bible' for me was the 'Superbook' cartoon on TV." (19M95O) "I didn't know about the Bible beyond the storybook that I had." (18F99O) "I knew Bible stories, but I didn't think about what they meant." (18F97A)

**b. Orthodox Ignorance** – Young people in Orthodox families learned to have a high view of the Bible. "I knew that the Bible was right, and that it was the Word of God." (23M98O) However, this was generally a respect from a distance. "I didn't know about reading the Bible, because Orthodox people didn't read it, and nobody told me that I should read it." (29F92O) "My mother was from a strong Orthodox family, and she attended an Orthodox church at least once a week, sometimes twice. But she never read the Bible, and in fact didn't have a Bible." (22F95O) During the 1990's the Bible became widely available in Russia, but this did not necessarily lead Orthodox people to widely read it, or look to it directly as having authority in their lives. Spiritual teaching for most came through the priests. "I just accepted the teaching of the church." (19F99O)

**c. Intellectual Curiosity** – Some who had not been believers in God were drawn to the Bible, but appreciated it for reasons other than a quest for spiritual truth. "I wanted to read the Bible just because I wanted to be educated and know everything. Intellectual people should know about everything, like the Bible, the Koran, and other holy books." (26F92A) "I knew that the Bible existed, and I was going to musical school, where many of the compositions had some connection with the Bible – and this made me think about it. But I took it as artistic literature." (27F95A) Even some Orthodox young people looked at the Bible without considering its spiritual truth. "I thought that the Bible was just a history book that could be read from that point of view." (13F99O)

**d. Simple Respect** – Beyond their intellectual curiosity, many of the atheist youth looked at the Bible with a simple respect, as the holy book of the Christian faith. "When I was in high school and before that, they never told us about the Bible. I had heard a little bit, that it was some kind of spiritual book, about some kind of God, and I knew that it was a sacred book of Christianity, like every religion has its sacred book. Later some people told me, and I got the idea that it is supposed to be God's Word, and I wanted to check it out." (32F92A). For some of these seekers after Perestroika, the Bible was the natural, or even the only book to turn to. "I didn't know any other alternatives, so the Bible was religion for me. It was the only source of information about God and religion. If I were to decide to investigate in the direction of God, the Bible would be the only option for me. I didn't really know what it was, but I would respect it as a book of wisdom. I thought, 'Maybe it is a wise, wise book.'" (26F92A)

**e. Apathy** – Although the Bible has become available for anyone to read, very few of the young people I interviewed had much interest in it. In fact, most didn't pay much attention at all to the Bible. "I didn't really think at all about the Bible." (15M99O) "We had a Bible on the shelf. To me it was just a book. An Orthodox one." (20F94A) Others had some forms of curiosity that didn't bear much fruit. "My friend, who was an Orthodox believer, told me that she had read the book of Revelation, and found it pretty interesting, so I wanted to read it because I thought it would be interesting. But I didn't really think about the Bible (and didn't follow up on this interest)." (22F95O)

**f. Secret and Mysterious** – A few of the young people had a view of the Bible that made it almost sound occultic. "I thought the Bible was a mysterious book with maybe some magic in it. A real dark and secret book." (19F96A) "I thought that the Bible is a really strange book that many people can't understand, and I wouldn't understand it either." (17F96O)

**g. Incomprehensible and Boring** – A great many comments related to a common belief that the Bible was not to be understood. "The Bible was something that was too complicated, and I was afraid to approach it. I thought that it would be too difficult for me to read it alone without any instruction." (26F92A) Others came to this viewpoint by personal experience. "I read the Bible, but didn't understand anything I read. I had this stereotype in which I thought that only the old women who would go to the church would read the Bible." (15F99A) Others were turned off by reading the Synodal translation, which often uses Russian language that is not contemporary. "When you read a few phrases you get confused, especially with the Russian translation of it. It is an old Russian language and it sounds very 'religious' and (at that time) we had one translation of the Bible as opposed to many available in English. So it was just very hard to understand, and I might have felt that it was some holy book that I am not meant to understand." (23F92A) This lack of comprehensibility led many to conclude that the Bible is a boring book. "When I got hold of a New Testament, most of the things were boring to me, and I couldn't understand them." (19M95O) "I thought that the Bible was a really old fashioned book, and that I shouldn't read it, because it was just for learned people to read. And also that it was very boring." (15F99O)

**h. Man-Made, Mythological** – Atheist young people had a common belief that there was nothing supernatural about the Bible, not really understanding the doctrine of inspiration, and thus had little respect for it. "When they told me that God wrote the Bible, I couldn't believe that He could have written it. I believed that people just devised it. Over time they just wrote their own stories." (15M96A) "I thought that the Bible was some old, made-up

story. Nothing serious." (22M94A) But this kind of thinking was also found among some Orthodox young people: "I considered it to be like a history book, but that it was also mythological." (17M99O) "I read the Bible for children, but I thought that it was just a miracle fairy tale because of all the miracles that Jesus did. They were just a fairy tale for me. I didn't think that it could be true, or that it could be translated into practice." (21F98O)

**8. World Religions** – With their lack of knowledge about the basics of the Christian faith, it might be suspected that Russian youth also knew little about other world religions – and this is exactly the case. Many equated religion with Orthodoxy. "I didn't know anything about other religions than Orthodoxy." (23F96A) "For me, religion was in the Orthodox temple." (19M95O) This often meant an ignorance of the fact that other religions even existed. "The only thing about God and religion that I knew about were Orthodox. I didn't know about any cults, or even about other Christian denominations. I was totally unaware of all this stuff, and was really surprised when I saw it." (26F92A)

Others had learned at least the existence of other religions. "I knew about other religions from my geography textbook, but not much about them. I just knew they existed." (22F95O) Some could have named at least the main branches of Christianity. "The only thing I remember was when our geography teacher was telling us something about different religions in the world, and she mentioned that there were three main branches of Christianity – Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Just those names. But she didn't say anything about the differences or anything else." (19F96A) "I knew of Catholicism, but I thought it was pretty much the same, and I wasn't really interested." (22M94O) Thus Russian youth did not start out with much consciousness of religious division, although this knowledge has grown in the 1990's. What many believed could be summed up in this statement: "I knew that there were a lot of religions, but I was not quite sure what was the difference, other than different traditions they might have. So I thought that there was one God, but that there are different traditions for people to come to God." (19F92J)

Of course, among unbelievers there were those who had no respect for religions of the world. "It seemed to me that people were just trying to escape the world when they spoke of 'God.' For me, it was the word 'god' with a small letter, like in the history books, such as the Egyptian gods, for example. So I knew of them, but it would always be like a myth or a fairy tale. But that was the point of view that we were taught – they believed this, but they were not educated at that time, so they believed that there were some kind of gods." (21F92A) Others mentioned that they visited Orthodox churches and mosques, but just as if they were museums.

One final note on world religions is the penetration of Russian youth culture by Eastern religions. Many are searching for answers from Eastern thought, and are coming up with their own notions about the spiritual realm. "From Yoga and other Eastern religions I got the idea that there is some kind of spiritual force that holds things together and works in the spiritual realm, but I didn't understand it." (32F92A) "I thought that perhaps reincarnation was true, and couldn't find any reason to object to it." (22M94O) A syncretistic idea of world religions is becoming more fashionable in the 1990's, but is not necessarily becoming a strong conviction, since so few have any deep involvement in any kind of religion, as will be discussed later below.

