

The Delayed Parousia and Other Disillusionments as a Model for Today

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The main subject of this article is the massive disillusionment of many Christians, in one way or another connected with Russian Orthodoxy, with their ecclesiastical tradition. As a model for overcoming this crisis, the so-called “delayed Parousia” of the first century A.D. is proposed, when the delay of Christ’s Second Coming became the main stimulus for the creative development of Christianity and its incorporation into the polis society and social structures of the early Roman Empire. Such aspects of the problem as the building of relations between church and state, the presentation of the foundations of faith in the language of modern philosophy, and the overcoming of a dictatorial past, particularly the consequences of war, are addressed separately.

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1. Another Great Disillusionment

Many Russian-speaking people, including the author of the present paper, are disillusioned at present – with their former ideals, their country, their church. “We have lost everything,” they say, and they revise their former assessments and bitterly discard their former hopes and dreams. They watch their country being actively engaged in a typically imperialistic war, and its spiritual leaders blessing this war and calling it “sacred.”¹ But this situation is not unprecedented in history, and the very first Disillusionment of Christians can give today’s disappointed people, if not an example to follow, at least a reason to think. This paper offers some reflections on the subject which may appear more personal than academic in nature but hopefully can help the reader to assess the present situation.

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¹ As is clearly stated on the webpage of the Moscow Patriarchate: WRPC, “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира»” [Resolution of the XXV World Russian People’s Council «Present and future of the Russian world»], accessed January 27, 2025, patriarchia.ru/db/.

The first and the most important *Great Disillusionment* of Christians occurred around the third quarter of the first century,² when the first generation of Christians began to die, some under persecutions. At the same time, it became clear that the Second Coming of the Lord did not happen, did not put everything in its place, did not punish the evildoers and did not reward the righteous. Therefore, the believers had to somehow live in this not-very-friendly world. In scientific and theological literature this new vision is called “*Delayed Parousia*.” The Greek word *παρουσία* can mean both “coming” and “presence”, so one may say that the Christians had to switch from the first meaning to the second.

In fact, it was this Disillusionment that shaped Christianity as we know it: with its clearly defined dogmatics, its complex worship, its elaborate asceticism, its many debates, and the range of opinions on each of them. While people lived with the expectation of the imminent end of the world, none of these things could really matter, but in the late first century a new Christian culture had begun to emerge. There were still about two centuries to go before Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire and had to adapt to the Empire’s needs, enough time for it to take shape.

Most importantly, it was necessary to understand the reasons for this delay. The author of the Second Epistle of Peter expressed this most fully and detailed: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Pet. 3.9, NIV)

And if so, the position of passive consumers who are ready to receive everything from the finally enthroned Christ became implausible; on the contrary, the essence of the Christian life was to proclaim the Gospel to this world, which was not at all inclined to accept it, and to realize it in their own lives, which, of course, many wanted to spend on something simpler and more pleasant.

Simply put, *parousia* itself came to be understood not as a “final triumphal coming” but rather as a “permanent presence.” The call “*Maranatha*” (“Lord, come”) did not disappear, but gave way to the words “Christ is in our midst.”

But the problems were not limited to the “delay” of the Second Coming. Below, only the most significant ones will be outlined briefly. Initially, Christ addressed the people of Israel, as did the first apostles, but

² See, among others, Christopher M. Hays et al., *When the Son of Man Didn't Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

the majority of Jews did not accept their preaching, and the majority of Gentiles simply did not take it seriously, as Paul's speech in Athens showed (as described in Acts 17), or they mixed this preaching with their own prejudices, as it happened with the same Paul and Barnabas in Galatia (Acts 14). So now it was necessary to address the border group of "those who fear God," i.e., those Gentiles who had already accepted the doctrine of the One God, but had not yet converted to Judaism (which, to all appearances, was Paul's main audience). The educated Gentiles needed the biblical teaching presented in a language they could understand.

As the number of communities grew and spread throughout the empire, there was a risk that they would spread too far apart, that Christianity would be mixed with a multitude of other religions and cults; so, it was necessary to formulate the basic, common tenets of the Christian faith as the boundaries of the necessary unity. In turn, the Roman state was beginning to see Christians as a threat because they were preaching a new cult and building social ties on top of existing ones, accepting both slaves and patricians into their ranks; so, it was necessary to find a form of loyalty to the state power that would not call Christian identity itself into question.

