

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY
OF THE
ATTITUDES TOWARD LIFE AND RELIGION
AMONG MODERN RUSSIAN YOUTH

by

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INTRODUCTION

A rapid cultural transformation is taking place within the borders of Russia at the close of the 20th century. A new generation of young people is being raised in circumstances vastly different from those of their parents or grandparents. Traditional ethnographies describing the nature of the "Russian soul" are beginning to apply less and less to this new generation – a generation more influenced by factors outside of Russia than perhaps any generation in Russian history. New ethnographies will be required to gain an understanding of this new generation. This paper is a simple addition to that huge task.

The opinions in this paper come primarily from a few selected cultural informants living in the city of Ryazan, Russia. Through ethnographic interviews I have sought to gather information on the dominant attitudes of average, non-Evangelical Russian youth toward life and religion. I sought to discover overall features and general attitudes, and have not gone into great depth in the individual details. The result is an overview of important cultural and religious influences on modern Russian youth, and the resulting beliefs, values and attitudes that they display.

Russian young people are not a monolithic group, as explained in this paper. Any one young person may have attitudes quite divergent from what is explained in this paper. However, my informants and I have tried to aim for the dominant youth culture that is the primary audience for the gospel in Russia – and most specifically in Ryazan. The factors explained here could be helpful in any part of Russia, with some regional variations.

Sentences in quotations in this paper were suggested by the cultural informants as typical ways Russian youth would express themselves regarding various issues. I have provided some historical background myself, and have provided footnotes for insertions which I considered helpful toward understanding that background. All other statements of opinion and explanation of background come from the explanations of the informants themselves.

I. INFLUENCES ON RUSSIAN YOUTH

A. Major Ideological Influences

1. Russian Orthodoxy

a. Position

i. Main Religious Source – Russian Orthodoxy has been the national religion of Russia for just over 1,000 years. Up until the Bolshevik Revolution, it could be said that "To be Russian is to be Orthodox." Although there were a few Protestant groups that had become established in the late 19th century, and there was an intellectual circle in Russia that was attracted to a more evangelical faith, Orthodoxy reigned supreme and persecuted its opposition in Russia. Russian culture and religion were closely intertwined, and there was no such idea in operation as the "separation of church and state." Any discussion of modern attitudes toward life and religion must begin with this fundamental fact of Russian history.

ii. Break During Communism – During the seventy years of communism in Russia, the close identity of Russian culture and Orthodoxy was largely broken. Churches, monasteries and seminaries were closed down all over the country, although a nominal presence was always allowed. Atheism became the official state religion, and was aggressively taught in schools and youth organizations. The State used many means to discourage all citizens from

religious faith of any kind. The economic deprivations and even physical persecution are now well documented facts of this period.

iii. Privileged Position Regained – Since the fall of communism in Russia, the Orthodox Church has been making a comeback of sorts. Churches have been remodeled and rebuilt, and seminaries revitalized. Importantly, much of this "revival" has been with the help of the Russian government. Although Orthodoxy is no longer the official state church, it is always Orthodox leaders that appear in political gatherings. In the middle of this decade, a new law was passed that made it more difficult for new religious groups to become established in Russia – a law that had the strong backing of the Orthodox Church. Thus Orthodoxy is working hard to regain its lost position in Russia. The extent to which it will be able to do this is debatable, but it is clear that at least its symbolic position has been largely regained in the 1990's.

b. Factors of Influence

i. Claim of Exclusivity – Perhaps the most important factor of Orthodox influence is its claim to be the one true church of Jesus Christ on earth.¹ All others who claim to be followers of Christ are considered to be heretics. Those who seek to "cooperate" with Orthodoxy in evangelizing Russian youth are seeking in vain.

ii. Uncontextualized Traditionalism – The Orthodox Church believes that its forms, sacraments and traditions have continued uninterrupted from the apostles themselves.² The Church does not alter these forms in order to fit into a new context. These traditions are considered to be as authoritative as the Bible itself,³ and thus cannot be arbitrarily changed. When the average Russian youth thinks about the operation of "church," the images of the unchanging Orthodoxy all around him exert a strong influence. Russian culture has changed drastically since the Revolution; the Orthodox Church has not changed at all.

iii. Folk Syncretism – Although Russian folk ideas about God and the spiritual life come primarily from Orthodoxy, the practices of common people display a mix of Orthodoxy, paganism and folk superstitions. To understand the influence of Orthodoxy on young people, it is not enough to read the official church doctrines. The Orthodoxy that is observed by Russian youth is that which is practiced by the people around them.

iv. Nominality – Regardless of what level of commitment Orthodoxy may call for among its people, the common practice is one of extreme nominality. A reportedly high percentage of Russian youth have been baptized into the Orthodox Church, but very few will attend a service. A visit to a common service will reveal the fact that the overwhelming majority of attenders are older Russian women. Russian youth do not have an image of a vibrant church or a spiritual life that involves every aspect of life. Religion has the appearance of occurring just within the walls of a church, with the priest as mediator between the believer and God.

2. Secularism

a. Position

i. Main Cultural Influence – Secularism has been the central feature of the Russian cultural scene since the Revolution. All Soviet public institutions and all forms of art assumed a life without God. In order to learn more about God, one had not only to go out of his

¹ George Florovsky, *The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church*, in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 112.

² John Karmaris, *Concerning the Sacraments* in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 30.

³ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 109.

way, but had to face many obstacles as well. Even with the revival of Orthodoxy, mass culture even today operates very much in a secular mode.

ii. Main Peer Influence – With such a small percentage of Russian youth involved in any way in religion, the dominant peer influence is secularism. In spite of some reports to the contrary, there has been no mass movement of youth into churches. Thus the peer context for the average Russian youth is not a spiritual context.

b. Factors of Influence

i. Keep the Status Quo – Young people in Russia are peer conscious, like their counterparts all over the world. In Russia, to "be like everybody else" is to remain unreligious. It is the unusual youth who gets involved more deeply in religion, and one who does so stands out sharply from the crowd. The pressure is to remain like the group – and the group is not religious.

ii. Live With Minimal Religion – The status quo does not demand that a person have absolutely no religious beliefs – but just that they be kept to himself. One's religious practices should be inconspicuous. A common comment regarding the fear of becoming a deeply religious person is very telling: "Everybody will think I'm an idiot."

iii. Reject Soviet Ideals – The secularism of today's youth is different from that of their parents, because they have grown up without Soviet propaganda. Just as it would be strange for a young person to be very religious, it would be equally strange for that youth to have strong ideologies in the political realm. The result is that Russian youth are increasingly becoming devoid of higher ideals.

3. Western Culture

a. Position

i. The New Fashion – Western culture, in many forms, flooded into Russia after the fall of communism. The effects of this invasion are seen most strikingly among the young Russians, who are avid consumers of Western fashion and music. The desire to emulate the West is one of the more dominant themes in Russian youth culture.

ii. Cultural War – The traditionalism and conservatism of Orthodoxy works at cross-purposes with the faddism of Western culture. In the eyes of the Orthodox church, the Russian youth are being corrupted by these influences. The Church, in this message, is echoing the former communist position against the "damaging influences" of the Western world. At this point, it appears that Western values have captured the imaginations of the youth in a way that Orthodoxy is not able to counter. This has placed Orthodoxy in a defensive position, trying to salvage a traditional viewpoint that is quickly fading away.

b. Factors of Influence

i. Anti-Traditionalism – The influence of the West attracts youth into a mindset that seeks out latest fashions and ways of thinking. It calls them to reject the outdated ways of the past and look toward the future. As mentioned above, Western clothing and music have been fully accepted by most Russian youth.

ii. Rationalism – Traditional Russian thinking, heavily influenced by Orthodoxy, placed a high value on mystery, and called for a faith in the unexplainable. But extensive exposure to Western rationalism has helped influence Russian youth to question things that they cannot understand. This had already been an influence of communism, which tried to create a scientific mindset in Russia that looked for all explanations within the material world. Today, although Russian young people are rarely atheists, as will be explained below, they are much more skeptical than their ancestors.

iii. Materialism – The most common observation about Western culture, as seen by Russians via media or personal visits, is the drastically higher standard of living enjoyed by Western people. This is the most obvious feature of the West, since it is visible on the surface. Western values invite young people to find enjoyment in material things, and is a strong influence on the minds of youth who are hungry for a "better life."

iv. Hedonism – It cannot be said that the West introduced a love of pleasure to Russian culture. Russian youth had sought pleasure, though discreetly, even under communism. However, the hedonistic values of the West were some of the heaviest influences seen in the Western movies, television and music that captured the imaginations of the Russian youth. It can perhaps be said that the West offered a wider range of pleasures to be sold on the Russian market, and also made them seem all the more attractive.

