

# On Idealism

Fr. Seraphim Rose

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A letter from Fr. Seraphim Rose to Roman Catholic monk, Fr. Thomas Merton. 1962

Dear Fr. Merton,

I am a young American convert to Russian Orthodoxy-not the vague "liberal" spirituality of too many modern Russian "religious thinkers," but the full ascetic and contemplative Orthodoxy of the Fathers and Saints-who have for some years been studying the spiritual "crisis" of our time, and am at present writing a book on the subject. In the course of my study I have had occasion to read the works of a great number of Roman Catholic authors, some which (those, for example, of Pieper, Picard, Gilson, P. Daniello, and P. de Lubac) I have found quite helpful and not, after all, too distant from the Orthodox perspective, but others of which I have found quite disturbing in the light of what seems to me the plain teaching of the universal Church. I have read several of your works, and especially in some recent articles of yours I seem to find signs of one of the tendencies in contemporary Roman thought (it exists in Orthodoxy too, to be sure) that has most disturbed me. Since you are a Roman monk, I turn to you as to someone likely to clarify the ambiguities I have found in this trend of thought. What I would like to discuss chiefly concerns what might be called the "social mission" of the Church.

In an essay entitled "Christian Action in World Crisis" you

devote yourself especially to the question of "peace." In an age when war has become virtually "impossible," this is, of course, of central concern to any Christian, but your remarks particularly on this subject have left me troubled.

What, first of all, are the real antagonists of the spiritual warfare of our age? To say "Russia and America" is, of course, trivial; the enemy, as you say, "is in all of us." But you further say, "The enemy is war itself" and its roots, "hatred, fear, selfishness, lust."

Now I can quite agree with you that war today, at least "total war," is quite unjustifiable by any Christian standard, for the simple reason that its "unlimited" nature escapes measure of any sort. The point in your argument that disturbs me is your statement that the only alternative to such war is "peace."

The alternative to "total war" would seem to be "total peace;" but what does such a "peace" imply? You say, "we must try as best we can to work for the eventual abolition" of war; and that is indeed what "total peace" must be: abolition of war. Not the kind of peace men have known before this, but an entirely new and "permanent" peace.

Such a goal, of course, is quite comprehensible to the modern mentality; modern political idealism, Marxist and "democratic" alike has long cherished it. But what of Christianity?-and I mean full uncompromising Christianity, not the humanist idealism that calls itself Christian. Is not Christianity supremely hostile to all forms of idealism, to all

reduction of its quite "realistic" end and means to mere lofty ideas? Is the ideal of the "abolition of war" really different in kind from such other lofty aims as the "abolition , of disease, of suffering, of sin, of death? All of these ideals have enlisted the enthusiasm of some modern idealist or other, but it is quite clear to the Christian that they are secularizations and so perversions of genuine Christian hopes. They can be realized only in Christ, only in His Kingdom that is not of this world; when faith in Christ and hope in His Kingdom are wanting, when the attempt is made to realize Christian "ideals" in this world-then there is idolatry, the spirit of Antichrist. Disease, suffering, sin, and death are an unavoidable part of the world we know as a result of the Fall. They can only be eliminated by a radical transformation of human nature, a transformation possible only in Christ and fully only after death.

I personally think that "total peace" is, at bottom, a utopian ideal; but the very fact that it seems practical today raises a more profound question. For, to my mind, the profoundest enemy of the Church today is not its obvious enemies-war, hatred, atheism, materialism, all the forces of the impersonal that lead to inhuman "collectivism," tyranny and misery-these have been with us since the Fall, though to be sure they take an extreme form today. But the apostasy that has led to this obvious and extreme worldliness seems to me but the prelude to something much worse; and this is the chief subject of my letter.

The hope for "peace" is a part of a larger context of renewed idealism that has come out of the Second World War and the

tensions of the post-war world, an idealism that has, especially in the last five or ten years, captured the minds of men-particularly the young-all over the world, and inspired them with an enthusiasm that has expressed itself concretely-and, often, quite selflessly in action. The hope that underlies this idealism is the hope that men can, after all, live together in peace and brotherhood in a just social order, and that this end can be realized through "non-violent" means that are not incompatible with that end. This goal seems like the virtual revelation of a "new world" to all those weary of the misery and chaos that have marked the end of the "old" world, that hollow "modern" world that seems now to have finally - or almost-played out its awful possibilities; and at the same time it seems like something quite attainable by moral means-something previous modern idealisms have not been.

