

# 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

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**Abstract:** The Russo-Ukrainian War, beginning with the invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, witnessed a full-scale invasion of the entire nation in early 2022. As the renewed conflict enters into its seventh month, its repercussions threaten to impact other nations in myriad ways, ranging from radioactive catastrophes from attacks on civilian nuclear power plants to direct military aggression or spillover to other nations. One of these looming concerns is a famine in Ethiopia resulting from reduced access to Ukrainian wheat; the Black Sea shipping lanes are under threat by Russian warships and mines. This article offers a theological reflection on this conflict, and how famine is now being used as a weapon of war. The orations of Basil the Great are discussed in relation to economic analyses on the causes of famine by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. These are brought forward in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian War, which has become an internecine war within Orthodox Christianity.

**Keywords:** Russia; *Russkii Mir*, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian War, Ethiopia, Famine, Amartya Sen, Book of Amos, Basil the Great

*The Lord will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither.*

– Amos 1:2 (KJV)

Last year, in this journal, I published an article on what was then a little-known political and theologically-imbued doctrine known as *Russkii Mir*.<sup>1</sup> In brief, it is a worldview (the name itself translates as “Russian World”) advocating for the reclamation of historically Russian lands – even through military action if necessary – in order to protect Christianity from the growing tide of secularism that threatens to corrupt and eventually erase the true Church (in its own self-understanding). This message, heralded by the Russian Orthodox Church in its newfound alliance with the State apparatuses of power, hopes to refashion the expansionist Russian Federation into a “Third Rome” standing alone against a supposedly satanic West. Put simply, *Russkii Mir* is an apocalyptic reimagining of biblical theology and church history, and a very dangerous one.

The concerns expressed in that article were largely theoretical at the time of publication. Then, to my horror, what I predicted *could* happen actually did happen with the brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war still rages, and the Russian invaders are showing no regard for the Geneva

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1. See David K. Goodin, “The Rise of the Third Rome: *Russkii Mir* and the Rebirth of Christendom,” *JCREOR* 2, no. 2. (Spring/Summer 2021): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v2i2.56>. See also the recent international pan-Orthodox declaration by clergy and scholars repudiating its theological claims, which I am a signatory to: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching>.

convention, international law, or human rights in what has become a concerted effort to erase Ukrainian culture in the name of *Russkii Mir*.<sup>2</sup> For Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, this is nothing less than a Holy War<sup>3</sup> that must be seen through to the bitter end, no matter the consequences – Putin has even threatened all-out nuclear war against the West.<sup>4</sup>

With this present article I am documenting the theological contexts appropriate for considering the famine in Africa that will more than likely result from Ukrainian grain being blockaded and stolen by Russian Federation forces.<sup>5</sup> The irony (if I may use such an innocuous word to describe a war crime) is that the victims will predominately be Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> The war has expanded, and we are now not only witnessing Russian Orthodox Christians attacking their Ukrainian Orthodox brethren in an unjustifiable war, but now Orthodox Ethiopians will be purposefully starved unless the West agrees to give up economic sanctions against the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> Such atrocities are not unprecedented – Stalin employed famine against Ukraine from 1932–1933, killing millions as a way to counter its popular independence movement, a genocide known as the *Holodomor*.<sup>8</sup> What is happening today is nothing less than a repeat of that history, but now it is the Orthodox Church destroying itself. The very foundations established at Nicaea in 325 CE are being undone in this internecine war. Worse, it has, without exaggeration, become truly apocalyptic, with ramifications threatening the entire world. Something must be done.

As a scholar, I can do nothing about it – or nearly nothing. I can only document the theological and historical contexts conducive to contextualizing what is happening and considering what is likely to happen next. This is important work, yes. These insights can give clarity with respect to the disinformation and propaganda that now abounds in the news. Perhaps I can also inspire public resolve in the face of indecisiveness and confusion. I truly hope my fears about an impending famine in Ethiopia will be proven

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2. See Chris Brown, “A Kremlin Paper Justifies Erasing the Ukrainian Identity, as Russia is Accused of War Crimes,” *CBC News*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/kremlin-editorial-ukraine-identity-1.6407921>. The Russian intent to erase the Ukrainian identity is evidenced by, among other things, the mass deportation of Ukrainian civilians to Russia for “re-education.” See Hugo Bachegam, “The Russians Said Beatings Were My Re-Education,” *BBC News*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61683513>. Ukrainian children also seem to be a target of special interest. See Reuters Staff, “Ukraine Accuses Russia of Forcibly Deporting Over 210,000 Children,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-accuses-russia-forcibly-deporting-over-210000-children-2022-05-13/>.

3. See Goodin, “The Rise of the Third Rome.”

4. See Giulia Carbonaro, “Russian TV Says Nuclear War Only Alternative to Russia’s Victory in Ukraine,” *Newsweek*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-tv-says-nuclear-war-only-alternative-russia-victory-ukraine-1709539>.