## **B. Attitudes Toward Religion**

### **1. Toward Orthodoxy**

#### **a. Church Worship and Atmosphere**

**i. Complete Ignorance or Apathy** – Many Russian youth, especially those coming from an atheist background, had little interest in forming an attitude about Orthodox church worship or atmosphere. "I visited an Orthodox service one time. I remember the smell and the atmosphere, but since I wasn't really interested in it, I didn't have any deep impressions about whether I liked it or didn't like it. I just didn't care." (21M96A) During Soviet times Orthodox churches were treated as cultural treasures to simply be visited and looked at. "Orthodoxy was more like a museum to me. When we would visit some cities, churches were always part of the tour. So that was the general perception – it is really beautiful, it is very rich in culture and ornamentation, but the perception was not as a church, but as a museum." (25F93A) Many of these young people were not really aware of the functioning of an Orthodox church. "For me there was no such thing as a church service or no church service. Orthodox churches were always open. The ritual is that you go in, buy candles, and place them before a particular icon. So I didn't understand that there were particular times when there were church services." (25F93A) For such young people, Russian Orthodoxy was foreign, even though they were Russians themselves. "The atmosphere of the service was unusual to me. I entered it as entering totally unknown territory. It was like how one would go into a foreign country and try to follow their rules. You don't know the rules, so you kind of try to pick them up by looking at the people. So we would go and just look around. I just accepted it like, 'well, it exists.' It was like looking at scenery – I would go in, look around, and just forget about it." (26F92A)

**ii. General Appreciation** – One group of Russian young people had positive feelings toward the Orthodox atmosphere, for a few different reasons. For some, their appreciation was for reason of cultural or general interest. "I don't really remember much about the Orthodox church except that it was interesting as a cultural thing." (21F96O) "When I went into an Orthodox church, the atmosphere was pretty neat. An old man told us to take our hats off right at the threshold. We thought that this was funny, but we did it. We walked in and saw all the pictures on the walls and everything. And it was just interesting and unusual, because we had never been inside a temple." (27M92A) "I went into an Orthodox church, and thought it was beautiful, but to me it was just more art. I understood that art and music are very effective somehow, and I felt something spiritual about the architecture, but that was all." (27F95A) "I went into an Orthodox church during an excursion with my class. It was quiet and peaceful and mysterious." (19F96A)

The feeling for many young people was one of a reverence. "I had a feeling of reverence in the Orthodox church. I had a positive feeling toward it." (21F98O) However, this reverence was not necessarily tied to religious feelings. "I thought that the church was a place of reverent attitude and dedication toward something." (23F92A) "I thought the inside of the churches were beautiful, and I felt some reverence, but I didn't connect this with God." (18F97A) In addition, they did not necessarily enter into this reverence deeply. "The Orthodox atmosphere was something grandiose and great to me. I had some kind of respect and reverence toward it, but I didn't think specifically about God. There was just something that people were revering. I wanted to behave in the same way, but it didn't happen with me." (20F94A) But one young atheist man felt strangely moved in his visit. "I felt like I was the smallest person on earth. I looked at the icons and the crosses and the priest in the darkness

there, and I felt as if something was pressing on me. Not necessarily a bad feeling, but some kind of pressure on me. I felt like following the rituals, like lighting a candle or crossing myself. It is hard to describe how I felt. It's not that I felt bad about it, but it was like something was pushing on me to do something that I hadn't intended to do – because I was just curious, and had not gone there for spiritual reasons." (22M94A)

Others, who were more involved in the services, had a religious appreciation for the services. "I liked the Orthodox services. It was so warm, and the singing was nice. My mom's church was a really nice church with nice icons and so on. So I liked it. I didn't understand it, but I liked it." (22F95O) Those who received baptism as adults tended to have appreciation associated with that act. "In the beginning I liked the atmosphere of the Orthodox church, the music and sights and smells, because it was all connected with my baptism." (29F92O)

**iii. Lack of Comprehension** – Young Russians had the most to say about the fact that they had little comprehension of what was going on in Orthodox services. "My mom took me to some Orthodox services, like at Easter or Christmas, but I could never understand what was going on." (22F95O) "I didn't understand what was going on. I never understood the rituals, or what the services were about." (21F93O) "I was impressed by their faith, but I didn't understand anything. I didn't understand the gospel, or Christ, or anything." (28M92A) Often their parents weren't able to help them understand. "When we would go to the church, I would ask my parents why people would light candles. They didn't know. I just felt like I didn't understand very much when I was in church." Some of this lack of understanding came from the fact that the Orthodox services are conducted in old Church Slavonic. "I couldn't understand what Orthodox people were saying in church, because it was in ancient Russian. When the choir sang it was beautiful, but it was hard to understand what they were singing about because of the language. And the priests were praying, but it was hard to understand what they were talking about." (19F92J)

Some young people simply accepted that this lack of understanding was the way it is supposed to be. "I had this feeling in the Orthodox church that you can't understand what is going on. It is unreachable. You can't get the idea – you just stand there like a sheep, and you don't know what is happening. I just thought that this is the way it is, and that's the way it has always been." (19M97O) "Everybody was just standing there, and I assumed that this was just the way it is done." (21F93O)

Other young people felt frustrated by not being able to understand what was happening. "I felt sorry that it was so sophisticated and complicated." (28M92A) "I didn't know why I had to do these things, and I didn't want to do them, but nobody could explain it to me." (21F93O) "I didn't feel comfortable in church, and I didn't know what to do and how to do the right things there. There was a certain way to place candles, and a certain place to stand, and a way to pray to certain icons on certain days." (32F92A) Those who had gone with questions in their minds were often disappointed. "I didn't find answers to my questions, and so I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to know who God was, and where He was, and things like that." (32F92A) This was a problem especially in the early 1990's: "Now the Orthodox Church is trying to explain things to people more. Back then it was a big problem, because they weren't teaching people anything or explaining anything." (29F92O)

One example of confusion for many young people was the presence of so many icons in the temple. "I knew that there was supposed to be one God, and was a bit confused about why there were so many pictures of different saints, and how they all fit into

one picture." (23F92A) "Inside my heart I knew that there was God, and that this had nothing to do with icons." (29F93O) Some even decided against Orthodoxy primarily on this basis. "I thought that Russian Orthodoxy was not right. I didn't want to do what they did with icons." (23F96A)

The predictable result for many youth was that their lack of understanding led to boredom. The length of the services, and not being able to sit during the service, added to this difficulty. "I hated standing in an Orthodox temple. I didn't understand a thing they were saying. So for me to stand for an hour or more was real torture." (19M95O) "I wasn't interested in Orthodox services. They were too long and boring." (23F96A)

**iv. Spiritual Heaviness** – The negative attitudes of many young people went beyond that of simple lack of understanding. Many felt different kinds of oppression. "In the Orthodox services it was very hard for me. I felt very tight, as if I were in a very narrow tunnel pressing in on me. This was both physical and mental. I couldn't relax." (21F93O) "My general impression was that it was very mystical, but somehow dark and gloomy." (25F93A) "I thought the music was boring, gloomy, scary and monotonous." (22M94O)