B. Sources of Influence

1. Family

a. Parents

i. Secularism of Another Time – One can hardly imagine a greater generation gap as that which exists in modern Russia. The difference is striking between the world in which the parents grew up and that in which their children are being raised. Secularism with heavy ideology is a very different world view than secularism with freedom. The values and attitudes of the parents did not change overnight with the fall of communism – but the youth are absorbing a whole new set of secular values from many sources. The result is that parents and youth have less understanding of each other than they did a generation ago, when the schools were teaching the same thing to the children that they had to the parents.

ii. Nominal Orthodoxy – After the fall of communism, most parents began to have their children baptized into the Orthodox Church. This is a very old tradition, and most do not think deeply about the meaning of it. Once it is done, there will commonly be no further Orthodox influence through the parents. The parents themselves may rarely, if ever, visit an Orthodox church. There are also many parents who have no religious beliefs at all, but who still have their children baptized. Thus, nominalism in the extreme is a common approach of the parents of today's Russian youth.

iii. Fear of Deep Religion – Russian parents are usually pleased with a minimal, nominal Orthodoxy as explained above. However, if their child were to get more deeply involved in Orthodoxy, most parents would begin to worry. They might say, "It is strange that my child goes to church like this. Something must be wrong in his (or her) life." It is actually an abnormal thing for a young person to become serious about Orthodoxy. The parents would not usually panic, because they know that Orthodoxy will not deeply change their minds. As long as it doesn't bring anything very new to their lives, they will accept it with reservations. However, deep involvement in anything other than Orthodoxy is cause for grave concern among most parents, for the following reason.

iv. Fear of Cults – Along with every other Western influence invading Russia have come religious cults of all kinds. Many of them are destructive cults that have separated children from their families, and which result in highly regimented lifestyles. Parents are naturally frightened about these, all the more since Orthodox priests are often warning about them through various media. However, there is very little discernment among parents when it comes to non-Orthodox faiths. The tendency is to believe that they are all cults. An evangelical leader will often get a call from a mother whose child has started attending the church. She will

anxiously ask something like, "What is going to happen to my daughter?!" Parents with stronger control over their children will often forbid them to attend a non-Orthodox church.

v. Loosening Grip on Youth – The power of parental influence is largely being offset by a growing movement among Russian youth to be independent and manage their own lives. As young people get into their later teens, peer influence tends to offset parental influence. It would not be considered "in vogue" to order one's life according to parental opinions, and so teenagers do not necessarily avoid non-Orthodox religions just because of the disfavor of their parents.

b. Grandmothers

i. Source of General Belief – Many have credited Russian grandmothers for passing on the tradition of belief in God to younger generations. With the overwhelming majority of married couples both at work, and with the great number of single-parent households in Russia, grandmothers have long had an important hand in the raising of children – especially in their early years. It is very common for the grandmother to live in the same apartment as a married couple, and so the exposure of Russian children to their grandmothers is much greater than it is in the West. (Due to alcoholism, deaths in WWII, and split families, grandfathers have had much less influence.) The majority of grandmothers believed in God, and have passed this general belief down to children. Due to the vast ignorance of biblical teaching among the Russian population, it would have been rare for grandmothers to pass on much biblical substance to children. In fact, it has been common for folk superstitions to be handed down along with general theism – and most of it would be mixed with Orthodox traditions.

ii. Cultural Conservatism – Even the grandmothers who did not believe in God had passed down the folk wisdom of Russia to the children. This will include folk remedies for ailments, behaviors required to stay healthy, ways to behave in public, and the like. The general tenor of their input to children would always lean toward maintaining the traditions of Russia.

ii. Cause of Negative Stereotyping – The tendency for grandmothers to be believers and church attenders was often used by communists as propoganda. "Religion is just for old women – it is not for young people." A visit to any Orthodox or Baptist church will reveal a high percentage of old women in the congregations. As a result, many young people have the attitude: "Maybe I will become religious when I am old. It is boring for me now, and probably only when I am old will I be interested." These negative stereotypes have endured, and many young people are afraid to get too close to an "old person's" religion. It is simply not socially acceptable.

2. Peers

a. Strong Peer Pressure – Young people in the West are heavily influenced by their peers, and Russian youth feel this same pressure to conform to the styles and attitudes of those around them. Combined with the active desire to be independent from their parents, as mentioned above, peer pressure becomes perhaps the most dominant direct influence on Russian youth. A very common statement would be, "I don't want to be different. I want to be like everybody else."

b. Pervasive Secularism – The dominant life perspective of a Russian teenager's peers is secularism. It is different from the secularism of their parents, because it has not been influenced by constant educational propoganda. But the practical result is that young people live their lives with very little thought of God. They don't deal with spiritual issues in their everyday lives, and find few around them that do. As a result, they will say, "Everybody else lives that way (without God), so I should too."

c. Desire for Fun – Russian teenagers love to have fun, and seem to have few moral scruples about what is or is not an appropriate way to seek this fun. There is a strong pressure on peers to join in the fun, and few have the ability or desire to resist. As will be seen below, one of the ideas held by Russian youth is that religion is something which gets in the way of fun, and for that reason is to be avoided.

d. Pressure Against Real Religion – The three factors above combine to create an atmosphere in which deep religion of any kind is rejected among Russian youth. It is generally acceptable among peers for a teenager to wear a cross, carry an icon, or occasionally visit a church service – as long as it does not affect his or her everyday life. Young Russians do not freely discuss deep life issues – this is a matter only for a very few close friends. It is no small matter to break through the surface of superficial religious issues to get to the heart of true faith, and even then a young person is going to be thinking, "What would my friends think if I responded to this message?" The usual answer is, "They will think I have become strange." Getting deep into religion automatically makes a person an outsider from the dominant peer group. One young Christian man said, "When God starts doing something, people become suspicious and oppose it."

In the initial days after the fall of the Soviet Union, an atmosphere of tolerance reigned. Everything was new and open, and there was very little active opposition to steps of faith. In many ways, people did not really know what to expect from open faith in God, and were ready to welcome anything that would help them escape the troubles of the past. As life began to enter the post-Soviet reality, with new worldly attractions flooding in from outside, young people became more aware of the meaning of making a choice to submit to God. The dominant peer culture ran faster toward materialism and hedonism than to spiritual values, and now those dominant values find the religious life to be a threat rather than a help. Subtle opposition to true religion began, and has grown into active persecution in some places. Young people are finding that accepting the gospel is going to mean rejection by their peers.

There are many young people who have had exposure to the claims of the gospel, and to the lives of true converts. If they have stayed in the world, many of them are convicted that they should be pursuing a higher kind of life. They become caught in the middle between the attractions of being popular and living life as they want to, on the one hand, and becoming a social outsider living by the will of God, on the other hand. They don't like the prospect of this change, as they understand it, and so would rather not be faced with the gospel message. The result is that many are actively avoiding exposure to true religion.

3. Priests and the Church

a. Subtle Influences – As mentioned above, the Orthodox Church makes the claim to be the church for all Russians. And, for around 1,000 years, that has been close to the reality. The very presence of Orthodoxy in every city and village, as well as the visible presence of priests and monks, has a subtle influence on the attitudes of all Russians. Many are not really aware of more than the very basics of the Christian faith, and all that they do know has come to them most likely through Orthodox churches and priests.

b. Kept at Arm's Length – In spite of this pervasive subtle influence, young people tend to keep the Orthodox Church very much at arm's length. Most would never go to see a priest to discuss issues of life. The prevailing practice is to do the absolute minimum – which in many cases is simply baptism. Even at the peak of the power of Orthodoxy in Russia, it was often said

that "the Russian masses were only superficially Christian..."⁴ Much of the approach of youth is simply a continuation of ancient tradition.