Something similar is happening on a new level now, some general reflections on this theme will be proposed here: how the current disillusionment can become a source of creative development for Christians who share Russian identity of some kind and are (or used to be) somehow connected to the Eastern Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition. This is particularly important for recent emigrants, including the author of this paper, who are facing a serious identity crisis and need to redefine their faith. Approximately one hundred years ago, Nina Berberova who found herself in a similar situation, solemnly declared: "We are not in exile, we are on the message."³ A frustrated emigrant, she was probably inventing an important role for herself in the new milieu, she thought she was called to proclaim some message which, in fact, hardly anyone around was ready to listen to. Learning from that experience of the first wave emigrants, we can hardly repeat the same words today. Nevertheless, we continue to exist, so we need to find some meaning for our existence.

In the era of the Russian "spiritual revival" of the 90s, which eventually turned into the current catastrophe, the voices of the old Russian

³ This phrase is erroneously attributed to Zinaida Gippius – see Lilia Rodicheva, "«I am not in exile, I am in the message» by Nina Berberova: canonization of the phrase (in Russian)," in *Textology and Historical-Literary Process: collection of articles of the VII International Conference of Young Researchers*, Moscow, March 15–17, 2018 (Moscow: Buki Vedi, 2018), 143–57.

emigrants were clearly heard. They proved to be unable to prevent the catastrophe, but maybe they managed to delay it, and, most importantly, to become beacons for the multitude of the confused. The recent emigrants are not “on message” in the sense that they have to reveal something extremely important to the rest of the world, but they can see themselves as messengers of their own experience and their own ideals that work for the future even beyond their own lifespan.

2. Faith outside the empire

Perhaps the main point that unites all those who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in Russia is that its main problem is imperialism (although there are very different answers to the questions of what exactly it consists of and how to get rid of it). In ecclesiastical language, this is usually called “Sergianism”: In 1927, Metropolitan Sergius, the *locum tenens* of the patriarchal throne, signed a document that can be read as a standard declaration of loyalty to the existing authorities, but can also be seen as a statement that Stalin’s USSR replaces the collapsed Russian Empire as the main and almost the only support for the Church as an organization.⁴ Practice has shown that it is the second reading that has become dominant.

A great moral and social force has been abolished: the force in which our people felt their own strength, in which they were guided in their creative labors and enterprises, in which they took comfort for many years [...] And to our beloved and unforgettable Joseph Vissarionovich we prayerfully, with deep, fervent love, proclaim eternal memory

– such words describing Stalin would hardly have been uttered by Metropolitan Sergius in 1927, but in March 1953, they echoed across the world from the lips of his successor, Patriarch Alexy before the funeral service for the deceased leader.⁵

The irony of history is that the most vivid and implacable opponents of Sergianism among Russian emigrants tended to repeat the same mistake with regard to other political regimes, and while the 1927 declaration can be justified by blackmail and threats from the Chekists (Bolshevik

⁴ For a good (and rather critical) description of Sergianism see Boris Talantov, “The Moscow Patriarchate and Sergianism,” in Ivan Andreyev, *Russia’s Catacomb Saints* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Press, 1982), 463–86, pages.uoregon.edu/sshoe-mak/, accessed January 27, 2025.

⁵ Patriarch Alexy, “Речь перед панихидой по И.В. Сталине” [Speech before the funeral for I.V. Stalin], in *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 4 (April 1953): 3, translated by the author of this article.

secret police), other episodes of the “restoration of the empire” were completely uncoerced and voluntary.⁶ In March 2014, the author of this paper was in the U.S. at the invitation of local parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) and personally observed the delight of many of its parishioners at the “return of Crimea to its native harbor”; their dreams of the restoration of the empire were finally coming true before their eyes, and the beginning was made in none other than Crimea, which remained the last shard of the empire. This is a very personal recollection of course, but ROCOR metropolitan Hilarion during an official visit to Russia in 2017, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, visited several Crimean cities with their holy sites as an integral part of the Russian Federation, which was clearly stated in sermons and publications.⁷

Another characteristic example is the Statement of the ROCOR European Bishops issued on February 22, 2022, where the only object of criticism was labeled as “Western sources of information”.⁸ Quite characteristically, it mentions St. Vladimir Bogoyavlensky who united Russia in his heart because “he was successively Metropolitan of both Moscow and St Petersburg, and finally of Kiev” (thus, Kiev was openly labeled as a Russian core city).