5. See Eyder Peralta, “Drought and Soaring Food Prices From Ukraine War Leave Millions in Africa Starving” *NPR*, May 18th, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/18/1099733752/famine-africa-ukraine-invasion-drought>. See also Reuters Staff, “Ukraine envoy says Turkey among destinations of grain stolen by Russia,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraines-envoy-says-turkey-among-those-buying-grain-stolen-by-russia-2022-06-03/>.

6. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church shared the first three Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea 325 CE, Constantinople 381 CE, and Ephesus 431 CE) with the Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Churches – a schism emerged with Chalcedon in 451 CE.

7. See Radio Free Europe Staff, “Putin Ties Ukraine Grain Flow To Sanctions Relief; Macron And Scholz Urge Serious Peace Effort,” May 28, 2022, *Radio Free Europe*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-ukrainian-grain-exports-sanctions/31872896.html>. See also the emergent counternarrative: Ricardo Mazalan and Elena Becatoros, “Russia Slams Sanctions, Seeks to Blame West for Food Crisis,” *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ukraine-war-grinds-world-pushes-grain-84989665>.

8. See Ray Gamache, *Gareth Jones: Eyewitness to the Holodomor* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2018).

wrong, that peace soon being declared, and that the wounds within Orthodoxy will be fully healed via a renewal of conciliary and brotherly love, born of the *spirit* of Nicaea, the Holy Spirit, with the entire Church brought back together once again.

Yet I cannot let a fanciful hope distract me from the task of getting ahead of the counternarratives that will soon be propagated by the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church, and their apologists. I begin my analysis with a historical overview of famines – in Ethiopia and beyond – since famine is a poorly understood economic phenomenon. Then I turn to the theological commentary on famine by St. Basil the Great (329–379 CE), a church Father shared by Ukrainian, Russian, and Ethiopian Orthodox alike, whose analysis reveals the true causes of famine and the necessary remedies to redress it. Finally, I conclude with additional commentary on this apocalyptic internecine war.

### The Truth about Famine

Perhaps the cruelest way to die is starvation. It is a living death where a body eats itself until nothing is left, stealing one's dignity as the body becomes a skeletal abhorrence, an object of only pity, or scorn. Then there is the conscious awareness of slowly dying, knowing that it is a needless death with no other cause than famine. There is no medicine. There is no treatment. Only nourishment can relieve its coming, but any scant food that can be found during this time will just prolong the suffering. Only a miracle will end a famine, or so it often seems – but, historically speaking, it is a miracle that will never happen. When death does come, which it invariably will, the person's life is soon forgotten, and with it the hopes and dreams they once held. The anonymous dead become nothing more than a dehumanized statistic, if at all, in the seemingly endless accounting of all such "Acts of God" repeated throughout history.

But is it, really? Are we to take for granted that what are referred to as *Force Majeure* in international law are actually caused by God? As will be shown later, the Book of Amos would instead place the blame for famine on human sin, a message that will be reaffirmed by Basil the Great. But before I turn to that theological discourse, it will be necessary to detail the economic circumstances of famines – lest that discussion be seen as utopian or unrealistic in any way. The documentation here is vast, since famines are not a rare event in history. Even today, the Food Security Information Network estimates the number of "acutely food-insecure people" in fifty-five surveyed countries and territories at 135 million, with seventy-three million in Africa alone, and another 183 million people "at risk" of worsening to crisis conditions.<sup>9</sup> Countless more suffer health consequences from living with chronic malnutrition.

The east African nation of Ethiopia is especially vulnerable. It has seen seven major famines in the twentieth century alone, with 30 major outbreaks in the 400 years before. The Great Famine of 1888–1892 reportedly resulted in the death of a third of the population.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is the famine of the early 1980s that most people will recall. It brought unforgettable images of starving children in print media and on television; it inspired unprecedented humanitarian relief efforts such as the Live Aid benefit concert

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9. Food Security Information Network (FSIN), *Global Report on Food Crises: Joint Analysis for Better Decisions*, Washington, DC: Food and Agricultural Organization, World Food Programme, and International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020, <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/2020-global-report-food-crises-joint-analysis-better-decisions>, 2.

10. Yebio Woldemariam, *Ethiopia, An Ancient Land: Agriculture, History, and Politics* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2016), 37.

of 1985. Yet with its growing population of 114 million people, Ethiopia remains particularly vulnerable to another humanitarian disaster of this kind.