4. Schools

a. Orthodox Access and Courses – Although influences directly from priests and the churches are not great, Orthodoxy has relatively recently gained a special means of influence through public schools. Special courses are taught by Orthodox priests in many schools. The general assumption is that the children are Orthodox, and need to be instructed so that they will attend church. Orthodoxy, as the national symbol, is thus allowed to promote its "revival" in a way that makes no pretension to the American popular notion of the separation of church and state. As a result, in these schools almost every child will have exposure to Orthodox teaching. However, the attitude of the youth is consistent with their general apathy to serious religion. Most do not consider it an important subject, and the teaching is commonly taken very lightly.

The subject matter of the Orthodox teaching will generally be the laws and ways of Russian Orthodox church life. This would include lessons on the commandments of God, how to behave in church, how to pray (memorized Orthodox prayers), how to make the sign of the cross, and other rituals that each Orthodox believer should know. There may also be teaching about Orthodox theology and philosophy. There would certainly be warning against getting involved with any non-Orthodox religion, all of which would be labeled as "cults." There would not be the kind of New Testament study with which Evangelicals are familiar.

b. Bias Toward Conservatism and Nationalism – In addition to the influences of priests visiting the schools, the tendency is for teachers of other subjects to be promoting Russian tradition. The curriculum in schools has not changed very much from Soviet times, other than the removal of atheist propoganda. What has changed is that teachers tend to promote the Russian way, including Orthodoxy. Their attitude would be, "Our religion is Orthodoxy, so you should believe the priests. If you try to seek God, seek Him through Orthodoxy." Even teachers who are not believers would tend to hold to this view.

The bias of teachers commonly includes warnings against Western influence. This was the constantly repeated theme to youth all through Soviet times, and it is slow to disappear (if it ever will). Teachers of subjects that deal with religion, such as History and Sociology, are not inclined to think well of Evangelical churches, because they perceive them as being something from abroad, and "not ours." The common attitude is, "It is American influence. We are Russians, and outsiders should not influence our culture."

c. Atheistic Science Holdover – During communism, science was one of the main sources of anti-religious propoganda. Evolution was taught as fact, and teachings about God ridiculed. Although there is no more atheist propoganda in science courses, the continued teaching of evolution, without any counterbalancing teaching on creationism, is bound to have some effect on the thinking of students.

d. Exclusion of Evangelicals – Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, American Evangelicals were welcomed to come and speak to Russian students in classrooms and assemblies, and were allowed to say whatever they wanted. The gospel was preached openly in many cities, right in the schools. Over the past several years this door has been closed, and Americans are no longer allowed to come into schools and present their beliefs. The resurgence of Orthodoxy has combined with the conservatism of the establishment, as described above, to once again close schools to the gospel.

5. Media

⁴ James Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 129.

a. Orthodox Presence

i. Orthodox Access – In the early days after communism many different Evangelical programs were aired on Russian television. Along with the "Jesus" film, Christian cartoons aimed at children were watched by many people (including adults). Now those days are gone, and the main presence left on television is an Orthodox one. There are several regular programs with Orthodox teaching that will be seen by viewers. The vast majority of Russians only receive a handful of channels, and are more likely to see any particular broadcast program than are their counterparts in America who, through satellite and cable, have access to dozens of channels. Orthodox priests also use radio for spreading their teaching, but these will be far less likely to have much of an audience among youth.

ii. The Orthodox Message – Apart from normal teaching, Orthodox leadership uses the media to broadcast warnings against all other religions. The attitude of youth toward these warnings depends largely on their presuppositions about Orthodoxy and the West, as will be explored below. But many who are nervous about the gospel in general will remember those broadcast warnings and be less likely to pursue further understanding.

b. Secular Presence

i. Russian TV and Movies – Russian television was rather limited under communism, but the Russian movie industry thrived, producing a constant flow of entertainment (of the politically correct sort) for Russians to enjoy. Both television and movies grew up under communism, and so are entirely without religious content (or, if religion is portrayed, it is not in a positive light). The pervasive secularism mentioned above is clearly evident in any television and movies that Russian youth would have watched in their lifetime.

ii. Russian Popular Music – Russian popular music used to be heavily controlled under communism, but is now a free-wheeling industry. Consistent with general youth attitudes about religion, popular music has very little to do with the topic. There is only a tiny evangelical music industry in the stage of infancy, but this music would rarely be heard outside of church circles, and would get virtually no media exposure.

c. Western Presence

i. Television and Movies – American movies and television shows are extremely popular on Russian television and in new movie theaters. Many Russians comment, however, that it is the sex and violence of American shows that are having the most impact on Russians. Russian movies under communism were quite conservative morally, even in the absence of religious values. Today the worst values of the West are extensively marketed to young Russians through the media, not only giving them more taste of moral laxity, but associating in their minds these kinds of values with Western culture.

ii. Music – American music, mixed with Russian, is heard on all Russian radio stations that target the youth market. The extent of listening is thus very widespread. The nature of the influence is harder to estimate than that of movies and television. Unlike the case with the visual media, there is no translation broadcast with songs that are in English. However, the visual images of the singing groups are collected by many Russian youth, affecting attitudes even without the benefit of verbal understanding.

6. Government

a. Alignment with Orthodoxy – Although the Orthodox Church does not have the legal status as the national church of Russia, it certainly has the symbolic status – and this is seen in the way that Orthodox influence has entered politics since the fall of communism. It has been common for President Yeltsin and other high officials to be filmed at an Orthodox event, and for

the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to be present at selected political and public gatherings. This would be completely unheard of for any Evangelical group in Russia. Many scoff at the involvement of the government officials, pointing out that all such acts are purely political. Nevertheless, if the Orthodox Church had no influence with public opinion, even such political actions would not be taken.

b. Weakness of Moral Authority – The widespread distrust of government that grew under communism has spread to the Russian youth of today. The common attitude is that it is better not to listen to government, because they are incompetent. You might hear, "They want something from us, and we should avoid what they say to us if we can." Cynicism is so widespread that very few youth even get involved in politics. They have tended to close it out of their lives. As a result, a government stand on an issue, such as, for example, a call for Russian youth to get involved in Orthodoxy, may be more likely to produce the exact counter effect.

II. SLAVOPHILES AND WESTERNIZERS

A. Historical Background

1. An Old Controversy – A famous historical debate that has been long carried out in Russia, but has been especially strong since the middle 1800's, is between two different views of how Russia should create its path in the world. There are many aspects to this debate, but a few are especially relevant to understanding modern Russian attitudes. Slavophiles believed that Russia held the key to the regeneration of Europe through ideals found uniquely in traditional Slavic culture and Orthodox Christianity. Westernizers were in favor of leaving behind these ideals in a move toward more rational ways that they believed were found in Western thought.⁵ The entrance of communism into Russia complicated the issue even more, but did not eliminate the underlying controversy among Russians.

2. Unchanging Orthodox Position – The Orthodox Church, with its ultra-strict traditionalism, has unswervingly championed the Slavophile position in Russia. Many Orthodox leaders have called for a return to the pre-Revolutionary ways in Russian society, a call that Westernizers find to be extremely unenlightened. This is an important fact in understanding how youth view religion. As long as Orthodoxy remains the conceptual base for youth comprehension of the Christian faith, that faith will seem to be completely removed from modern reality.

B. Current Manifestations

Although radical cultural changes are taking place among Russian youth, an awareness is still very present that two polar positions exist, which have their roots in the debate between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. The positions have shifted somewhat, largely because the Orthodox Church has lost its predominant position in shaping attitudes. What largely remains among Slavophiles takes the form of Russian nationalism. Westernizers are also less ideological than their forebearers, and are mostly fixated on Western popular culture.

