Amir Azarvan

Askesis and Politics: A Preliminary Look at the Impact of Christian Spiritual Practices on One's Political Outlook

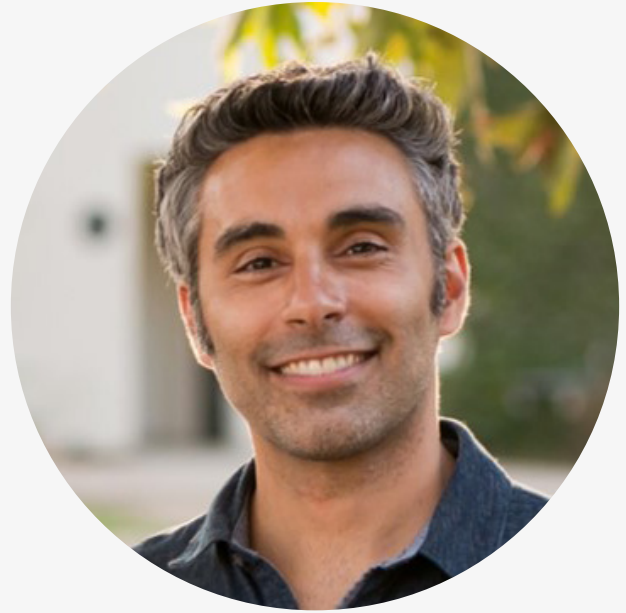**Is Christian spirituality systematically associated with patterns in people's political attitudes and worldview? Are spiritually active Christians predominantly conservative or liberal? If so, does this imply anything about the correctness of their political views? Is greater spiritual involvement associated with a friendlier disposition towards those with whom one otherwise strongly disagrees on social and political matters? In my review of the Orthodox spiritual literature, as well as my survey analysis of Orthodox Christians throughout the United States, I make a preliminary effort to address these and other questions. I point to the importance of transcending the liberal-conservative ideological dichotomy when studying Christians' political outlooks. Communitarians, in particular, merit greater attention, given their apparently large size and high level of spiritual commitment. I also presents findings that suggest that spiritual commitment can result in friendlier attitudes towards those viewed as sociopolitical threats.**

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1   Introduction

Is Christian spirituality systematically associated with patterns in people's political attitudes and worldview? Are spiritually active Christians predominantly conservative or liberal? If so, does this imply anything about the correctness of their political views? Is greater spiritual involvement associated with a friendlier disposition towards those with whom one otherwise strongly disagrees on social and political matters?

In my review of the Orthodox spiritual literature, as well as my survey analysis of Orthodox Christians throughout the United States, I make a preliminary effort to address these and other questions. I point to the importance of transcending the liberal-conservative ideological dichotomy when studying Christians' political outlooks. Communitarians, in particular, merit greater attention, given their apparently large size and high level of spiritual commitment. I also presents findings that suggest that spiritual commitment can result in friendlier attitudes towards those viewed as socio-political threats.

The next two sections expound on the transformative effects of involvement in the spiritual life, as well as their social implications. I then discuss caveats that ought to be borne in mind when interpreting the findings of empirical studies on spirituality. After elaborating on the research design and methods used in my investigation, I present and interpret my findings. The final section consists of a brief summary and suggestions for further study.

2 Background

St. Seraphim of Sarov (2009, 112) taught that "the true aim of the Christian life consists in [the] acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God". St. Paul observes that the "fruit of [and evidence of having acquired] the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). After a moment's reflection on today's politically polarized society, where opposing groups frequently mistrust, ridicule, and demonize one another, it would be difficult not to conclude that this fruit is quite rare indeed.

Such pessimism seems to have scholarly support. As Pildes (2011, 273) remarks, "we have not seen the intensity of political conflict and the radical separation between the two major political parties that characterizes our age since the late nineteenth century". While, from a Christian perspective, such conflict is an evil in and of itself, Zakaria (2013) alludes to the policy implications of our increasingly divided society: "The United States needs serious change in its fiscal, entitlement, infrastructure, immigration, and education policies, among others. And yet a polarized and often paralyzed Washington has pushed dealing with these problems off into the future." As I will suggest in the following section, the cause of, and solution to, to our increasingly divisive society is partly spiritual in nature.