In *Development as Freedom* (1999), Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen examines the causes of famine throughout the world, from ancient times to the present.<sup>11</sup> His findings contradict the common assumption that famines are caused by a shortage of food. In fact, famines often occur when food is abundant, and the nation is a net food exporter to international markets. For example, he found the Bangladesh famine of 1974 “occurred in a year of *greater* food availability per head than in any other year between 1971 and 1976.”<sup>12</sup> Famines, Sen found, can also occur “without any decline in food output” by that nation.<sup>13</sup> So why do people starve to death during times of abundance? It is simple. The cause of every historical famine, and in every part of the world, has always been the same: the poor simply cannot afford to buy the available surpluses.

What happens is that droughts, natural disasters, and/or human-caused shocks to domestic or international economies (such as through wartime disruptions) force food prices to rise. Since production costs stay the same or drop during these times, the higher prices for agricultural commodities represent a windfall profit opportunity. It is a situation that greatly disadvantages the poor since wealthier communities and international markets can afford to pay the highest prices. The poor cannot, so they starve to death even in the midst of agricultural plenty.

A case in point is the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s. This is a time when *over one million people* died of starvation, yet Ireland was a net food exporter. There was actually plenty of food to feed everyone, and Sen remarks: “Certainly food could have moved from Britain to Ireland *if* the Irish could have afforded to purchase it.”<sup>14</sup> With respect to Ethiopia, Sen investigated the famine in 1973 when drought resulted in widespread dislocations of rural peasantry, particularly impacting the Wollo region. However, Sen noted that, “despite the disastrous failure of food output, food prices did not go up very much and for long in Wollo.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he observed that wholesale food prices in the main market town of Dessie actually went down as a market response.<sup>16</sup> Government intervention was required to prevent starvation. This same kind of governmental response can also be found with the worldwide economic crisis of 2007–2008, which forced India and Vietnam to restrict exports of rice in order to prevent domestic famines.<sup>17</sup>

Again, the point to be taken is that food is always and readily available in famines. The hindrance is that commodity producers seek the best price for their agricultural goods, which in times of economic stress means inflated charges for domestic and international markets. Their impoverished countrymen starve as a result. This is just the reality of market based economic systems where “price vs. demand” efficiency comes at the cost of the poor – a cost that is sometimes their very lives. In all this, Ethiopia is especially vulnerable due to its dependence on foreign wheat, made all the more precarious since Ukrainian wheat currently supplies the Horn of Africa region.<sup>18</sup> That wheat is now blockaded, stolen, and sold on the “black market” by Russia to the highest bidders. Because Ethiopia’s agricultural economy is heavily

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11. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

12. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 165.

13. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 167.

14. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 171. Emphasis added.

15. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 94ff.

16. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 95ff.

17. “Food Security in Asia: The 2007–2008 Food Price Crisis,” Asian Development Bank, August 30, 2012, <https://www.adb.org/features/has-world-learned-2007-2008-food-price-crisis>.

18. FSIN, *Global Report on Food Crises*.

weighted for international trade in coffee, only the wealthiest in Ethiopia will be able to buy foreign wheat, leaving the poor to starve without this subsistence staple. Communitarian sharing within Ethiopia will not be enough to stave off the resulting famine.<sup>19</sup> It will be a humanitarian crisis the world will struggle to redress because the war is what dominates public discourse and international aid efforts. Many will simply dismiss the famine as yet another “Act of God” that simply cannot be helped. This is the narrative my article is seeking to debunk.

### A Scriptural Theodicy of Famine

With this historical and economic background in mind, we are now ready to consider a famine that struck Cappadocia in the years 368/9 CE. The Cappadocian Father, Basil the Great, is one of the three Hierarchs of the Orthodox Church. During his time as bishop of Caesarea, a city in what was then known as Asia Minor (central Turkey), Basil commissioned the construction of a hospital (*ptochotrophion*, πτωχοτροφεῖον), which in time grew to become a “City of the Poor.” Built on his family’s estate or, as some sources report, on land donated by the emperor, the new city became the episcopal residence for his See. It included a unique gathering of facilities that served travelers, the poor, the sick, and the leprous. The entire population of the city, in fact, was made up of clergy and the needy. Particularly noteworthy was that the Basileias<sup>20</sup> gave job training to the poor so that they could learn trades, and it provided long-term care for lepers, for whom learning trades and livelihoods was not an option.<sup>21</sup> While he was a great theologian and defender of the Trinity against all heresies that emerged after Nicaea, Basil’s greatest legacy is, arguably, his tireless care for the poor.<sup>22</sup>

Basil’s episcopate was in Cappadocia, a semi-arid region of Asia Minor where the risk of drought was ever present. As it happened, a prolonged drought and famine struck the region with unusual severity during his time as bishop, leading many to speculate on whether God had abandoned the people. Basil gave a response in the form of an oration to answer their questions and to address the underlying causes. He began with an allusion to the words of the prophet Amos,<sup>23</sup> “A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?”<sup>24</sup> It was a most terrible biblical passage; everyone knew these words of Amos signaled an end to God’s protective covenant for the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

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19. For my recommendations on how to help alleviate famines in Ethiopia, see Goodin, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Forests and Economic Development: The Case for Traditional Ecological Management,” *Journal for the Study of Religion and Society* 21 (2019): 1–23. For Sen’s suggested economic and democratic reforms around the world, see *Development as Freedom*.

