

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 1 Theme: **Engaging Modern Atheism**
Title: **“Evicting the Gods”** Author: **Mr. Andrew Boyd**

Every once in a while, God metaphorically slaps me across the face and makes me realize how much I don't know or understand. This is what happened when I sat down to write about atheism in the Soviet Union. The topic seemed natural. How can a modern, Orthodox publication talk about Atheism and not talk about the Soviet Union? I thought I was educated on the subject, I have a minor in Russian history, and I had many family members that suffered during the Revolution. But, as I sat down at my laptop and opened up Microsoft Word, nothing happened. Well, something did happen; I realized I had nothing to say.

So, I logged into facebook instead and realized that my Russian friend was online. She grew up in the Soviet Union, in an atheist family, and was baptized when she was eighteen. I grilled her about her experiences growing up in an atheist country. She started right in with a disturbing, yet somehow homey anecdote.

“My grandma used to sing a song from the 1920's ‘Away, away with the monks, the rabbis, and the priests. We'll climb up to heaven and evict all the gods!’”

“Was it a folk song?”

“No, it was more of a jingle. The government made sure that there were mandatory events at schools and in companies on all major church feast days. There were Komsomol patrols at the few remaining active churches that caught all kids who tried to go to, say, Pascha services, and took down all your information and boy, the trouble you got into... and especially your parents.” *(The Komsomol was the youth branch of the Communist Party. Membership was basically compulsory, though my friend added “people who patrolled were the activists, not just the majority who were drafted into the party because it was mandatory.” The Komsomol youth were party to some of the most brutal executions in the 1920's and 30's.)*

I naively asked, “What kind of trouble?”

“It depended. You wouldn't get expelled, but your “behavior” grade would go down considerably, and of course you'd get kicked out of any leadership position. That was important because it affected college admission. For your parents, it would be worse, it went into their files, which meant no promotions, no pay raises, no trips abroad when those were available, etc. It was a very big deal, a huge black mark on the family.”

I asked her how she became Orthodox, which turned out to be a long and complicated story.

“When I was growing up, my parents rented a summer house from a village man who was very religious. It was about 30 kilometers from the Trinity-Sergius Lavra. All summer long we would go to the Lavra for trips. My parents weren't religious; it was just an incredibly beautiful place. I'd always go into the small group of worshipers during the services. My parents would go crazy trying to find me in those big cathedrals. The landlord never took the icons and lampadas in the house down during the summer, so I slept under the icons my entire childhood.

At the same time, I was a fairly devoted ‘young pioneer’, loved that stupid jingle, and believed that religion was, as Marx had said. “opium for the people”. In short, I was as brainwashed by the system as anyone. In the Soviet Union, you were born brainwashed.”

“So, how did you become a Christian out of all this?”

“When I was ten, I heard a broadcast of Father Schmemmann on the radio at my friend’s house. I think her parents were listening to it, which seemed strange, not the kind of thing you did when company was around. Father Schmemmann, of course, broadcasted weekly sermons into Russia on Radio Free Europe for years. I didn’t quite understand it, but it touched my heart. From then on, my friend’s family would take me to churches from time to time, even to the services at the Lavra (which were not accessible to the “outsiders” at the time, I have no idea how she got us in). I would get parts of services here and there. Somehow, the Church was just growing on me.”

“When were you actually baptized?”

“ I was baptized when I was 18, and in college, when I had a little bit more control of my own life. Still, even though it was at the beginning of perestroika, it had to be done in secret. Also, I wasn’t really educated or catechized. There was no one to do it. I really didn’t become “churched” until I came to the United States in a couple of years. The traditional churchgoers in Russia at the time didn’t always trust the young converts, they thought we could be spies... and as for the converts, many of them tended to become very fundamentalist which turned me off.”

“Where you scared when you were baptized?”

“No, I wasn’t scared, I was very sure of what I was doing, but I was very stressed. There could still be trouble in college and for my parents if it became known. But it wasn’t hard for me to keep this secret. I grew up with a ‘split mind’, a classic child of the Soviet intelligentsia. You knew that you were never to repeat at school what you heard at home. My parents’ crowd wasn’t actively dissident, but it was very anti-Soviet. So, I grew up with that rule. I grew up as essentially two people, it’s not hard to do in that setting. When I had to maintain, later in life, a baptized “me” as a secret persona, it was kind of the same thing.”

“Any other vivid memories that you think are important?”

“Yes, there was a movie called Storm Clouds Over Borsk. It was about a young Komsomolka who gets drawn into a Pentecostal “Cult” (most denominations save Orthodoxy and Catholicism were labeled as “cults” by the Soviets). This “cult” decides to crucify her, but the brave communists save her just in time. It was incredibly well made and had some of the best actors in it. Of course, it was fiercely anti-Christian, and it was mandatory for us to view it at school.

Soviet Christmas?

I think the replacement of Christmas as the great Christian feast with the secular New Year celebration was the greatest success of the regime because it endures to this day. All of the ‘entourage’ of Christmas was transferred to New Year: the gifts, the tree, even the star. Of course, the star on top of the tree was red and five-ended, like on the Kremlin. The main idea was to get very drunk and eat a lot and make merry to celebrate something totally secular. It became

THE holiday. If you want to understand something about it, google how many Soviet movies take place on New Year's night, all the romantic comedies, all the dramas, everything. It is still the case, although the country is supposedly Orthodox now."

The person being interviewed asked to remain anonymous. Mr. Andrew Boyd, the Managing Editor of "Wonder", conducted the interview.

Discussion Questions:

Are Christians persecuted in our society today?

Does identifying yourself as a Christian mean that you are signing up for a certain amount of persecution?

Did you have to risk anything to become a Christian? Do you risk anything by indentifying yourself as suck in the workplace or the campus setting?

Is religion just an "opium" as many suggest, a drug to dull the pain of life?