It should also be mentioned that these two positions do not always represent ideological camps with sharp dividing lines between them. However, there seems to be a gravitational pull in one direction or the other, and it is important in communicating with a Russian teenager to discover which way he or she is leaning. These do not seem to represent clearly identified and named subcultures, but I will use terms that I have heard from Russian young people to identify the alternative positions: traditional vs. contemporary.

In the discussions of beliefs, values and attitudes which follow this section, this division of young people will at times be important, and at other times not. But given that Russian youth

⁵ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p. 320-21

are culturally not a monolithic group, these basic distinctions as explained below will help to interpret the characteristics of youth within at least two major contexts.

1. Traditionals

a. Lifestyles and Characteristics – The image that is commonly held of these young people is that they head into ways of life and fields that are Russia-bound. When they are young they are more likely to be involved in sports, and young men are more likely to go into the military. Many who are business-minded end up heading toward Russian mafia connections. They are considered to be "tougher" in a sense, more able to deal with the harsh realities of current Russian life. For this reason they are often called "bulls" by contemporaries, or else "gopniki" – a Russian slang word that indicates a young man who thinks like a young gangster. Their clear intent is to stay in Russia and not alter their attitudes to take into account the ways of other cultures. Among the young women, the main interest tends to be on boys, and the main ambition to get married and have children. They tend to get married at a much younger age than the more contemporary young women.

b. Beliefs and Attitudes – The traditional young people are first and foremost patriots. They speak well of Russia; they love their country and are ready to die to defend it. They do not necessarily deny the current suffering present in Russia, but they do not believe that a person should try to escape it by leaving their homeland. Their traditionalism works in favor of the Orthodox Church. Although very few would actually be involved in the Church, they will say that, as Russians, "the Orthodox Church is our church. It has been proven for over 1,000 years, and we don't need to hear about any other kind of church."

2. Contemporaries

a. Lifestyles and Characteristics – Contemporary people tend to be pragmatic optimists. They are often found studying business, economics or law in better institutions, and are looking for creative ways to create for themselves a better life. They tend to adopt all things Western that they find attractive. Young women tend to stay unmarried much longer, and are not so fixated on setting up a household just yet. They have a positive attitude toward marriage, but see it as something to postpone until after their education is complete.

b. Beliefs and Attitudes – The contemporaries are often identified by their absence of national pride and their absorption of Western values. They are very flexible in their thinking, and are ready to leave Russia to find a better life elsewhere, should the opportunity present itself. Orthodoxy has the least hold on these people, who find it hard to believe that a Russian religion can hold all the answers for everybody – and especially one that is completely resistant to change in order to enter the modern world.

III. MAJOR BELIEFS AND VALUES

A. Cultural

1. General Values

a. Traditionalism vs. Novelty – Russians are historically a very traditional people, and accept new things very cautiously. Most see this as an influence that Russia gained from its involvement with Eastern cultures, which tended to look backward in history to find answers, rather than trusting in innovation and development as do Western cultures. Apart from its manifestation in the form of the patriotism of the traditional youth, however, extreme forms of traditionalism have seemed to lose their grip among all Russian youth. Even those who feel that they are holding to Russian ways are often not aware of how much Western ideas have already affected what is now considered by them to be Russian. Modern traditionalism among youth

would hold on to Russia as it is today, as opposed to attempting to return to an idealized pre-Revolutionary Russia. But most young people now want to change and catch up with the Western world – even those who are otherwise conservative

b. Ethnocentrism vs. Openness – This issue is related to the one above, but speaks more to the question of national pride. The Slavophile/Westernizer debate is seen perhaps most clearly in this set of contrasting values. There are many young people that have practically become Western in their outlook, largely through absorption of all things Western through the media. They dream about the chance to move to America and start a new life, and have no feelings of patriotism to keep them in Russia. They want a better life, and are ready to transfer to a new culture and leave everything Russian behind in order to find this life. (By the way, anticipating further discussion below, these are the young people that typically flock around American missionaries who come to Russia). Another group looks on this attitude as betrayal of Russia, as well as a leaving of what is already superior to the West (if not materially, at this point in time, at least culturally). There are also middle positions, such as the young person who might say, "It may not be good here, but at least I know how to live in Russia. It is safer to stay here."

c. Collective Idealism vs. Practical Individualism – Collective values have been strong in Russia even before the communist takeover of the culture. The collective farm was the picture of ideal living for many people. With communism came a pervasive idealism that was forced upon the people through many means. The suffering of Russians was to be accepted as a duty in bringing in a glorious communist future. Russian youth today have rejected such idealism, having seen the suffering and disillusionment that characterized the lives of their parents and grandparents. They suffered their whole lives, and now have nothing to show for it. The young person today is likely to say, "We've had enough of that. We want to be normal people like in Western countries. We don't want to suffer – we want to *live*."

The result of all this is that Russian youth have become more pragmatic and individualistic than perhaps any of their ancestors. They have sought out a new life orientation that will not leave them disoriented and demoralized like so many of their parents. They want something that they can rely on that doesn't depend on high government ideology, and have turned more to simply seeking out better lives for themselves. If there is any sacrifice to be made, it should be made in something reliable – such as studying hard now in order to have a better job in the future. But there is much less likelihood to trust in an ideological leader who would say, "Trust me. Sacrifice yourself now, and in the future something good will happen."

d. Spiritual vs. Material Values – If there is a "spirituality" (not necessarily Christian) among young Russian people, it is very superficial. Development of the inner life for its own sake is a concept that secularism, especially communist secularism, largely disdained. Inner values were to line up with the collective purpose, and should not be individualistic. The abandonment of communist ideology has not created the vacuum that many in the West assumed would cause the rapid absorption of spiritual values among the new generation. Curiosity about spiritual realities has not commonly resulted in adoption of spiritual values in life, and as a result Russian young people are mainly practical materialists. The drive to create a better life, defined largely as one that brings good material things, is crowding out any of the more subtle spiritual drives that may have been suggested to youth.

e. Morality vs. Immorality – With the absence of a commonly accepted transcendent moral standard, the morals of young people have become in most cases very self-serving. "The point of having good morals, whatever they might be, is to make my own life better." They are more likely to trust a loosely defined set of common human values as their moral base, and resist

having religious authorities define these values for them. Thus a strong desire for independent control of one's life is crowding out any search for a higher morality, especially one that will get in the way of the fun and pleasures that young people are avidly seeking. Fear of sexual immorality (by the Christian definition) or drug use is largely weak among Russian youth, and as a result indulgence in both is rampant. Regarding sexual morals, even those of their parents were extremely loose, as youth under communism used sexual freedom as one of their only means of controlling their lives. It should be no surprise that such a lifestyle continues unchecked.

2. Contrast with American Values

a. Merging of Values – Most Russian youth with no direct exposure to American culture are not greatly aware of the differences between the cultural values of the USA and those of Russia. They tend to think that the values are the same - that only the quality of life is different. Their values tend to be very simple – have fun, study for the future, look forward to having a family, etc. – and see these as the same as values in America. It is usually Russians that have had extensive contact with Americans, especially those who have spent time in the USA, who begin to sense a few key value differences. Two of the most commonly mentioned are discussed here.

b. Superficiality and Depth – Russians commonly mention that Americans are very friendly – but only to a point. At first they greatly enjoy how everybody smiles at them, but then their experience begins to make them wonder what is behind the smiles. Are they sincere? Young Russians who have visited America will often say, "Everyone is nice and open, and they say, 'come visit us.' But when you drop in on them (unannounced – the Russian way) they say, 'It is nice that you came by, but what do you want? Why did you come by?'" They miss what Russians call *dushevnost* – which can be described as "open-souled." Russians prefer being more straightforward, and being friendly only with those who are really friends. And, once people are friends, there are no artificial boundaries between them. Russians expect that friendships should be deeper, and that friends should depend on each other much more than they see in American relationships.

c. Structure and Disorder – Americans suffer in Russians' estimation by comparison to Germans (a culture disliked by Russians for many obvious historical reasons). American culture, like German, is seen as being too structured, with everything "cut and dried." When they visit such a country it feels to them unnatural, and makes them long for the simpler life of home. They tend to feel nervous when they go to a place with lots of order, because they always seem to be breaking the rules. Western influence has caused Moscow to become much more orderly than the average Russian city or village. Because of this, even Moscow feels different than the rest of Russia – it is unique. Young people are more flexible in adapting to a highly structured environment, but will tend to react to it unfavorably at first.

