

Fractured Orthodoxy: The Apocalypticism of the Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) Theology

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Abstract: The Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) theology is at the heart of the invasion of Ukraine, and is fueling the ongoing war with apocalyptic rhetoric. Specifically, the Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev), Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, has declared the “special military operation” in Ukraine to be a Holy War, and sees the Russian Federation as the prophesied one restraining the reign of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 6–7). The West, and its permissive culture of secularist governments, religious pluralism, reproductive freedom, and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ persons, is seen as literally satanic – that is, as heralding the coming of the Antichrist from the Book of Revelation. This article traces the evolution of this aberrant theology, as well as the geopolitical contexts in which it has evolved. The article concludes with a counternarrative coming from the Orthodox Church Father, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon († 202 CE). It is hoped that a “Return to the Fathers” in theological worldview will, in turn, help Russian Orthodoxy to return to sanity, and away from its dangerous apocalyptic rhetoric.

Keywords: Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian World (*Russkii Mir*), Apocalypticism, Invasion of Ukraine, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon

In idealized self-understanding, Orthodoxy sees itself as the realization of biblical faith, heralding its conciliar and eucharistic theology as the unaltered transmission of God’s message from apostolic times, free from innovation and heresy. While a worldwide Church of diverse cultures, there is to be only one chalice, one confession, and one mind in harmony with the Fathers, just as it is proclaimed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is a faith further unified through two millennia of shared struggle both in glorious mission and in fearful persecutions. Admittedly, this idealized vision obscures the complexity of tumultuous internal struggles, ranging from the political, the ecclesial, and the theological. Yet it is also an ideal that kept the faithful striving to toward that horizon of perfection. As imperfect as humanity is, the struggle to attain purity of faith is a defining virtue of Orthodox life. Yet it is also one that highlights the dismal failure of Orthodoxy in making it a real-world reality.

The invasion of Ukraine, a predominately Orthodox nation, by the Russian Federation, which is also primarily Orthodox, is the latest failure (to put it mildly). The war has killed hundreds of thousands for the sake of a claimed greater good, one in which the fate of the world is said to be at stake. The invasion was, in part, an outgrowth of an aberrant apocalyptic narrative: the Russian Orthodox Church envisions itself in a real-world battle against Satan and the Antichrist, a claim explicitly announced on March 27, 2024, at the World Russian People’s Council (WRPC), headed by the Russian Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev), and held at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The ratified document of that conference is entitled “The Present and Future of the Russian World (Настоящее и будущее Русского мира),” and is published on the Patriarchate’s official website.¹ It is specifically addressed to the legislative and executive

1. “Настоящее и будущее Русского мира,” Официальный сайт Московского Патриархата, last modified March 27, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

authorities of the Russian Federation. A key quote from document, the subject of which frames this present analysis, is presented below:

From the spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation [that is, the invasion of Ukraine] is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of the Holy Rus', fulfill the mission of the "Restraining One" [2 Thessalonians 6-7; that is, the one who restrains the Antichrist] by protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the west that has fallen into Satanism.²

The Western World is seen as characterized by secularism, pluralism, inclusivism, and diverse lifeways (such as LGBTQIA+ and reproductive freedom), all of which has been condemned by the Russian Church as satanic – not 'satanic' as rhetorical hyperbole, but as actually coming from Satan in prelude to the coming of an American Antichrist and Armageddon. This is the context for the biblical reference to the prophesized "Restraining One" holding back the forces of evil in an increasingly godless world. This is the theological vision driving the war against Ukraine, which is itself only the beginning of a greater objective of reclaiming all of the former Russian and Warsaw Pact territories including Moldavia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Alaska,³ and perhaps even further.

The aim of this article is to detail the apocalypticism of the *Russkii Mir* theology for those unfamiliar with it, but not only. I will also bring that eschatological vision into dialogue with commentary and warnings of the Orthodox Saint, Irenaeus of Lyon (†202 CE). Yet perhaps the most surprising aspect for most readers will be that the Russian World apocalyptic theology has a correspondence in the West that appears to have shaped its creation. I am referring to *The Late Great Planet Earth*, an international best-seller written by Evangelical authors Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson from the United States in 1970 – a book taken as "gospel truth" by far too many. It is this book which started a dialogue on politics and the hoped-for return of Christ, a journey, it explicitly claims, that must begin in Moscow. But before I turn to that, I will highlight some recent developments in the *Russkii Mir* theology, beyond those I have provided previously.⁴

Recent History

In 2016, after nearly a century of planning, an attempt was made to have a council to resolve several longstanding divisions within Orthodoxy. These included the hope for a common calendar for worship (that is, to end the division between the Russian "Old Calendar" [Julian] and the Gregorian Calendar used by other Orthodox). More critically, it was hoped that outstanding questions about establishing autocephaly/

2. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "When Theology Fuels the War: False Prophecy and State Policy in 'The Present and Future of the Russian World' Document," *Public Orthodoxy*, April 8, 2024, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2024/04/08/when-theology-fuels-the-war/#>.