You yourself, indeed, speak of a possible "birth agony of a new world," of the duty of Christians today "to perform the patient, heroic task of building a world that will thrive in unity and peace," even, in this connection, of "Christ the Prince of Peace." The question that sorely troubles me about all this is, is it really Christianity, or is it still only idealism? And can it be both-is a "Christian idealism" possible?

You speak of "Christian action," "the Christian who manifests the truth of the Gospel in social action," "not only in prayer and penance, but also in his political commitments and in all his social responsibilities." Well, I certainly will say nothing against that; if Christian truth does not shine through in all that

one does, to that extent one is failing to be a Christian, and if one is called to a political vocation, one's action in that area too must be Christian. But, if I am not mistaken, your words imply something more than that; namely, that now more than ever before we need Christians working in the social and political sphere, to realize there the truth of the Gospel. But why, if Christ's Kingdom is not of this world? Is there really a Christian "social message," or is not that rather a result of the one Christian activity-working out one's salvation with diligence? I by no means advocate a practice of Christianity in isolation; all Christianity-even that of the hermit-is a "social Christianity," but that is only as context, not as end. The Church is in society because men are in society, but the end of the Church is the transformation of men, not society. It is a good thing if a society and government profess genuine Christianity, if its institutions are informed by Christianity, because an example is given thereby to the men who are a part of that society; but a Christian society is not an end in itself, but simply a result of the fact that Christian men live in society.

I do not, of course, deny that there is such a thing as a Christian "social action;" what I question is its nature. When I feed my hungry brother, this is a Christian act and a preaching of the Kingdom that needs no words; it is done for the personal reason that my brother-he who stands before me at this moment-is hungry, and it is a Christian act because my brother is, in some sense, Christ. But if I generalize from this case and embark on a

political crusade to abolish the "evil of hunger," that is something entirely different; though individuals who participate in such a crusade may act in a perfectly Christian way, the whole project-and precisely because it is a "project," a thing of human planning-has become wrapped in a kind of cloak of "idealism."

A few more examples: The efficiency of modern medicines adds nothing to the fulfillment of the commandment to comfort the sick; if they are available, fine-but it is not Christian to think our act is better because it is more "efficient" or because it benefits more people. That, again, is idealism. (I need hardly mention the fact that medicines can become, indeed, a substitute for Christian "comfort" when the mind of the practitioner becomes too engrossed in efficiency; and the research scientist searching for a "cure for cancer" is not doing anything specifically "Christian" at all, but something technical and "neutral.")

"Brotherhood" is something that happens, right here and now, in whatever circumstances God places me, between me and my brother; but when I begin to preach the "ideal" of brotherhood and go out deliberately to practice it, I am in danger of losing it altogether. Even if-especially if-I make use of a seemingly Christian "non-violence" and "passive resistance" in this or any other cause, let me before I call it a Christian act-carefully ask myself whether its end is merely a lofty worldly ideal, or something greater. (St. Paul, to take a pretty clear example, did not tell slaves to revolt "non-violently;" he told them not to revolt at all, but to concern themselves with something much more important.)

The "Peace of Christ," being in the heart, does not necessarily, in our fallen world, bring about outward peace, and I would wonder if it has any connection at all with the ideal of the "abolition of war."

The difference between organized "charity" and Christian charity needs no comment.

There may be-I would not have written this letter if I did not hope there was-a kind of true, though so to speak subterranean, "ecumenism" between separated Christians, especially in times of persecution; but that has nothing remotely to do with the activities of any "World Council of Churches."