B. Religious – The religious views of Russian youth are very complicated, reflecting a lack of settled spiritual roots and the onset of a multitude of competing religious voices in the past decade. The views generally stated below represent the responses of the Ryazan cultural informants regarding the local majority tendencies of belief of average Russian teenagers.

1. The Existence of God

a. Widespread Theism – It is common to receive a positive response from a teenager to the question, "Do you believe that there is a God?" The level of understanding will greatly vary, as described below. However, when in the midst of great difficulties, most will tend to pray to a being they consider to be a personal God as taught by Orthodoxy. There is a small number of confirmed atheists, but many of them have been found to have been offended by some or another

event in their life, and are currently angry at God. But there is a Russian saying, "There is no atheist in a foxhole under fire," and even these "atheists" will return to God in a crisis.

b. Practical Atheism – The effect of this theoretical theism on the lives of Russian youth is another matter. A great many will say that there is a God, but that they are not believers. Their lives often show a complete separation of religious belief and practical life – as if they were two completely different realms. In this sense they are practical atheists – living as if there were no God.

c. New Influences – Many non-Christian teachings about the existence and nature of God have begun to have their influence among Russian youth. A growing number are saying that there is a God, but that this God is not personal. It is "higher mind" or the universe itself, for example.

2. The Nature of God

a. Biblical Terminology – Among those that would consider themselves theists, the influence of Orthodoxy in Russia has given them a set of categories regarding the nature of God that more or less come from the Bible. To the extent that these descriptions of God have filtered into society, they will tend to be the descriptions of God held by the majority. On the other hand, there is yet a widespread ignorance of biblical truth. Many of the impressions of the nature of God come more from folk interpretations of Orthodox attitudes and practices.

b. Orthodox Impressions

i. A Distant God – The informally understood remoteness of God is perhaps most clearly seen in the common attitude of youth toward prayer. Young people will say, "Don't bother God, especially with little things. God is God – so why should you ask him about your strange needs that are not so important." Some have compared the feeling that God is distant with that found in Islam. The idea of a close personal relationship with God is rarely heard.

ii. A Mysterious God – God's supposed distance is largely related to the aura of mystery surrounding Him in the Orthodox practice. Elaborate rituals, old language in liturgy, medieval architecture in church buildings – all contribute to a notion of a God who is not to be understood logically.

iii. A Judging God – Young people cannot seem to avoid the issue of sin and punishment, even though they try to ignore it or suppress it. They commonly believe that they are being punished for their sins in this life – if pressed for an explanation. Thus God is understood as a judge who disapproves of their lives. The common reaction is to avoid thinking about the subject.

3. The Nature of Man

a. Unworthiness – The combination of widespread theism, practical atheism, and belief in a judging God have led to a common feeling of unworthiness before God. Man is seen as pervasively sinful, and so it is not considered right to spend much time thinking of God and heaven. It is best just to muddle along in life and try to be more or less moral. God will judge everybody, and nobody is worthy, so try to be at least average. Thus the common folk attitude is devoid of an understanding of the other side of the gospel – the forgiveness of God based on the worthiness of Christ as substitute. What remains of religious feelings is best suppressed if earthly life is to be enjoyed.

b. Physical Life as Sinful – There are at least some influences on youth that lead them to believe that Christians regard all physical life as sinful. Some would teach them that sex itself, even in marriage, is sinful. The common feeling that everything attractive to youth is

unacceptable before God can lead to a life filled with attempts to suppress conscience in order to indulge the flesh, and yet which becomes weighed down by guilt.

4. The Spiritual Life

a. Nominality – One of the most striking features of the religious beliefs of Russian youth is the ease with which they can call themselves "believers," "Christians," or "Orthodox." For many, to be Russian is to be Orthodox, even if they have no intention of being involved in the Orthodox Church. Because so many of them have been baptized, this becomes often the sole factor in naming themselves Orthodox Christians. When asked why he considers himself to be a Christian, a young person is likely to answer, "Well, I'm Russian. I've been baptized, and I wear this cross." Christian identity demands very little reality. Even some who identify themselves as "unbelievers" will still say that they are Orthodox. This religious self-identification thus in many cases has more in common with national identification than with religious beliefs or practices.

b. Sacramental Approach – Orthodoxy has influenced many with the concept that religion is sacrament. If a person has a "spiritual life," it is defined mainly by involvement in church rituals. This is seen, for example, in the deeply ingrained traditional belief in infant baptism, even among those not involved with the Orthodox Church. The concept of religious duty is more connected with participation in liturgy, taking communion, and going to confession, than it is to the way a person lives his life in the world. It is very common for young people, even those involved in lives of sin and crime, to make sure to show up at church on Easter.

c. Superstition – The factor of superstition is related to the concept of sacrament, mainly in the way that folk beliefs have combined them with traditional Russian superstition. Many who say that they believe that God is helping them are often trusting in the fact that they carry an icon with them or wear a cross. It is the presence of these religiously-charged items that is the cause of the protection. Many who don't believe in God will have the attitude that they should at least do some symbolic act, "just in case." One young man said, "People in Russia are very superstitious – and the main superstition is Orthodoxy."

d. Private Spirituality – Young people often have the idea that religion is between them and God and the priest, and nobody else. It is a private matter. Religious discussions are not considered public subjects, and will rarely be broached except among very close friends. In addition, the personal beliefs of a person are often a very separate matter from their public behavior, and this is not something that others should challenge. One might answer, "I did what I was told to do, and it is none of your business."

e. Minimal Morality – Young people want to have fun, and don't want church teachings to restrict their behaviors. The fact that most people around them have the same attitude, and are also nominally Orthodox, leads to an expectation that strict morality is not a religious issue. A common attitude is "There is much sin in this life, but you can't help it. So just try to be more or less moral according to your own point of view. Do the best that you can in comparison to everybody else's life." The level of morality, by biblical standards, is so low among Russian teenagers that this attitude calls for to very little alteration of life.

f. Self-Reliance – Russian youth are much more likely to seek natural answers to life's problems, rather than to trust in God (except in cases where extreme problems lead to prayer, as mentioned below). There is a close Russian counterpart to the saying in English "God helps those who help themselves." Or one may say, "You may trust in God, but you should rely on yourself." They may believe that God is good in some way, but that you cannot rely on Him since you cannot see him or hear him. "In this life, you have to trust in whatever you can touch

and see and know how it works." This is generally how they will encourage each other when they have problems.

5. Prayer

a. Prayer as Religious Rite – Many Russians see prayer as a means of getting a response from God, regardless of one's personal relationship with God or his understanding of the words of the prayer. The common idea is, "If I say this prayer, something will happen." Much of this comes from folk superstition, but is attached to the Orthodox approach to prayer: memorizing by heart the prayers of the Church. They hope for a response, as if the prayer were an incantation and not an appeal to a personal God. Some may recite the Lord's Prayer in the evening, but again usually as a religious habit.

b. Prayer as Last Resort – I mentioned above that a distant God is considered not to be bothered with trivial matters. This leads to an attitude that prayer is only the last resort, after all personal efforts to solve a problem have failed. Prayer as communion with God, or as daily continuation of personal relationship, is unknown to most.

IV. ATTITUDES TOWARD LIFE

A. Boredom and Fun

1. Life as Boring – A common theme among Russian youth is the boredom they feel about their lives in general. This may be a fact not admitted to a casual questioner, but is admitted between friends. Part of the cause of this is the relative lack of creative things to do outside of school studies. Russian schools do not have the extracurricular activities common to American schools, and there are far less options for creative stimulation. School itself is filled with many difficult courses, and homework demands a great deal of time. Russian students have far more years of science courses than their American counterparts. All these factors contribute to pervasive complaints of boredom.