3. Russia settled Alaska in the eighteenth century before being purchased by the US in 1867. The Russian Orthodox Church venerates many Alaskan saints, including Saint Herman of Alaska, Saint Innocent, Saint Jacob Netsvetev, and the New Martyrs Saint Peter the Aleut, Protomartyr of America, and Saint Juvenal. As such, Alaska too is part of the so-called Russian World; see Isabel van Brugen, "Russian State TV Slips in Ominous US Threat: 'Our Alaska'" *Newsweek*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-state-tv-us-threat-alaska-1931298>.

4. See: David K. Goodin, "The Rise of the Third Rome: *Russkii Mir* and the Rebirth of Christendom," *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion* 2, no. 2 (2021): 71–88, and David K. Goodin, "Interneccine War and Intra-Nicene Sin: Russia, Ukraine, and Ethiopia through the Lens of the Apocalyptic Oration by Basil the Great on the Book of Amos," *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion* 3, no. 2 (2022): 24–39.

autonomy, as well as jurisdictional disputes (for example, the Qatar churches), could be resolved between Patriarchates. Then there was the question of whether widowed clergy may be permitted to remarry, as well as formulating a response to the ecological challenges facing the world today, amongst other issues.

The most decisive issue turned out to be Ukraine and its desire for autocephaly. The Moscow Patriarchate, which historically had jurisdiction, vehemently resented the question even being raised. The majority of Ukrainians, on the other hand, were horrified at the Moscow Patriarchate's support for the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and appealed to Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople for its ecclesial independence – they feared Moscow was using its Ukrainian churches to further the political aims of Vladimir Putin, and would again be used to legitimize the annexation of the entire nation in the name of *Russkii Mir*. Offended, the Moscow Patriarchate boycotted the 2016 Council, pulling out less than a month before the scheduled start. It was a political move aimed at breaking conciliarity, thereby denying ecumenical status for the council and preventing its decrees from having binding authority.

The Russians would pressure three other churches that have fallen under its sphere of political and ecclesial influence (Antioch, Bulgaria, and Georgia) to likewise withdraw. It is as Sergei Chapnin from the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace writes: “The Patriarch of Moscow torpedoed the event. [...] [This move] can only be interpreted as a fairly explicit nod to Orthodox fundamentalists who dismiss the council as iconoclastic and ungodly.”⁵ The fundamentalists are a reference to the socially and politically conservative within worldwide Orthodoxy that, very generally speaking, seek to counter pluralistic and secular views that embrace diversity, gender equality, inclusiveness, and reproductive freedom – what has come to be known as “woke” culture. For this reason, many of these fundamentalists have fallen under the influence of the Patriarch of Moscow, seeing him as the last remaining true Orthodox voice in an increasingly unfamiliar world.

Nevertheless, despite the withdrawal of these four churches, the other ten autonomous and autocephalous churches would attend, and the council did issue several decrees and statements, making the council “Pan-Orthodox” if not fully ecumenical. The decrees are still binding across those episcopal jurisdictions. Yet it was also clear it is no longer one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

These disputes would continue to worsen. In 2018, the Moscow Patriarchate took the extraordinary move of excommunicating the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate for their intention to grant autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.⁶ What is most astonishing about this decision is that the Moscow Patriarchate assumed the authority to take such an action unilaterally. Clearly, there was no longer a perceived need to seek conciliarity outside the Russian World. It must be observed, then, that it is a one-sided schism, as the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate has not excommunicated the Russians in turn. Nevertheless, in response to the pleas from the Orthodox in Ukraine fearing further Russian aggression, on January 5, 2019, the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate signed the *tomos* that officially recognized and established the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, granting it autocephaly. It is now independent of Russia, at least for now. In response, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to resolve this matter, as well as to further their greater *Russkii Mir* aims of reclaiming former Soviet territories, through military force.

5. Sergei Chapnin, “Russia’s No-Show at Pan-Orthodox Council Reveals Hopeless Lack of Unity,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 29, 2016, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/63954>.

6. “Statement by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Concerning the Encroachment of the Patriarchate of Constantinople on the Canonical Territory of the Russian Church,” October 11, 2018, Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/47059/>.

Threats to the Russian World

The Moscow Patriarchate has become the “soft power” arm of Putin’s militaristic agenda. The question is now, “Why?” The answer is found in certain demographic realities, including an economically disastrous decline in birth rates coupled with migration away from Russia by those who are able and are seeking a better life. Even replacement level population cannot be maintained. Russia’s statistics agency, *Rosstat*, projects that “population could drop to 130 million [from the current 146.1 million] by 2046 due to declining immigration numbers and low birth rates, according to a worst-case projection.”⁷ Social services for the older generation cannot be provided without the tax base support of a growing population. War deaths of military-aged men are further exasperating the crisis. These problems could lead to the collapse of the Russian Federation. Putin has therefore asked Russian women to “have eight or more children [each]” as a national policy goal to reverse the demographic trajectory.⁸ But the numbers are still declining.