You may from these examples, I hope, understand the doubts I entertain about the resurgence of seemingly "Christian" ideals in our time. I say "doubts," for there is nothing intrinsically evil about any of these "crusades," and there are involved in them all quite sincere and fervent Christians who are really preaching the Gospel; but, as I say, there is a kind of cloak of "idealism" wrapped about them all, a cloak that seems to be drawing, them into its own quite independent service (without thereby negating, of course, the personal Christian acts performed under their auspices). What "service" is this?- the placating of the modern sense of "idealism" by translating inward and Christian truths into outward and at best-semi-Christian ideals. And we must be realistic enough to see that the general effect on the minds of people both inside and outside these movements, both inside and outside the Church, is precisely to place emphasis upon the

realization of outward ideals, thus obscuring inward truths; and since this emphasis has been made, the path is all too short to the palpable falsehood that "doing good is the real purpose of Christianity anyway, and the only basis in which all Christians can unite, while dogma and liturgy and the like are purely personal matters which tend more to separate than unite." How many of those indeed, even Catholic and Orthodox, who are participating in the world of "social Christianity" today, do not believe that this is really a more "perfect" and even "inward" Christianity than a dogmatic, ascetic, and contemplative Christianity that doesn't get such obvious "results?"

I have, before this, been reproached by Catholics for lack of interest in the social mission of the Church, for holding to a onesided "ascetic" and "apocalyptic" Christianity; and some Catholic philosophers and theologians have made such accusations against the Orthodox Church itself-accompanied, sometimes, if I am not mistaken, by a somewhat patronizing tone that assumes the Church is rather "backward" or "out-of-date" about such things, having always been "repressed" by the State and used to looking at the world through the all-too-unworldly eyes of the monk. Far be it from me to presume to speak for the Church; but I can at least speak of some of the things I think I have learned from Her.

You may legitimately ask me what, if I am skeptical of "social Christianity"-though of course I do not wish it abolished or given to the devil, I am merely pointing out its ambivalence-what I advocate as "Christian action" in the midst of the "crisis" of the

age with its urgent alternatives.

First and foremost I radically question the emphasis upon "action" itself, upon "projects" and "planning," upon concern with the "social" and what man can do about it-all of which acts to the detriment of acceptance of the given, of what God gives us at this moment, as well as of allowing His will to be done, not ours. I do not propose a total withdrawal from politics and social work by all Christians; no arbitrary rule can govern that, it is up to the individual conscience. But in any case, if many may still be called to work for "justice," "peace," "unity," "brotherhood" in the world and these are all, in this generalized, ideal form, external and worldly goals-is it not at least as good a thing to be called to the totally unequivocal work of the Kingdom, to challenge all worldly ideals and preach the only needful Gospel: repent, for the Kingdom is at hand? You yourself quite rightly say of America and Russia, "the enemy is not just on one side or the other.... The enemy is on both sides." Is it not possible to deepen this perception and apply it to those other seemingly ultimate alternatives, "war" and "peace?" Is one really any more possible for a Christian than the other, if the "peace" is a "total (i.e. idealistic) peace?" And does not the recognition of these two equally unacceptable alternatives lead us back to a genuine "third way"- one that will never be popular because it is not "new," not "modern," above all not "idealistic", a Christianity that has as its end neither worldly "peace" nor "war," but a Kingdom not of this world?

This is nothing "new," as you say, and a world that

imagines itself "post-Christian" is tired of it. It is true that when we, as Christians, speak to our brothers we often seem to be faced with a blank wall of unwillingness even to listen; and, being human, we may be made somewhat "desperate" by this lack of response. But what can be done about this? Shall we give up speaking about what our contemporaries do not want to hear, and join them in the pursuit of social goals which, since they are not specifically Christian, can be sought by non-Christians too? That seems to me an abdication of our responsibility as Christians. I think the central need of our time is not in the least different from what it has always been since Christ came; it lies, not in the area of "political commitments" and "social responsibilities," but precisely in "prayer and penance" and fasting and preaching of the true Kingdom. The only "social responsibility" of a Christian is to live, wherever and with whomever he may be, the life of faith, for his own salvation and as an example to others. If, in so doing, we help to ameliorate or abolish a social evil, that is a good thing but that is not our goal. If we become desperate when our life and our words fail to convert others to the true Kingdom, that comes from lack of faith. If we would live our faith more deeply, we would need to speak of it less.