Again, as with the issue of incomprehensibility, many young people assumed that this is just the way things are. "I felt some fear in the celebrations and ceremonies. But I had the religious mentality that there is a God, and God is like that, and God is here, so maybe God likes all that. It feels normal to Russians, and even to Russian atheists." (19F99O) "My first impression of the Orthodox atmosphere was one of darkness. But I thought that maybe people needed this to be able to imagine God or something. Maybe they were creating this atmosphere for people to be fearful of God, and that people should think it should be different from the world – so it should be dark, and there should be candles." (32F92A)

But others felt driven away by those feelings of fear. "I felt really terrible when I would go to an Orthodox church. I felt an animal kind of fear. My one desire was to run away and never come back." (22M94O) "We would go on different tours and excursions with my public school class, and would go to monasteries. And they were always scary places. There were all those priests and all those monks in long, dark clothing. And inside the church were all the icons. And I didn't really know what it meant. I didn't really want to go there. For me it was enough to go and sit there just once, and see that darkness there. It was scary to me – I didn't really want anything to do with that religion, or whatever it was." (21F92A) One girl with a Moslem background gave her outsider's viewpoint: "In the church I got so frightened because of the smells and darkness and stuff. And I decided, 'Christianity is not for me, that's for sure.' And I thought, 'How can people come here? It is really frightening.'" (28F91M) For one young Orthodox man, the heavy feeling became a deep spiritual burden on him. "The atmosphere to me was heavy. And that is the kind of impression that I was getting about God – that there was no hope. It was a hopeless situation, and there was no way that I could get to Heaven or to God (I couldn't define it at the time). Whatever it was, it was just hopeless." (19M95O)

**b. Church Requirements** – As seen in some of the comments above, their lack of understanding was a burden for many young people in church. For most who mentioned this, it was the legalistic atmosphere, usually enforced by old women, which made going to the church a very unpleasant experience for them. "My grandmother often took me to an Orthodox church. I considered that it was a very beautiful place, but there were so many rules that I was always worried that I would do something that was not right. And I was afraid that

the babushki would scold me for doing something wrong. It didn't happen to me, but it happened to my friend. She just sat down during the time of a service. And you aren't supposed to sit during the service, and they scolded her. She was there in a service and her leg started to hurt, and so she sat down on a bench. And a babushka ran up to her and said, 'What are you doing?' and scolded her. And I was so surprised that you couldn't even sit down in the church." (15F99O) "There were all these weird ladies who would tell you to do this and don't do that, and you would become all confused, because you don't know how to act." (19F99O) "All these little old ladies who are there like to correct people. And they see this person who has just come, and so they were trying to correct me. 'You have to do this, and this and this, and you are doing that wrong, and you need to do this to please God.' This made me feel real uncomfortable." (32F92A) "I would go and the babushki would be rude to me. And I am the kind of person who doesn't like to be ordered around like that, so I couldn't handle it." (29F92O)

Young women felt an additional pressure of being required to dress a certain way in an Orthodox church. "I didn't like the atmosphere in the church. People there pay attention to the way you dress and how you behave yourself. And babushki would come up to me and say, 'Why don't you put something on your head?'" (18F99O) Young women noted that they were required to wear skirts, cover their heads, and remove all their makeup in order to go into church. "And all of these things were what I felt that religion did that makes you not beautiful, and which views women as evil in some way, wanting to undo the beauty and attraction of them." (25F93A)

**c. Orthodox Believers** – With some exceptions that are noted below, Russian young people had negative feelings toward Orthodox believers before they heard the gospel. Actually, the term "Orthodox believer," in the minds of many, could be considered by many to include almost everybody in Russia that has been baptized as an infant. But the focus here is on Orthodox people who take their faith and religious duties seriously. Some combination of the following categories defined the outlook of those I interviewed.

**i. General Respect** – Among young people there were those who had respected Orthodox believers for reasons of Russian tradition. "I always respected Orthodox believers, and thought that it was a part of national history and national life." (21F94A) This respect really began growing with Perestroika. "Later on in 1985 when Perestroika began under Gorbachev, and Orthodox churches began growing and developing, in the back of my mind I began respecting that." (26F92A) Some of the respect was for what they had been through under communism. "After I became a spiritual seeker, I believed that they were great guys, because in spite of all the pressure around them they still recognized that there is a God. And they really tried to reach God." (28M92A) For those who were themselves Orthodox believers, they would generally extend the same respect to them that they would to themselves. "They were just looking for God. They did the same things I did." (29F93O) "I considered myself to be a religious person. So regarding religious people, I felt that they believed in God, and that is good." (23M98O)

**ii. No Strong Opinion** – Another group of young people were largely indifferent to the religious Orthodox. "My attitude toward the regular people (in the churches) was neutral." (21F98O) "I didn't think about them at all." (17M96O) Some of this indifference was because they were not considered to be a different kind of people. "I had no thoughts about religious people. Maybe they were just like me." (17M99O) "I thought that religious people were normal people, but with a different understanding of the world. I didn't think

about this much. I would think of everyone equally." (20F94A) "They weren't different from other people except that they believed in God and went to church." (21F96O) Some young people had a hard time distinguishing the difference between those who were religious and those who weren't. "I didn't see a difference between a regular good worldly person and an Orthodox person." (32F92A) "I didn't know about the people who went to church, whether they were believers or not. They were like me. I didn't know the term 'believers.' I thought that all people were the same. They just either go to church or don't go to church. And the 'believers' were like the priests and leaders in the church. I saw them as two different groups." (19M97O)

**iii. Tradition-Bound** – One attitude that was expressed was that Orthodox believers were bound by traditions as opposed to having a vital faith. "I just looked at them as people who know some kinds of rituals, or who have to memorize prayers." (23F92A) "I didn't think that Orthodox believers believed in a living God. I thought it was just tradition." (18F97A) There were those who gained this attitude through personal experience: "I went to an Orthodox church to see what they did there, and what kind of God they worship, but they would tell me more about saints and traditions than about God." (32F92A)

**iv. Strange, Abnormal** – One of the most common attitudes held by young people was that normal people were not to be found in Orthodox churches. "I was looking for people who ... would just be normal people. Usually all the religious people that I saw were really weird. I never saw normal people who lived a life in Christ – just normal people and not 'freaks.'" (22M94O) For many young people, Orthodox believers just had a mild strangeness about them. "I thought it was strange that they went to church, and wondered what could be the purpose for them to go to church." (21M96A) "They definitely looked different, by even their outward appearance." (23F92A) "I had different attitudes toward religious people. Some of them I admired, but I pitied others, because they would be mocked at school. And I thought that these were just poor fanatics." (19M95O)

Other young people were less reserved in their rejection of the strangeness of Orthodox believers. "I kind of looked down on believers, and the Orthodox people that I saw. They looked real pitiful to me. I thought that they were mentally disturbed – that's how they appeared to me." (21F93O) "I thought that they were freaks." (27M92A)

**v. Ignorant and Foolish** – The common belief promoted by communists, and thus picked up by many young people, was that believers were simply uneducated. "I pretty much looked down on religious people. I looked at them the way people usually did, that they are unlearned. They were fooled, since as Marx said religion was opium for the people. And I believed this." (28M92A) "My first idea about Orthodox people was that they were uneducated people, like old women who have no education, and they fear God because they don't know science." (32F92A) Some reacted negatively to what they saw as superstitions mixed with faith in Orthodoxy. "I didn't really understand, but I saw this weird superstition built on something that was serious..., and I think this is what brought out of me such a negative reaction." (22M94O) "Sometimes I would hear people say, 'Did you know that icons cry with oil, yet there is nothing behind the icon?'" (27M92A)

