In this contribution I wish to touch upon the topic of individual and ecclesiastic theological accounts in the dehumanization of humans in Auschwitz and the Gulag. Such an account is a condition to speak about God in the 21st century. “Theology after Auschwitz” is understood here as exemplary for (theological) reflection about God, recognizing the singularity of any suffering. There is a tradition in Western theology for thinking about “God and/in/after Auschwitz”; in post-Communist Eastern Orthodoxy, however, comparable reflection on the Holocaust and/or on the Gulag and the Communist past is lacking. At the same time, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) recently published important doctrinal documents on issues such as human rights and dignity. I will inquire how this lack of reflection works out in the ROC’s use of the traditional theological notions of imago dei and theosis.¹

¹ This article is part of an ongoing project. In my forthcoming monograph Theology after Gulag: Conditions for Reflection on the Soviet Past and Post-Soviet Present (2016), I will work out how theosis may be applied in theology after Auschwitz/Gulag when confronted with the challenges that Shalamov’s testimonies pose for traditional theology. Here this challenge will be first introduced.
“The Man in Man” in Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn

A question that has occupied me for quite some years regards an essential difference between two works of literature about labor camps. Both are composed by Russian writers with some ninety years space between them. The first one is Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead* (1860-1862). This work marked Dostoevsky’s comeback into literature after the ten years he spent as a political prisoner in Siberia, four years of which (from 1850 to 1854) in servitude. During those years of hard labor Dostoevsky lived amid the “dregs” of Russian society. In *The House of the Dead* Dostoevsky incorporated many biographical observations. Besides its literary value, the book gives a unique social and psychological portrait of the Russian convicts in this time. One of Dostoevsky’s Siberian discoveries was that the Russian nation is basically a Christian nation. It was precisely in Siberia that his religious convictions came to stabilization. Moreover, it was there that he came to love the Russian people and to believe that the nation is essentially good, pure, and strong.

Dostoevsky tried to penetrate the essence of humanity his entire life. When he was eighteen years old he already appointed himself his life task: “Man is a mystery. It needs to be unravelled, and if you spend your whole life unravelling it, don’t say that you’ve wasted time; I’m studying this mystery because I want to be a human being.” In 1881, the final year of his life, Dostoevsky sums up the goal of his authorship: “In full realism finding the man in man.”

“The man in man” is exactly what I want to highlight here. Dostoevsky was not a theologian: theological idiom was foreign to him. Still I do not think that a

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4 F. M. Dostojevskiĭ, Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах [Complete Collected Works in Thirty Volumes], edited by V.G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: “Nauka”, 1972-1990), XXVII, 65. [Henceforth PSS]
theological equation of this “man in man” with imago dei, God’s image, would be wrong. My working definition of God’s image is: the indefinable essence of humans, which makes humans human.\textsuperscript{5}

One of Dostoevsky’s most important personal experiences in Siberia was that in the “dregs” of society the human essence was preserved. In the Siberian camp of Dostoevsky the basic things which make a human human, such as friendship and affinity with creation, are maintained; there is even room for celebration of religious holidays. One may call this preservation of humanity the central idea of the book. In theological vocabulary, the people of The House of the Dead preserved their image of God in spite of the severe living conditions and hard labor.

Something similar can be said of the Stalin camp experience of another great Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Of course, compared to Dostoevsky, there is a radical change of the ethical norm as a consequence of Soviet state atheism. The Stalin camps confirmed the truth of Dostoevsky’s expectation that the abolition of the concept of God will lead humankind to what he calls “anthropophagy”\textsuperscript{6} and to crime. Solzhenitsyn’s description of the camps can serve as illustrations of Dostoevsky’s formulas: “if there is no God everything is permitted,” or “Conscience without God is horrifying, it can stray into extreme immorality.”\textsuperscript{7} A certain camp utility can, nevertheless, still be derived from Solzhenitsyn’s writings. Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky share the same theological anthropology. For both, the camp can, in principle, have a purifying function, leading to a catharsis. Because of this similarity between the two, Solzhenitsyn is not the writer I want to concentrate on here.