You speak of the necessity, not just to speak the truth of Christianity, but "to embody Christian truth in action." To me, this means precisely the life I have just described, a life infused with faith in Christ and hope in His Kingdom not of this world. But the life you seem to describe is one very much involved in the things

of this world; I cannot help but regard it as an "outward" adaptation of true Christian inwardness.

Modern idealism, which is devoted to the realization of the idolatrous "Kingdom of Man," has long been making its influence felt in Christian circles; but only in quite recent years has this influence begun to bear real fruit within the womb of the Church itself I think there can be no question but that we are witnessing the birth pangs of something that, to the true Christian, is indeed pregnant with frightful possibilities: a "new Christianity," a Christianity that claims to be "inward," but is entirely too concerned with outward result; a Christianity, even, that cannot really believe in "peace" and "brotherhood" unless it sees them generalized and universally applied, not in some seemingly remote "other world," but "here and now." This kind of Christianity says that "private virtue" is not enough- obviously relying on a Protestantized understanding of virtue, since everything the true Christian does is felt by all in the Mystical Body; nothing done in Christ is done for oneself alone but not enough for what? The answer to that, I think, is clear: for the transformation of the world, the definitive "realization" of Christianity in the social and political order. And this is idolatry. The Kingdom is not of this world; to think or hope that Christianity can be outwardly "successful" in the world is a denial of all that Christ and His prophets have said of the future of the Church. Christianity can be "successful" on one condition: that of renouncing (or conveniently forgetting) the true Kingdom and seeking to build up

a Kingdom in the world. The "Earthly Kingdom" is precisely the goal of the modern mentality; the building of it is the meaning of the modern age. It is not Christian; as Christians, we know whose Kingdom it is. And what so greatly troubles me is that today Christians-Catholic and Orthodox alike are themselves joining, often quite unaware of the fact, often with the best possible intentions, in the building of this new Babel....

The modern idealism that hopes for "heaven on earth" hopes likewise for the vague "transformation" of man-the ideal of the "superman" (in diverse forms, conscious or not), which, however absurd, has a great appeal to a mentality that has been trained to believe in "evolution" and "progress." And let not contemporary despair make us think that hope in the worldly future is dead; despair over the future is only possible for someone who still wants to believe in it; and indeed, mingled with contemporary despair is a great sense of expectation, a will to believe, that the future ideal can, somehow, be realized.

The power of the impersonal and inhuman has ruled the first part of our century of "crisis," a vague "existential" spirit, semi - or pseudo-religious, idealistic and practical at the same time (but never otherworldly), seems destined to rule the last part of this century. They are two stages of the same disease, modern "humanism," the disease caused by trusting in the world and in man, while ignoring Christ-except to borrow His name as a convenient "symbol" for men who, after all, cannot quite forget Him, as well as to seduce those who still wish to serve Him.

Christianity become a "crusade," Christ become an "idea," both in the service of a world "transformed" by scientific and social techniques and a man virtually "deified" by the awakening of a "new consciousness": this lies before us. Communism, it seems clear, is nearing a transformation itself, a "humanizing," a "spiritualizing," and of this Boris Pasternak is a sign given in advance; he does not reject the Revolution, he only wants it "humanized." The "democracies," by a different path, are approaching the same goal. Everywhere "prophets"-semi- or pseudo- Christians like Berdyaev and Tolstoy, more explicit pagans like D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Kazantzakis, as well as the legions of occultists, astrologers, spiritualists, and millennialists-all herald the birth of a "new age." Protestants, and then more and more Catholics and Orthodox, are caught up in this enthusiasm and envisage their own age of ecumenical unity and harmony, some being so bold-and so blasphemous-as to call it a "third age" of the "descent of the Holy Spirit" (a la D. H. Lawrence, Berdyaev, and ultimately, Joachim of Floris).