**vi. Only Old Women** – The most common connection to Orthodoxy made by young people was that of the ever-present old women at the churches. For many this was the primary picture that they had of Orthodoxy. "The only religious people I ever saw were those babushki in the Orthodox churches who were really into it, and so were wearing scarves on their heads, bowing down, and memorizing all those prayers in the old Slavonic language,

and so it seemed strange to me." (26F92A) "When I would think of a Christian, I would think of an older lady with a scarf around her head and a long skirt, in front of an icon." (23F92A) The communists used this very fact for propaganda purposes, and it had worked on many young people. "I thought that religious people were just a bunch of old women who are too old to change. That's what they were taught to believe when they were young, and they are just too dumb to realize that there is no God. That was my prideful and arrogant perspective of religious people." (27M91A) "I just explained to myself, 'When you get old, you get all kinds of strange thinking.'" (25F93A) Perhaps more important than the presence of old women was the absence of young people. "I never saw any younger people who were believers – only older people." (22M94O) "I never saw a believer who would be young or in mid-life, or who would be active." (27M91A) "The first time I met young people who were believers was when I repented myself." (26F92A)

**vii. People Without Vitality** – Young people, who are full of energy, often could not identify with the lack of such energy in people they saw in Orthodox churches. "The people I knew about who were religious were these old ladies covering their heads. It looked very mysterious, and it didn't draw me to them, because it seemed that there was no life in them. They were so quiet. I didn't really pay any attention to them." (19F96A) "They spent their time and their life doing nothing. I didn't like them." (18F99O) Some connected this lack of vitality with restrictions imposed on their lives. "It was hard for me to understand how people could forget about worldly pleasures." (22M94A) "I looked at people in the Orthodox church, and would see the women with scarves, and who can't really step out and do anything in the world – they had to watch their step carefully. And they were very boring, and there was nothing to talk about with them except about God." (15F99O)

**viii. Hypocritical** – One of the more negative judgments made on Orthodox people was the hypocrisy that young people commonly saw in churches (and, to be fair, in themselves as well). "Regarding the people in the churches, this brought me to some disillusionment and confusion, because it seemed so hypocritical. I understood that it was just like a 'show.' And they would go to church, and then sin again, and I did the same. And I clearly understood that this is not the way it should be." (19F99O) "I saw that unbelieving people would go and light a candle, thinking things would be better for them if they did this." (17M99O) "I saw that people just talked about their faith and didn't live it out, and I knew that this wasn't right." (15M99O) "They went to church, but they would also use alcohol and drugs." (21F98O) "I had a relationship with some Orthodox people. I saw that they were absolutely not holy. I saw the way they talked about God, but didn't do anything about it. I didn't think that they were alive spiritually – they didn't reveal this." (18F97A)

Some of the hypocrisy related to the growing acceptability of faith after Perestroika, in which "it became fashionable to wear a cross, get baptized and go to church." (26F92A) At Easter it was common for people who had no other signs of spiritual life to enter into the words of the holiday: "People would say, 'Jesus is risen,' but it was so formal it was almost like, 'How are you doing.' But it bothered me, because it was just once a year, and then the next day everybody goes back to drinking and stuff. People didn't really care about God – it was just fake to me when people would say that." (27M92A) "On Easter, when I heard these people, who didn't really believe, saying those things, I think I felt that it was hypocrisy. I really hated to hear this." (22M94O)

**ix. Self-righteous** – After the fall of communism, when many people started to go back to churches, the tables began to be turned. Now the people who had all along been in

the ridiculed churches could look down on those from the world who were finally coming in to them. "Orthodox people would put themselves on a higher level than others, because they knew much more than others." (29F93O) Again, it was the babushki who were identified as the main gatekeepers in this regard. "People are very angry in the Orthodox churches. I would see it in their eyes, and hear it in how they talked. If I didn't understand something, I would try to ask the priest, or the babushki (who seemed to know what they were doing), but they would say something mean to me or yell at me – and they do yell a lot - but they would never explain. They would say, 'You aren't supposed to talk right now,' 'just get out of here,' 'you don't know anything,' 'you're not supposed to stand here,' and other things. And a lot of those things really pushed me away." (21F93O) "The babushki never allowed you to go anywhere. They would say, 'Don't stand by that icon!' because it was a special place. So I was thinking, 'Okay, I don't like those old ladies.'" (22F95O)

**d. Orthodox Leaders** – Though Orthodox believers were not always easy to differentiate from common Russian people, this was not the case with the priests and monks. They wear very distinctive robes, and everybody knows who they are. Many of the things that were said above about normal believers were repeated about the leaders, but often with more focus. Some held them in reverence. "I would look at Orthodox monks and priests and think, 'These are committed people. Those guys have committed their whole lives to God. I admired them. I felt that they were the closest to God, and that when you talked with them you would really get the answers from God.'" (19M95O) The supposed ideal lives of the leaders did not mean that all were endeared to them. "I didn't like the religious leaders, because they were so righteous. They knew how to behave, and they were so spiritual. I did wrong things, but I thought of them as very right, very ideal, and close to God." (21F98O) Others had some personal discouragement as a result of looking at them. "When I looked at them I thought, 'There is no way that I could become a monk – I just wouldn't make it.' And so I concluded, 'Well, it will just never work with God.'" (19M95O)

Others saw the difference in these men not in terms of holiness, but strangeness. "Seeing those monks on the street wearing black robes, they were just strange to me. I never understood what they were doing or why they were doing it. I thought that they had no reason for this – just some strange ideas. They were just strange and crazy, and it was even funny for me to see them." (22M94A) "I thought of religious leaders as fanatics – weird people with boring lives. They always pray, they have beards and wear all black." (19M97O) Some formed their opinion of the Christian life by observing these men. "I met what I considered to be 'Christian' people, and these were the hungry-looking, gray young men that were going on the electric train between Alexandrov and Sergeev-Passad, where the religious people were studying. And I thought they were sad and hungry-looking, and I thought, 'Hey, it is not fun being a Christian.'" (28F91M) Others even had some fear of them. "The only religious people that I knew about were those priests and monks, but I would not even have called them 'religious' at that time, because I didn't know the word. I knew that they were somehow associated with those saints in the churches, but I didn't know that they were associated with God or anything. But I was afraid of them. They looked strange, and they had those long beards, and there was something dark about them. So for me, as a little girl, it was quite scary." (21F92A)

The charges of self-righteousness were directed against some priests, as they were against the regular believers as noted above. "The priests would put themselves on a higher level than others, and were kind of looking down on everybody else." (29F93O) Young

women venturing into churches felt this the most. "I went all around to the Orthodox churches, but I wouldn't wear a skirt, and I would wear makeup, and I would not cover my head. So no Orthodox priests would speak to me or answer any of my questions. At that time I felt really offended by that. I didn't like the fact that the clergy wouldn't even look at me when I spoke with them." (25F93A)