\textsuperscript{5} For a full definition, accounting for the interconnections of a) imago dei, b) soul and c) spirit within a more technical systematic-theological discourse would be a prerequisite.

\textsuperscript{6} An equivalent of misanthropy (also an existing word in Russian). Cf. e.g. PSS, XIV, 65, 83, 235; XXVI, 90.

\textsuperscript{7} PSS XIV, 240; PSS XXVII, 56.
“Dokhodyagi” in Varlam Shalamov’s Kolyma Tales

In Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* I find challenges for theological anthropology, which also can be found in stories about Auschwitz. Without reflection on these challenges no honest discussion about God is possible.

From 1937 to 1953 Shalamov spent seventeen years in the Gulag, and it took two more years before he was permitted to leave Kolyma. Like Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead*, Shalamov’s stories are based on biographical observations. They are testimonies, which is important for my point. Like *The House of the Dead*, the *Kolyma Tales* are not merely a literary masterpiece, but also a lucid sociological and psychological slice of the Soviet convicts. Totally opposite to Dostoevsky—and for this part to Solzhenitsyn—is the whole experience Shalamov derives from his camp years. Whereas the positive side of Dostoevsky’s and Solzhenitsyn’s camp experiences lies precisely in the depiction of the ineradicability of *imago dei*, Shalamov challenges theology by describing a human condition in which everything human has left the human being.

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Such dehumanized “living corpses” are called dokhodyagi. This phenomenon is not solely a Soviet one. The “living corpses” of the Nazi camps are known as *Muselmänner*. Unfortunately, there is no room for dealing with the witnesses of the Holocaust in this article, but Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Ella Lingens-Reiner, and many other Holocaust survivors testify the same as Shalamov: there is a limit of exhaustion behind which no moral laws count. There is a frontier behind which nothing human is left in a being. A survivor of Auschwitz, Isidor Levin, calls the question “where was God in Auschwitz” almost blasphemous. “The question should be: ‘where were you, man?’”

I would like to apply this question to Dostoevsky’s “man in man” as: where was the *imago dei* in Auschwitz and in the Gulag? I will not touch upon the executors because this theme has little to do with the point I want to make and would, thus, unnecessarily complicate my argument.

In Shalamov’s experience, two main factors lead to this extreme of dehumanization. The first is severe hunger:

All human emotions – love, friendship, envy, concern for one’s fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts. [In the slight muscular layer which still remained in our bones (...) differed only anger – the most enduring human feeling.]

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12 Plural of the Russian “dokhodyaga,” something like “goner.”
15 I intend to address this aspect of the question of evil and dehumanization in my forthcoming monograph (see fn. 1).
16 Shalamov, “Dry Rations,” *Kolyma Tales*, 56. Translation between square brackets are mine; this passage has not been included in the translation by John Glad.
The second factor leading to total dehumanization is severe frost: “The same frost that transformed a man’s spit into ice in midair also penetrated the soul. (...) And the soul shuddered and froze – perhaps to remain frozen for ever.”

Hunger and frost seem to have a power to totally reduce the human being to a physical thing:

To eat better, one had to work better. But to work better one had to eat better. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were always the first to die – a phenomenon that the doctors always explained away by claiming that peoples of the Baltic states were weaker than Russians. True, there normal way of life was more dissimilar than to that of the camps than was the world of the Russian peasant, and it was more difficult for them. The primary reason, however, was quite different: it wasn’t that they possessed less endurance, but that they were physically bigger than the Russians.

The vanishing of all human emotions besides anger and bitterness is repeated many times in Shalamov’s stories about the Kolyma camps:

Envy, like all our feelings, had been dulled and weakened by hunger. We lacked the strength to experience emotions, to seek easier work, to walk, to ask, to beg... We envied only our acquaintances, the ones who were lucky enough to get office work, a job in the hospital or the stables – wherever there was none of the long physical labor glorified as heroic and noble in signs above all the camp gates.