While quality of life surveys outside government control are not possible, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that, “When asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10, Russians on average gave it a 5.5 grade, lower than the OECD average of 6.7.”⁹ Russia is simply not a place where people want to be, and it is only getting worse under political repression and unending war. The culturally specific word for it in Russian is *rocka*, which is loosely translated as an existential weariness of life and utter hopelessness, a state of existence exquisitely captured in the classic literary works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. And it is only getting worse under Putin and Kirill. Unfortunately, the redress sought by the Church and State has not been through life-affirming social openness and increasing political freedoms, but the opposite course of war and the suppression of human rights domestically.

This explains why “The Present and Future of the Russian World” document by the Moscow Patriarchate is surprisingly economic in focus (Section 5.1), and seeks to restrict migration to other countries through legislation (Section 5.4). It also calls for State censorship of Western ideas in public school systems, through “critical revision of Western scientific theories and schools (primarily in the field of social sciences and humanities) for their compliance with the sovereign Russian worldview, usefulness or destructiveness for strengthening national self-awareness; conducting an audit of the body of humanitarian knowledge, generally accepted theories and concepts based on their correlation with the system of ideological ideas and moral values of Russian civilization” (Section 6).

The Moscow Patriarchate has blamed Western values on reproductive rights (including birth control and abortion) for this demographic decline, as well as the social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ persons. They have taken unprecedented measures to combat these perceived evils using the State apparatuses of power to further their agenda. This has included designating the “international LGBT social movement” as extremists akin to terrorists in 2023, outlawing gender affirming surgeries, and convicting persons found

7. “Russia’s Population Could Fall to 130Mln by 2046 – *Rosstat*,” *The Moscow Times*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/10/russias-population-could-fall-to-130mln-by-2046-rosstat-a83687>.

8. Shweta Sharma, “Putin Urges Russian Women to Have ‘Eight or More’ Children Amid Soaring Deaths in His Ukraine war,” *The Independent*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putin-women-eight-children-ukraine-war-b2455957.html>.

9. “Russian Federation,” *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD), n.d., <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/russian-federation/>.

with a “pride flag” or “rainbow” themed jewelry.¹⁰ Putin himself has stated Russia is under attack by Western agents employing ideologies aimed at destroying it from within:

They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they [LGBTQIA+ persons] are contrary to human nature.¹¹

It is a message echoed by Patriarch Kirill, yet with apocalyptic overtones:

There is a specific test of loyalty to these [foreign] powers, a requirement for being permitted into the happy world of excessive consuming and apparent freedom. This test is very straightforward and at the same time horrifying—the gay parade [...] [The issue here] is about something different and much more important than politics. It is about human salvation, about on which side of God the Saviour humankind will end up.¹²

With respect to Ukraine, the Patriarch calls for the government to continue the war in hopes of “creating conditions conducive to the massive repatriation of compatriots to Russia” to redress the demographic problems of declining birth rates.¹³ In plain language, repatriation means forcible deportations from conquered lands. Russia’s own Presidential Commissioner for Children’s Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, boasts that 700,000 Ukrainian children have been taken to Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion, part of the total 4.8 million Ukrainians that have been forcibly relocated to Russia.¹⁴ In response, the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for her and Putin for these illegal kidnappings and deportations.¹⁵

The Apocalyptic Origins

What is of interest to this present study is the apocalyptic framing of the war and Russia’s domestic issues. Deconstructing the history of the Russian World theology was the aim of my two prior studies.¹⁶ I will only provide a brief summary here, before turning to the new apocalyptic elements. My earlier articles should be consulted for a fuller picture of its origins.

The capture of Constantinople, the heart of the Byzantine Empire, by Islamic invaders in 1453, left, not only a political void in the Orthodox world, but more critically, a perceived theological one. In the Byzantine worldview, the city represented an anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven itself, with the

10. “Russia Makes First Convictions for ‘LGBT Extremism’ Following Ban,” *Reuters*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/russia-makes-first-convictions-lgbt-extremism-ban-rcna136753>.

11. Graeme Reid, “Russia, Homophobia, and the Battle for ‘Traditional Values,’” *Human Rights Watch*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/17/russia-homophobia-and-battle-traditional-values>.

12. Reid, “Russia, Homophobia and the Battle for ‘Traditional Values.’”

13. Gavriluk, “When Theology Fuels the War.”

14. Elsa Court, “Lvova-Belova Claims 700,000 Children Deported from Ukraine,” *Kiev Independent*, July 31, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/russian-official-reports-deportation-of-700-000-ukrainian-children/>.

15. Court, “Lvova-Belova Claims 700,000 Children Deported from Ukraine.”

16. See: Goodin, “The Rise of the Third Rome: *Russkii Mir* and the Rebirth of Christendom,” and Goodin, “Internecine War and Intra-Nicene Sin: Russia, Ukraine, and Ethiopia through the Lens of the Apocalyptic Oration by Basil the Great on the Book of Amos.”