2. Fun as Escapism – Russian youth seek fun as an escape from boredom, and often talk of fun as something to maximize during their youth. Currently, fun is mainly found in the form of worldly pleasures – dancing, drinking, sex and drugs. There is a common desire to abandon oneself to all these things and "experience it all." The lack of a solid moral base means that there is little social stigma attached to most forms of sensual pleasure, as long as one keeps his life generally in order at school and among friends and family.

B. Optimistic vs. Pessimistic Expectations

1. Postponement of Planning – Russian youth, as mentioned above, seek to maximize their fun while they are young. Accompanying this attitude is a tendency to postpone thinking about their future. A great deal of what they seek as youth is a means of diverting their attention from the serious decisions of life. The expectation is that future life will be settled and routine – it is better not to think too much about it right now. It is better to party.

It must be noted at the outset of this section, regarding attitudes to life, that the young people of Moscow tend to be much more influenced by Western thinking than young people in other cities and villages. There is less apathy, gloom and hopelessness in Moscow, where the better prospects of good future lives tend to help keep the youth from falling into dark fatalism. There is a much higher percentage of Westerners in Moscow than in any other city, and there are many job opportunities with solid companies for those who will pursue their education diligently. This factor will skew results of interviews of young Muscovites away from the negative attitudes largely seen in this section.

2. Pressures to Drop Out – With increased freedom has come an increased opportunity for youth to become cynical about school and life in general, and become "dropouts." So far this does not seem to be a very popular option, but as drugs grow in availability in Russia it could become a much more serious problem.

3. Pressures to Resignation – More common is the pressure to resign oneself to the fact that life doesn't have as much to offer as one might hope. Those who started out with deeper dreams often become pessimistic, because they were looking for something that would bring them deep inner satisfaction, and discover that it is not forthcoming. One should therefore not really expect to reach his dreams, but rather accept a reduced set of expectations for something that is more real to pursue. At least this way life will not have so many disappointments.

4. The Dirty Rules of Life – There is a general assumption that one cannot succeed in this life without getting "dirty." There are a set of sinful rules that every person will have to learn in order to get ahead. One will have to lie and cheat, but that is just the way life is. Youth will even scoff at a person who tries to live a life of integrity, thinking that this person is a fool. Much of this is a carryover from communist times, when everyone had to cheat the system in order to survive. There was no social stigma to this kind of activity, because virtually everybody did it. Today, government bureaucracy is still stifling, and taxes are high. The mafia is everywhere. It is hard for young people to conceive of doing well in life without being dishonest.

C. The Meaning of Life

1. "Life is Garbage" – One result of common pessimism is the tendency to speak ill of this life among friends. Many will actually say, "Life is garbage – it should be better." One of the reasons that they are always trying to escape into fun is because of this low view of life. Many know inside that they should do something to achieve true meaning, and want to escape the "dirt" and boredom, but discouragement about the prospects of finding true meaning has seemed to infect the majority.

2. Avoidance of the Topic – As a result of pessimism, young people tend to avoid the topic of the meaning of life. It tends to promote depression and hopelessness. Most will give the appearance that serious life discussions are not interesting to them, though they do in fact have questions, and can be stimulated by someone they trust and are interested in.

V. CURRENT RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

A. Toward Orthodoxy

1. Skepticism and Distrust of Claims and Practices – Much of the skepticism of Russian youth comes from their openness to the West and its plurality of religions. The tendency to reject the idea that Russia is superior in every way (the constant dogma of the Soviet Union under communism) includes the tendency to reject many of the claims and practices of the Russian Orthodox Church. The extent to which this skepticism is present in any one young person depends to a large extent on where he is on the Slavophile/Westernizer scale, as discussed earlier.

a. Exclusivity – The claim that the Orthodox Church is the only true church would be widely disputed among youth. Young people would not be averse to arguing directly with a priest who made this claim. They tend to believe many things that contradict the teachings of Orthodoxy, and are ready to stand by their own ideas rather than submit to the Church.

b. Inspiration of Forms – Young people are more likely to want to understand the logical point of any religious practice, and to reject the idea that truth is found in religious forms. Orthodoxy teaches that the forms themselves are inspired by God, and handed down to the

present from the Apostles themselves. Young people are skeptical about this, and are more attracted by sincerity and substance.

c. Mysteries – The Orthodox Church makes much more of the "mysteries" of the faith than do Western churches, which are more influenced by rationalism. But the new generation of Russians are also more interested in logic, and want to understand what they believe. They don't want to accept what they don't understand. They have questions, but they feel that priests tend to give them religious conservative answers that don't satisfy their desire for rational explanations. Unlike their ancestors, they do not seem to be satisfied to walk into a mysterious place (an Orthodox Church) and put aside their critical thought processes. On the other hand, there is no denying that they have had some influence by the Russian culture that this is the way religion should be. This Russian idea may still have a subconscious effect on many.

d. "Pagan" Practices – Young people are not as likely to believe that Orthodoxy reveals the truth about Russian character. Many who are more educated even think that paganism, which is the native Russian religion before Orthodoxy, has more to do with native Russian and Slavic culture than does Orthodoxy – which is Byzantine in origin. Furthermore, Orthodoxy seems to them to be so mixed with paganism that they have a hard time separating the two. It can be commonly heard that "Orthodoxy is a combination of Christianity and paganism." They see the folk practices such as lighting candles and praying to icons, and their modernism tells them that this is some sort of pagan practice. Thus they want to avoid it.

2. Oppressed by Orthodox Worship

a. Atmosphere – The atmosphere of an Orthodox Church, with candles, walls covered with icons, and old women in dark clothing, is too dark for most young people. Most will report a feeling of gloom and oppression in that environment, and the result is that only a tiny fraction of Russian youth are attracted enough to return to church. One young man said about Russia that, "We have only scary, medieval churches here." Youth thus feel nervous, even scared, as well as sad and bored, in an Orthodox service.

b. Music – Likewise young people cannot appreciate Orthodox music, because it is also gloomy and boring to them. Their tastes are heavily influenced by modern Western music, with its lively tempo and bright harmonies. They will say about Orthodox music, "There are enough gloomy things around us in life. We've had enough of dark things – don't give us any more." Orthodox music is very old, and does not speak to their hearts.

c. Ritual – Young people feel a need to be free and liberated, and are not attracted to the strict ritual inside an Orthodox service. Older people in Russia may feel a need for this ritual, but young people "can't handle it." With ritual, as well as music and atmosphere, there are always going to be a few young people who appreciate it – but they are a very small minority.

d. Broadcasts – Orthodox teaching and music that is broadcast on TV and radio is extremely unlikely to be watched by youth. In addition to having the same reactions noted above to the elements of Orthodoxy, they find the broadcasts to be supremely boring, and are likely to quickly change the channel when an Orthodox program comes on the air.

3. Offended by Hypocrisy – The skepticism of youth leads them to question what they see as inconsistencies in lives of Orthodox people. They observe the religious forms and wonder about the substance of it all. They know that many people go through the motions of Orthodox worship without even really believing in it. A young person will say, "So what if he writes his sins on a piece of paper (for confession)? It's not going to change anything. He will confess, and then go out and sin again." Some girls will put on the appearance required for worship (see immediately below), but will change back into their modern Russian attire immediately

afterward. The stark separation between church behavior and societal behavior is not conducive to a high respect for Orthodoxy.

4. Ridicule of the Devout – There are those young people that will get more deeply into Orthodox religion, but the majority will think that such people are strange. They would say about such a young man, "He is obviously not a thinker, since he has submitted to this strange system and accepted all their views. He is weird – he isn't like us." Thus it is rare for a young person to get attached to the Orthodox Church (not including simple baptism, wearing a cross or carrying a small icon). Those who become involved must change drastically, because Orthodoxy is not inclined to be associated with contemporary society. Girls must wear long skirts, head coverings, and go without makeup. Thus a person who gets deeply into Orthodoxy will not be accepted by the world. Since young people don't like to be ridiculed, they will avoid this involvement. Few want to bear the stigma of being considered "weird."