17 Shalamov, “Carpenters,” Kolyma Tales, 48.
19 Shalamov, “Condensed Milk,” Kolyma Tales, 181.
The narrator in the story “Sententious” testifies: “Bitterness was the last feeling with which men departed into nonbeing, into the world of the dead.”\(^{20}\) A dokhodyaga plans his life for the next two hours at the most.

Shalamov writes that by severe frost and hunger and while working sixteen hours a day seven days a week and being constantly beaten up by convoy and criminals, healthy young men became dokhodyagi within twenty to thirty days.\(^{21}\) “These terms are repeatedly tested,”\(^{22}\) Shalamov’s narrator adds laconically. Whereas in Dostoevsky the “dregs” of society preserved their imago dei, in Shalamov the dehumanization involves anyone, regardless of background, social, educational, or any other condition. In Shalamov the dehumanization is unconditional.

According to Shalamov there is no room for love or friendship for a dokhodyaga in the camp. This may be qualified by the remark of another Gulag survivor, Yevgenia Ginzburg, “[t]here are no more fervent friendships than those made in prison.”\(^{23}\) Both with Shalamov and with Ginzburg, there is a clear differentiation between the living conditions in a Stalin prison and in a Stalin camp. Camp is obviously worse, and as I argued earlier, quality of life is the only reason for the difference of Dostoevsky’s, Solzhenitsyn’s, and Shalamov’s camp experiences.

Shalamov’s testimony reads:

> Friendship is not born in conditions of need or trouble. Literary fairy tales tell of ‘difficult’ conditions which are an essential element in forming any friendship, but such conditions are simply not difficult enough. If tragedy and need brought people together and gave birth to their friendship, then the need was not extreme and the tragedy not great. Tragedy is not deep and sharp if it can be shared with friends.

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\(^{20}\) Shalamov, “Sententious,” Kolyma Tales, 75. Cf. 70: “Little flesh was left on my bones, just enough for bitterness – the last human emotion; it was closer to the bones. (…) What remained with me till the very end? Bitterness.”


\(^{22}\) Shalamov, “Татарский Мулла”: “Эти сроки многократно проверены.”

Only real need can determine one’s spiritual and physical strength and set the limits of one’s physical endurance and moral courage.24

A testimony on friendship can also be found in the story, “An Individual Assignment”:

Cold, hunger and sleeplessness rendered any friendship impossible, and Dugaev [a main character of the story] – despite his youth – understood the falseness of the belief that friendship could be tempered by misery and tragedy. For friendship to be friendship, its foundation had to be laid before living conditions reached that last border beyond which no human emotion was left to man – only mistrust, rage and lies.25

Hermeneutics of Real Suffering

A narrator in another story tells: “We understood that death was no worse than life, and we feared neither.”26 This brings to mind a fragment from a lost tragedy by Euripides: “Who knoweth if to die be but to live, / And that called life by mortals be but death?”27 Yet this association does not hold true, not only because Shalamov’s thought comes from a story with a reality behind it, while Euripides’ isolated sentence remains open for any interpretation, but also because of a qualification by Shalamov: for a dokhodyaga life is qualitatively not better than death. Because it has been severed from its context, Euripides’s sentence does not belong to a genre of tragedy, but to a philosophical, epistemological discourse, which remains abstract

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26 Shalamov, “Dry Rations,” Kolyma Tales, 57.
exactly because its context is lost. Shalamov’s qualitative assessment of life and death brings the discourse to the level of real tragedy.\textsuperscript{28}

The difference between concrete suffering and abstract reflection is important. This may be elaborated some more in order to show the connection of hermeneutics with the very essence of humanities, in particular of theology and ethics. In his brilliant comparative analysis of Shalamov’s and Solzhenitsyn’s message, the French philosopher Alain Badiou prefers Shalamov. According to Badiou, Solzhenitsyn is too much of a Russian to be able to teach the Western readers something they could discover themselves—that is “that Stalin was totalitarian.”\textsuperscript{29} I agree with that.