The perceived hypocrisy of some priests was a repellent to some young people, especially in the early days of Perestroika. "I knew that there was lots of hypocrisy among the Orthodox priests. I heard about this, how the priests would teach regular people to fast and pray and to do all these good things, but they themselves would get drunk and lead immoral lives." (32F92A) One young woman felt she had experienced this personally. "I went to the priest for confession, and ask about sexual sin, and ask him for a word about this. And he would say that I was taking the sins of this man onto myself, because we were one flesh when we were doing this. But then I saw this impure look in his eyes as he was looking at me. And this kind of thing more and more disappointed me." (29F92O)

**e. Orthodox Exclusivity** – Although there are some forms of Orthodoxy that do not consider Orthodoxy to be the only Christian church, and some regular Orthodox believers who do not believe it, young people can often hear what this young man heard: "The Orthodox people consider that they are the only true church, and that others are sects and false teachings." (17M99O) Some young people under communism were not even aware that other forms of Christianity existed. "I never thought about the Orthodox Church claiming to be the only true church. It was just 'The Church' to me. We weren't allowed to know anything else, so people didn't know." (21F93O) People today are aware of other forms of Christianity, and many of them don't know of Orthodox exclusivity. "I didn't know that Orthodoxy claimed to be the one, true church. And usually ordinary people aren't aware of this. Contemporary people think that Orthodoxy is simply one of the religions, one of the ways to God." (22M94O) Some who found out about this exclusivity became confused by it. "I knew that Orthodoxy considered itself the only true Christian church in the world. I was told that Catholics were a 'different' kind of church, so I didn't have an idea of Christianity having different denominations. But at the Catholic church I saw that they worship Jesus Christ, and mention Him. So then I felt that there is one kind of religion, but two different parts of it. And I was wondering why the Orthodox Church calls itself the only true church if there is another one." (32F92A) There were those, of course, who started out in Orthodoxy and accepted this exclusivity. "When I became a seeker..., I then became very much pro-Orthodox when I learned about Christ. At first I thought that it was the only way." (28M92A)

**f. Prospect of Becoming Orthodox** – For those young people who were not already Orthodox, most of the factors above worked together to dissuade them from wanting to be Orthodox themselves (in any more than a very nominal way). One common idea was that in order to become Orthodox, one would need to become a monk or nun. "Many people are afraid that if they become believers, they will have to become Orthodox and go to a monastery, and so on." (22M94O) "For me to become a Christian would mean for me at that time becoming something like a monk, going to a monastery and shutting myself off from the world, and even forgetting the world and people. I would think it meant living in solitude until the end of my life." (22M94A)

Others were turned away by the idea of becoming like the people that they saw in Orthodox churches. "I wouldn't associate with them. I wouldn't have wanted to do anything like they did." (26F92A) "I thought that religious people were fanatics, and that it was not for

me." (21F96O) "I thought that religious people were strange. I had different interests than they did, and so didn't feel like associating with them." (15F99A) This lack of desire to associate with them was not necessarily a shunning of spiritual things. "Regarding believers, I didn't want to be like them. I wanted to be a believer according to my own understanding of how a believer should be. They were not an example for me." (29F92O)

**2. Toward Russian Protestants** – Many Westerners have come to Russia and worked with existing Protestant groups such as the Baptists and Pentecostals. They are usually not aware of how obscure and berated the Protestants have been in Russia. The majority of the young people said almost the same thing: "I didn't know anything about Protestants." (19M97O) "I only heard about Protestants after I had heard the gospel. I only knew that Orthodox and Catholics existed." (15F99O) Almost none of the young people I interviewed had any notion of the Pentecostals, so most of the comments in this section relate to the Baptists. Again most said something like, "I didn't know anything about Russian Baptists. I didn't know that they existed." (26F92A)

**a. A Cult** – Among those that had heard of the Baptists, most considered them to be a cult. "I had heard about Russian Baptists, but only bad things – they are a sect, a cult." (32F92A) "I knew that there were heretics in the world. In my lectures at the university I heard that Baptists and Pentecostals were officially cults." (23M98O) Among young Orthodox people, this idea made them afraid of Baptists. "Once I visited a Baptist church by accident. My mother had asked me to place a candle for my grandmother who had died. So I went into this church, but I didn't see any candles. The pastor came up to me and asked me how I was doing. So I shook his hand. I kind of looked around. The pictures on the wall kind of reminded me of the Orthodox church, so I didn't comprehend immediately that this was not an Orthodox church. So I was shocked that the 'priest' had greeted me. But as soon as I realized that this was not an Orthodox church, I ran away in shock." (23M98O) Even those who were not Orthodox would be against the Baptists, often simply because they were not Orthodox. "I wasn't much aware of Russian Baptists, but I knew that they were Protestants, and so was at first kind of critical about them." (28M92A) Even their name caused others to dislike them. "People didn't know what the word 'Baptist' meant. In Russian it sounds pretty scary. It doesn't sound nice in the Russian language." (21F93O)

**b. Evil People** – Many who thought they knew more about the Baptists were often operating on vicious rumors that had spread throughout the Soviet Union. "In the area of my town where I lived in Siberia, people would tell me not to go play in the poor neighborhoods, 'because there is a prayer house of Baptists there, and they sacrifice children.' So my perception was, 'Baptists – that means that they sacrifice children. This was always in the back of my mind.'" (27M92A) Much of this kind of rumor had started with a movie produced in Soviet times. "The communist government produced this one movie that was on TV many times about these Baptists in the village somewhere. And they showed a service where they were crucifying a person." (27M92A) "There was this one movie in which Baptists sacrificed children, and so people would talk about this." (21F93O) Even in recent times young people had been frightened by such rumors. "I knew about Russian Baptists, but I didn't think anything good about them. I thought it was a cult where they did something terrible and scary. Everyone would tell fairy tales and stories about Baptists. My friend told me such things." (19F99O) "I knew about Baptists, but had a negative attitude, because I was told really awful stories about them – that they killed children and drank their blood. Rumors about them spread all over. I was afraid of them." (21F98O) "I lived in the village, and there

was one grandmother who was a Baptist. People would say that she was very strange, and that she was involved in different matters like kidnapping and things like that." (22F98M) Parents who were afraid of Baptists would then warn their children to stay away from them. "My mother was afraid of them, and warned me not to walk on the same side of the street as the Baptist church." (17M96O) All of this resulted in a common attitude: "I felt something was wrong with these people. I didn't even want to think about them." (27M92A)

**c. Uncultured People** – The Russian Baptists had developed into an isolated subculture through the Soviet period, and were largely excluded from higher educational opportunities. In fact, exclusion began early and made others afraid of their fate. "I heard that they were not allowed to be Pioneers, and the kids who were believers were strange, and so that was bad, because I was a Pioneer. Orthodox believers were allowed, but not Baptists." (27F95A) Others had heard rumors that Baptists "don't let people develop their abilities." (32F92A) Since they were not the same as others, and often tended to be more simple in dress and manner, they were often rejected as being unsophisticated. One girl who met a family of Russian Protestants said, "I didn't really like these people. They weren't very neat or sophisticated, and were very simple." (25F93A) Whether or not these comments squared with reality, they were in fact the attitudes that many young Russians held in their minds.

**3. Toward Outside Religions in Russia** – In order to understand responses to outside religions by Russian youth, it is important to realize how little these religions were known or understood, especially before Perestroika, but even after the fall of communism. The great varieties of religions in pluralistic Western countries, taken for granted by Westerners, was largely unknown to Russians. The entrance of outsiders into the Russian religious scene thus caused a great variety of responses from Russian youth.