5. Apathetic Regarding Real Involvement

a. Avoidance of Worship – As mentioned above, and for the reasons given, very few young people, baptized or not, will be found in the average Orthodox worship service. A great deal of visiting that has taken place could be described as idle curiosity, since repeated visits are rare. The main exception is Easter, when a great many will go. Many will be fulfilling a sense of (minimal) obligation; others are going just to witness the pageant or have a fun overnight party. Only a few will take it seriously - but even those will try not to let these feelings be known to others, who might ridicule them.

b. Limited to Superstitious Practices – The main involvement with Orthodoxy will be on a very superficial level, mainly tied to superstitious views on Orthodox practices. Wearing a cross or carrying an icon will be common, but in-depth understanding of these items will be rare. The items do not represent a relationship with God or even with the Orthodox Church, but are more pagan-like uses of "holy items" in order to gain some protection from problems. The main practice for those in deeper problems will be to visit a church and light a candle, hoping that this act will bring about the help they need. If a young person was not baptized as an infant, he or she may decide to receive Orthodox baptism due to fear and superstition. They will say, "I'd better get baptized, just in case..." But overall, for young Russians, Orthodoxy is not something to bring into one's everyday life. It is found inside the Church or in the holy objects, but not in the life.

c. "Use" of Priests – Westerners are often surprised at the number of young businessmen who will be in an Orthodox Church at Easter, or at other times. The reality of the situation is that young men who become businessmen or gangsters will go to a priest and pay him money to pray for them. They then trust in the fact that somebody else is taking care of their relationship with God. They can then say, "my relationship with God is taken care of by the priest." However, their lives of sin and crime remain the same. This tendency to "use" the priests is also seen in those young people who will go to confession or communion, but only just before important school examinations.

d. General Apathy – Much of what has been said above relates to those who have some minor involvement in Orthodox practices. However, there are a great many who don't care in the least about the Orthodox Church. They are aware of its existence, but have no interest in it. Unlike many older Russians, they don't care about the attempts of Orthodoxy to become revived among the Russian population. They have become thoroughly secularized.

B. Toward Other Religions

1. Fear of Cults – The warnings of Orthodox priests and the fears of parents have contributed to a great wariness of non-Orthodox religions. News of extremism by cults in the Ukraine and Russia led many to lump all non-Russian religions together and label them "cults." If a religious belief involves joining a particular group and entering into their practices, there will automatically be suspicion among young people. Those who are more flexible, however, feel that they can discern the difference between a strange cult and a legitimate religion, and are not so afraid or overly cautious. Even with them, however, the building of trust is no easy matter.

2. New Age Syncretism – Along with religious groups that flooded in after the fall of communism, many new religious ideas began to pervade Russia. Young people have become exposed to Eastern mysticism, astrology and occult teachings through various media. Most young people now have a folk belief in astrology. They don't necessarily believe it deeply, but will read the daily astrological charts. In a sense, they treat it the same as they would treat wearing a cross or carrying an icon. It is a way to find help through a superstitious practice. Many young people have in their minds a strange mix of karma, astrology and other non-Christian beliefs and practices along with their Orthodox beliefs – although none of these may be deeply held beliefs.

3. Confusion Over Choices – Several cults that are Christian heresies, primarily Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, have caused much confusion among Russian youth. Since they are from the West, they are often lumped together with Evangelicals as "strange Western cults." These cults have been very active in Ryazan, more active in fact than Evangelicals. They have spread a great deal of literature among the people. The fact that their form of worship is similar to that of evangelical churches has caused problems for local Evangelicals. Evangelicals are perceived as something new, and therefore suspect, due to the confusion of them with cults.

C. Toward Russian Evangelicals

1. Baptists

a. Causes of Problems

i. Communist Propoganda – During communism, the Baptists were the primary Protestant group in Russia. They were thus the primary targets of extensive propoganda by the communist media. They were labeled as very strange and even dangerous. Some even believed that they sacrificed their children, so extreme was the propoganda.

ii. Orthodox Opposition – Even before the period of communism, the Baptists had been persecuted in Russia by the Orthodox Church, whose claim to exclusivity led to great intolerance of non-Orthodox religions. Today, even though Baptists have been in Russia for over a century, and are now given some legal protection due to this fact, they are not accepted (nor will they ever be) by Orthodox leadership. They will always be considered a "Western heresy."

iii. Baptist Seclusion – The Baptists themselves have contributed to problems by becoming a cloistered subculture within Russia. In early days, and during communism, this was understandable due to the heavy persecution they received. However, even today Baptists operate well out of the mainstream of Russian culture. They hold to their own religious vocabulary that is not understood in the same way by the rest of the population (similar to an American church that might continue using King James English). Their music is not modern, nor is it always Russian-sounding (many hymns were borrowed from the West at the beginning of this century). Finally, their strict legalism has tended to keep out all but the truly committed. For example, a young woman visiting for the first time would commonly be scolded for wearing makeup or jewelry. The atmosphere would often not be welcoming. This attitude is slowly changing in some churches, but in others has remained just as strong as it ever was.

b. Resulting Attitudes

i. Considered Strange – Because of the factors above, even though most Russians know very little about Russian Baptists, they have in their minds that they are somehow strange and different, even "weird." The initial response of a young person would usually be that "it is some strange subcultural organization, and it's not for me. I'd better stay away." Parents would also not like to know that their children had become involved with Baptists. This is a stigma that the name "Baptist" may carry for many years to come.

ii. Unknown in Fact – Russians, in fact, don't really know what Baptists are. Most of their attitudes are from second-hand impressions. Thus when they are invited to visit, they are initially taken aback. "What are they going to DO there?" However, having visited and seen that they are just normal people (though very conservative and with their own unique ways, as mentioned above), it is possible for apprehensions to be dropped. Young people can then understand that they had been reacting to propaganda, and not reality. This doesn't mean that the young person would want to be involved with Baptists, but at least the fear would be gone.

iii. Experienced as "Different" – It should be stressed again that the young person visiting the Baptist church will normally feel that they are very different kinds of people, and not just because of the Baptists' Christian ways. The vocabulary, sermon approaches, music, ways of greeting, and several other things may not seem truly Russian to the visitor. In this way Baptist churches have some similarity to Orthodox churches, in that tradition has kept practices the same for many years. There is very little attempt to contextualize the forms or messages for the modern generation, suggesting that some Orthodox attitudes may have influenced how Baptists feel about change of any type.

2. New Evangelicals

a. Initial Suspicions – New Evangelical Churches, which were mainly planted by Western missionaries, have different obstacles than Russian Baptists. Because they are very new to Russia, they are even less known to Russians than the Baptists. The amount of suspicion will greatly depend on the openness of the young person to Western things. However, the fact that the forms and approaches are not indigenous to Russia will often provoke initial suspicions that go beyond the fear of cults that was mentioned earlier. If a Russian believer introduces himself to another Russian as a "Christian," the unbeliever will naturally assume that he means that he is Orthodox. Finding out otherwise, he will then be surprised, and initially suspicious.

b. Growing Attitude of Toleration – Because of openness to the West, and growing exposure to it through the media, there is a growing attitude of toleration to various religious groups among young Russians. Young people are looking for new things, and initial suspicions will not necessarily be high barriers for the New Evangelicals. The strong Slavophiles may say, "This is something strange – it is not Russian." However, the more common attitude would be, "Well, it is your choice what you want to believe. Nobody should interfere." Again, this does not mean that this person would be personally attracted to the evangelical church, but that he or she would simply be more tolerant of others who got involved.

c. Appreciation of Approach – The key to attitude change toward Russian Evangelicals is for young people to actually spend time with them, either at church or in a home meeting. This is the way that their prejudices are overcome. They can also even begin to appreciate a fresh approach to faith that they have never before experienced.