There is, however, a problem with Badiou’s methodology, and the discipline he chooses to analyse the two writers. He opts for Shalamov because “his art directs the possibility of political thought.”\textsuperscript{30} The abstract level of political philosophy is inappropriate for understanding the difference between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn. In any case we cannot start on this level. Our analysis has to start on the level of the concrete testimonies. An ethical norm, applicable on this level is (to quote Shalamov): “there are, perhaps, worse deeds than to dine on a human corpse.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Anamnestic Culture: Remembering the Forgotten Victims}

Departing from this concrete anthropological level, opposite to Badiou’s project, will immediately clarify what really matters—the question of preservation of humanity in

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\textsuperscript{28} This evokes a whole spectrum of hermeneutical and heuristic questions on our relation to and understanding of the texts and the real people of the past, which I can not address here. See my \textit{Kaleidoscope}, and F. Bestebreurtje, “Postmodern Orthodoxy? The Problem of Biblical Criticism in Orthodox Hermeneutics,” in K. Tolstaya (ed.), \textit{Orthodox Paradoxes: Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy. Proceedings from the 1st INaSEC Conference (Institute for the Academic Study of Eastern Christianity)}, Brill: Leiden, Boston 2014.

\textsuperscript{29} Alain Badiou, \textit{Can Politics Be Thought?} followed by \textit{Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of the Truth of the State}, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), 21. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Bosteels for sending me his translation prior to publication.

\textsuperscript{30} Badiou, \textit{Can Politics Be Thought?}, 22.

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the Gulag. Badiou writes that Shalamov’s purpose was to create an artistic world where “exception becomes the metaphor for normality, and the literary immersion in this nightmare may awaken us to the universality of a will.”

Shalamov was, indeed, an artist. But the issue is not at all his interest in metaphors. His ultimate goal was not a “literary immersion” of his reader into a “world of metaphors.” Shalamov is writing what he calls “the prose of the future,” the only criterion of which is “reliability”: “prose of the future demands something different. Not the writers will talk, but men of profession who possess the writer’s gift. And they will tell only about what they know, what they saw. Reliability – this is the power of literature of the future.”

To some degree the author Shalamov is trying to exceed a common ontological condition of his narrators. For example, the narrator of his story “Dry Rations”: “A human being survives by his ability to forget. Memory is always ready to blot out the bad and retain only the good.” Moreover, the narrator of the story “Sententious” tells about the eviction of language and inevitably also of memory and emotions in the camp. The goal of Shalamov’s prose can be described with what the Catholic political theologian Jürgen Manneman in another context calls a creation of an “anamnestic culture, which remembers about the forgotten victims.” Shalamov wrote: “I don’t want to forget anything and exactly in that (…) I see my fate!” Because a reader cannot experience what Shalamov has experienced, his prose is not aimed at “literary immersion.”

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32 Badiou, Can Politics Be Thought?, 23.
34 Shalamov, “Dry Rations,” Kolyma Tales, 66.
Theology after Auschwitz and Theology after Gulag

The category of memory reminds us that we must find conditions in order to speak about God in the face of the dehumanization in the Gulag and Auschwitz. Uncomfortable and leading to aporias (or inability to solve theological questions), thinking about ‘God and/in/after Auschwitz’ has a tradition in Western theology. Representatives of this tradition are Dorothee Sölle, Hans Joachim Iwand, Jürgen Moltmann, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Helmut Gollwitzer, Richard Rubenstein, Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Manneman and many others. “Theology after Auschwitz” was nearly the first topic I learned about when I began my study of theology in the Netherlands in 1993.