2.1 Spirituality and Political Attitudes

In the Orthodox mystical view, the path to spiritual growth is what Markides (2001) calls the "Threefold Way", or the stages one must complete in order to directly encounter God. As Markides (2001, 213) explains:

> "At first there is the stage of Catharsis, or the purification of the soul from egotistical passions. It is then followed by the stage of Fotisis, or the enlightenment of the soul, a gift of the Holy Spirit once the soul has undergone its purification. Finally comes the stage of Theosis [or, as it is called in the West, glorification], union with God, as the final destination and ultimate home of the human soul."

The remainder of this theoretical *cum* theological discussion is set against the backdrop of the Threefold Way. I will explain how askesis – the means by one is purified, according to the Orthodox Church – may produce socially beneficial effects.

2.2 Askesis and Society

> "Perfect love does not split up the single human nature, common to all, according to the diverse characteristics of individuals; but fixing attention always on the single nature, it loves all men equally."

St. Maximos the Confessor

According to Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood 2009, 133), sincere love for others is predicated on *catharsis*, or, as he puts it, the cleansing of "one's heart from worldly plans and desires". "When the body is humbled," he maintains, "our thoughts become more peaceful…" (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood 2009, 136).

I argue that this teaching carries important sociopolitical implications. One may reasonably hypothesize that societies where more members undergo such *catharsis* tend to be more harmonious. Elder Thaddeus notes elsewhere that once "God's all-encompassing love manifests itself within us, we see no difference between people – everyone is good, everyone is our brother, and we consider ourselves to be the worst of men, servants of every created thing" (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood 2009, 120). Likewise, St. Maximos the Confessor expands on the message expressed in St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians (Gal 3:28):

> "For him who is perfect in love and has reached the state of dispassion there is no difference between himself or another's, or between Christians and unbelievers, or between slave and free, or even between male and female. But because he has risen above the tyranny of the passions and has fixed his attention on the single nature of man, he looks on all in the same way and shows the same disposition to all" (1981, 70).

This idea seems to resonate with conclusions drawn in social scientific research. According to Lupfer and Wald (1985, 296–297), "people who do not subscribe to orthodox Christian beliefs [1] and activities are more likely to view humans as self-centered and deceitful" (Lupfer and Wald 1985, 296–297). As suggested above, such cynical views are all-too-commonly held, which implies the need for a "collective *catharsis*". The need seems especially pressing today, as tensions between Christians and Muslims are on the rise. St. Porphryios clearly explains the former's duty to the latter:

"Be a true Christian. Then you won't leap to conclusions about anybody, but your love will 'cover all things'. Even to a person of another religion you will always act as a Christian... You will care for a Muslim when he is need, speak to him and keep company with him... Just as Christ stands at the door and knocks and does not force an entry, but waits for the soul to accept Him freely on its own, so should we stand in the same way in relation to every soul" (Sisters of the Holy Convent of Chrysopigi 2005, 187) [emphasis included].

It should be pointed out, however, that askesis does not, in itself, assure such salutary effects. As the contemporary elder to whom Kyriacos Markides assigns the pseudonym "Fr. Maximos" explains:

"There are no practical methods, no specific exercises that will guarantee that the Grace of God will automatically be bestowed upon you. There is no formula involved here. A layperson with little or no askesis, but who may have already reached the depths of humility, may be visited by Grace. You cannot buy God's Grace through practical exercises" (Markides 2001, 208) [2].

This fact will hinder any effort to measure the effect of spirituality on political attitudes and outlook. Moreover, any particularly contemporary sample of Orthodox Christians may not provide an adequate glimpse of the transformative effects of the Threefold Way. While presumably not intending to provide a literal figure, Fr. Romanides (2008, 26) expresses the common view that it is increasingly rare to find genuinely illumined Christians: "A church sanctuary... might hold three hundred Orthodox Christians. Of that number, however, only five are in a state of illumination [i.e., *fotisis*], while the rest of them... have not even the slightest idea what purification [i.e. *catharsis*] is." Regrettably, it is not possible to determine whether such exceptional Christians are represented in my sample. Even if they were, moreover, it should not be assumed that they hold to more correct political views, as I explain below.