20. The new city was later known as *Basileias* (βασιλείας, Kingdom), a wordplay on Basil’s name (βασίλειος), but also meant in the sense that the city foreshadowed the eschatological Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

21. Timothy Patitsas, “St. Basil’s Philanthropic Program and Modern Microlending Strategies for Economic Self-Actualization,” in *Wealth and Poverty In Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 269.

22. It is often said that, of the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil championed the mission of the Church, Gregory Nazianzen the mystical beauty of theological hymnology, and Gregory of Nyssa the philosophical grandeur of Orthodox theology. But it is equally true that all three worked in the hospitals, cared for the poor, wrote mystical theology, and possessed unparalleled philosophical mastery in their doctrinal writings. These distinctions are therefore merely a matter of emphasis, not difference.

23. Amos disavows the title of prophet in a verbless clause, “I not a prophet, nor I the son of a prophet” (7:14). The meaning may suggest that the verb is to be understood as, “I *was* not a prophet, until ...” or, more likely, his words were meant as judgement and sentence only, not a prophetic call to repentance for the people at that time, since eight times the Lord declares, “I shall not turn away its punishment,” in the opening two chapters of this book.

24. See Basil the Great, *On Social Justice* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009); Amos 3:8.

While the Book of Amos is not regarded as an apocalyptic text, what is pertinent here is that Basil does interpret it this way for his oration.

Amos had preached both judgement and prophecy, and elements of his message can be read eschatologically – it is truly a frightening book. From its onset, Amos makes clear that God punishes sinners through natural disasters, including earthquakes, pestilence, fires, drought, and famine. This is divine retribution for offenses such as idolatry, but most especially for crimes against the poor. It is this last offense that seems to be the greatest in the eyes of God, and the reason why Amos was sent to pronounce judgment on the people. The horrible truth was that the wealthy elites were exploiting their impoverished countrymen, even selling them into slavery (Amos 2:6–7). Their greed, theft, and cruelty truly knew no bounds when it came to exploiting the poor, as the following verses make clear (Amos 8:4–6; NKJV):<sup>25</sup>

Hear this, you who swallow up the needy, and make the poor of the land fail, saying:

‘When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? and the Sabbath, that we may trade wheat? Making the ephah [a unit of dry volume measure, such as when selling grain] small and the shekel [price] large, falsifying the scales by deceit, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—even sell the bad wheat?’

The rich had thereby grown fat like “heifers of Bashan” through exploitation; it was they “who trample the needy, and who say to their lords, ‘Bring us wine that we may drink!’” (Amos 4:1). It was a most callous greed, and an image of uncaring extravagance. God, however, would bring forth another image, one that would serve as its counterpoint: the basket of summer fruit (Amos 8:1–2).

The agricultural cornucopia symbolized abundance and plenty, yet the late season fruit it contained was overly ripe, on the verge of rotting. It is the biblical type for the eschatological grapes of wrath in the Book of Revelation: “So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God” (Amos 14:19–20).<sup>26</sup> The time had come, Amos announced, for the Northern Kingdom to be punished for these crimes against the poor. But the book also includes a stark admonition that signals the dire need for repentance: “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord’” (Amos 8:11).

Basil recognized that this was the true crisis in Cappadocia. Many of his congregation thought the drought signaled the end of the world, but Basil wanted them to understand instead that their true hunger and thirst could only be satisfied, not with rain, but in true repentance – lest they suffer the fate of the Northern Kingdom as proclaimed by Amos. It was too late for the Northern Kingdom to change their evil ways. But it wasn’t so for Cappadocia in the fourth century. Basil therefore stepped forward to preach about

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25. The New King James Version of the Hebrew Bible is the favored English translation for many Orthodox Christians, being the source for the *Orthodox Study Bible*, prepared under the auspices of the academic community of St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Press, 2008).

26. The image of the winepress is also associated with another prophecy from the Old Testament having to do with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isaiah 63:2, see also Genesis 49:10–11). This is, obviously, a Messianic prophecy concerning the crucifixion as it is celebrated in the Paschal hymn where Christ “tramples down death by death.” The winepress prefigures the Eucharist, where the suffering of Christ becomes the “medicine of immortality” for us today, to use the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 20:2). The imagery thus moves from suffering to glory. This passage from the Book of Revelation, on the other hand, shows that Christ himself is the reaper of the harvest, indicating that the winepress imagery is being used quite differently. The Revelation antitype instead finds its typological complement in Amos, where the message of both is unmistakably one of retributive justice.



the drought and its true significance in light of Amos. He would tell them *exactly* what was happening, why God was withholding the rains, and how they were all intended to come together as Christians during this time of famine and drought – a message as relevant today as it was back then.