Contemporary Western theology has no answer to Auschwitz. According to some Christian theologians, God is present in:

1. the “why” question itself, or,
2. in the aporia we experience, or,
3. in our complaint and indictment of the violence, or,
4. in reason fighting the violence of technique and reflection through dialogue and reconciliation, through compassion and retry.36

The answers given are not conclusive, exactly because theology (in its primary meaning of the human capability of speaking about God) reaches its limits here. Soteriology, Christology, and eschatology are possible directions to reconsider these aporias. What matters is not the absence of a conclusive answer, but the presence of systematically validated theological groundwork which can be fruitful for theological reflection in Eastern Europe.37

36 The list is taken from an unpublished manuscript on Christian dogmatics by A. Van der Kooi, whom I thank for her kind permission to use it here. In Part II, I intend to discuss further related questions.
37 In this respect, a theology after the Gulag could learn much from the theology after apartheid and South American liberation theology as well.
Time, distance and, even more, repentance is required for adequate reflection. *Theologie nach Auschwitz* emerged some 20-25 years after the Holocaust. The same amount of time has now passed since the fall of communism. Within the Reformed tradition in post-communist Eastern Europe a profound reflection on the communist past has arisen (I only mention Michail Beintker here). In post-communist Eastern Orthodoxy, however, reflection on the Holocaust and/or the Gulag and communism, comparable with that in the West, is still lacking.

Given the current Russian church-state relations, a complicating socio-psychological aspect should be mentioned. “Theology after Auschwitz” is, in general, twofold: one side is given political, historical and theological guilt through


complicity with the genocide of the Jews (the chosen people) simply by association of their identity as Christians. The second is the problem of speaking about God after this evil and suffering. These two aspects are, of course, reciprocal.

For the post-soviet society—given the political, historical, and theological dimensions—the question of complicity is more intricate because the borders between enemies and victims were extremely blurred. Within the communist system, which ideologically implanted the idea of brotherhood, any citizen/comrade could become an “enemy of the people” just as anyone could be or become an NKVD (former KGB) informant. The repressive system sorted enemies inside society. By contrast, the complicity in Auschwitz (and for that part, for instance, in apartheid) was that of guilt against a clearly defined outsider (Jew, Gypsy, homosexual, black, or colored). Paradoxically, this “otherness” apparently makes confession and sense of complicity easier to accept. Reciprocity, not (necessarily) confinement to one stigmatized group or people, of the communist legacy, makes complicity unconditional. This is, however, on another level than the unconditional destruction of imago dei as described by Shalamov.

Three further factors are important to consider the content of theological reflection in the Russian context. First, that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is adopting doctrinal documents after more than 70 years of enforced silence; second, the disruption with the pre-revolutionary tradition of academic theology; third, the

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41 For example: “Various statistics, which are difficult to verify in terms of their accuracy, show the Gestapo having 1 regular member per 4,800 citizens in 1938 compared to the Soviet Union with the KGB’s 1 per 5,830 in the late 1930s.” Steve Hewitt, Snitch! A History of the Modern Intelligence Informer (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 105. At my inquiry, however, “Memorial” (see note 11) answered that no statistics have ever been gathered on the “snitches” due to inaccessibility of sources. No personal files were disclosed in Russia, and archives with dossiers where such information could be found are still locked. In investigational dossiers that can be obtained by researchers, this information is blocked, or these documents are not given out because they contain such information. On this level, too, the remnants of the closed Soviet system hinder remembrance and repentance.

42 In my forthcoming monograph on Theology after Gulag (fn. 1), I will argue that unconditionality of guilt can become theologically functional in the project of “Theology after Gulag.”
growing rapprochement of church and state where the successors of the repressive apparatus hold power and are, thus, not inclined to repentance.\textsuperscript{43}

Below I will relate the question of destruction of \textit{imago dei} to the official theology of the ROC.

\textit{The Absence of Memory in New Doctrinal Documents of the Russian Orthodox Church}