Byzantine Emperors “icons” of Christ in His Glory. Constantinople was, in a very real sense, the “already but not yet” of God’s eschatological kingdom, and a symbol of unity of heaven and earth. In turn, the Emperor was to be the guardian of the people against temporal threats, and the Apostolic See of Constantinople, having a “primacy of honor” amongst all the Orthodox churches (per Canon 3 of the Second Ecumenical Council in 381), the defender of the faithful from all heresy until the Parousia. And while the Apostolic See of Constantinople still exists (the Phanar district of Istanbul), no longer was there a corresponding political authority for the Orthodox – that is, not until the rise of Vladimir Putin who is heralded as the new defender of Orthodoxy in the Russian World theology.

Constantinople had been proclaimed the New Rome at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381. Then, by the time of the schism with the Catholic West, the Roman See was seen as lost to heresy, leaving only Constantinople. But with the Islamic conquest, the very “idea” of Rome as the foundation for the worldwide Church seemed lost altogether. This is the political and theological context necessary to understand the rise of the “Third Rome” ideology in Russia, where the Tsars took the role of Byzantine Emperors, and the Moscow Patriarchate the place of honor over and above Constantinople, even though it is not an apostolic church!

That history is more modern revisionism than historical reality; it is a tale bordering on pure fiction born of wishful thinking. This is a subject I detailed at length in 2021. Highlights of that analysis included recent efforts to present Joseph Stalin as a secret Orthodox Christian, and the proliferation of devotional icons depicting Stalin and Putin as Orthodox Saints. What is pertinent to this study is “The Present and Future of the Russian World” document by the Moscow Patriarchate, and its alarming new declaration that Russia is the prophesied *katechon* (τὸ κατέχων from 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7), meaning “the one that withholds” the Antichrist from his plans to destroy the faithful through apostasy. Stated plainly, the Russian Orthodox Church sees itself as the only true Christianity left in a world that has fallen under the spell of Satan. As such, killing Ukrainian Orthodox is indeed a Holy War since they are *de facto* allied with the satanic West and its secular ideologies of permissive humanism.

Biblical Fanfiction

While the Russian World theology may seem to be a stark outlier far outside the mainstream, it has a correspondence in the West through a bestselling book by two amateur theologians, a book taken as the “gospel truth” by many Evangelicals today, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.¹⁷ The ramifications of this book

17. Hal Lindsey and C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970). Lindsey has a Masters in Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary, a school dedicated to training priests in the dispensationalist tradition. Lindsey’s co-author has a degree in journalism, and evidently served as the one to turn his preaching into a compelling narrative. The book has no bibliography to speak of, merely a listing of newspaper stories and sources for historical anecdotes. Only one scholarly work can be found, a commentary on the Hebrew Bible (Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971]). It is only cited once. *How* it is used by the authors affords an opportunity to reveal the “reasoning” used throughout the book. They note that Ezekeil 38:2–3 uses the Hebrew word *Rosh* as being associated with the identity of Gog. Actual scholarship indicates that it is a common word, and simply means “leader” (See James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, updated ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007], no. 7218). In this verse, it means “prince regent” or something similar. Lindsey and Carlson, however, use the citation for something else. After indicating the Hebrew word *Rosh*, they note that “The Byzantine and Arabic writers frequently mention a people called Rōs and Rūs, dwelling in the country of Taurus, and reckoned among the Scythian tribes” (Lindsey and Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 65). Notice the quote has nothing to do with Hebrew translation or the passage from Ezekeil; it is only mentioned, apparently, so that the uneducated reader will believe that *Rosh* in Ezekeil means Rus (the Russian

go far beyond religious considerations, having had dire consequences in US politics, especially concerning foreign policy in relation to Israel and Russia, for reasons that will soon become self-evident.

The book describes three preconditions to the hoped-for return of Jesus. The first is the rebirth of Israel as a nation in the land of Palestine, which had already happened when the book was published in 1970. The second is that “old Jerusalem and the sacred sites” must be repossessed by Israel.¹⁸ Lastly, the Temple must be rebuilt so that the devotional worship prescribed by Moses in the Torah could once again take place. For this to happen, the Temple Mount must be cleared of other holy sites, specifically the al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) that contains the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This will bring forth Armageddon, beginning with a siege of Jerusalem by “all nations.”¹⁹ After a hellish battle, the remnant Jews will receive a “personal revelation” by Jesus, and convert. The authors insist that these events *must* take place: “Prophecy demands it.”²⁰

Leading the war against Israel will be Russia, led by figure known as “Gog” from Revelation, who resides in Moscow.²¹ Yet this is not the Antichrist according to the authors, merely a necessary warmonger that will allow for the Antichrist to be revealed as a peacemaker in the United States. The Antichrist will be on the side of Israel, and Israel in turn will love him for having previously resolved the Arab/Israeli conflicts.²² It will lead to the Western world falling under control of this Nazi-*esque* “New Fruerer.”²³ But the peace will be short-lived, and a new world war will begin with a surprise invasion of Israel by the Arab nations now allied with the Russian confederacy.²⁴ This will be World War III.