For many, their Orthodox identity became inseparable from the empire – even if not really existing, but imagined and therefore especially desirable. And this despite the fact that they were born and raised in the United States and other Western countries, where the state is fundamentally and consistently excluded from association with any religious organization, considering religion to be a private matter of citizens.

Metropolitan Sergius was certainly not first church leader in Russian history who embraced official protection and offered his resources to the state in exchange for safety. The Old Believers will confidently attribute the moment of subordination of the Church to the state to the times of Patriarch Nikon and Tsar Alexei in the 17th century, whereas similar developments can even be traced back to the reign of Tsar Ivan the Terrible.

And in general, if we look into it, the state-ization of the Church began in the 4th century, if not under Constantine, then certainly under

⁶ On the most controversial example, see, e.g. Mikhail Shkarovskii, “The ROCOR and the Axis Powers During World War II,” rocorstudies.org/category/, accessed January 27, 2025.

⁷ russianorthodoxchurch.ws/synod/eng2017/20170720_enmhcrimea.html, accessed November 22, 2025.

⁸ orthodox-europe.org/content/statement-on-conflicts-in-ukraine/, accessed November 22, 2025.

Theodosius (both are canonized saints). Having made Christianity a permitted religion, the empire could not but make it a state religion, nationalize it, subordinate it to its own interests. The history of the Church is full of examples of resistance (for example, in the time of the Iconoclast emperors), but the forces were, of course, too unequal. Mother Maria Skobtsova summarized in the following way the essence of the Synodal period of the Russian church (roughly speaking, 1700–1917) which has left its marks on people's attitudes and habits long after it ended:

The synodal type of religious life, which put forward along with spiritual values other values – from the state, or everyday life, or the tradition – thus not only rearranged and confused the hierarchy of values, but often simply substituted Christ's love with selfish love for the things of this world [...] (Now) the Roman emperor defeated Christ not in the circus arena, not in the catacombs, but in the moments of his recognition of the King of Heaven, in the moments of the beginning of the substitution of Christian commandments for the commandments of the secularized statehood.⁹

And one can easily imagine how, after some political changes in Russia, the present church leaders or their immediate successors, now quite loyal to the Kremlin, will immediately offer their services to the new political regime, whichever it may be, as a new *Katechon* providing security and prosperity.¹⁰

One may object that the experience of Orthodox communities in exile in the 20th century shows that they can live perfectly well in the complete absence of attention from the state. But it seems that this experience was never accepted by the wide audience back home in Russia.

There is no alternative history of Christianity; however, it does not mean that changes are impossible. Among the best known examples of positive changes is the German experience of repentance after dictatorship, which is, in fact, unique. There is no point in going into further detail here, one can only recall that the key role in German politics after 1945 was played by parties whose names began with the word "Christian," the CDU and the CSU, and they did not just use traditional symbols or sets of quotes (after all, the *Wehrmacht* also wore crosses and the slogan "God with us"), but were guided by evangelical values in relation to the

⁹ Mother Maria Skobtsova, "Типы религиозной жизни" [Types of Religious Life], in *Vestnik RCD* 176 (1997): 48–49, translated by the author of this article.

¹⁰ On *Katechon* ideology in Russia, see among others Victor Shnirelman, "Russia as a *Katechon*: «Civilizationism» and Eschatological Discourse in Putin's Russia," *russiapost.info/society/katechon*, accessed January 27, 2025.

contemporary situation. There has never been a Christian policy of this kind in Russia before, but even now there is no visible attempt to reflect on the possibility of such a policy and on what will have to be resolutely abandoned.

However, Russia is far from unique here. One may suppose that in some other post-Soviet countries the emergence of new jurisdictions independent of Moscow is understood by many as the formation of churches that are primarily national and only secondarily Christian, but the citizens of these countries may judge this better.

It is not so difficult to understand all this if we remember that, according to the Gospel, Christ died on the cross not for the greatness of Rome or the independence of Judea but for each individual, who, unlike empires and republics, is eternal. The first generations of Christians, faced with this problem, offered their own solution: outward loyalty to the existing state (but nothing more) and the building of communities based on principles other than that state.