One of the new doctrinal documents adopted by the ROC is “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” issued in 2008.\textsuperscript{44} As can be expected, within the above mentioned socio-political and socio-psychological setting this document is not based on introspection, but on mirroring—that is, re-flection turned outwards. As stated in the “Introduction,” it is an address of the ROC to “the world today.”\textsuperscript{45} The whole address to “the world” regarding human dignity, freedom, and rights lacks any direct reference to or account of recent Russian history—decennia of suppression and injustice.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} See, by contrast, the preamble to the South-African Constitution of 1996: “We, the people op South Africa (…) [h]eal the divisions of the past (…).” Quoted in Veraart, \textit{De passie}, 35. In contemporary Russia the current course is to reinforce patriotism and create a positive image of the communist governmental structures. A sort of conspiracy theory emerged through this that claimed: because of the high percentage of former KGB employees in the current Russian administration, the government demanded that former KGB people, or members of the party, or of government bodies be portrayed in books and films as pious and courageous people—people who are able to guide the country in harmony with the Orthodox revival. In the slipstream of the increasing confluence between church and state in Russian society, this would lead to a better popular image of the KGB/[FSB]. I touch upon this problem in Katya Tolstaya, Peter Versteeg, “Inventing a Saint: Religious Fiction in Post-Communist Russia,” 2012 (forthcoming).


\textsuperscript{46} The so-called “Darmstädter Wort” of the \textit{Bruderrat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland} was adopted on the 8th of August 1947. „Der von Hans Joachim Iwand entworfene und unter Beteiligung
One of the few indirect references is in Ch. II, Section 4 to the “martyrs who served God even to death and the (...) confessors who refused to renounce Him in face of persecutions and threats.”

One might see this as an allusion to the Orthodox victims of the Soviet repressions. Exactly this allusion brings me to my main question of theological account for dehumanization in the Gulag.

Other than the secular Human Rights Declaration, “The Basic Teaching” derives human dignity from the biblical notion of the endowment of man with God’s image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). “The image of God can be either darkened or illumined depending on the self-determination of a free individual, while the natural dignity becomes either more apparent in his life or obliterated by sin.” I constrain myself here to only one remark: this chapter (II) of “The Basic Teaching” is entitled “Freedom of choice and freedom from evil.” The fate of the Muselmänner and dokhodyagi of respectively Auschwitz and the Gulag has disclosed a possibility of what I would call a total loss of any dignity and of the image of God. Free will was

von Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth und anderen überarbeitete Text galt der Konkretion eines kirchlichen Schuldbeckenntnisses nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg.” [“The text, designed by Hans Joachim Iwand and revised under the participation of Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth and others, served the concretion of a confession of guilt of the church after the Second World War.”] Beintker, *Die Kirchen*, 388. Beintker discusses the import of this document for reflection on Protestant post-communist theology and “Theology after Auschwitz.”


49 Ch. I, section 1: “According to the Biblical revelation, God not only created human nature but also endowed it with qualities in His image and after His likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26). It is the only ground which makes it possible to assert that human nature has an inherent dignity.”

50 Ch. II, section 1.

51 I find a similar observation in David Patterson, “Nazis, Philosophers, and the response to the Scandal of Heidegger,” in: John K. Roth (ed.), *Ethics after the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Pargon House, 1999), 148-172, there 152: “The divine image in man can
out of order in these circumstances. Another layer forms, in this regard, the question of freedom of the ‘free’ Soviet society at large; for example, given state imposed atheism. As far as the radical evil of dehumanization of the dokhodyagi in the Gulag represents suffering and injustice in general, the question seems appropriate whether the ROC preserves its veracity/reliability in not accounting for the recent history and its own role in its newly adopted documents.52

Revival of the Concept of theosis

Dehumanization of the Gulag and Auschwitz forms a fundamental challenge for Christian theological anthropology as such, and especially for Eastern Orthodoxy, considering the importance of deification (theosis)53 and the current theological revival of this doctrine. Given that contemporary interest in theosis is certainly not confined to the Orthodox context, but “is perhaps the hype of twenty-first century theology,”54 the link between the concepts of imago dei and of theosis in the newly adopted doctrinal documents of the ROC becomes important for our discourse on

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52 I intend to discuss this question in Part II. Cf. the opinion that rejection or ignorance of the Holocaust “is foreclosed to ‘us humans’ not just qua Europeans, Americans or Westerners, but qua members of humanity – in this case understood as a community of all human beings that have gone, are going, or will go through a human life. (…) On the plane of justice on a global scale, the adoption of conceptions that fail to condemn the perpetration of new holocausts under different names (…) can then be rejected as something, that undermines humanity’s possibility of maintaining a sense of self-respect, and each of its members’ ability to regard humanity within himself [I read: imago dei, K.T.] as worthy of respect.” Alessandro Ferrara, “The Idea of Charter of fundamental Human Rights,” in: Claudio Corradetti (ed.), Philosophical Dimensions of Human Rights: Some Contemporary Views (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer, 2012), 173-190, there 185.