The coming battle will involve all the nations of the world, from China to Ethiopia, from the European Union to India. The American Antichrist will lead a ten-nation military alliance (i.e., the beast with ten horns from Revelation 17:6–7). The Antichrist will seem like a charismatic Messiah: “His conquest will be rapid, he will be very strong and powerful, and there will be air about him which is self-assured and proud.”²⁵ Satan will give him powers and the ability to work miracles, and the people will reward him with a “throne” of ruling the world government.²⁶ He will also be heralded by a Jewish “false prophet” as the true Christ,²⁷ and this in turn will bring all the Christian denominations of the world together into one false faith.²⁸ The American dictator will force obedience through economic controls over each nation and marshal a world war against the Russian confederacy. God’s plan is then revealed. “As the battle of Armageddon reaches its awful climax and it appears that all life will be destroyed on earth – in this very moment Jesus Christ will return and save man from self-extinction.”²⁹

people) merely because the words are phonetically similar. Here it should be noted the Taurus Mountains are in southern Turkey, and the Scythians lived around the Black Sea, what today would be Eastern Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, and the southern Caucasus – areas not including Moscow! Lastly, the Keil and Delitzsch book is not even cited correctly: there is no indication which volume they consulted, let alone the page number, or even the year. To say the least, this is not scholarship. It is wishful thinking at best, outright deception at worst.

18. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 50–51.

19. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 54.

20. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 56.

21. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 63, 65.

22. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 152, 154.

23. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 152.

24. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 167.

25. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 106.

26. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 106.

27. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 112.

28. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 131.

29. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 168.

There are many, many, problems with this theological speculation – far too many to be discussed here. To note just a few, besides encouraging war, it requires the necessary election of the Antichrist by American Christians. *If they want* Christ to return, they will knowingly have to vote immoral people to public office against their Christian values for the sake of the hoped-for “greater good” of God’s supposed plan. It also requires pro-Russian politicians for the same reason.³⁰ More pertinent to this present study, in terms of biblical exegesis, all of it is completely nonsensical. It is a narrative constructed from cherry-picked and out-of-context verses across the Bible, woven together with nothing more than wishful thinking. The authors all but admit it with their denial: “We are not playing a game of Biblical hopscotch when we turn from one prophet to another.”³¹ But that is exactly what they have done, as I will show next.

The Early Church

The Apostle Paul expected to see the Second Coming of Christ in his lifetime. Yet what could be a hint of desperation can, perhaps, be seen in his earnest plea, “*Maranatha!*” (1 Corinthians 16:22). It is an Aramaic expression meaning, “Lord, come quickly!” So too in the Book of Revelation, the author writes a similar plea, this time in Greek. Christ again promises that, “Yes, I am coming quickly,” but the author adds, “Come [ἔρχου], Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20). The Greek verb is in the imperative, indicating earnestness, and perhaps even a touch of worry that He could be delayed. But this second coming has not come to pass, at least not in a chronological sense, and the seeds of doubt began to plague the early Church. The Apostle Peter mentions skeptics and scoffers who boast, “‘Where is this ‘coming’ he [Jesus] promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation’” (2 Peter 3:4, NIV).³² It is a question that still plagues some of the faithful today, nearly two thousand years later. The temptation, both then and now, was to seek out those who would give answers the Church could not.

They would be known as the Gnostics – literally, “the knowers” of secret knowledge. Often, the Gnostics did not have to look far for these secrets, consulting marginal texts such as the Book of Enoch that speaks of the fall of the angels, the half-human Nephilim, and eschatology.³³ Others embraced philosophy, and developed their own speculative theories based on the accepted wisdom of the day. The most notorious of these philosophically inspired Gnostics was Marcion of Sinope (c.85–150 CE), who Saint Irenaeus called “The Devil’s Mouthpiece.”³⁴ Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (†155 CE) would go further and say to Marcion’s face: “I do know thee, the first-born of Satan” (AH 3.3.4). This of course was meant derisively, not literally.

30. There is growing support among Republican Evangelicals in the US for Putin precisely because, they claim, he is “completely clear and completely correct on the society-destroying nature of wokeness and postliberal leftism” (David French, “Why MAGA Loves Russia and Hates Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, Feb 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/08/opinion/why-maga-loves-russia-and-hates-ukraine.html>). Prominent Orthodox influencers, like Jordan Peterson, likewise “went so far as to imply that Russia’s aggressive attack may have been merely self-defense against the threat of Western cultural decadence” (French, “Why MAGA Loves Russia and Hates Ukraine”). It is not known if their pro-Russian propaganda is rooted, in whole or in part, in Lindsey and Carlson’s apocalypticism.