3. Hope for a society

Personalities make up society. Interaction with the society is often understood by traditional church structures as something between corporate public relations and an ideological department that fulfills the order of the state in exchange for privileges.

Jesus, however, referred to his disciples as the “salt of the earth” (i.e., the minerals without which the earth cannot bear fruit, Mt. 5.13), and an unknown author around the year 200 in an epistle to Diognetus expanded on this idea further:

Christians do not differ from other people in place of residence, language, or customs, since they do not dwell in special cities, do not use some distinctive dialect, and do not have a peculiar way of life [...] In short, what is in the body is the soul, Christians are in the world (5–6).¹¹

Today, it seems to be rather the opposite: practicing Christians are clearly distinguished by external characteristics (clothing, special turns of speech, everyday rituals, etc.), but they rarely try to become the “soul of the world,” i.e., to show others some special patterns of behaviour, meanings, and values. Churchgoing is usually understood as joining a certain

¹¹ *The Epistle to Diognetus: The Greek Text with Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Classic Studies on the Apostolic Fathers) by Henry G. Meecham et al. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2024), translated by the author of this article.

special subculture. As for active participation in the life of society, from charity to defending civil rights, belonging to the Church does not, in general, affect a person's behaviour.

The first generations of Christians, as far as we can tell, did not specifically create such a subculture. They faced much more important tasks: how to fit into the *polis* society and how to fill the well-known forms with new content. The ancient polis already featured a special institution into which early Christians could easily integrate.¹² First of all, it was the *collegium*, a voluntary and self-governing association of free people with its own rules, elected presidents, treasury, and regular meetings. Collegia in the early empire were completely voluntary, the state did not particularly regulate their activities and they united people on various grounds: religious brotherhood, professional shop, compatriotism, club of interest. However, one can say that almost any collegium was to some extent religious: its members performed certain rites, honoured this or that deity, appointed their meetings on memorable days of the calendar, etc. Collegia played an important societal role: they distributed resources, promoted the interests of their members, rationed production, established horizontal ties with other collegia etc. So, the first Christians did not invent completely new social structures; instead, they adapted and used the existing ones.

There was one more institution in the Roman Empire which is absent today – namely *patronage*.¹³ The society was rigidly structured; each person was individually dependent on others, but the form and the degree of such dependence varied greatly. In addition to slaves, who were considered the property of their masters, there were *clients*, legally free but closely connected to their *patron*. It was a multi-tiered system, so the patron, in turn, was often someone's client as well. A freedman would normally become a client of the one who freed him.

Patrons were caring not only for individuals, but also for large communities such as cities, armies, etc. Public charity was understood in terms of patronage: the emperor could erect public buildings in a city as its patron, a general could distribute land plots to his loyal veterans, etc. At the same time, the relations between deities and humans were understood in approximately the same way: deities were patrons of individuals and entire communities and performed favors for them demanding active

¹² See, among others, Bruce W. Longenecker, ed., *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity* (Waco: Baylor, 2022).

¹³ See, first of all, David DeSilva, *Honor Patronage Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Lisle: IVP Academic, 2022).

loyalty in return. Patronage relationships could be temporary: a visitor from another city became a client of his host while living in his house; in turn, he would offer the same hospitality in his hometown.

Any resources in such a society were understood as limited (the proverbial “zero-sum game”), they were concentrated in the hands of a narrow group of patrons – distributors. Roughly the same was true for the social capital, such as security, protection, permission to do business, etc. Naturally, not every patron had every resource at his disposal, but he would negotiate some sort of exchange with another patron if needed. For the resources he provided his clients with, a patron expected personal loyalty which implied the fulfilment of his assignments and even unspoken wishes. Ingratitude to a patron was considered to be a grave sin.

Since early Christians were actively involved in patron-client relationships, the early church was quite familiar with them. Moreover, this model was transferred to the theological sphere and the Pauline tradition described its theology in these terms: the common patron and mediator is the Lord Jesus Christ, who in turn is subordinate to the Father. The believers are redeemed by Jesus from slavery to sin and death, and thus become his freedmen or clients, whom he endows with the necessary resources (righteousness) and who in return are obliged to do his will. In fact, when Paul mentions “redemption” (Greek ἀπολύτρωσις), he is metaphorically speaking of a ransom of a servant to freedom: “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3.24 NIV). The next task was to present the Good News in the language of Hellenistic philosophy – primarily Platonic – so that it could be heard and understood; in fact, this task gave rise to Christian dogma and patristic theology as we know it today.

