

“IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU”

Orthodox Witness and Contemporary Politics

Metropolitan Tikhon

*What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

(Eccl 1.9)

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union came crashing down in 1991, the people of the world, and many Orthodox Christians in particular, thought we were entering upon a new age of peace and prosperity. To borrow, perhaps unfairly, Francis Fukuyama's misunderstood turn of phrase, many thought we had reached a literal “end of history”—liberal democracy was destined to triumph everywhere.¹ And optimistic Christians, many Orthodox Christians among them, thought this might portend the victorious preaching of the Gospel throughout the world. A liberal democratic world order, leavened by the Gospel—this possibility seemed real in 1991. No one thought this would mean the end of man's sinfulness and fallenness, the end of all problems, the solution to all challenges. But the possibility of a genuinely new, largely free, largely peaceful, largely prosperous way of life for most or all of the world seemed real.

Things do not look quite as optimistic in 2022. Truly, the only things that are inevitable are the Church (the gates of hell will not prevail against her; Mt 16.18); Christ (he has faithfully promised to be with us to the end of the world, and his promises are true: Mt 28.20; Ps 144.13)—and the Last Judgment (for, as our Lord tells us in the Book of Revelation, “Surely I come quickly”; Rev 22.20). As for everything else, its course seems unpredictable. What we thought was past is present; our imagined future has

¹Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

turned out to be a strange regression. Maybe this is the other inevitable: human nature is fixed, and history, while not repeating, certainly rhymes.

It is easy for us to get caught up in the whirl of history, in its rhythms, in its patterns. We want to find ourselves on the winning side, and we want our side to win, so we form parties and factions, and we build our identities based on these worldly allegiances. We start to convince ourselves: if only it weren't for the other side, then the world could be fixed. Maybe we really could arrive at a new golden age, if it weren't for the bad guys.

But, to quote the words of our Master, a Galilean rabbi who lived two thousand years ago and who made the world and everything in it with his own theanthropic hands: "It shall not be so among you" (Mt 20.26). Our identity as Christians does not begin with history, but with the Lord of history who exists from eternity. To quote an ancient Latin Christian motto: *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, "the Cross stands while the orb of the world turns." Our Master is "the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world" (Rev 13.8), who made the world in a cruciform pattern, as St Justin the Martyr and St Irenaeus of Lyon point out so beautifully.²

Our identity is not bound up with any passing things, with any elemental spirit of this age. Our identity is in Jesus alone. As the Apostle assures us, our true selves are hid with Christ in God (Col 3.3). The Word of God himself proclaims: "All these things will pass away, but my word will not pass away" (Mt 24.35).

To students of theology and especially to those going into ministry, I say: do not be deceived by the passing fads and fashions and promises of this world, whether right or left, red or blue, team X or team Y, program A or program B, flag F or flag G. Saint Paul declares: "Let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3.21–23).

This is easy to say in theory: we are Christ's above all. But maybe it is not so easy in practice. We all want to believe our priorities, our plans, our politics, are those that are truly godly. The left wants to blame the right; the right wants to blame the left. We all want to wrap ourselves in the burial shroud of the crucified God, and claim that he died only for those who

²Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.60; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 34.

support our opinions, who agree with us. But before we tear the garment, we must step back, and start with the basics of the Gospel.

First, we must contemplate the claim Christ holds on our lives, overcoming all worldly interests. Second, we must reckon with what it means to be called forth from the world as a holy people, a people set apart, a people who are commanded to live neither for this transitory world nor according to the mores of this world. Third, we must heed the Lord’s call to be in the world while not being of it, and thus to discern what it means to provide Christian witness in the midst of time and change and history, in the midst of our present moment.

First and foremost: our identity is found in Jesus Christ alone, without any qualifications or hesitations. We belong to Jesus Christ. We are not our own; we were bought at a price (1 Cor 6.20); and that price is the most precious imaginable: the Blood of the God-man. Into him were we baptized, and having been baptized into his death (Rom 6.3–4), we hope to live forever as participants in his unending life. Our destiny, therefore, is not bounded by space, time, or worldly goals. If we remain faithful to the end (Mt 24.13), and sincere in our desire, then our destiny is participation in divinity itself (2 Pet 1.4), through Jesus Christ.

Our high calling cannot be exaggerated. And, therefore, we must never confuse means with an end. Christ is our beginning and our end, and our means are all the graces he provides: his commandments, by which we conform ourselves to the divine character; his sacraments, by which the life of God enters our lives; his teachings, by which we contemplate the one whom we desire. Beyond this, there are secondary means in the Christian life. We value and pray for a peaceful coexistence with the civil authorities, and do our best to preach the Gospel and promote the good life in our communities. But these secondary, political, social means can never be confused with our primary means, much less our goal. Otherwise, we risk the sins of blasphemy, idolatry, and scandal.

To choose one obvious but unfortunately salient example: Christians can never endorse lawless violence as a bulwark of the moral order. When anyone attempts to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine by pointing to Western decadence, they are only proving their own moral irrelevance. In

the face of the brutality of this war, such justifications are hard to understand as anything but idolatrous and unacceptable for Orthodox Christians.