2.3 Askesis, Knowledge, and Political Ideology

It is argued that those who have completed the stage of *catharsis* not only adopt friendlier attitudes towards others, but may also attain knowledge of some sort. As Fr. John Romanides (2008, 94) notes, "if the contemporary Orthodox theologian is to acquire objectivity, he must rely on the experience of *theosis*". As it is evident that not all self-professing Christians have had such an experience, this statement implies that they will differ in their level of objective knowledge.

At this point, it is necessary to inquire on what sort of objectivity is imparted in the experience of *theosis*. Does it pertain to theological understanding, strictly understood as the knowledge of God, or to a broader theology that addresses how the believer ought to relate to her society and polity? If the latter is the case, then may we conclude that believers will differ ideologically according to how far they have advanced spiritually, such that the more advanced possess greater objective knowledge about political matters and, therefore, subscribe to ideologies that are more "correct"? It is arguable that Fr. Romanides rejects such a view:

"Can we Orthodox Christians claim... that someone who possesses noetic prayer [i.e., a spiritual gift typically received prior to the experience of theosis] is obligated to be on the Left or on the Right? Of course we cannot. So the science, which we call 'Orthodoxy', should never be associated with politics... When it comes to questions of ideology, Orthodox Christians are primarily concerned about whether the Church has the freedom to carry out Her work, which is to heal the sick in Her care. The Church must have this freedom." (2008, 184)

Similarly, Fr. Maximos argues that a saint "is not necessarily a scientist of the external world", and may err "on issues related to knowledge about worldly affairs" (Markides 2001, 161). After all, such a blunder would be "an intellectual mistake... not a mistake based on discernment about good and evil" (*Ibid*.). The sage goes on to point out that "after Pentecost, the disciples of Christ, being humble fisherman, did not all of a sudden become knowledgeable about this world" (*Ibid*.).

I conclude this section by calling to attention two caveats that the reader ought to bear in mind before drawing conclusions from my findings. First, there can be no guarantee that one's sample includes those who have successfully traversed the Threefold Way. Second, people do not necessarily possess greater objective knowledge on political matters due to their higher self-reported spiritual involvement.

3 Methods

3.1 Samples

A directory of Orthodox Christian parishes was used to compile a listing of virtually every Orthodox church in the U.S. for which there was a website [3]. On two separate occasions, I randomly selected 20% of these churches, and instructed research assistants to send a standard message to the rectors of each, asking them to invite their parishioners to complete a survey for a chance to win a $100 Amazon gift card. Thus, two rounds of this survey were conducted; the first round (i.e., Round 1) in the summer of 2014, and the second (i.e., Round 2) in the fall of 2015. Respectively, there were 102 and 76 respondents in total, drawn from all regions of the country. Where there are no significant differences between the rounds with respect to methods and findings, I limit my discussion and presentation of findings to Round 2.

3.2 Political Ideology

Ideology was measured in two ways. First, respondents were asked to place themselves on a 10-point ideological scale ranging from far left- to far right-wing. I adopted the exact wording used in the World Values Survey [4]. Second, they were asked to indicate how strongly they agree with each of 7 statements that form my Obnoxiously Short Political Ideology Test (OSPIT), which I designed for use in my American Government class (see Table 1). The test classifies one as a communitarian, conservative, liberal, libertarian, or a combination of two or more of these ideological types. The advantage of this measure is that it provides a broader range of possible results than those that compartmentalize people into either the liberal or conservative camp [5].

Table 1.
The Obnoxiously Short Political Ideology Test (OSPIT) [1]

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

Options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

1.) There need to be stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment.

2.) The government should spend more on reducing poverty.

3.) Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry legally.

4.) Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good.

5.) Abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

6.) Generally speaking, the best way to ensure peace is through military strength, not diplomacy.