53 I use both terms here as interchangeable.

searching directions for 21st century theology. Within Orthodox theology, and thus in these documents, deification is a soteriological consequence of the anthropological and ontological presuppositions of *imago dei*. Precisely with its notion of *theosis* Eastern Orthodox theology bears a great potential to make theological thinking about God more or less sufficient, or, perhaps, together with the Western solutions more comprehensive. In this contribution I will restrict myself to some comments on the ROC documents.55

The *Basic Teaching* states: “Human life therefore lies in seeking ‘God’s likeness in all virtue so far as it is possible for man’, as St. John of Damascus says in his Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith. The patristic tradition describes this elicitation of the image of God as deification. The God-given dignity is confirmed by a moral principle present in every person and discerned in the voice of conscience.”56 *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2000) calls deification the “ultimate goal and calling of man”: “The body, free from slavery to sinful passions and illnesses as their consequences, should serve the soul, while the spiritual powers and abilities, transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, should aspire for the ultimate goal and calling of man which is deification” (Bold in the original).57

55 I will indicate this direction for interpreting the concept of *theosis* my forthcoming monograph (see fn. 1).


In both the Basic Teaching and in the Social Concept the notions of *imago dei* and *theosis* are used from a sort of timeless perspective, in factual oblivion of the recent past (I suspend both the question of complicity and the problem of dehumanization and evil here).\(^{58}\) Whereas the “Theology after Auschwitz” church based anti-Semitism can—up to a certain extent—be identified as non-compliance with Christian doctrines, for the Orthodox context, concepts like *theosis* and *imago dei* prove incommensurable for the complicity of the Gulag and dehumanization when they are not confronted with historical reality. A timeless perspective is not adequate to address the “world today.”\(^{59}\)

An additional question should involve the perception of theological notions by a common (i.e., not theologically skilled) reader. The official doctrine of *theosis* came into being as result of controversies.\(^{60}\) Since then this notion has become theologically loaded and multi-interpretable throughout church history.\(^{61}\) Within the scope of contemporary systematic theology, discourse on *theosis* involves a scale of *loci* (dogmatic themes such as the concept of God, ontology, anthropology, Christology, soteriology); the interpretation of which will lead to differences in the

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\(^{59}\) There is a broader aspect to it that is connected with the Orthodox notion of tradition as unchangeable and with theological hermeneutics. Positioning oneself at an odd hermeneutical point (of view) is also not foreign to Western theologians. See my criticism of Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen for (literally) taking a position “from God” [“von Gott aus”] in Part III of my *Kaleidoscope* (see n. 2), and my “Literary Mystification: Hermeneutical Questions of the Early Dialectical Theology,” in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 54/3 (2012), 312-331.

\(^{60}\) Roughly: in the first phase with Barlaam of Calabria, in the second phase with the group lead by Gregory Akindynos, in the third phase with Nicephorus Gregoras, and in the fourth and last phase with Prochorus Cydones. See e.g. Russel, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 304-309.

\(^{61}\) Cf. the four modes of approaching deification (nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic) as distinguished by Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 9.
completion of one’s interpretation of *theosis*. Thus, a functional explanation of its application in the official ROC documents is needed for theologians, and especially for the common readers. Deification is not considered in a theological (historical) context in any of the documents published on the official web site of the ROC. Thus, in the documents discussed, the goal of deification and the concepts of human dignity—“church-state relations and a number of problems socially significant today”—remain, similar to Euripides and Badiou, on the abstract level. For a doctrinal document to be reliable—I recall Shalamov’s demand of reliability—deification could only be prescribed as a norm to “every person” within a thorough theological account, which is now lacking. When our theology loses its context, the tragedy of the concrete testimonies becomes as abstract as Euripides’ discourse.