**a. Curiosity** – The attitude of most youth in the early 1990's was one of curiosity. Many in Russia had never seen a foreigner in person, and this was a strong motivating factor for many to seek out Westerners. "Because the country had just opened up and such things were interesting to us, I was curious." (22M94O) There was a great lack of spiritual discernment, however. "This was a time when everything was changing, and people were all trying new things, and this (Western evangelicalism) was just another of the ideas that people wanted to try out." (22M94O) "I didn't have any question about what was right or wrong – I just grabbed everything I could." (19M95O) For others, it wasn't "religion" that aroused their curiosity. "I didn't know that Western groups were coming to Russia to preach. But I was very excited about Americans coming to Russia, though I didn't think about their Christian purpose for coming. It was new for all of us to meet with Americans back in 1991 when the doors had just opened up." (22M94A)

**b. Ignorance and Apathy** – There were many young people that either didn't know or didn't care that Westerners were coming to Russia. "I didn't know that Westerners were coming to Russia until I met them." (22F95O) "I didn't know that people from the West were in Russia talking about God." (13F99O) Others said, in several different ways, that the fact of Westerners coming to Russia didn't interest them. "I didn't pay attention to the fact that Westerners were in Russia teaching about God." (15F99A) "I wasn't really interested in the fact that outside people were coming to Russia to talk about God. It was all so new to me. I hadn't known anything like that before, and I wasn't interested." (21F94A) "I knew that people were coming in from the West to talk about God, but I didn't pay any attention to it, and didn't think about it." (29F92O) Some who were exposed to Western messages on television had a kind of detachment that was somewhere between interest and apathy. "I saw

some American preachers on TV. When I listened, I had a strange mixture of feelings. On the one hand, I felt that it was right, but on the other hand it seemed strange. I felt that it was good, but I felt that if I could actually see it and try it, then it would be interesting. So I didn't really pay too much attention to the TV messages." (22M94O)

**c. Welcoming and Acceptance** – Young people gave many different reasons for welcoming and accepting Westerners who came to Russia for religious reasons. Some accepted them for the main reason that they felt no reason to reject them, especially in the early 1990's when they didn't have much religious understanding or attitudes. "I had no negative attitude toward Western evangelists coming to Russia. I didn't have any feeling that my religion should be 'Russian,' because I didn't really see the difference. The nationalistic pressure was not there at that time. And we didn't know about the old Russian traditions at that time, because the communists had done a good job of erasing all religious traditions from society." (19M95O) "I didn't care if a person was a believer or not, as long as it was a good person and a nice person to be around." (21F94A)

Others were welcoming those who came to preach, for the very reason that these visitors were believers. "I didn't think anything bad about these preachers. I thought it was good, because they were believers. I thought that I was a believer too, so the fact that they were believers was good." (23M98O) Others connected this with their own curiosity or hunger for God. "The first people that I heard were coming from the West and talking about God were those who first shared the gospel with me. And when I realized that they came to tell me about God, that they came to tell me the truth that there is a Creator, I was very grateful to them. I understood that it was a very good work, and it was important for them to come." (21F92A) "My attitude to Westerners coming in was very positive. I never tried to say that some people are right and others are wrong. If I knew that they were believers, then I thought that it is great that they believe, because I didn't believe. It was interesting for me. I was attracted to them in general, thought I also knew that there were certain sects as well coming in." (22F98M) The path was paved for many Westerners through the "Superbook" cartoons that were shown on Russian TV in the early 1990's. "The first time I learned anything about the Bible was in watching some of the American cartoons on TV about God and about Bible stories. That was the first and the only thing that I was aware of before meeting the Americans through whom I heard the gospel. I really liked those cartoons." (21F93O)

There was also a group that was not only welcoming of foreigners, but were in fact looking to the West more than to their own country. "Frankly, I was predisposed to foreigners, and especially Westerners. And in fact I didn't like Russian people and Russian culture, and couldn't care less about it. So it was even beneficial that I heard the gospel from a foreigner. I didn't have that deep of roots in Russian culture and its religion." (27M91A) "I would actually accept more what foreigners said about God than what Russians said, because Russians didn't look like a good example to me. They didn't have something that I would want to have." (21F93O)

**d. Dismissing of American Religion and Culture** – The long history of Russia and its Orthodox faith, compared to the youth of America, was often a reason to question why Russia would need either culture or religion from the West. Some youth picked up on this. "I was a little critical at first, just because of the difference between the Western mentality and the Eastern mentality, and there was a lot of criticism of Americans. The basic concept was that they were bringing into Russia their American God. They are bringing their culture

along with their religion. And Russians are pretty proud of their 1000-year-old Christian culture, and it was pretty insulting to hear Americans preach to us, because they are only 200 years old, and we are 1000 years old, so our way is pretty much better." (28M92A) "I had some questions about why they needed to come to Russia if we have already had Orthodoxy for 1000 years." (17M99O) Even some who had rejected Orthodoxy were ready to reject Western religion for the same reason. "I thought it would be just like Orthodoxy, but in an American way. I thought, 'Why do I need that?' If didn't appreciate Orthodoxy, why should I appreciate that American thing?" (22M94O) Others were turned off by cultural manifestations found in America but not in Russia. "I knew about the evangelical church in our city, and about all these preachers who would dance and yell, and I didn't take them seriously. And my relatives would tell me that it was bad." (19F99O)

**e. Distrust of America** – Among many young people is a vague distrust of those who have come from the West. "I sometimes heard about Westerners coming to Russia to talk about God. I didn't trust them. I didn't understand what they wanted." (18F97A) "It seemed so strange to me why they would come to our church, give gifts and talk about God. After all, I'd already heard about God many times. Then they left, and that was it." (15F99O) "Before I became a believer I kind of had superstitions toward Americans, so I felt tense about them in the beginning." Others had more specific theories behind their distrust. "I didn't trust the people from the West that were coming to Russia to talk about God. I thought that they had only come to Russia to earn money and to deceive the Russian people, and that their religion was not right. Our religion was the most correct." (21F98O)

**f. Americans Rejected as Heretics** – Influence coming from Russian Orthodoxy caused some young people to consider all other religions to be heretical and something to avoid. "I heard something about Americans coming to Russia, and it was the common opinion that they were cults and sects. I believed that something was not right with them. Something was unusual. So I was trying to stay away from them." (19M97O) "I thought that all other religions were sects. I knew about Westerners coming in general, but didn't know that they were here around me. I would have a negative attitude toward them." (15M99O) "I thought that people coming in from outside were cults and false religions." (17F96O) Some had heard extreme statements in Orthodox churches against America. "Orthodox people would tell me that America was the harlot of Babylon." (19F99O)

**g. Fear of Cults** – Beyond the fear of theological heresy has grown a fear of the kinds of cults that will be damaging to young people in other ways. At first Russians had little knowledge of other beliefs as they were making moves of faith. "I didn't know anything about cults, because the country was closed at the time. I would only see a few foreigners when they would go to our school for a visit. Then when the country first opened, it was still just a few foreign people who entered. So it happened at the same time for me – Christians came, and all those cults came. But I was lucky enough to get among real believers at the first." (26F92A) Confusion reigned for those who were following the many religious appeals in Russia after Perestroika. "If you turned on TV in those days, you would see a lot of different religious programs and people testifying about the change in their life for the better. But you could see a lot of different things on TV about different religions. I remember clearly this one Krishna follower saying, 'I was a drug addict, and my dad was a drug addict. And now I have become a Krishna worshipper. We shaved our heads, and we look like freaks, but we're actually good guys, and you should join us.' And I was thinking, 'No way – I don't want to join *those* people.'" (27M92A)