If today we perceive these culturally conditioned forms and constructions as something once and for all given from above, we betray the very principle of incarnation, according to which divine Truth is united with human flesh, which in turn includes a nationality, cultural identity, and much more. So that these words do not look too general, we can offer two very famous and at the same time very uncontroversial examples of the search for such models that emerged in the mid-20th century in the Western world.

The first is the attempt to apply existential philosophy to the exegesis of New Testament texts, which in the 1940s gave rise to Rudolf Bultmann’s theory of demythologization and the critical response to it that has shaped much of modern New Testament scholarship. Bultmann’s thesis was that the New Testament was written in the mythological language of the time,

and that it needed to be translated into the language of modern philosophy and psychology. Simply put, people of the mid-20th century do not need to be told stories about angels and demons; they need to talk about the meaning of their existence, extracting the gospel message in its very essence (*kerygma*) from the mythological narrative.¹⁴

Another example is liberation theology, which emerged in Latin America in the 1960s as a reaction to the wide spread of Marxism (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and others). It sought to read the Bible and evaluate what was going on around them not from the perspective of the church establishment, but from the position of the “poor of the Lord” on behalf of whom the Old Testament prophets spoke. From this perspective, the Gospel calls for the liberation of the oppressed and the restoration of justice, and it is hard to disagree that the Gospel does indeed contain such calls and that the state-ized churches preferred to ignore them.¹⁵

Both theories have attracted a sea of criticism and may be considered outdated today, having been formulated eighty and sixty years ago, respectively; nevertheless, a rather successful attempt to integrate their most important points into the tradition can be found in Jürgen Moltmann’s “theology of hope” (1970s).¹⁶ But for obvious reasons, Russian theology was very far away from such questions at that time, just as it did not notice them in the nineties, when it was time to rebuild walls and reprint books, and still does not notice them today. Well, catching up in development has undoubted advantages: one can generalize the experience of predecessors and avoid their mistakes. But asking questions about how we can combine modern philosophy and psychology with Christian faith, how to preach the Gospel to the people of the 21st century without pretending that we still live in the Roman (or czarist) Empire, and what to say to the oppressed about their situation, is unavoidable. If this is not done, the traditional Church is destined to become a folk sanctuary somewhere on the margins of the modern world.

¹⁴ The literature on the subject is endless; the principal reference will probably be Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter – Universitätsverlag, 1962).

¹⁵ As a good introduction, one can recommend João Chaves, “Latin American Liberation Theology: The Creation, Development, Contemporary Situation of an On-Going Movement,” in *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Themes and Developments in Culture, Politics, and Society*, Hunt, Stephen J. (ed.). (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 113–28

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

We cannot say that such attempts have not been made in the contemporary Russian-speaking environment, but they are still very few and rather inconsistent. As an example, let me cite the so-called “weak theology” (an idea expressed in the 2010s by John Caputo, developed in Russia by Svetlana Konacheva,¹⁷ Andrei Shishkov¹⁸ – who prefers to call his theology “dark” – and some others). It proposes to view God not as a superpower that demands unconditional worship and obedience and severely punishes sins, but rather as a transformative event that helps us find meaning in our own lives and build relationships with others. In this sense, such a theology inherits both Bultmann’s demythologization and the liberation theology of Latin American pastors.

Simply put, since the Church wanted to influence the society of the Roman Empire, it had to put on the pallium of Platonic philosophy. Today, in order to accomplish the same task, it has to put on the outfit of postmodernism.

All this concerns not only high controversies, but also practical issues. At the risk of arousing a sea of emotions, only a few will be mentioned, the most topical as it seems. The first is the question of *sexual ethics*. Yes, medieval Christianity was, to a large extent, fixated on the sexual sphere as sinful and in many respects remains so to this day; but we do not find this in the early Christian texts. There is an extremely strict requirement for that time to limit sexuality to marriage, and the rest is not even discussed. At the same time, marriage was chronologically the last-declared Church sacrament, and the wedding as a special rite was performed only from the 4th century on, already in the imperial period, and, to all appearances, initially only for the upper strata of society while peasants kept traditional pagan forms of marriage, to the indignation of preachers.

