

Against the Current

A column for teens and young adults

May, 2012
Fr. Bohdan Hladio

Home

"Father, I just read this article about my generation's attitude towards religion."

"What did it say?"

"Well, it said that my generation doesn't really go to church all that much or see religion as a big deal, doesn't know much about spirituality or religion, and that most of us follow a belief system which the author calls 'moralistic therapeutic deism.'"

"Moralistic therapeutic deism?"

"Yes. If I understand it correctly, it means that we understand that some things are right and others are wrong (moralism); that religion exists to help us be better people (therapeutic); and that we believe in God (deism), though we're not terribly concerned with who that God actually is."

"Does this sound right to you?"

"Actually, yes. It describes most of my friends at school and work very well."

"What else did the article say?"

"Well, it also said that 'highly religious teenagers appear to be doing much better in life than less religious teenagers.'"

"Well, that's good to hear!"

"It is. You know, Father, studying at the university you hear and see a lot of things which are either openly or covertly anti-religious or anti-Christian. But I think about my family, my parish and my experiences in the Church and I have a hard time understanding why people would think we're bad, or stupid, or misguided."

"How do you feel when you hear that kind of stuff?"

"Sometimes I get upset, but sometimes the person has a good point, and I begin to consider whether they might not be right. Is that bad?"

"It would be bad if you didn't think critically about questions like that. You've reached the point in your life where you're able to engage these big questions about the world, the meaning of life, and God, and it's really important to do so. The faith that we have when we're 8 years old and our parents make us go to Church is OK, but as we mature we need to engage our faith on a deeper level, just like we engage mathematics, or literature, or science on a deeper level."

"I'm glad you said that. At school I know people with all kinds of religious backgrounds, Christian, non-Christian, atheist, agnostic, everything. Some of them are very 'in your face' about it, some don't seem to care at all, and most are somewhere in the middle. Leaving aside the teachers or students who are anti-religious, even some of my friends who know I go to church and am active in the parish have trouble understanding why."

"So given all that you've said, I'll ask you the million dollar question: 'Now that you're an adult and can think for yourself, given the fact that in your social environment religious adherence isn't regarded as necessary and is often perceived as a negative factor, why do you choose to remain committed to your faith?'"

"Actually, Father, I was hoping that you might help me figure that out!"

"OK. Let's start at the beginning. You obviously like going to church and being active in the parish? Why?"

"Well, I'm no saint, I go out with my friends, and I'll admit that there are times I don't want to go to church or say my prayers or do the 'right thing', but I really do appreciate what I get from my faith, like my friends in the parish and the others I've met through the youth group and church camp. It feels good to be there in Church with my parents and grandparents. Notwithstanding the occasional arguments or misunderstandings, our parishioners are generally good, kind people. My spiritual life gives me a sense of peace and joy. I really do feel loved by God, and know that when I do something wrong I can be forgiven. Belonging to the Church makes me feel connected to my ancestors, to the apostles, saints, and martyrs, and reminds me that my ultimate goal is to end up where they are. Does that sound right?"

"Yes, it's a good start. I notice that most of what you said is very subjective, that you're talking mostly about your experiences and your feelings."

"Is that bad?"

"No, it's a good place to start, it's real, no one can take it away from you. But given what you said earlier, I think maybe you're searching for deeper, more objective reasons."

"Like what?"

"Well, like you, I sometimes wonder why I should be Orthodox."

"What! You're a priest! That's your job!"

"Well, if you think about it, neither being Orthodox nor being a priest is a 'job'. It's more like being married – it's a choice we make every day, every minute. Because I choose to be married I act a certain way with my wife, my children, friends and strangers. Because I choose to be Orthodox – and we've got to admit that Orthodoxy is definitely not the most 'user-friendly', fashionable, or 'fun' thing going as far as religion in America is concerned nowadays – I cultivate a particular way of life, I 'live' in a certain way."

"So tell me why."

"Just off the top of my head I'd say this. Orthodox Christianity is authentic and historical. I can trace what I believe and what I do back to the days of the apostles, and it's been passed down to me by saints and pious people whose lives testify to their goodness and holiness.

It's tried and true. I know that if I follow the Gospel teachings as understood and taught in the Orthodox Church I will be transformed in a positive way. In this sense I find Orthodoxy to be very practical.

Orthodoxy has a very positive view of the physical world and all creation. What does Hinduism, with its caste system, have to say about human equality? What can Buddhism tell us about the innate goodness of creation? Orthodoxy sees everything and everyone as essentially good, doesn't 'grade' them, doesn't see the created world as a problem.

Then there's beauty. You go into Church and see the icons and hear the singing and experience the Liturgy and smell the incense and taste the Eucharist and can't help but be struck by the beauty of it all.

Our faith offers us a correct understanding of God and man. It's not something someone 'made up' (if you wanted to make up a religion in order to be famous or successful in a worldly sense it certainly wouldn't be Orthodoxy!), but offers us a true vision of God, man, and life which is totally unique, and absolutely realistic.

Orthodox Christianity recognizes that sin, suffering, and evil are an undeniable part of this fallen world, and gives us the means to understand them and deal with them effectively.

We've got a very developed tradition and teaching on personal spirituality, to the point where I have no problem saying that Orthodoxy is objective in its approach to the individual believer. In other words, if we 'follow the program' we get to a point where we can see things (and ourselves) for what they really are. We don't deal in delusion or fantasy.

Orthodoxy is non-judgmental. We're taught not to judge, that God judges. This doesn't mean that we don't regard certain things as wrong and others as right, but we've got a very nuanced perspective on moral or ethical issues. As you know by now, very little in life is simply black or simply white. There are a lot of 'grey areas', which our Church looks at from a spiritual, rather than a legalistic perspective.

Then there's the connectedness you mentioned. Through my faith I'm not just connected to every other Orthodox Christian on planet earth, I'm connected to every Orthodox Christian who ever lived and ever will live. I'm connected to heterodox Christians to the degree that they correctly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and connected to every single human being by virtue of the fact that they, like me, are created in God's image and likeness, and we are children of the same Father.

And we can't forget truth. When talking about any religion or philosophy we've got to ask 'but is it true?' If we're talking about ultimate things, 'moralistic therapeutic deism' really doesn't get you anywhere. Having done my best to live an Orthodox Christian life for decades, I'm totally convinced that what our church teaches and practices is, in an ultimate and objective sense, true.

But there's one other thing which I think brings it all together."

"What's that?"

"It's an experience which all kinds of different people, those baptized into the Church as babies, adult converts, highly educated theologians, and uneducated peasants, all have in common. It's the feeling that the Church is 'home'."

"I know what you mean. It's like when I go home during spring break or summer vacation. I still might have disagreements with my parents or fight with my sister or not like what my mother cooks for dinner, but I know that I'm in a place where people love me and if anything bad ever happened I could depend on them for anything."

"Yes, that's it. It's amazing how often I hear people express this thought. And for good reason. Though our Church isn't by any means perfect (it is, after all, filled with sinful people like me), it is in one sense the house of our Father. I once heard 'home' described as 'the place where, when

you show up at the door, they have to take you in'. I thought this was a pretty good definition. So keep showing up at the door, and I can guarantee you that as you get older you'll see for yourself the truth and reality of everything we talked about today in your own life. God bless you."