Several events raised the fear of parents and young people in the early 1990's. A group called the "White Brothers" got a reputation for wild predictions and hyper-control of young people. This scared many people away from anything not Orthodox. "I was confused by the White Brothers, who were predicting the end of the world. I was a young girl at the time, and was afraid of the end of the world. I saw other cults as well, but I was afraid of them, and I was careful at that time. I thought I should stay away from anyone who is not Orthodox." (19F99O) As a result of this activity, "rumors started circulating that we were getting a lot of cultic things in Russia." (19M95O) "People were really scared about sects and cults. And since they were coming from the West, this caused fear." (21F94A) So all Western groups, including evangelicals, began to be lumped together with the other groups coming into Russia. "When there were different movements and denominations, I would think of them all as sectarians. I knew that Western groups were coming in, and all of them were sects. I thought that they had their plans and goals, and I was afraid that these people were influencing our minds, and that a person would become dependent on them. I was afraid of that." (20F94A)

Finally, since evangelical Christianity is still within the realm of "Christendom," it is likely to arouse less fear in young people than something that is entirely foreign. "I wouldn't have had much questions about people coming in from another country, but I would have had more question about Buddhists coming in that I would about Bible-believing Christians." (23F92A)

**C. Religious Practices** – Some of the Orthodox religious practices of young people can be inferred from the discussion above regarding their religious attitudes. However, in this section I will focus on more specific statements they made regarding these practices.

**1. Church Attendance** – Unbelieving young people, of course, never went to church as a religious practice (perhaps they visited out of curiosity). However, even those that might be considered "religious" by others didn't go to church very often, with a few exceptions. Most of the Orthodox would say, "I would visit the Orthodox church on Sunday sometimes." (23M98O) Or else, "We would normally just go to church on major holidays." (21F98O) Frequency might increase if the young person had a particular need. "When I would need God's help, for example before exams, I would go to church more often." (23M98O) Some were reluctant to go to church, but just obeyed parents in the matter. "My mother forced me to go. If I had the question 'Why?' the answer was, 'It is something you have to do.' So for me, church was just something that you have to do. There was no teaching." (21F93O) As a result, some of these young Orthodox people went to church mechanically. "There was a time when I went to church without feeling anything. I just knew that God was inside." (29F93O)

This kind of church going caused confusion and inner turmoil in some young people, who would alternate between a good and bad conscience. "I would visit Orthodox services more than others, but it was still just once in a while. It was not continuous. I would feel like you come to church and you say your prayers, but that there was no use. So I didn't feel that it was something that I needed to do, but on the other hand when I went out of church I felt better. I would then think it is good to go. But I would also understand that my approach was not the one God wanted. On the one hand I thought I was a believer, but on the other hand I thought it was foolish." (19F99O) "I would go to church and stand for the whole service. I would take communion and do confession, and then I would leave. I would be pleased – until the next time I sinned. And this would go on and on." (23M98O)

**2. Baptism** – The Orthodox Church baptizes children, and this practice was carried on all through the communist period. "My mother went often to Orthodox services. And she wanted me to be baptized (as a baby). They did it in secret at night, in hiding from the militia, since she could be fired for this." (22F95O) But baptism was practiced not only by Orthodox families. One girl who grew up in a staunch communist family was baptized secretly for an unusual reason: "When I was seven years old, my parents took me and my little sister to be baptized. This was because my aunt had some breast problems that she could not treat in a regular hospital. She went to these women who whisper and do all these mystic things, as an alternative medicine. They would always ask you if you had been baptized, and so this had some kind of mystical connotation to it. And because that breast problem occurred in the family, and we had not been baptized, my parents took us to be baptized, far away from Moscow." (25F93A)

During and after Perestroika, baptisms of young people took on a popular status. "Under Perestroika it became fashionable to wear a cross, get baptized, and go to church." (26F92A) One family that I knew had two daughters who had gotten baptized, but for them it did not involve going to church, and their grandmother said it was "just a fad." This was supported by other young people I interviewed. "I was baptized in an Orthodox church, but never went to church after that." (17F96O) "My stepfather took me to Moscow and asked me if I wanted to get baptized, and I said okay. I learned the Lord's Prayer and got baptized, and I never went to church after that." (18F97A) On the other hand, there were some young people for which the experience was profound. "I went to an Orthodox church to get baptized. I had never felt anything like that before. I had the feeling that I had been cleansed. It deeply affected me." (29F92O)

**3. Other Religious Practices in Church** – When young people spoke of their religious practice in the church, they mainly pointed to rituals. One of the most common was the lighting of candles. "I would light candles in the church, and my mom would ask me to light a candle for a certain icon, because it would give you health or happiness or whatever. And she said that I could ask for something that I wanted, and then light a candle. So I did. And I was quite happy about it, because I felt that it would help me to get what I wanted." (22F95O) Some practiced this mechanically. "During the services I would light candles without thinking of anything. No one would explain to me what to do and how to do it." (26M94O)

Very few of the young people had anything to say about other practices inside the churches, because in fact few were involved in church beyond the very minimum. However, one young woman who started going to church as an adult described her response to confession and communion. "I was baptized in the Orthodox church when I was around 25. The next week I came to the church, and saw the procedure of confession and communion, and I did it, and didn't like it. I didn't like the idea of people confessing their sins to a man, and I knew that this man was not perfect, and I knew that some people had to pay money for this. They didn't ask me to pay, because I was a first-timer. And, since I was a medical student, I didn't like the idea of every one taking communion from one spoon, with a whole line of 100 people, and all this kissing of the ring and everything." (32F92A)

**4. Religious Practices Outside of Church** – Besides the little that the young people did inside the church, most said the same basic thing: "I didn't do anything religious outside of the church." (19M97O) "I didn't have any real religious behaviors outside the church." (19M95O) One of the only things that many did was to wear a cross, which had become

fashionable in the 1990's. "I wore a cross before I heard the gospel. I thought that I was a believer, so I had lots of crosses. Maybe if I would wear the cross, God would do something better in my life, or protect me because of this." (15F99O) The other practice surrounded enduring restrictions on holidays. "When there was a certain Orthodox holiday, I wasn't allowed to do anything. I couldn't clean my room or take a shower. The religious holiday was supposed to be dedicated to God, so you don't do any cleaning, because it is dirty work." (21F93O)

**5. Private Prayer** – Only a few of the young people mentioned having any prayer outside of the church, but there were a few who took this seriously. "I accepted that I would go to the church as a holy place to pray, but I would also pray at home on my knees all the time as well." (29F93O) For some, this tradition had begun with a grandmother (and, as this next quote shows, could have ended there as well). "When I was a little girl I lived with my grandmother. And at night she would pray, and I would pray with her. But then she died, and I forgot all about this." (15F99O)

Very few of the other young Orthodox people had practiced private prayer beyond a few basic ritual evening prayers, often with weak motives. "I would do traditional prayers before I went to bed, like the Lord's Prayer. I felt that this was enough for God. Well, I knew that it was not good, but I thought that I should maybe do it 'just in case.' Maybe it would help me for the next day. I would think that at least I did something good." (19F99O) One young man noted that there was no real life to his ritual prayer. "Prayer for me was just kneeling and reading something from a book – it was pretty boring." (19M95O) Another young person noted the self-serving nature of her prayers. "My mom told me that she wanted me to pray to God, but she didn't really tell me how. She wanted me to pray to God every single night, so I was trying to do it as best as I could. And my prayers were like, 'God, help me to get good grades in school, and I would like to have a new dress or a new doll, if it's possible to help me with this,' and so on." (22F95O) For many, prayer was something to do in extreme circumstances only. "I went one time to pray when my brother went into the military, because I thought that he might be killed." (21F98O) Nobody told of any kind of a normal prayer of communion with God as Father, a concept far from their minds.