But in the Roman Empire, marriage law was complex and elaborate; for example, marriages *cum manu* and *sine manu* (lit. “with hand” and “without hand”) differed in their status and consequences, marriages between slaves were generally impossible, etc. In today’s secular society, the concept of marriage is much more blurred, the notorious “stamp in the papers” is becoming an optional formality, and a Church wedding for most people is just a beautiful rite. In this situation, is it possible

¹⁷ Svetlana Konacheva, “The Political Aspects of Weak Theology,” in *Theology and the Political. Theo-political Reflections on Contemporary Politics in Ecumenical Conversation*, Theology and Mission in World Christianity, vol. 16, eds. Alexei Bodrov and Stephen M. Garrett (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 145–59.

¹⁸ Andrey Shishkov, “Dark Ecclesiology: What We Do in the Shadows,” publicorthodoxy.org/2021/, accessed January 27, 2025.

to impose the requirements of a completely different society on young people? Does it require, on the contrary, a radical revision of ideas about fidelity, adultery, and other things in the spirit of modern practice, where people “meet,” “live together,” etc.? Nobody seems to have an answer to that question. In any case, the recent norm of “no sex before marriage” has actually already been replaced by the opposite norm: “marriage only for couples who have made sure they are serious about it.”

Much is said in connection to current events about the necessity or even possibility of *national repentance*, but it is usually said from the position of a future officer of the occupation administration: how “we” will make “them” repent? At the same time, the world has accumulated a rich experience of nations overcoming their own dark pasts and overcoming the spiral of defeat and resentment, and there are more countries than Germany on the list. Nikolai Epplé’s book *An Inconvenient Past* presents this topic for the Russian readership.¹⁹ Some kind of Christian response for the ongoing war will be necessary, especially since the church has a rich experience of repentance as an active hope for new beginnings.

In modern society, a kind of backwards *cancel culture* is gaining momentum. This expression can be interpreted rather as a *cult of unforgiveness*. It implies that past mistakes or previous failures to meet current standards require that a person be completely cut out of society, without any second chance at all. Such a cult is especially dangerous in the digital age, when everyone leaves a trace on the Internet with literally every action and the standards may change rapidly. Christianity, by contrast, offers from the outset the principle of true inclusiveness and universal forgiveness based on the separation between the sin and the sinner. This general principle, of course, needs elaboration and adjustment, but it has lost none of its relevance over the past two millennia, and the development of new practices of reconciliation with the past in this context (not to mention the current wars) could be an important task for Christians.

4. Love and the church

Reflecting on the fate of “eternal” Rome, ruthlessly sacked by the Visigoths, Augustine, in the early 5th century, wrote in his treatise *The City of God* about two cities: the earthly, based on love of self, and the heavenly, based on love of God and neighbour. They coexist in time and space, and each person inevitably finds himself or herself a citizen of one or the oth-

¹⁹ Nikolai Epplé, *An Inconvenient Past: Memory of State Crimes in Russia and Other Countries* (in Russian, Moscow: NLO, 2020).

er. Such a view allowed Christians not only to experience the unthinkable – the capture of Rome by the barbarians – but to find a meaning in it and a task for the future. The catastrophe we are experiencing now can move us to a similar reflection.

According to the model of the religious scholar and sociologist Gerd Theissen, there are three main areas in religion: myth, ethics, and ritual.²⁰ Turning to the first centuries of Christianity, one cannot help but see how little they focused on the ritual side of religion and how much attention was paid to myth (i.e., the narrative explaining the structure of the world and man's place in it) and the practical ethics that flowed from it. The “revitalized spirituality” that has become the object of our Disillusionment has concentrated mainly on the ritual side of religion. At the same time, it turned out to be quite compatible with the new mythology of the “Russian world,” which was being born and conquering minds and territories literally before our eyes. Contrary to Bultmann, myth is still present in our lives and even governs our societies to an extent.

For those who are not satisfied with the new mythology, it will probably not be enough to retell the old stories to each other. They will have to learn to be a different Church, and in this otherness, if they wish, they can see a return to apostolic times.

First of all, the Church will inevitably be and is already becoming poor and weak, not only in the sense that it will not be given the same amount of money and power as before, but also in the sense that it cannot speak to the rest of society from a position of strength even now. Moreover, it will not be able to speak as having a monopoly on the truth in the last instance in the current conditions, when there is a rich palette of the most diverse opinions and practices. A more detailed analysis of the tasks and prospects of theology in our era (made even before 2022) can be found in Mikhail Epstein's book “Religion after Atheism: New Possibilities for Theology.”²¹ One of the key concepts of this book is “poor religion/faith/church.”