### The Oration

The drought in Cappadocia was severe, and even the freshwater springs and rivers were failing. Everywhere, hopelessness gripped the people. Everyone knew the drought would soon lead to a widespread famine and death. Basil could see it for himself:

Farmers sit in their fields and clasp their hands against their knees—this, of course, is the posture of those who mourn—weeping for their wasted efforts. They look at their young children and burst into tears, they see their wives and wail with grief, as they stroke and caress the dried-up crops, racked with sobs like parents who lose their children in the flower of youth.<sup>27</sup>

The starvation that would follow would be truly horrific, and Basil had witnessed it all before. As administrator for the City of the Poor, he was well familiar with all the forms of disease and death in the ancient world. But starvation, he writes, was the most dreadful of all:

Hunger is the most severe of human maladies, the very worst kind of death. The other hazards to human life do not involve extended torment: whether in the case of death by the sword, which brings about a swift end, or roaring flames, which swiftly extinguish life, or wild beasts, that tear limb from limb with their teeth, the interval of suffering is relatively brief. But starvation prolongs the pain and draws out the agony, so that sickness is ensconced and lurks within the body, while death is ever present yet ever delayed. The body becomes dehydrated, its temperature drops, its bulk dwindles, its strength wastes away. Skin clings to the bones like a spider's web. The flesh loses its natural coloration: its ruddiness fades as the flow of blood decreases, while the alabaster of the skin turns discolored and dark. The body takes on a mottled hue, with yellow and black patches mingling in a manner terrible to see. The knees can no longer support the weight of the body, but are forced to drag along behind [as the person crawls]. The voice grows weak and feeble. The eyes become diseased and rendered useless, sunken in their sockets like fruits that shrivel up in their skins. The belly is empty, shrunken to nothing, possessing neither girth nor the natural tone of the bowels, so that the bones of the spine are visible from the front.<sup>28</sup>

It seemed an inescapable tragedy, and one that was horrifying slow in its approach, making it all the more terrible. The question on everyone's mind was: Why had God withheld the rains? Basil tells his congregation God has done this as a punishment, just as he did in the time of Jeroboam II to punish the Israelites (Amos 4:7–8). Basil pleads with his congregation to repent:

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27. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §2.

28. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §7. Lest Basil be seen as exaggerating the effects of starvation on the human body, the reader should consider the following words from Private J. Hill from the 120th Evacuation Hospital which was called in after the liberation of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 15th, 1945. Private Hill, in a letter to his wife, wrote: "The sight of those near death was almost beyond belief—thighs the size of my arm, buttocks no longer visible, pelvic bones seen at any angle, as were other human bones. You can imagine the odor." See John C. McManus, "Medics in Hell: Saving the Survivors of Buchenwald," *HistoryNet*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.historynet.com/medics-in-hell-buchenwald.htm>.

We should learn, then, that it is because we have turned away from the Lord and disregarded His ways that God has inflicted these wounds upon us. He does not seek to destroy us, but rather endeavors to turn us back to the right way, just as good parents who care for their children are stern and rebuke them when they do wrong, not because they wish them harm, but rather desiring to lead them from childish negligence and the sins of youth to mature attentiveness.<sup>29</sup>

For many, it was a most unexpected message. What the people experienced as evil, Basil was instead telling them was the necessary remedy; they should see what was happening as an opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity. For some, this was yet another invitation to apostasy. It was certainly not what they expected from God in exchange for their prayers and devotion! Worse, the people were suffering collectively, not just the wicked. What could be the meaning of this?

Basil assures his congregation that this too is part of the providence of God. First and foremost, it must be realized that God cannot reward immaturity, sinfulness, and disobedience, lest the souls of the people be lost forever. Secondly, the true cause for the drought was sin. Just as it was for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart,<sup>30</sup> so too did sin cause God to remove his grace, and this hardened the earth and bereft the skies of rain. Thus, culpability for the famine resided with humankind alone. Lastly, but not least of all, the essential virtue that must be learned for eternal life is love for one's neighbor (cf. Matthew 22:36–40). In order to learn communitarian ethics, this required the community as a whole to share in reward and punishment alike. And while these uncomfortable truths caused some of his congregation to doubt the providence of God, Basil instead pointed the accusing finger back at them:

A wise person would not say this [that is, doubting God's providence]. Rather, the reason why our needs are not provided for [by God] as usual is plain and obvious: we do not share what we receive [from God] with others. We praise beneficence, while we deprive the needy of it. When we were slaves, we were set free, yet we feel no compassion for our fellow slaves. When we were hungry, we were fed, yet we neglect the needy. Though we have a God who is generous and lacks nothing, we have become grudging and unsociable toward the poor. Our sheep give birth to many lambs, yet there are more people who go about naked than there are shorn sheep. Our storehouses groan with plenty, yet we have no mercy on those who groan with want. For this reason we are threatened with righteous judgment. This is why God does not open his hand: because we have closed up our hearts toward our brothers and sisters. This is why the fields are arid: because love has dried up.<sup>31</sup>

The Book of Amos reveals that God pronounced judgment on the Israelites for exploiting the poor, and Basil announced that the same was now happening in Cappadocia. There was plenty food for all, yet it was being hidden away in storehouses by the rich who were awaiting foreign buyers. The poor went naked and starved as a result.

The same is still true today, as it has been with every case of famine in history, as documented by Sen. For some, tragedy is an invitation for price-gouging and personal hoarding, regardless of the consequences for one's neighbors. Avarice is truly the root of all evil, just as Peter of Damaskos

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29. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §2.

30. See *Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), §§73–76

31. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §2.



had warned.<sup>32</sup> Yet, instead of repenting, Basil saw that many who were responsible for this tragedy spent their time only praying for rain:

The voices of those who pray disperse vainly in the air, since we do not listen to those who entreat our help. Is this what you call prayer and supplication? The men, except a few, occupy themselves with commerce, while the women assist them in service of Mammon [the vice of desiring wealth]. [...] The masses of adults, on the other hand, the people entangled in sins, hurry about the city free and easy and cheerful, even though they are responsible for these ills; they are the ones who have wrought and set in motion this catastrophe.<sup>33</sup>

True repentance, Basil reminded his listeners, would require changing one's evil ways as an act of atonement and penitence:

Who supports the child without parents, so that God might in turn support the wheat, which is like an orphan battered down by the unseasonable [dry] winds? Who ministers to the widow afflicted by the hardships of life, so that the provisions we need might now be measured back to us? Tear up the unjust contract, so that sin also might be loosed. Wipe away the debt that bears high rates of interest, so that the earth may bear its usual fruits. For when gold and bronze [coins] and things that do not naturally reproduce give birth in a manner contrary to nature,<sup>34</sup> then the earth which bears according to nature becomes barren and is sentenced to fruitlessness as a punishment to those who dwell there.<sup>35</sup>

The message is that God wants his people to address the *causes* of social injustice. Again, it must be kept in mind that there is always plenty of food and resources during times of drought and famine – always. The rich, desiring to protect their wealth and social positions, and possibly increase their fortunes at these times of scarcity through exorbitant pricing, refused to share their storehouses of agricultural goods with those who could not pay. The poor and needy were being starved to death by the selfishness and greed of the rich, not because of the drought. Those who did not repent – that is, the ones who have murdered their neighbors through starvation – will be subjected to God's final justice as foretold in the Books of Amos and Revelation. So, this is what Basil preached to them:

Let those who account greed a virtue and amass far more wealth than they actually need demonstrate now the value of the things they have treasured up. What good are they, if God is angry and prolongs His chastisement? Without the bread that was readily available in abundance until just yesterday, such people will soon turn an even paler shade of yellow than the gold they amass. Suppose there were no merchants [to sell to], nor any grain in the storehouses [to sell]: tell me, what then would

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32. See Peter of Damaskos, "A Treasury of Divine Knowledge – Introduction," in *The Philokalia vol. 3*, translated and edited by 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), 79.

33. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §3.

34. Basil is drawing on commentary by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the true source of wealth (*NE* 1133; see also *Pol* 1257b, 19–24). Aristotle harshly condemns the charging of interest (τόκος) on loans, since it imagines that wealth can "reproduce" like a living being. True power and prestige (ἐξουσία) are an extension of the substance (οὐσία) of a person, and thus can only be increased through virtue – it is a perversion to measure it economically as wealth and sinfully increase one's prestige in society through charging interest on loans.

35. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §4.

be the value of even the heaviest purse? Will your purse not be buried together with you? Is not gold earth? Will it not be interred like worthless clay together with the clay of your body?<sup>36</sup>

This is the theodicy of famine. Tragedy is a reminder that true personhood is not individualistic and selfish, but communitarian and caring. In seeking to manifest the likeness of the Trinitarian God in ourselves, Basil preached that we must love our neighbor as called for in Matthew 25. He therefore reprimanded his congregation:

Let us now examine our lives, both individually and corporately; let us regard the drought as a guide leading us to remembrance of our sins. Let us sensibly utter the cry of the noble Job: “The hand of the Lord has touched me!” Let us truly account this catastrophe as having occurred primarily because of our own sins. And if it is necessary to add yet another consideration, we should remember that sometimes such unfortunate events occur in people’s lives as a test of soul.<sup>37</sup>