Thus, the question remains: how can we speak theologically reliably of *theosis* and *imago dei* after Auschwitz and the Gulag? For our discussion of *theosis* to be reliable, a confrontation with the reality of one’s own past and guilt is required. One could even say that such self-reflection is a precondition for the practice of *theosis*, on an ecclesial level as much as on an individual level (in this case for complicity in the Gulag). With F.W. Marquardt—who was led by the *Nie wieder!* (‘never again Auschwitz’)—we are determined by the primacy of ethics over dogmatics and of practice over theory, the historical over the metaphysical. In its official documents the ROC heretofore fails to connect the appeal to *theosis* to the theological Orthodox tradition regarding *theosis*.

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63 A short questionnaire I held under 15 Russian respondents—none of them a theologian; all had at least an university degree; seven were church attendees; eight were from a more secular background—showed that they expected something “very elevated” (“очень возвышенное”) and “mystical” by the word «обожение» (“deification”). No respondent would connect it with the Orthodox doctrine or practice, nor with deeper theological strata.
64 See note 58.
66 I refer to Chapter I, Section 1.3 of the “Basic Teaching” (see quote above).
The amnesia of the Gulag experience in the new adopted doctrinal documents of the ROC brings to memory Shalamov’s driving force. As Juri Drumi says:

In memory [Shalamov] sees ‘a symptom of humanity’. Memory is also a safeguard of immortality and resurrection. As follows from the story ‘The procurator of Judea’, to forget the names and faces of martyrs, or equally to consign to oblivion their executors, means to forget Christ and His torturers. With all might of his nature Shalamov resists ‘the terrifying human force – the will and ability to forget’. Only having overcome in himself the temptation of unconsciousness, he calms down and goes to sleep: a right to sleep quietly has only he, who remembers the faces of the cripples, who did not forget the insane shine of their hungry eyes.

To recall Badiou once again, the awakening from “this nightmare” should have nothing to do with “the universality of a will” or with political philosophy. An allusion to Pascal’s “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world, we must not sleep during that time” seems more appropriate. I also think of Yevgenia Ginzburg’s testimony that memory in the prison “reaches virtuosity” — as she calls it, she writes that she literally knew pages from difficult books, she read only once, by heart:

During the long months and years I spent in various prisons, I was able to observe the virtuosity that human memory can develop when it is sharpened by loneliness and complete isolation from outside impressions. One remembers with amazing

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68 Drumi refers to Shalamov’s story, “Resurrection of the Larch.”
69 Drumi quotes from Shalamov’s story, “Train.”
accuracy everything one has ever read, even quite long ago, and can repeat whole pages of books one had believed long forgotten. There is something almost mysterious about this phenomenon.⁷²

We live in different times than Shalamov and Ginzburg. Despite different socio- and church-political differences and positive steps toward European integration, we still can say with Johann Baptist Metz that we lack the “anamnestic spirit” required to comprehend what in “such a disaster” happened “also with us, with Europe and eventually with our talk about God.”⁷³ In these times amnesia or a dormitory stupefaction is, probably, not merely an ecclesiastical, but a broader cultural phenomenon: I have read Shalamov’s stories at least five times and each time I forget the concrete content. The paradox is that theology is, on the one hand, a normative discipline, and, on the other hand, it is a hazardous enterprise that demands—as a norm—the individual voice of the theologian. It is only with individual voices of theologians that theology after Auschwitz was initiated in the West.

Theological rethinking of theosis (and imago dei) might give the Church (and, foremost perhaps, the individual believer) a means to confess and accept this guilt, but also to find a way forward to a faith and theology after the Gulag. In what way the doctrine of theosis can be a theological basis for individual and ecclesial account in the shadow of radical evil requires elaboration. It will involve a discussion on the related Orthodox doctrine of divine essence/energies.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ I shall expound my vision of this positive potential of Orthodox thinking on theosis-essence/energies to become a theological basis for this individual account in the shadow of radical evil in my monograph (see fn. 1).