

# The Voice of Russia

## ANDREI KURAYEV: "WHY AM I NOT AN ATHEIST"

Tags: The Christian Message from Moscow

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By Nadezhda Pronina

"Why Am I not a Christian?" — this is the title of the popular book by the celebrated English mathematician and philosopher Bertran Russell, which has been translated into many languages. For our program, however, we have chosen a title similar in form, but essentially opposite in meaning — "Why Am I not an Atheist?" The guest of our today's program is Andrew Kurayev, deacon at one of the churches in Moscow, lecturer at several institutions of higher education, professor, philosopher and theologian. But Father Andrei objects to being described as theologian.

"A theologian? This sounds too high," says Andrei Kurayev. "The Orthodox tradition knows of only three theologians, namely, St. John the Theologian, the favorite disciple of Jesus Christ Himself, Gregory the Theologian of the 4th century and Simeon the Theologian of the 10th century. So it seems to me somewhat pretentious to call myself a theologian. A church journalist, though, would be a more proper description."



Well, whatever you say. Let it be church journalist. However, it is hard to argue with Father Andrei. A lifetime isn't enough to study the wealth of wonderful words by Orthodox theologians. Books by Andrei Kurayev on comparative theology have sold like hot cakes. Some of them have already become bestsellers. Mark, by the way, the paradoxical fact that super-serious Orthodox books are in great demand in Russia today. Some have worked up even a boom. Well, it can't be helped, considering the rapidity with which Russians en masse are returning to Orthodox spirituality. And books by Andrei Kurayev have made a great contribution to this process.

Not only his books, though. Father Andrei gives lectures in Moscow and in provinces. Lecture-halls on these occasions cannot accommodate all those who wish to listen to him. Perhaps, the exceptionally intense activity of this priest has been warmed up by the healthy booming energy of young age. Indeed, Andrei Kurayev is a little over 30. His ascetic missionary activity has repudiated the old, unfair, opinion that Orthodox priests are poor missionaries.

A poignant detail has turned out: an unshakeable pillar of true Orthodoxy as Deacon Andrei Kurayev appears to be today was preparing himself for quite an opposite ministry. He was going to devote himself to atheistic propaganda.

The family to which Andrei Kurayev was born and in which he was raised had a stamp of elitism. His father, a celebrated philosopher, often went abroad to work there for long and to stay there together with his family. Unlike other people in the then Soviet society, those who went abroad were privileged. They enjoyed better living conditions, somewhat greater freedom and greater access to information. In the eyes of people who could not go out of the Soviet Union, those who could go abroad on business trips were people belonging to a different dimension, to a higher order.

As a child Andrei lived in Eastern Europe. Back home in the Soviet Union, he regarded his mates who did not have jeans or chewing gum as savages. That is how he himself recollects that time, stressing that he was not alien to the temptations of the so-called consumer society.

Now, as a student at the department of philosophy of Moscow State University, he was sitting for an exam in philosophy, his favourite subject. He got an "A"... and a request from the examiner to convey best regards to his philosopher father. It was at that point that the young man decided that never again he would be presented as a celebrity's son. He would go into a field where the name of his brilliant philosopher father was of no consequence. Eventually he changed over to the chair of scientific atheism. Later he even made post-graduate studies at the

Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences.

As a result of all these studies he was steeped in the critical attitude to belief in God and stuffed with atheistic arguments. What happened then? How did the skeptical mind of a Soviet atheist made a turnabout? We shall try to explain it, but warn you straight away that all the words expressed will still leave behind them a MYSTERY — a MYSTERY of Divine influence on human life, a MYSTERY of the Holy Spirit Who breathes where he wills...

Let us open the book by Andrei Kurayev entitled "Is It All the Same How to Believe?"

"One becomes a Christian not because somebody has driven one into a corner by pure arguments. Simply one's soul at a point comes in touch with the Divine... Or, as one Orthodox theologian put it, "nobody would ever become a monk unless he once saw the shining of eternal life in the face of another person". A believer differs from a non-believer simply in that the range of his experience is greater, just as a person with an ear for music differs from those who do not hear the harmony of music accords. If a person has the experience of an encounter with God, so much changes in this world for him! But if he loses it, so much gets darkened! One young man wrote at the dawn of the 19th century: "If a person has been given this virtue of union with Christ, he meets the blows of fate with calmness and inner tranquility, opposing courageously the storms of passions and withstanding fearlessly the rage of evil. How can you fail to endure suffering if you know that by persisting in Christ and working zealously you glorify God Himself?!" Later, after rejecting Christ, the author of these remarkable words about a life-time union would write only about alienation. The name of this young man was Karl Marx."