An age of "peace" may come to weary, yet apocalyptically anxious, man; but what can the Christian say of such "peace?" It will not be the Peace of Christ; it is but fantasy to imagine a sudden, universal conversion of men to full Christian faith, and without such faith His Peace cannot come. And any human "peace" will only be the prelude to the outburst of the only and real "war" of our age, the war of Christ against all the powers of Satan, the war of Christians who look only for the Kingdom not of

this world, against all those, pagan or pseudo-Christian, who look only for a worldly Kingdom, a Kingdom of Man.

It was only after I had completed the preceding pages that I saw your article in *Commonweal*, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility". There you bring up the topic to which I was planning to devote the rest of this letter: the Apocalypse.

There is, of course, nothing of which it is more dangerous to speak. Futile and over-literal speculation on apocalyptic events is an only too obvious cause of spiritual harm; and no less so, I think, is the facile way in which many of our contemporaries refer to the "apocalyptic" character of the times, and in so doing raise in others deep fears and hopes which their own vague pronouncements are far from satisfying. If a Christian is going to speak of the Apocalypse at all, it is quite clear that in this as in everything else his words must be sober, as precise as possible, and fully in accord with the universal teaching of the Church. In this case I can see no reason why Latin and Orthodox testimony should be substantially different. The prophetic texts are the possession alike of East and West; the commentaries and statements of the Fathers, both Greek and Latin, on these texts are explicit, detailed, and in mutual agreement; and the tradition of the Fathers has been affirmed, after the schism, by both the Orthodox and Latin Churches-in the latter most authoritatively, I would presume, in the person of Thomas Aquinas. The recent book of Josef Pieper, *The End of Time*, basing itself almost entirely on Western sources, is, so far as I know, in no essential point at variance with Orthodox

tradition. It is rather a shock, in fact, to read in Fr. D'Arcy's Meaning and Matter of History that "not all Christian scholars would accept such a literal acceptance" of apocalyptic literature. Perhaps not, indeed, but that is to say no more than that, just as many Jews did not recognize the Christ of their prophecies, so will many Christians fail to discern the signs of the times with regard to the Antichrist and the end of time. (Many Christians have departed so far from tradition as to believe that the Antichrist will be no actual man, but a vague "spirit" only, much as many modern Jews have transformed their messianic hope into belief in a mere "messianic age.")

But this failure of many Christians is itself part of the prophecies concerning the "falling away," even within the Church itself; as Blessed Jerome said, "Many esteemed as the Patriarch shall fall." For the Antichrist is a deceiver, and too few Christians are prepared for his deceptions. It is thus dangerous to speak of "apocalyptic" things without speaking of the Antichrist and his spirit. It is easy for the weakest understanding today to see something "apocalyptic" in the fantastic destructive powers man now possesses; but worldly power is only one aspect of the reign of the Antichrist-great deceptiveness, such as to deceive, if possible, even the elect, is another and less obvious one. You speak, like many today, of the possible "destruction of the human race;" is this not a rather strong phrase for a Christian to use? Does it not, again, place too much emphasis on the power of man? Does it not, above all, overlook the prophecies of what must come to

pass before God (Who, of course, alone can "destroy the human race" He has created) calls men into His Kingdom?

In no uncertain words you affirm, once more, "War must be abolished. A world government must be established." Is not "must" a rather strong word? It is indeed a symptom of the apocalyptic character of the age that the only "practical" solution to the present crisis-the abolition of war-should at the same time be (as I think) totally idealistic. To some this situation gives rise to thoughts of a "new age" or a "new world;" to me, it suggests the possibility that we are, in actual fact, on the threshold of the last days, when all courses of -worldly action begin to become impossible.

A "new world"- this is a phrase, I have noticed, that you yourself use. In The Living Bread you even suggest that "we are witnessing the dawn of a light that has never before been seen.... We live, perhaps, on the threshold of the greatest Eucharistic era of the world- the era that may well witness the final union of mankind." You ask, to be sure (but without giving an answer), "Will this visible union be a political one?" And you even suggest that "perhaps the last age of all will be 'Eucharistic' in the sense that the Church herself will give the glory and praise to God by being put to the Cross."

To Christians, who possess the word of Christ and His Prophets and Saints concerning the last days, I do not see how there can be any "perhaps" in the matter. The political union of mankind, however legitimate it may be as a political goal, can only

end in the reign of Antichrist; the Church, beyond all doubt, will be crucified after a good many of the faithful have betrayed Her through the deceptions of the Antichrist.