Anxiety over culture wars can never be an excuse for Christians to go to war. Even in the midst of culture wars or demands for social justice, our desire for victory can never mean compromising on the commandments of Christ. That means that we can neither give in to the temptation to endorse sinful behaviors—whether those behaviors are violent, fratricidal military aggression, or abortion, or any sexual behavior outside of marriage between a man and a woman. But likewise, we cannot give in to the temptation to pride, hatred, self-satisfaction. We are always called to bear witness to a perishing world—a witness of love, joy, peace, and self-control. We are always called to give a good answer for the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3,5). We are called to decrease, so that Christ may increase in us (Jn 3,30), for the salvation of the world.

This brings me to my second point: *we, Christians, are called to be set apart from the world as a holy people* (1 Pet 2,9). As Saint Paul, paraphrasing the Old Testament, reminded the Corinthians: “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord” (2 Cor 6.17; cf. Lev 20.26, “You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own”).

The trouble with taking a partisan, identitarian approach to the troubles of the day is not just that we are betraying the one who bought us with his Blood by compromising on his commandments—though this, of course, is bad enough. We go even further by creating scandal. If we abandon the way of Christ—turning the other cheek, praying for enemies, placing our trust not in princes and sons of men but in the Prince of Peace, the Son of Man who shall come again with glory on the last day—if we abandon that and instead adopt worldly ways of doing business—lies, violence, slandering and cursing enemies—then we are giving unbelievers every reason to think that Christians are just one more interest group, one more faction who are trying to get power to get their way, to use the worldly force to impose their will.

I repeat again the words of our Lord: “It shall not be so among you” (Mt 20.26). We are called not to worldly victories. We can pray and work peacefully, in good conscience, so that righteousness prevails in this world,

in our laws, in the life of our neighbors. And if God grants us success in that, we should sing hymns of thanksgiving. But our victory is the victory of the Cross: of a new, better, and eternal life that is breaking into the world because of crucified love.

In other words, our victory is the victory of holiness, of strength in weakness, of bold courage in the face of violent power—courage, not to kill, not to win, but to be humiliated and to die and to be defeated in the eyes of the world.

“You are to be holy to me, says the Lord” (2 Cor 6.17; cf. Lev 20.26), and that means to be holy with his holiness: the holiness of self-immolating, humble love. Now, striving to be holy through self-emptying love doesn’t mean quietism, a disdainful attitude toward the world. It doesn’t mean lacking conviction; it doesn’t mean eschewing action. And this brings me to my third point: *even if our identities are not grounded in politics or worldly goals, still, we are called to bear witness to Christ, to strive for justice, to condemn wickedness, to protect the innocent.*

One saint who exemplifies Christian witness in the political arena—as well as in the literal arena—is the holy martyr Telemachus, an Eastern monk visiting Rome who, in order to protest the continuation of gladiatorial games in the Christianized empire, threw himself into the midst of a contest and was promptly killed. But his death, an act of self-sacrificing love, quickly resulted in the outlawing of gladiator and beast fights.

Closer to our own era, we might consider the countless Russian Orthodox Christians, hierarchs, monastics, clergy, laity, who endured prison and death rather than renounce the Savior or participate in the evils of Soviet Communist totalitarianism. Or we might remember the participation of Orthodox Christians, notably Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Archdiocese, in the non-violent protests of the Civil Rights Movement. Even more recently, we see the widespread Orthodox participation in the pro-life movement, especially the March for Life, at which I have been present myself many times. Once again, Christian witness in these cases, even in the face of monstrous and violent injustice, is the peaceful, gracious, humble, loving proclamation of the truth. The witness of these movements is so powerful because both their goals and their methods are completely informed by the Gospel.

And so true Christianity never entails abandoning the world with selfish disdain in favor of purely “spiritual” pursuits. But we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Mt 10.16), and always desire and seek to have Jesus Christ as the root, stock, leaf, petal, and fruit of all of our actions. Not Hellenism, not Holy Russia, not social conservatism, not social justice—it is *Christ* who is everything for us.

And so, at the end, we arrive back at the beginning. Christ is our ultimate goal, but he is also our starting point—as he proclaims: “Lo, I am the Alpha, and the Omega. The beginning, and the end” (Rev 22.13). In making our common way toward the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, it is not true that the Church has nothing to say to the world of politics, human affairs and events, human action and decision. Sometimes we must speak out in ways that the world says are political; sometimes we must flee from politics as if it were a blazing fire. Sometimes we must hold fast to our private convictions; sometimes we must be willing to see things in a new way and abandon everything that is superfluous, even idolatrous. But at all times, we must start as repentant sinners at the pierced feet of the slain, buried, and risen Creator of the universe, repeating again and again until our voices fail us: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, the sinner!”

If we start with this—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3.2; 4.11)—and if we cleave to this our whole life long, then we can trustingly hope to arrive at our longed-for destination, where the prayer of repentance is transformed into a festal shout of joy, which will ring out forever: *Christ is risen!*



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