There is an account of how exactly the conversion of Andrei Kurayev, a student of Moscow State University, happened in reality. In the same book "Is It All the Same How to Believe?" we read:

"For me a turning point occurred during one wordless encounter at the Holy Trinity St. Sergius Monastery. Sometime at the beginning of 1982, I happened to be there as a student of the chair of atheism and a Komsomol activist. I had to accompany a group of Hungarian student tourists. I did not remember the worship service and was little interested in architecture and history. But when we were coming out of the Cathedral of the Trinity, a miracle happened. Walking out in front of me was a young man from another group. Just two steps before reaching the threshold, he suddenly turned around briskly to face me. But he was not looking at me. He was looking at the icons in the heart of the church in order to make a sign of the cross at them and to receive a blessing before coming out. I just turned out to stand between him and the icons. For the first time in my life I could see the eyes of a believer so close. No, there was nothing mysterious or enigmatic about them. A similar impression is often put upon for some obscure reason by actors playing priests. The eyes of the young man, however, were just bright, meaningful and lively. And a thought penetrated me: why does this guy, who was taught the same stuff at school as I was, knows something completely closed to me for all my religious studies? Indeed, he knows whatever I was taught, but it is he who feels at home here, while I am a stranger? Does it mean that to become a believer one should know something that atheists do not know?..

Then I came back to Moscow, a city where I had no believers among my acquaintances. But I found an access to Orthodox books and understood from them that I was not the first on the earth to search for a completely new spiritual experience. I also understood that I could find such people and stand next to them in church, as if saying: "Let me too try..." Indeed, we do not have to create anew our own Church of the Apostles. It is there to join and to accept what is not made with hands, which is the joy of Communion, as a gift and a legacy."

In the books by Andrei Kurayev there are many rare facts and penetrating observations concerning the tortuous ways of human spiritual life. They are brilliantly supported by references to Holy Scripture and writings by holy fathers of the Church. The author also takes resort to poetry. Here is an example:

"To know God one should be God.  
To love and worship him unknown.  
One has to have the heart alone..."

We had an opportunity to meet Father Andrei and ask him questions. One of them was as follows: Didn't he, on his way to faith and the Church, feel a certain contradiction between his scholarly cast of mind, molded from childhood, and the need to take a religious doctrine on trust?

"The Orthodox theology, too, is a world of very profound and sophisticated scholarship," Father Andrei answers. "From the philosophical point of view, Orthodoxy is the most attractive faith for me. But not only from the philosophical point of view. Orthodoxy, whichever of its aspects you take, is the richest of all Christian confessions. In it you find the most developed art of worship, liturgies, and the wondrous beauty of ritual. And take the church

theology, or patristics, or, say, Russian religious philosophy... And on top of that I was born in an Orthodox country — the fact that makes me especially happy.”

Still how has your scholarly mentality manifested itself in the Orthodox environment?

“I don't think that the scholarly mentality should fade away when a person comes to church,” Andrei Kurayev says. “Approaching a church, one should take off his cap, not his head. Reason is the working horse of the heart. Reason will pasture in whatever field the heart sends it to. I will say to my reason: ‘Go and study the laws of physiology!’ And it will. I will tell my reason to study poetry, and it will go and study the development and laws of poetry. And if the heart says: ‘Heed the Lord and try to understand the Gospel's truths and the holy fathers’, reason may prove helpful here too. But one should bear in mind that reason cannot fathom everything in existence and in the very human being. Here we come to the field where problems end and mysteries begin...”

Orthodoxy has been often accused today of excessive conservatism, allegedly obsolete canons, long worship services conducted in an unintelligible Church Slavonic and exhausting fasts. What Deacon Andrei will say to that?

“The Orthodox Christians in today's world are like mountaineers in a summer camp,” Father Andrei says. “Imagine a heat in a city when one feels hot even in linen slippers. Suddenly you see people walk, carrying at the ready warm caps, parkas and thick boots with spikes at that. What are ice-axes for in a city? What are spikes for on the asphalt? But if at least one of these things is left behind below here, the price of having it thrown out may prove to be very dear high there. So it is in Orthodoxy. Everything is calculated for moving up in an arduous ascend. Once on the spiritual heights up there you will understand why the fasts, why Church Slavonic, why so long worship services and why no rows in churches; what the veneration of saints signify and what an icon offers to you... But however necessary the complex equipment may be for mountaineers, they themselves have to climb up, for the spikes and ice-axes will not carry them to the top. People carry whatever can help them to climb up. In Orthodoxy the truth is given with room for ascend.”

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