I by no means preach an imminent "reign of Antichrist" apocalypse. That is possible, of course, and Christians at all times must be prepared for it; but no one knows the hour . . . . What I do wish to emphasize is the fact- I take it so- that, spiritually speaking, contemporary man in his despair of the present and still-present hope in the future, confronted with "ultimate" alternatives and seemingly "apocalyptic" social and scientific transformations (and evolutionary hope), has never been more receptive to the advent of a pseudo-Messiah, a supreme "problem-solver" and inspirer of the bright human "idealism."

In times like these, I think, the Christian should be wary of involving himself in the tangled web of political activity, lest in striving for too much he lose all; boldness in faith and in preaching the Kingdom (above all by the example of one's life), to be sure there is not nearly enough of that today-but caution in worldly "planning," of which we have a superfluity, even (in fact, most of all) in the interest of "high ideals."

Above all, the Christian in the contemporary world must show his brothers that all the "problems of the age" are of no consequence beside the single central "problem of man": death, and its answer, Christ. Despite what you have said about the "staleness" of Christianity to contemporary men, I think that Christians who speak of this problem, and in their lives show that

they actually believe all that "superstition" about the "other world" I think they have something "new" to say to contemporary man. It has been my own experience that serious young people are "tired" of Christianity precisely because they think it is an "idealism" that hypocritically doesn't live up to its "ideals;" of course, they don't believe in the other world either-but for all they know, neither do "Christians."

I think Christians have of late become entirely too "sophisticated," too anxious to feel at home in the world by accommodating their faith to passing fashions of thought; so contemporary Christians become "existential," speak of the "here and now" of faith and spiritual things. Well, that is fine, as far as it goes-but it doesn't go far enough. Our hope as Christians cannot be reduced to the abstract, but neither can it be reduced to the concrete; we believe and hope in a Kingdom no one living has ever seen, our faith and hope are totally impossible in the eyes of the world. Well then, let us tell the world that we believe the "impossible." It has been my experience that contemporary men want to believe, not little, but much; having abandoned Christian faith, nothing can seem too fantastic to them, nothing can seem too much to hope for-hence the "idealism" of today's youth. For myself, my own faith grew rather gradually, as a more or less "existential" thing, until the stunning experience of meeting a Christian (a young Russian monk) for whom nothing mattered but the Kingdom of the world to come. Let the contemporary sophisticate prattle of the childishness of seeking "future rewards"

and all the rest-life after death is all that matters. And hope in it so fires the true believer-he who knows that the way to it is through the hard discipline of the Church, not through mere "enthusiasm"-that he is all the more in the present (both in himself and as an example) than the "existentialist" who renounces the future to live in the present.

The future Kingdom has not been abandoned by modern Christians, but it has been so "toned down" that one wonders how strong the faith of Christians is. Particularly all the involvement of Christians in the projects of social idealism, seems to me a way of saying: "You, the worldly, are right. Our Kingdom 'not of this world' is so distant and we can't seem to get it across to you; so we will join you in building something we can actually see, something better than Christ and His Kingdom-a reign of peace, justice, brotherhood on earth." This is a "new Christianity," a refinement, it seems to me, of the Christianity of the "Grand Inquisitor" of Dostoevsky.

And what of the "old" Christianity of "private virtue?" Why has it become so stale? Because, I think, Christians have lost their faith. The outward Gospel of social idealism is a symptom of this loss of faith. What is needed is not more busyness but a deeper penetration within. Not less fasting, but more; not more action, but prayer and penance. If Christians really lived the Christian hope and the full path of unification that looks to its fulfillment, instead of the easy compromise that most laymen today think sufficient-and doesn't the "new Christianity" tell them that

working for social ideals is really more important than following the Christian discipline-if Christians in their daily life were really on fire with love of God and zeal for His Kingdom not of this world-then everything else needful would follow of itself?