31. Lindsey and Calson, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 119.

32. All biblical citations are from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted. The NKJV is the basis for the Orthodox Study Bible, and is used here for the sake of Orthodox readers. The New International Version (NIV) is used only when necessary for the sake of translation clarity.

33. Enoch is only canonical for the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox. It is not part of the Bible for anyone else.

34. This popular paraphrase has its origin from this passage by Irenaeus: “That before the Lord’s appearance Satan never dared to blaspheme God, inasmuch as he did not yet know his own sentence, because it was contained in parables and allegories; but that after the Lord’s appearance, when he had clearly ascertained from the words of Christ and His apostles that eternal fire has been prepared for him as he apostatized from God of his own free-will, and likewise for all who unrepentant continue in the apostasy, he now blasphemes, by means of such men [like Marcion].” See

For the first and second century Gnostics, the theological questions they sought to answer were primarily related to the nature of the world, God, and the person of Jesus. Marcion, for example, taught that the world was not created by God, but by a satanic demiurge as a place of sensual distraction from God (AH 2.11.2). The Gnostics promised an imminent eschatology experienced through esoteric revelation (Peel 1970, 144).³⁵ This belief was furthered by their own pseudepigrapha, such as the Gospel of Thomas, which announced “That [day] for which you are waiting has come, but you do not recognize it.”³⁶ And in another text, Dialogue of the Savior, “Already the time has come, O brothers, that we should leave behind us our sufferings and stand in the Rest; for he who stands in the Rest will rest himself forever. But I say to you, be in heaven at every time.”³⁷ While this bears some semblance to the Pauline “already/not yet” of the New Testament, the key difference is *how* one attains this salvation, whether through Christian piety or Gnostic revelation.

The failure of the Parousia to come in accordance with Christian hopes led to the growth of this movement, drawing the faithful away through their theories on the end of the world, described as the “Rest of the Aeons,” the “completion of the Pleroma,” and the like. The eschaton was said to include an outpouring of divine wrath against the world, the darkening of the sun and moon, the destruction of the world through a holocaust of fire, and a cosmic war between good and evil.³⁸ Many readers at this point will undoubtedly find this very familiar, sounding a lot like the Book of Revelation.³⁹ Indeed it is, and the Church was slow to accept the Book of Revelation because of its gnostic similarities. It almost did not make it into the New Testament for this very reason!

How it came to be accepted was because of Saint Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (†3rd Century CE). He began by noting the controversies surrounding it:

Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity. And they affirm that none of the apostles, and none of the saints, nor any one in the Church is its author, but that Cerinthus, who founded the [Gnostic] sect which was called after him the Cerinthian, desiring reputable authority for his fiction, prefixed the name.⁴⁰

But as for he himself, Dionysius writes:

But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem. But I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words. I do not measure and judge them by my own reason, but leaving the more to faith regard them as too high for

Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” (AH), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1., *The Apostolic Fathers: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 5.26.2. Malcolm L. Peel, “Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament,” *Novum Testamentum* 12/2 (Apr. 1970): 141–165.

36. Peel, “Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament,” 153.

37. Peel, “Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament,” 153.

38. Peel, “Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament,” 158.

39. One key difference is the renewal of creation is entirely absent with Gnostic texts (Peel, “Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament,” 158), but emphasized in the Book of Revelation (21:1).

40. Eusebius, “Ecclesial History,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, vol. 1, *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 25.1–2.

me to grasp. And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it.⁴¹

Because of his assessment and it being endorsed by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesial History*, the Book of Revelation was accepted into the Christian canon for the New Testament. Its theology, however, would be, for the most part, restricted to only homiletic interpretation and for historical insights into the time of its composition. It was not seen as some kind of roadmap of the future.

The Orthodox Reception

The Church's response to Gnosticism was to emphasize the true scriptures, preaching that the promises of Christ are being fulfilled in the *Kairos* of the Kingdom of God – that is, the “already” but “not yet” in our earthly experience of chronological time (1 John 3:2, Hebrews 2:8, Ephesians 2:6, Romans 8:15–23, et al.). Stated another way, Christ is present in the “here and now” during the divine liturgy, in the chalice of Eucharist, in the Image of God in the least of His brethren through service to the suffering and poor as commanded by Matthew 25, and whenever two or more are gathered together in His name (Matthew 18:19–20). While the Parousia is not yet an earthly reality in this still fallen world, it did not matter. For the true devotee, the Second Coming became a contemplative reality of the here and now, as well as an eschatological certainty. Saint Peter of Damaskos († 12th Century) explains:

In thunder and lightning we see the day of judgment; in the call of cocks we hear the trumpet that will sound of that day (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16); in the rising morning star and the light of dawn we perceive the appearance of the life-giving Cross (cf. Matt. 24:30); in men's rising from sleep we see a sign of the resurrection of the dead, and in the rising sun a token of the second advent of Christ.⁴²

As beautiful, poetic, and edifying as such a spiritual understanding is for the faithful, it also requires Christians to accept that the eschaton of history (that is, Judgement Day) is pushed sometime into an unknowable future. For the not-so-committed believers, this would become a crisis of faith. It became increasingly problematic in the continuing passage of centuries; for some, it would be cause for great alarm, wondering why He has not yet come. Maybe, they began to think, the problem was with us, that *we* had to do something *first* before He would return in His Glory. Maybe, they thought, we would have to create the eschatological conditions ourselves, and only then God would (or perhaps only then He could) keep the promise.