i. "Normal People" – The first impression received by young people exposed to Evangelicals is the surprise that they are normal people. As mentioned earlier, the initial expectation is that a serious religious believer is going to be very strange. This expectation is

usually overcome after having visited a group of believers. The visitor sees that believers can joke together, and that they are not that different than him or her - except that they have a peace and joy that the visitor is missing. That a person can have deep faith and remain somewhat normal is a surprise. They might say, "I thought that since you were Christians, you were going to be boring and sad, but you are normal people! This is interesting."

ii. True Friendships – Young people really want true friendship, but often cannot find it in the distrustful atmosphere of Russian culture. When they discover true friendships among the evangelical believers, they are attracted to this. They have less fear spending time with good people who sincerely have their interests in mind and are willing to help them. Personal relationships are thus the most important means of impacting young Russians and changing their attitudes toward Evangelicals. Some who come to an evangelical gathering in order to find this reality, and are not actively befriended by the people they find there, will not return, feeling that they have not found what they were looking for.

iii. Sincerity of Faith – Having seen that Evangelicals are normal people, the young Russian visitor will then often be deeply impressed by the sincerity of their faith. They share their spiritual and material difficulties together and sincerely pray for each other. They worship the Lord with open hearts. They see the group operating together like a family, and not like a set of individuals detached from each other (as is common in Orthodox settings). The absence of hypocrisy is absolutely critical to the changing of youth attitudes toward Evangelicals.

iv. Popular Music – Since the evangelical groups use popular Western music in their worship, the young Russian visitor will feel the worship in a way that he or she can understand. Even those who are not believers can enter into the singing (and perhaps clapping) and get involved in worship – through which their hearts are often more changed than through the teaching. Evangelical groups need to be aware, however, that music that is too "secular" sounding can have a negative effect, in that it will be hard for the young visitor to take seriously the call to worship. One young man said that Russian youth don't feel that all music should have a fast pace. They can appreciate other forms of music for other purposes.

v. Reality Apart From Forms – Young people have the normal Russian idea that religion is mystery and form. When they see none of this formality among Evangelicals, but still feel that there is a strong feeling of God's presence among the people, they become very interested. It is a great curiosity to them that religion could look like this. Again, with each of these factors mentioned above, there is always the lurking fear that this group could be a cult. Thus the appreciation of the evangelical approach does not necessarily lead to a desire to become deeply involved. Hearts that are initially open are still subject to fears that come from the warnings of Orthodoxy and parents.

d. Opposition to Real Religion – Attitudes toward Evangelicals have changed due to the factors explained above. However, there is also a backlash against true believers when the Spirit of God does a deep work in somebody's life. It is as if youth feel that a little religion is acceptable, but too much is a dangerous thing. Thus various forms of persecution have grown when people have drastic changes in their lives. Suspicion and opposition grow, and the fear that something wrong has happened to a convert leads to actions against the Evangelicals and against the new convert. This has caused many potential converts to stop short of full commitment.

D. Toward Western Evangelicals

1. Early Curiosity – In the early days after the fall of communism, Americans in Russia were a great novelty. Many Russians had never seen a foreigner in person before that time, and

would have been frightened to speak to him even if they had seen one. Early visits of American Evangelicals drew large crowds, curious to hear what the Americans had to say. Curiosity was actually the main driving force of Russian young people, and a great many of them attended evangelistic meetings in the early 1990's. Information about the West and its culture had been largely withheld from them in the past, and now they wanted to find out all that they could. A common response afterward was, "Well, the Americans came, and we had lots of fun. They gave out Bibles and talked about God – but we don't really know what they wanted. They stayed a few days and then they left. Funny Americans."

2. Ulterior Motives – Along with curiosity were found many other motives that were not related to the gospel message brought by the Americans. The opportunity to receive financial help was a major factor, especially for those who could speak English. English speaking Russians were also eager to get practice with their language skills by speaking with Americans. Good English ability was a prime factor in finding work in those days. Many Evangelicals and organizations were inviting Russians for a trip to America, and this also became a dramatic attraction. These ulterior motives were often not well discerned by Americans, who interpreted all interest as being interest in the gospel.

3. Growing Loss of Interest – The initial curiosity inevitably died down. And eventually, many Americans began to sense that several of the young "hangers on" around them were not growing spiritually. When Americans stopped providing the help they once did, those Russians who had not truly been converted began to drift away, and others were not as interested anymore. Many Americans had also made the mistake of talking too much about the American culture and not making clear distinctions between gospel and culture. Many Russians grew tired of this, or even became offended at the not-so-subtle expressions of superiority by Americans. As Russians lost interest in the gospel as well (see below), Americans themselves became less interesting.

E. Toward the Gospel

1. Seeking Help, Not Change – Many young Russians interpreted the message of the gospel, as brought by Americans, to be that God would help them in their lives. They heard only this part of the gospel, and not the part that called for a change of life. Their desires were self-centered, but they were rarely being told this. They often believed that a prayer was being given to them that would bring about positive benefits. This expectation was naturally improper, and eventually the vast majority lost interest when they didn't get the results they wanted.

2. Expectation of Instant Results – Beyond the self-centered attitude was an expectation that results should come immediately, with no effort on their part. This stems mainly from their basic superstitious approach toward spiritual things, but was often fed by undiscerning presentations of the gospel by Americans – many of whom were untrained in ministry (let alone cross-cultural communication).

3. Lack of Appreciation for Uniqueness of Gospel – The comment has often been made that "Russians are not really careful with their souls." Often young people would visit an evangelistic meeting and do what was requested of them (usually praying a sinner's prayer). Another evening they may visit a meeting on Transcendental Meditation and begin to meditate with a mantra given to them. This was especially common in the early 1990's. The true call of the gospel was not understood, but was seen as one of many ways to get help in life. Young people are becoming more educated and sophisticated now, and will be less likely to swallow anything that is offered to them.

4. Distaste for Expected Restrictions – Many who decided to believe in Jesus at an evangelistic event had no intention of becoming part of a local church or leaving their life open to scrutiny. When the inevitable call came to make moral changes, a great many were not interested in being so restricted. This again illustrates the self-centered misconceptions toward the gospel that have been rampant among Russian youth.

5. Conversion Through Relationships – There were also many young people who gained a clear understanding of the gospel and truly saw their life change. In the vast majority of cases, this was the result of gaining a long-term relationship with a Russian or American believer. Attitude change was found to be a complex issue among Russian youth, requiring explanations, patient love, and tearing down of misconceptions. The gospel found open ears, but only after close involvement over time.

F. Recent Changing Attitudes Toward Religion

1. Initial Curiosity and Desire – The freedom that came with the fall of communism brought forth an initial surge of interest in religion. Russians have largely always believed there is a God, and the new freedom caused many to seek out religious answers to their problems. Young people, being naturally curious, were some of the most active in seeking answers.

2. Later Disillusionment – For reasons discussed above, many became disillusioned about religion and are even becoming bored with the idea. Many young people feel that religion is not really honest, and was not able to do for them what they wanted it to do. Having begun with an expectation of almost magical results, it is no wonder if they have been awakened to the "limitations" of religious belief.

3. Overwhelming Attraction of the World – It seems that the greatest factor in the changing attitude toward religion is the all-pervasive presence of worldly attractions, which have advertized themselves far more aggressively than has the gospel of Jesus Christ. The world has met the natural desires of young people, and like a Pied Piper has led them away from their early interest in spiritual things. The gospel has a very formidable opponent among youth.

CONCLUSION

Many Americans who come to Russia expecting a great spiritual hunger will be surprised at the religious apathy that has grown among Russian youth. They will be unprepared for the barriers to the gospel set up by fearful parents, exclusive Orthodoxy, scoffing peers, nationalist teachers and worldly attractions. They will not easily understand how ignorance and superstition will cause many confusing responses to gospel invitations. And the result, as has been seen over and over again in Russia, is that very few supposed "conversions" among young people will prove to be genuine.

Americans desiring to reach Russian youth need to become educated on the cultural and religious context that shapes how their audience thinks and feels. Russian youth are definitely reachable with the gospel, and encouraging, fruitful ministry is proceeding along with the fruitless efforts that have discouraged so many American workers. May God grant us the desire to proceed in our labors with wisdom and discernment, so that a new generation will hear and see an effective communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ.