

Two False Approaches to Spiritual Life



But what, one might ask, does all this have to do with us, who are trying to lead, as best we can, a sober Orthodox Christian life? It has a lot to do with it. We have to realize that the life around us, abnormal though it is, is the place where we begin our own Christian life. Whatever we make of our life, whatever truly Christian content we give it, is still has something of the stamp of the "me generation" on it, and we have to be humble enough to see this. This is where we begin.

There are two false approaches to the life around us that many often make today, thinking that somehow this is what Orthodox Christians should be doing. One approach—the most common one—is simply to go along with the times: adapt yourself to rock music, modern fashions and tastes, and the whole rhythm of our jazzed-up modern life. Often the more old-fashioned parents will have little contact with this life and will live their own life more or less separately, but they will smile to see their children follow after its latest craze and think that this is something harmless.

This path is total disaster for the Christian life; it is the death of the soul. Some can still lead an outwardly respectable life without struggling against the spirit of the times, but inwardly they are dead or dying; and—the saddest thing of all—their children will pay the price in various psychic and spiritual disorders and sicknesses which become more and more common. One of the leading members of the suicide cult that ended so spectacularly in Jonestown four years ago was the young daughter of a Greek Orthodox priest; satanic rock groups like Kiss—"Kids in Satan's Service"—are made up of ex-Russian Orthodox young people; the largest part of the membership of the temple of satan in San Francisco, according to a recent sociological survey—is made up of Orthodox boys. These are only a few striking cases; most Orthodox young people don't go so far astray—they just blend in with the anti-Christian world around them and cease to be examples of any kind of Christianity for those around them. [Next...](#)

This is wrong. The Christian must be different from the world, above all from today's weird, abnormal world, and this must be one of the basic things he knows as part of his Christian upbringing. Otherwise there is no point in calling ourselves Christian—much less Orthodox

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Автор: Admin

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Christians.

The false approach at the opposite extreme is one that one might call false spirituality. As translations of Orthodox books on the spiritual life become more widely available, and the Orthodox vocabulary of spiritual struggle is placed more and more in the air, one finds an increasing number of people talking about hesychasm, the Jesus Prayer, the ascetic life, exalted states of prayer, and the most exalted Holy Fathers like St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory Palamas, and St. Gregory the Sinaite. It is all very well to be aware of this truly exalted side of Orthodox spiritual life and to have reverence for the great saints who have actually lived it; but unless we have a very realistic and a very humble awareness of how far away all of us today are from the life of hesychasm and how little prepared we are even to approach it, our interest in it will be only one more expression of our self-centered, plastic universe. "The me-generation goes hesychast!"— that is what some are trying to do today; but in actuality they are only adding a new game called "hesychasm" to the attractions of Disneyland.

There are books on this subject now that are very popular. In fact, Roman Catholics are going in very big for this kind of thing under Orthodox influence and themselves influencing other Orthodox people. For example, there is a Jesuit priest, Fr. George Maloney, who writes all kinds of books on this subject and translates St. Macarius the Great and St. Symeon the New Theologian and tries to get people in everyday life to be hesychasts. They have all kinds of retreats, usually "charismatic"; people are inspired by the Holy Spirit, supposedly, and undertake all types of these disciplines which we get from the Holy Fathers, and which are far beyond the level at which we are today. It is a very unserious thing. There is also a lady, Catherine de Hueck Doherty (in fact, she was born in Russia and became a Roman Catholic), who writes books about Poustinia, the desert life, and Molchanie, the silent life, and all these things which she tries to put into life like you would have some fashion for a new candy. This, of course, is very unserious and is a very tragic sign of our times. These kind of exalted things are being used by people who have no idea of what they are about. For some people it is only a habit or a pastime; for others who take it seriously, it can be a great tragedy. They think they are leading some kind of exalted life and really they have not come to terms with their own problems inside of them.

Let me re-emphasize that both of these extremes are to be avoided—both worldliness and super-spirituality—but this does not mean that we should not have a realistic awareness of the legitimate demands which the world makes upon us, or that we should cease respecting and taking sound instruction from the great hesychast Fathers and using the Jesus prayer ourselves, according to our circumstances and capacity. It just has to be on our level, down to earth. The point is—and it is a point that is absolutely necessary for our survival as Orthodox Christians today—we must realize our situation as Orthodox Christians today; we must realize deeply what times we live in, how little we actually know and feel our Orthodoxy, how far we are not just from the saints of ancient times, but even from the ordinary Orthodox Christians of a hundred years or even a generation ago, and how much we must humble ourselves just to strive as Orthodox Christians today. *From [Orthodox Christian Information Center](#)*