This is the context necessary for understanding that curious book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The authors, like their Gnostic forebearers, claim to have unraveled the mysteries of the Book of Revelation, only this time by correlating biblical prophecy to contemporary political realities. Yet correlation is not causation, a truism especially applicable to biblical exegesis. Irenaeus explains the dangers:

41. Eusebius, “*Ecclesial History*,” 25.4.

42. Peter of Damaskos, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 3, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, and compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth (London: Faber & Faber, 1986); “Twenty-Four Discourses,” XXII, 262f.

If, then, one does not attend to the [proper] reading [of biblical passages], [...] there shall be not only incongruities, but also, when reading, he will utter blasphemy, as if the advent of the Lord could take place according to the working of Satan.⁴³

Put simply, Irenaeus is saying that the power of God is not contingent upon the initiative of Satan, or the political affairs of human beings for that matter. Take, for example, Psalm 74. When the people complain that God seems absent and derelict for allowing evil to overtake this world (verses 1, 20, and 22), God tersely responds in Psalm 75, “*When I choose the proper time, I will judge uprightly. The earth and all its inhabitants*” (emphasis added; verses 2–3a). The message is that history is fully in the power of God, and God alone. “God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another” (Psalm 75:7). God does not need Satan or humanity to do anything first, as if powerless to act otherwise. The only proper attitude, the scriptures indicate, is to give thanks to the Lord for all His wonderful works (Psalm 75:1), and “keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait [προσδεχόμενοι; that is, to await the future welcomingly and expectantly] for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (Jude 21, NIV). Put simply, the Book of Revelation requires faith, not self-righteous certainty born of faithless desperation.

Now, with respect to the Antichrist, this word has taken on preternatural implications, even though in Greek “antichrist” (ἀντίχριστος) does not mean the demonic opposite of Christ, but “in place of or instead of Christ.”⁴⁴ The term is used by John to indicate *any* Gnostic that preaches another gospel based on secret revelation (1 John 2:18, 22, and 4:3). “For *many deceivers* have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (emphasis added; 2 John 1:7). Modern day Gnostics should think again about playing politics, as if God needed their help.

Most of the Eastern Fathers, like Saint Peter of Damaskos, were content to keep Judgement Day a matter of pious contemplation, leaving the details of history to God. The only Father drawn into interpreting this mysterious book would be Saint Irenaeus, but only in order to combat the Gnostics. As for the chronological date of the Parousia, he writes that, “For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded.” This would place the date of the end of the world 6,000 years from the presumed date of creation.⁴⁵ If we judge this date by the contemporary Jewish religious calendar, where 2024 correlates to 5784, this would place the date 216 years from now. On the other hand, “day” was also regarded as an “age” (αἰών) by some fathers, a time only known to God, making the date incalculable.

With respect to the 666 number of the beast, Irenaeus explains: “that is, six times a hundred, six times ten, and six units. [He gives this] as a summing up of the whole [number] of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years [before Judgment].”⁴⁶ The number thus relates to the total number of apostate angels, not a secret coded name.⁴⁷ Nothing more can be said for certain regarding those biblical clues, and so he advises:

It is therefore more certain, and less hazardous, to await the fulfilment of the prophecy, than to be making surmises, and casting about for any names that may present themselves, inasmuch as many

43. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 3.7.2.

44. Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, no. 500.

45. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.28.3.

46. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.28.2.

47. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.29.2.

names can be found possessing the number mentioned; and the same question will, after all, remain unsolved.⁴⁸

Irenaeus then turns to the true danger of such gnostic speculation:

Moreover, another danger, by no means trifling, shall overtake those who falsely presume that they know the name of Antichrist. For if these men assume one [number], when this [Antichrist] shall come having another [number], they will be easily led away by him, as supposing him not to be the expected one, who must be guarded against.⁴⁹

He again stresses this point:

These men, therefore, ought to learn [not to speculate], and go back to the true number of the name [that is, the number of fallen angels], that they be not reckoned among false prophets.⁵⁰

Irenaeus goes to great lengths to emphasize this critical point:

If it were necessary for his name [the Antichrist] to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him [John] who saw it at the revelation.⁵¹

The implication is that John was not speaking of a future demonic Antichrist. Instead, he was writing covertly about Emperor Domitian (reigns 81–96 CE), a persecutor of Christians, and someone immediately recognizable by his contemporary readers. This is also the opinion of Eusebius.⁵² Domitian had declared himself “*Dominus ac Deus Noster*” (Latin: our lord and god), demanding worship throughout the Empire; Christians who refused were severely persecuted and killed. This aligns with the scriptural evidence concerning the “Throne of Satan” in Pergamon (Rev. 2:13). In Pergamon, the Temple of Trajan (reigned 98–117 CE) was built. He would be yet another persecutor of Christians.