Note
[1] The exact wording in statements 1, 4, and 5 is borrowed from the Pew Research Center, accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org.

3.3 Attitudes Towards Perceived Sociopolitical Threats

From a list consisting of atheists, conservatives, immigrants, liberals, libertarians, neo-Nazis (right-wing extremists), religious fundamentalists and socialists, survey respondents were asked to identify the one social or political group they found the most threatening (see Eisenstein 2006 for a nearly identical approach). They were then asked questions designed to gauge their level of tolerance and acceptance of members of this particular group. Round 1 respondents were asked to express their levels of admiration, respect, hostility, friendliness, and hatred towards members of this group on 0–9 scales. These questions were adapted from Renfro *et al.* (2006) [6]. Round 2 respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they concurred with the four statements listed in Table 2.

Table 2.
Measures of Tolerance and Acceptance

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? **Options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree**
1.) I sometimes find it difficult to see things from this group's point of view.
2.) I would be willing to befriend a member of this group.
3.) I feel anger towards members of this group.
4.) I feel hatred towards members of this group.

3.4 Measuring Spiritual Involvement

In order to assess the impact of spirituality, it is necessary to measure it according to each religion's unique standards of spiritual commitment, as these standards differ markedly across religious traditions. As Hill and Maltby (2009, 37) note, many measures of religiosity and spirituality "are culturally insensitive and do not generalize well to other cultures and religious traditions outside of that with which it was first created". Thus, it would be highly misleading to use a single, all-encompassing measure of spirituality.

Writing, as I am, from an Orthodox perspective, my method of measuring spiritual involvement involves drawing from the ascetical writings of the elders of the Orthodox Church. One such elder is the renowned monastic and bishop, St. Theophan the Recluse, who succinctly summarizes the prerequisites of spiritual growth:

"These, then, are the activities and exercised which are the means of healing our powers and bringing them back to our lost purity and wholeness: fasting, labor, vigil, solitude, withdrawal from the world, control of the senses, reading of the scriptures and the Holy Fathers, attendance at church, frequent confession and communion" (St. Theophan 139).

I constructed an Index of Spirituality based on participation in most of these activities [7]. Table 3 lists the questions that were specifically asked of survey respondents.

Table 3.
The Index of Spirituality

1.)	How often do you attend church?
2.)	Outside of church, how often do you pray?
3.)	How often do you keep vigil (i.e., praying at night when one is typically asleep)?
4.)	How often do you fast according to the prescribed fasting days of the Church?
5.)	How often do you read Orthodox spiritual books (including contemporary books, books on the lives and teachings of the saints, and the Bible)?
6.)	How often do you go to Confession?
7.)	How often do you take Communion?

I calculated a percent score based on the frequency with which the respondent engaged in each of the seven spiritual activities referred to above [8]. The average of all seven scores was used to gauge the respondent's overall level of spiritual involvement.