We can hardly hope that such a life will be too widespread in our time, or even, perhaps, that its example will make many converts-surely not as many as will the "new" Gospel; for social idealism is a part of the spirit of the age, while genuine Christian otherworldliness is most emphatically not. Too, it is more difficult and often less certain of itself-so weak is our faith; altogether, in short, an unappealing goal for outwardly-minded modern man. All of this is inconsequential: ours it is to live the full Christian life-the fruit of it is in God's hands.

Well, I have said what I wanted to say. I should be very grateful to receive a reply from you, if you think my remarks worth replying to. And if you do reply, I hope you will be as frank as I have tried to be. This is the only kind of ecumenical "dialogue" of which I am capable; and if it seems more like a challenge to "combat," I hope that will not deter you. My criticisms, I am sure you know, are directed not at you but at your words (or at what I have made of them).

Yours in Christ,  
Eugene Rose

(The following short article is an introduction to one of Fr. Seraphim Rose's last talks in 1982 shortly before his illness and death.)

Before beginning my talk, a word or two on why it is important to have an Orthodox world-view and why it is more difficult to build one today than in past centuries.

In past centuries—for example, in 19th century Russia—the Orthodox world-view was an important part of Orthodox life and was supported by the life around it. There was no need even to speak of it as a separate thing—you lived Orthodoxy in harmony with the Orthodox society around you, and you had an Orthodox world-view provided by the Church and society. In many countries the government itself confessed Orthodoxy; it was the center of public functions and the king or ruler himself was historically the first Orthodox layman with a responsibility to give a Christian example to all his subjects. Every city had Orthodox churches, and many of them had services every day, morning and evening. There were monasteries in all the great cities, in many cities, outside the cities, and in the countryside, in deserts and wildernesses. In Russia there were more than 1,000 officially organized monasteries, in addition to other more unofficial groups. Monasticism was an accepted part of life. Most families, in fact, had somewhere in them a sister or brother, uncle, grandfather, cousin or someone who was a monk or a nun, in addition to all the other examples of

Orthodox life: people who wandered from monastery to monastery, and fools-for-Christ. The whole way of life was permeated with Orthodox kinds of people, of which, of course, monasticism is the center. Orthodox customs were a part of daily life. Most books that were commonly read were Orthodox. Daily life itself was difficult for most people: they had to work hard to survive, life expectancy was not great, death was a frequent reality—all of which reinforced the Church's teaching on the reality and nearness of the other world. Living an Orthodox life in such circumstances was really the same thing as having an Orthodox world-view, and there was little need to talk of such a thing.

Today, on the other hand, all this has changed. Our Orthodoxy is a little island in the midst of a world which operates on totally different principles—and every day these principles are changing for the worse, making us more and more alienated from it. Many people are tempted to divide their lives into two sharply distinct categories: the daily life we lead at work, with worldly friends, in our worldly business, and Orthodoxy, which we live on Sundays and at other times in the week when we have time for it. But the world-view of such a person, if you look at it closely, is often a strange combination of Christian values and worldly values, which really do not mix. The purpose of this talk is to see how people living today can begin to make their world-view more of one piece, to make it a whole Orthodox world-view.

Orthodoxy is life. If we don't live Orthodoxy, we simply are not Orthodox, no matter what formal beliefs we might hold.

Life in our contemporary world has become very artificial, very uncertain, very confusing. Orthodoxy, it is true, has a life of its own, but it is also not very far from the life of the world around it, and so the life of the Orthodox Christian, even when he is being truly Orthodox, cannot help but reflect it in some way. A kind of uncertainty and confusion have also entered into Orthodox life in our times. In this talk we will try to look at contemporary life, and then at Orthodox life, to see how better we might fulfill our Christian obligation to lead other-worldly lives even in these quite terrible times, and to have an Orthodox Christian view of the whole of life today that will enable us to survive these times with our faith intact....

Some recent observers of our contemporary life have called the young people of today the "me generation" and our times the "age of narcissism," characterized by a worship of and fascination with oneself that prevents a normal human life from developing. Others have spoken of the "plastic" universe or fantasy world in which so many people live today, unable to face or come to terms with the reality of the world around them or the problems within themselves....

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, it 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.