Further, the Church will be and is already becoming diverse and competitive. We have long seen by many examples that the principle of “one city, one bishop” is a thing of the past and is unlikely to return. Competition between denominations and jurisdictions may take violent forms, especially in times of war, but on the whole, it is rather beneficial, and under conditions of rigid monopoly, the omnipotence of diocesan

²⁰ Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1999).

²¹ Mikhail Epstein, *Религия после атеизма. Новые возможности теологии* [Religion after Atheism: New Possibilities for Theology] (Moscow: AST, 2013).

administrators becomes boundless. The classical ecclesiastical hierarchy arose in a society where people were not and could not be equal: patricians and plebeians, freeborn and freedmen, not to mention slaves. The notion of human rights as such emerged explicitly during the Reformation and in connection with the reading of the Gospel: if we are all created by God and all redeemed by Christ, on what can serfdom or the privileges of the nobility be based (as clearly stated in “Twelve Articles,” 1525)?²² In a much more egalitarian modern society the same sort of questions still can be raised and the good old answers may not sound quite convincing anymore.

In the area of ideas and practices, intense competition has long been a reality, especially with the spread of the Internet. Thus, the Church is increasingly likely to become markedly decentralized and geographically dispersed – a trend that was already evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only about the Internet as a means of communication and even a way of administering the sacraments. Christianity is less and less confined to strictly ecclesiastical frameworks: for example, the most poignant poems about Christmas in Russian were written by Boris Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky; there are different opinions about Pasternak’s ecclesiasticism, but Brodsky was definitely not religious in the traditional sense of the word. The phenomenon of extra-denominational or even extra-religious Christianity is becoming increasingly important in our lives. Such Christianity addresses meanings rather than rituals, which means that we have to talk about these meanings.

We live in an age of triumphant hatred, which usually considers itself righteous: tell me whom you hate and I will tell you whether I will hate with you or against you. The Christian Church is called to show love to the world, and this can be love of self (its own traditions and rituals, its own hierarchy and privileges, etc.) or love of God, which always poses many challenges.

5. Conclusion

The second letter of Peter identifies the Disillusionment of the first Christians as a source of hope for the whole world. But in order for this statement to become a reality, the Christians themselves had to revise a lot, they had to leave the cozy closed circle of like-minded people and face the

²² Martin Brecht, “Der theologische Hintergrund der Zwölf Artikel der Bauernschaft in Schwaben von 1525. Christoph Schappeler und Sebastian Lotzers Beitrag zum Bauernkrieg,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85, no. 2 (1974): 178–208.

world around them, often incomprehensible and even directly hostile. They did this, and along the way they had to revise many attitudes and habits, reformulate old positions and invent new practices, integrate into social structures while at the same time maintaining their own identity and ideals. They have by and large succeeded in this task and that is why we have the historical Christianity that we have.

There is every reason to believe that today, Christians who are, in one way or another, connected with Russian culture and Orthodox tradition face similar tasks. If they refuse or fail to solve them, their church life will gradually turn into a folklore reservation, fascinating for tourists, but virtually devoid of any connection with what is happening outside of it. The point, however, is not merely the need to reconsider the ongoing war, but also to reflect on the extent to which the leadership of the Orthodox Church bears responsibility for its initiation.

We are talking about the fact that the project of restoring “Holy Russia” (which never really existed) has come to its logical conclusion and it is time to address the pressing issues of modernity in a variety of areas: high philosophy, applied ethics, political theory and practice, etc. The experience of the first generations of Christians suggests that this is quite possible; it can be called upon in solving practical problems. The Church is likely to become increasingly “poor,” and not only in the financial sense, but the liberation from the burden of exorbitant claims may enable it to meet these new challenges with renewed vigor, while remaining faithful to the precepts of its Founder.

Coming back to the proverbial phrase “We are not in exile, we are on the message”, one can also add that emigration is a great opportunity to reflect on what is happening, to think about scenarios for the future, to lay the foundations of a building that we ourselves will probably never see completed. And if we understand our emigration as such a task, one can agree that it is not only an exile, but also a message – a message addressed to ourselves.