The test of the soul for Job was to ascertain if he would curse God for his misfortunes. The same is true in these times of famine and drought. Yet far too many only had love for God if they felt blessed with worldly riches. Adversity, for them, invited apostasy:

If God has the ability to provide food, but delays in giving it, it is in order to test your resolution and examine your disposition, to see whether your inner state is like that of the licentious and senseless. So long as people have food in their mouths, they gush with praise, flattery, and admiration. But if the setting of the table is only a little delayed, they begin hurling insults like stones at those whom they previously extolled as godlike on account of their satiety.<sup>38</sup>

The remedy for all these maladies, both spiritual and practical with respect to famine, is philanthropic charity for one’s neighbors. For the rich and those who have plenty, the answer was clear. But even if you are not, Basil preached that you too are not precluded from the opportunity to show love for another: “Are you poor? You know someone who is even poorer. You have provisions for only ten days, but someone else has only enough for one day. As a good and generous person, redistribute your surplus to the needy.”<sup>39</sup> By doing so, a person can remedy the ailments of his or her own soul. “Give but a little and you will gain much; undo the primal sin by sharing your food. Just as Adam transmitted sin by eating wrongfully, so we wipe away the treacherous food when we remedy the need and hunger of our brothers and sisters.”<sup>40</sup> Those who disregard the commandments face a worse fate:

Thus also at the Last Judgement, when the Lord shall call the righteous, the one who chares the first rank. The one who feeds others will be foremost among the honored; the one who gives bread will be summoned first of all; the person who is good and gives generously will enter into eternal life before the rest. But the unsociable and stingy will be the first to be given over to the eternal fire.<sup>41</sup>

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36. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §4.

37. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §5.

38. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §5.

39. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §6.

40. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §7.

41. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §7.

Only philanthropy can accord us, in the words of the Divine Liturgy, a good defense before the dreaded judgment seat of Christ (The Litany of Completion). Basil therefore concluded with a warning: “Consider carefully, I ask you, both the present and the future; do not betray the latter from a shameful motive of profit.”<sup>42</sup>

### The True Nature of Natural Evils

Basil was not being utopian. History has testified to his wisdom. For example, it might surprise some readers to learn that life expectancy in England during World War II *dramatically increased*, even in the midst of unending bombing raids and rocket attacks from Nazi Germany raining down from the skies on the civilian population.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the comparative improvement in longevity *more than doubled* when compared to the decades that preceded and followed the war. Despite the casualties, wartime shortages, and disruptions to agriculture, the British responded by practicing unprecedented “social sharing during the war decades” to help the most vulnerable.<sup>44</sup> This is how the British won the war – this is why the forces of evil could not break their will to fight. People helping people has always been the key to surviving disasters of every kind. There is always plenty of food during famines, though many prefer to blame God or the devil instead of themselves. Natural evils only serve to reveal the culpability of humankind in refusing to help. They are *not* Acts of God – just moral evils in another form.

Let me close with another history lesson in case these points have not resonated with the reader. Sen’s analysis of famines sought to contextualize his statistics and economic analyses with a literary allusion – a way to bridge the distance between the academic specialist and the general public. I will be following his lead here by expanding on the very example he used to discuss the great Irish famine.<sup>45</sup> The Irish playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) in *Man and Superman* (1903), raged against those who would assign the blame for famine on God or capricious nature.<sup>46</sup> In Act IV, the English character Violet asks her Irish father-in-law, Malone, whether his father had died in the great famine of 1847. This made Malone, who is ostensibly a proxy for Shaw himself, exceedingly angry. “The famine? No, the *starvation*. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no famine. My father was *starved* dead; and I was *starved* out to America in my mother’s arms. English rule drove me and mine out of Ireland.”<sup>47</sup> The devil is also a character in this play, and in Act III he too decries humankind for *his* supposed culpability in their deaths: “And I tell you that in the arts of life man invents nothing; but in the arts of death he outdoes Nature herself, and produces by chemistry and machinery all the slaughter of plague, pestilence and famine.”<sup>48</sup> The Irish famine was not caused by the devil, capricious nature, or even God. For Shaw, it was nothing less than genocide.

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42. Basil, *On Social Justice*, §9. For an expanded discussion on famines in relation to moral and natural evils, see Goodin, *Confronting Evil: Theodicy and the Eastern Patristic Tradition* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2021).

43. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 50ff.

44. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 51.

45. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 170.

46. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (London: Wentworth Press, 2016).

47. Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 170. Emphasis added.

48. Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 186.