**6. Bible Reading** – If few Orthodox young people prayed, even fewer read the Bible. Much of this is evident from the section above on the beliefs of young people about the Bible. But since a few had stated a high view of the Bible in that section, it might have been inferred that they read the Bible regularly. This was rarely the case. Even when the Bible had become widely available after Perestroika, it was not a part of the normal practice of young people to read it. For those few who did, it was often seen as another kind of ritual. "I read from the Bible, but it was the same as reading prayers. I felt that it was just a good thing to do." (19F99O) Others were thwarted by their lack of understanding and guidance. "Once I tried to read the Bible, but I didn't really understand anything, so I said, 'I'm not going to do that anymore.'" (22M94O) Others would read it now and then, with some influence on their hearts. "Once in a while I would read from the New Testament, because my grandmother gave it to me. This had influence on me, for certain. I had a fear of God when I would read Revelation. I also read the Sermon on the Mount. And I tried to practice it, but couldn't." (23M98O) Without guidance, it was possible to read such sections of the New Testament without a comprehension of the gospel, and become discouraged. "When I got to some parts, like the Sermon on the Mount, and would read it, I would get scared. Dead scared. Because I

knew that was how I was supposed to be, and I just understood that this is what God expects of me, and that there was no way I could come close to God." (19M950)

### III. CONCLUSIONS

**A. Selected Emphases** - Many different conclusions can be drawn from this paper. Each reader could emphasize themes in different ways, depending on what he or she was looking for. My summary conclusions are based on what I am looking for – the openness of Russian youth to the gospel of Jesus Christ. My selective emphases, then, fall under four main headings in this paper, starting from the cultural background and leading to the resulting "soil" that is found in the Russian youth of the turn of the century.

**1. Orthodox/Atheist Foundations** – The world view and values of a culture have roots in its history, and one must begin with the two dominating features of that history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Orthodoxy and Atheism. Outsiders may have considered that Russia was an "atheist" country in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this is a superficial perspective. The 1000-year history of Orthodoxy deeply affected the people of Russia - even through the period of the atheistic Soviet Union. However, since atheism was the dogma of the country in school, state and popular culture, it has also left a deep imprint on the people – even as many of them strive to return to some kind of Russian religious roots. And this historical struggle has its effect on Russian youth of today.

From their interpretations of Orthodoxy we can see how young people have taken the idea of a distant God, remote from sinners, who offers no assurance of forgiveness. They have a view of religion that is ritualistic to the extreme, and often has little to do with their daily lives. But much of this can also be attributed to atheistic pressures, which forced the idea of God out of the public sphere. Russian young people, like their parents, are used to living without a relationship with God, or at best with a remote relationship to Him. They may have a fear of death, but usually they have a lack of any desire to deal seriously with the issue. This is a profound cultural/religious inertia that is not to be overcome easily.

**2. Historical/Cultural Shift** – One very important feature of Russian youth culture is the recent, rapid change in characteristics of young people. The people who were in their teens in the late 1980's are a very different breed from the teens of today. There may be very little true atheism among young people anymore, but the practical atheism runs, it seems, even deeper. The deep curiosity of the early 1990's has passed away, and Western pop culture has rushed to fill the void left by the fall of communist ideology. The result is a great gap between young people today and those who are only ten years older than they are. That which appealed to a young person in 1990 is vastly different from that which will appeal to the young person in 2000. The great variety of options has resulted in a great variety of perspectives among young Russians, and the one who would reach them must be ready to probe deeply enough to understand their viewpoints. The strange mixture of world views and beliefs will be very different from what is normally seen in the West.

**3. Resulting Remoteness from Religion** – The most common result of the change in youth culture, built on the older framework of atheism and Orthodoxy, and now influenced by Western pop culture, is a remoteness from real spirituality. Young people on the whole may give minimal assent to very general religious beliefs, but they see very little true spirituality among themselves, and so lack much desire for it themselves. They have much ignorance about the nature of God and the Christian life, and have become apathetic in the

face of their many other worldly options. Further, they have largely taken on a distaste for what they think is religion. What they interpret as devotion to God is largely of no interest to them. The fact that they are rarely close to "their own" Orthodoxy does not mean that they are open to Western religions. In other words, their religious vacuum does not equal spiritual hunger.

**4. Reachable** – None of this is intended to paint a gloomy picture of the task of evangelism among Russian youth. Rather, the goal of this paper is that workers coming to Russia would become open-eyed to the seriousness of the task before them. Too much misinformation about the "great Russian revival" has been spread, and many think that Russian young people are all hungering for God, and will respond quickly to a simple gospel presentation given by an "enlightened" Westerner. This is not the case. And yet, Russian youth are reachable because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Each one of the quotes in this paper came from a young Russian who has since that time given his or her life to Jesus Christ. Some who seemed to be hardened beyond reach were softened by the Word of truth and the lives of loving believers. The way that this happened in their cases will be explained in detail in papers to follow this one. May the Lord guide us all to learn carefully the religious context of Russian young people, so that our work for the Lord will begin from the proper foundation.

**B. Areas for Further Research** – This paper has covered the perspectives of young Russian converts in many different areas of their internal and external religious context prior to their conversion. Each section suggests areas of further research that could be performed. I will mention just a few areas of both Qualitative and Quantitative research that would be useful in extending our knowledge of Russian youth culture.

### **1. Qualitative Research**

**a. Current Perspectives of Orthodox Youth** – These same interviews should be conducted with young Russians that are currently deeply involved in Orthodox churches. The young people that I interviewed were obviously not satisfied with Orthodoxy, and thus either left it or never went into it in the first place. The beliefs and attitudes of those who are firm in their Orthodox convictions would be a valuable addition to this research.

**b. Russian Youth and Orthodox Worship** – Young people explained their attitudes and practices to me in general terms. A more in-depth study of the Orthodox church as a "cultural scene" from the young person's perspective would require research that included on-site observation of youth as well as more in-depth interviews. This would help to get "behind" several of the comments read in this paper.

### **2. Quantitative Research**

**a. Quantification of Categories** – In each category in this paper, I have not attempted to identify what percentage of the Russian youth population holds to any particular attitude, belief, etc. This would require a quantitative study that surveyed a sample of the general population.

**b. Survey of Understanding** – My interviews identify a general ignorance among Russian youth regarding Christian truth. A survey could be designed that could test the actual level of understanding of key truths, and discover more precisely where the greatest misconceptions, as well as holes in understanding, are to be found among the youth population.