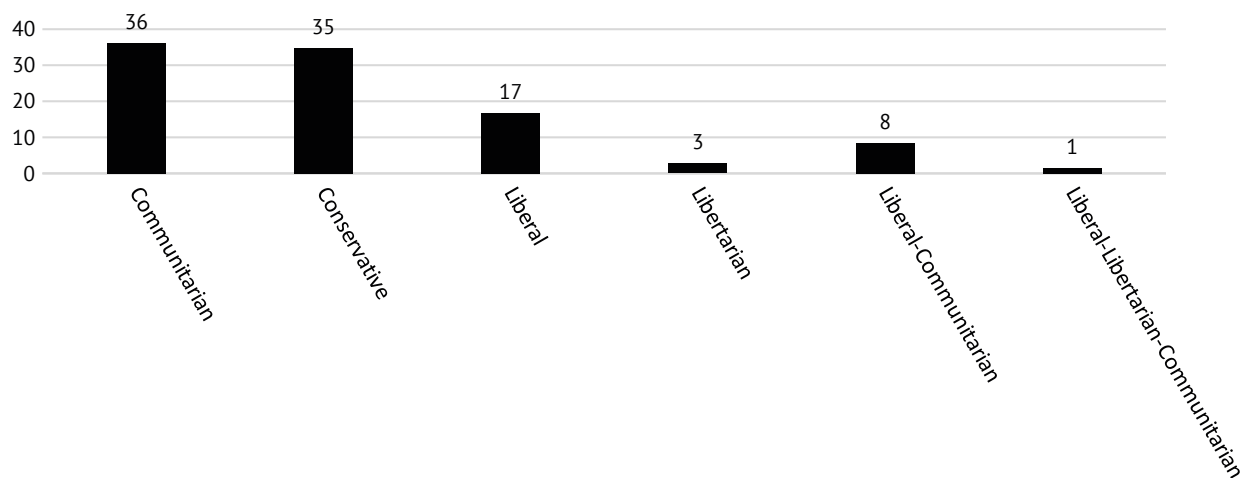# 4 Findings

4.1 Responses to the OSPIT

On the one hand, respondents' answers to the OSPIT could be interpreted as evidence that they are ideologically inconsistent, holding to both liberal and conservative views (see Table 4). Like most liberals, they reported greater confidence in diplomacy, and believed that the government ought to ensure that all Americans have access to health care, as well as do more to protect the environment. More in tune with conservatives, however, they were opposed to same-sex marriage and abortion rights, and were more critical of government regulation of business. They were split on whether the government should spend more on alleviating poverty (although 60% of Round 1 respondents favored anti-poverty spending) [9].

Table 4.
Responses to the OSPIT

Statement	Agree	Disagree
There need to be stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment.	65	35
The government should spend more on reducing poverty.	49	51
Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry legally.	29	71
Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good.	61	39
Abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.	76	24
Generally speaking, the best way to ensure peace is through military strength, not diplomacy.	27	73
The government should ensure that all Americans have access to health care.	64	36

On the other hand, such a conclusion only holds if we limit ourselves to the simple liberal-conservative ideological dichotomy. While respondents may not be consistently liberal or conservative, perhaps they are to some extent communitarian (that is, they are at once socially conservative and economic progressive). Indeed, communitarians were among the two largest ideological groups [10]. Liberals, "liberal-communitarians" (i.e., those who held both liberal and communitarian views), and libertarians formed much smaller groups (see Figure 1).
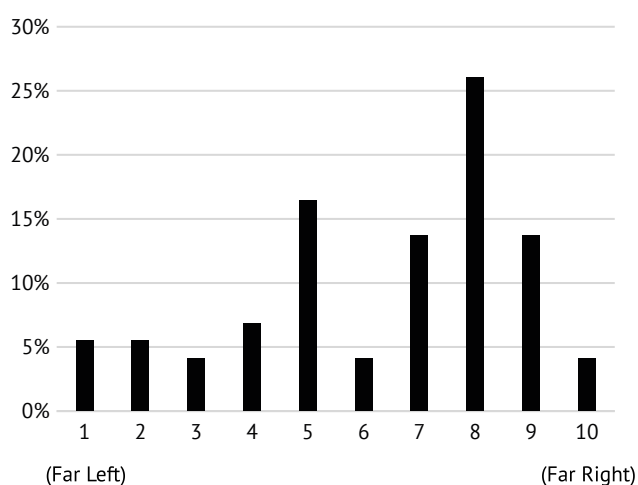
Figure 1.
Ideological Breakdown of Sample (Percentages)
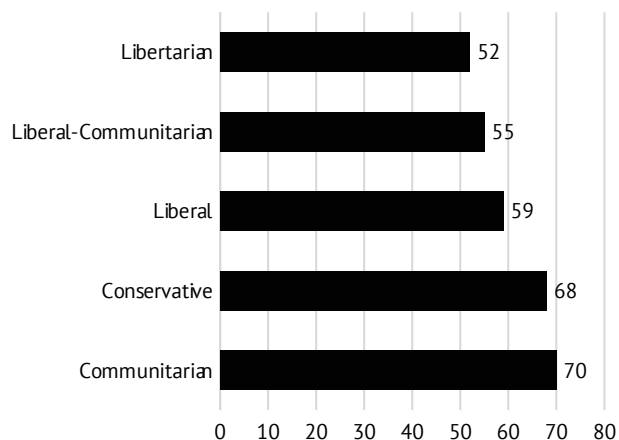