## Concerning Apocalypses

The word apocalypse has taken on eschatological “end of the world” connotations in popular discourse today. The Greek word actually means an “unveiling” of a mystery. The apocalypse of Amos was a revelation concerning the true causes of famine. It is, and always has been, the sins of avarice and callousness, perpetuated by those who prefer to see others suffer rather than surrender their pride in the face of God’s wrath. Cain likewise chided God to deflect blame for his sin of murder, mockingly asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9), thereby heaping sin upon sin. So too we are witnessing the Russian Federation holding their Ethiopian Orthodox brethren hostage after murdering their Ukrainian brothers in an unjust war. But rather than repent, they are using the impending famine as a “bargaining chip” for appeasement – very much selling Ethiopians like Amos has once described as happening in ancient Israel (Amos 8: 4–6). In the meantime, war-profiteering on the black market from stolen Ukrainian wheat is making Russian oligarchs fatter than any “heifer of Bashan” (Amos 4:1). Truly, the Russian Federation has outdone even Cain himself in callousness and cruelty.

The Russian Orthodox Church must not turn a blind eye to the suffering that has resulted from this unjust and unfounded belief in *Russkii Mir*, and to all the needless death it is inflicting on their Orthodox brethren and innocent others. The spirit of Nicaea, reaffirmed in the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, is to be “one” Church unified in the Holy Spirit. That unity has been fractured and split apart (which is the literal Greek meaning behind the word *diabolic*) by an unjust internecine war tearing the Orthodox world apart. Yet there is still time, as Basil pleads in his sermon to the Cappadocians, to repent.

Just as God is the “lover of humankind” (Divine Liturgy), Basil preached that we too are called to express this same love through the care of our neighbors. The redemptive economy is such that those who succeed will win everlasting life, while those who fail will face “the great winepress of the wrath of God” at the time of judgment (Revelation 14:19). The Russian, Ukrainian, and Ethiopian Orthodox all share that Nicene heritage, and well as the Cappadocian Saint, Basil the Great. His oration stands as an accusation against all those that would fracture the Church with war and famine in the false doctrine<sup>49</sup> of *Russkii Mir*. This is the context in which to now consider the words of Basil’s Troparion, celebrated by all Orthodox around the world:

Thy fame has gone forth into all the earth, which has received thy word. Thereby thou hast taught the Faith; thou hast revealed the nature of created things; thou hast made a royal priesthood of the ordered life of men. Righteous Father Basil, intercede with Christ our God that our souls may be saved.<sup>50</sup>

## A Postscript

Since the preparation of this manuscript, its peer review, and pending publication, certain developments have taken place in the news – developments that have only deepened the callousness by which the war is being waged by the Russian antagonists. Following Ukrainian battlefield successes in

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49. For more on this, see: Goodin, “The Rise of the Third Rome.”

50. “Saint Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia – Troparion & Kontakion,” Orthodox Church in America, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://www.oca.org/index.php/saints/troparia/2022/01/01/100003-saint-basil-the-great-archbishop-of-caesarea-in-cappadocia>.

reclaiming lost territory, particularly Snake Island off the coast of the port city of Odessa, a grain-deal was brokered that will allow both Ukrainian and Russian cargo ships to travel through the contested Black Sea to reach hungry international markets. It was not a humanitarian or good will gesture: the deal strengthens Russian interests by allowing its own grain shipments, including stolen Ukrainian wheat, to reach its embattled ally Bashar Assad in Syria, bolstering his own tenuous political situation, and securing the Russian seaport in Syria at Tartus.<sup>51</sup> Ukraine, under this agreement, has only been able to ship a trivial amount of grain to Ethiopia so far.<sup>52</sup> The true aim of the grain deal, according to the Carnegie thinktank, is leverage for the easing of international sanctions against Russia, which itself is in dire need of agricultural machinery for its own domestic needs and concerns over civil unrest.<sup>53</sup> This analysis is corroborated by the missile strike against the Odessa seaport mere hours after the grain deal was signed.<sup>54</sup> The message was, apparently, that Russia will terminate the deal whenever it wishes, or if it no longer suits Russian interests. In the meantime, Ethiopia grows more food insecure every day this senseless internecine war drags on.

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51. See John Gambrell, “Ship that Ukraine Alleges Has Stolen Wheat Likely Off Syria,” *ABS News*, August 18, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ship-ukraine-alleges-stolen-grain-off-syria-88534841>.

52. See Eddy Wax and Arah Anne Aarup, “Ukraine-Russia Grain Deal: The Unanswered Questions,” *Politico*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-black-sea-grain-deal-reality-check/>.

53. Alexandra Prokopenko, “What’s in the Ukraine Grain Deal for Russia?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 26th, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/eurasiainsight/87576>.

54. See CBC News Staff, “Ukraine, UN, Denounce Russian Missile Strike on Odessa Following Deal to Unblock Grain Exports,” July 23, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/russia-invasion-ukraine-day150-1.6530160>.

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