To be absolutely clear, the early Church considered much of Revelation as past history, not future prophecy. That historical evil was defeated when the Roman Empire became Christian through Saint Constantine the Great (d.337 CE). It was the birth of Byzantium, a time when the earthly Emperors were seen as icons of Christ’s future Kingdom. That is all the Book of Revelation was intended to foretell. As such, the proper Christian attitude toward the Book of Revelation is to follow Paul’s advice: that while all things may be permitted, not everything edifies (1 Corinthians 10:23). It is best to leave it for what it is, a book of wonder and mystery that assures that believer that history is in the hands of God.

The Gnostic Temptation

The great concern for the early church was the twinned dangers of apostasy from persecution and the gnostic temptation to know the exact timeline for the *Parousia*, imagining it to be in their own lifetimes. Many were struggling with their faith, helplessly witnessing the gruesome deaths of fellow believers in the Roman coliseum. The church had to close the door to this supposed “secret revelation” while navigating a

48. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.30.3.

49. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.30.1.

50. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.30.2.

51. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 5.18.3.

52. Eusebius, “*Ecclesial History*,” 3.19.

course between mystery and certainty. This explains the Book of Revelation, written during the time of the Domitian persecution, a text rife with sensational imagery concerning God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil. In this sense, it is no different than the apocalypse of Isaiah (Chapters 27 and 34 in particular) promising that the Babylonian defilers of the Temple and the Holy City of Jerusalem would indeed be punished. But divine retribution would take a different form than expected. Babylon would instead be conquered by Persia, and new Jewish Queen (Esther) to the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, would orchestrate the return of the Jews to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. But the ultimate message of the end to all evil in the coming Kingdom of God still held true, albeit someday (Isaiah 11).

The scriptures were written with two eschatological horizons: the proximate cause of the suffering of the people at that time of composition (Babylon in the Hebrew Bible and the new Babylon of pagan Rome in the New Testament) as well as for the ultimate cause of evil (the Devil and the apostate angels) who are to be punished by God at the end of time. As such, the historical contexts promising the defeat of Babylon and pagan Rome in the scriptures should inspire confidence that the particular evils faced by each generation will likewise be redressed by God, but in His own time and way. Yet, rather than having faith, far too many sought Gnostic insights into Armageddon, vainly hoping it will happen in their own lifetimes.

No answers to a crisis of faith can be found in either the Russian World theology or in its American counterpart. Such speculation is no different than those of that well-known charlatan and "mail-order astrologer" Nostradamus (Michel de Nostredame, 1503–1566), in that they all rely on confirmation bias and their reader's wishful thinking.⁵³ It is just the ancient Gnostic heresy in a modern guise, drawing the faithful away in vain promises that *their* century will be the one chosen by God, rather than the twenty that preceded before, or the ones to come next. Such works are born of faithlessness, and it has poisoned Orthodoxy with Gnostic nonsense.

Closing Words

It is not known to what extent the Russian World theology is actually believed by Putin and Kirill, or whether it is only being employed to consolidate political and ecclesial power, to motivate the nation with a common purpose, and to further policy goals related to a domestic demographic crisis. Regardless, it is reckless and dangerous. It is something that could spiral into world war with the help of likeminded Evangelicals in the West who see Russia's warmongering as key to Christ's return.

With specific respect to this present study on the Russian World theology, the focus has been on revealing its betrayal of Orthodox tradition. By turning to Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, who was called to counter the gnostic speculation of his day, it is hoped that his insights can deescalate the dangerous apocalyptic rhetoric of *Russkii Mir*. Perhaps it may also help draw back into the Orthodox fold those sympathizers with Putin and Kirill, turning instead to a trusted voice like that of Saint Irenaeus. Failing that, this article together with my two previous ones, collectively serve as a contemporaneous documentation on this tragic unfolding history.

53. Everett F. Bleilier, "Nostradamus." *The Washington Post* (September 11, 1999), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1999/09/12/nostradamus/a3fa24e0-55ad-4950-99ac-33da11f3c0b8/>. The assessment provided by Bleilier is as follows: "Was Nostradamus a total charlatan, or did he sincerely believe that he had inherited supernatural powers, as he stated? The mind of Renaissance man often was strangely compartmentalized, but there are arguments against believing in Nostradamus's sincerity. It is generally conceded that he knew little about professional astrology/astronomy and faked instead; he was apparently not over-scrupulous in dealing with his clients; and his so-called prophecies are a series of contrived subterfuges. Many of them are versifications of incidents in past history. Can one believe that a man who worked in this manner was sincere in his doings?"

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