4.2 Askesis and Ideology

On the 1–10 ideological scale, the average scores of my samples in Rounds 1 and 2 were 5.9 and 6.3 – in both cases indicating a center-right orientation (see Figure 2 for the distribution of self-reported ideological scores). In Round 1, however, the spirituality index was not significantly correlated with this particular measure of ideology. In Round 2, there was a positive association (the more spiritually involved, the further to the right one placed oneself ideologically), although the correlation was not particularly strong or significant at a conventional level ($p < .1$).

Those whose responses to the OSPIT placed them in one of the four "pure" ideological types analyzed in my study (i.e., the communitarian, conservative, liberal, and libertarian) varied considerably in their level of spiritual involvement. Communitarians and conservatives were the most spiritually active (see Figure 3). Liberals were on average 9 and 11 points less spiritually involved than their conservative and communitarian counterparts, respectively [11].

Figure 2.
Distribution of Self-Reported Ideology on the 1-10 Scale (Percentages)

Figure 3.
Average Spirituality Index Score, by Ideological Group

Were there statistically significant relationships between spirituality and ideology? In Round 2, there was a positive and statistically significant correlation of nearly 26% between communitarianism and the spirituality index ($p < .05$), while, in Round 1, there was a significantly inverse correlation (also nearly 26%) between liberalism and the spirituality index ($p < .05$).

What accounts for the apparent link between liberalism and low spiritual involvement? Is it simply the case that awareness of the stark contrast between one's views on hot-button issues like abortion or same-sex marriage and those expressed in official Church statements discourage the average liberal from becoming actively involved in the life of the Church? Or, more controversially, does spiritual involvement foster objective knowledge on worldly (including political) matters, such that Orthodoxy and political liberalism are intrinsically incompatible? For reasons previously discussed, I have misgivings about drawing the latter conclusion.

One must also be careful about generalizing from the results of an online survey (Gideon 2012, 73). My particular sample appeared to be exceptionally well-educated. Whereas 47% of Americans had some college education, according to the latest round of the World Values Survey [12], the comparable figure in my survey was nearly twice as high (93%). It is likely that this skewed the political attitudes of my respondents towards the right end of the political spectrum, since more highly educated people tend be wealthier (United States Department of Labor 2014), and the wealthy in turn tend to favor conservative economic policies (Page, Bartels and Seawright 2013) [13].

4.3 Askesis and Attitudes Towards Sociopolitical Threats

In Round 1 of my investigation, prayer and spiritual reading were discovered to be significantly associated with one's friendliness towards the sociopolitical group he or she identifies as the most threatening (see Tables 5 and 6). A unit increase in spiritual reading increased friendliness by .67 points, holding age and sex constant [14]. The comparable figure for prayer was .58 points.

Table 5.
The Impact of Spiritual Reading on Friendliness towards Sociopolitical Threats (Multiple Linear Regression Model)

	Friendliness
Spiritual Reading	.665**
	(.314)
Age	*-.045
	(.018)
Sex	-.1.020**
	(.556)

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$

Table 6.
The Impact of Prayer on Friendliness towards Sociopolitical Threats (Multiple Linear Regression Model)

	Friendliness
Prayer	.579**
	(.190)
Age	*-.043
	(.018)
Sex	-.896**
	(.556)

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$

In Round 2, I collapsed my measures of tolerance and acceptance into dichotomous variables, and ran binary logistics regressions to gauge probabilities of agreement with each of the four statements listed in Table 2. Holding sex and convert status constant [15], I discovered that one-unit increases in church attendance, spiritual reading, and taking communion increase the probability that one will be willing to befriend a sociopolitical rival by factors of .981, .988, and .978, respectively.

Interestingly, vigil-keeping appears to deviate from this pattern to some extent. For instance, this activity is inversely and significantly associated with the likelihood that one will be willing to befriend a sociopolitical rival ($p < .1$). It would seem that, for those living in the world, keeping vigil – a mainly monastic activity – may entail some risk. The consequent sleep deprivation may render one more irritable, and thus less tolerant of others. In a monastic setting, by contrast, there are certain safeguards that may mitigate or reverse this effect.

That said, it is arguable that certain spiritual practices have peace-inducing effects. This may come as little surprise to those immersed in the spiritual life. "Without prayer", an Athonite monk asks, "how can the monk love God and his fellowman?" For him, every cry to God constitutes one step towards the surpassing of egoism and the opening of one's heart to God and man (Fr. George Kapsanis, Date Unknown).

5   Concluding Remarks

This investigation is a preliminary attempt at understanding how spiritual practices might relate to political attitudes and outlooks. This study may be affected by selection bias, as it appears that my respondents were limited mainly to those Christians who were on priests' email lists or who attended church and learned of my survey through a church bulletin or announcement. If the population of interest is all self-professing Christians, then one's sample should include those who rarely attend church and are beyond the reach of their pastors or priests.

This issue aside, it is hoped that this study will contribute to a renewed appreciation for spirituality. Those of faith may not only extol the personal benefits that spirituality brings [16], but they may now also point to its potential *societal* benefits, for the findings of this study indicate that certain spiritual practices may enhance one's tolerance of sociopolitical rivals. This suggests that spirituality may bring greater harmony to what seems like an increasingly fractious society. These possibilities should be explored in future research.

Notes

[1] Not to be confused with Orthodox (or "Big O") Christian. Those Christians who are orthodox ("small O") include, but are not limited to, the former, and subscribe to such traditional doctrines as the Holy Trinity and the literal, bodily Resurrection of Christ.

[2] On a similar note, St. Seraphim (Moore, *An Extraordinary Peace: St. Seraphim, Flame of Sarov*, 112) taught that askesis is only a means "of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God. But… only the good deed done for Christ's sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit".

[3] This directory is provided by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America at http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/directories/parishes/.

[4] World Values Survey. Accessed February 19, 2014. http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp.

[5] To access this test, please write to the author.

[6] The exact wording of this these questions was borrowed from James P. Clifton, "The Role of Intergroup Threat in Attitudes towards Same-Sex Marriage and its Beneficiaries" (MA Thesis: Humboldt State University, 2001). Accessed March 10, 2014, http://scholarworks.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/2148/710/James%20thesis%20-%20FINAL.pdf?sequence=1.

[7] Spiritual labors, solitude, and "withdrawal from the world" are, perhaps, less practical for non-Monastics.

[8] Regarding the frequency of keeping vigil, for instance, respondents are asked to choose from among five options, which are arranged in order of increasing frequency of participation in this activity. On this 1–5 scale, one's score is the quotient of the number corresponding to the respondent's choice and 5 (i.e., the highest number one may select, corresponding to nightly vigils). Therefore, one who keeps vigil nightly receives a score of 100% (5 divided by 5), whereas another who keeps vigil a few times a month receives a score of 40% (2 divided by 5).

[9] However, 60% of Round 1 respondents favored anti-poverty spending.

[10] The largest ideological group in the Round 2 sample were communitarians, followed closely by conservatives. The reverse was true in Round 1: conservatives comprised 32% of the sample, while communitarians formed 26%.

[11] It should be noted that only two respondents were classified as libertarians based on their responses to the OSPIT. Therefore, their average score should not be assumed to be representative of all Orthodox libertarians.

[12] See f. 5.

[13] Whereas the mean ideological score among Americans in the latest round of the World Values Survey was 5.76, the comparable figure in my sample was 6.32.

[14] Interestingly, female and older respondents were found to have less friendly attitudes.

[15] Converts and women were less likely to express a willingness to befriend a sociopolitical rival.

[16] To give but one example, Seybold and Hill conclude from their review of the psychological and medical literature that religion and spirituality have a "largely beneficial" impact on physical and mental health. See Kevin S. Seybold, and Peter C. Hill, "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mental and Physical Health," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 1 (2001): 21–24.

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