

# **An Interview with Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis<sup>1</sup>**

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Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis is director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies (Volos, Greece), member of the Executive Committee of the European Academy of Religion (Bologna, Italy), and a Chair (with Prof. Aristotle Papanikolaou) of the Political Theology group of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA). He is serving as the editor of the theological series “Doxa & Praxis: Exploring Orthodox Theology” (WCC Publications), while he is a member of the Board or of the Advisory Committee of various theological journals (*The Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, *Political Theology*, *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, *The Wheel*). Dr. Kalaitzidis has been a Research Fellow at several academic institutions, including Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton University, DePaul University, the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, and the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Münster University. He has taught Religious Studies at the University of Thessaly in Greece as well as systematic theology at the Hellenic Open University and at St Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris. He is author of the books *Nel mondo ma non del mondo: Sfide e tentazioni della chiesa nel mondo contemporaneo* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2016), *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), and *Orthodoxy and Modernity: Prolegomena* (Athens: Indiktos, 2007, in Greek; English edition: *Orthodoxy and Modernity: Introducing a Constructive Encounter*, Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2023). He has published numerous articles in many languages on the eschatological dimension of Christianity, the dialogue between Orthodoxy and modernity/postmodernity, religious nationalism and fundamentalism, political theology, contemporary Orthodox and Western theology, issues of renewal and reformation in Eastern Orthodoxy, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and many more topics.

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**Dear Dr. Kalaitzidis, thank you very much for taking the time to give me this interview.**

**You are the Director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece, a well-known research center that organizes lectures, workshops, and conferences on various issues related to Orthodox Christianity and also publishes important works with its own publishing house. Could you please briefly state the mission and core values of this research center and whether it is an innovative endeavor within Greek Orthodoxy?**

Since its foundation, in 2000, the Volos Academy has been pursuing a creative and critical discussion on the challenges the Orthodox Church is called to face today (e.g., the task and mission of Orthodox theology in our changing world, ecumenical and

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted via email.

inter-religious dialogue, the theological dialogue with modernity/postmodernity, secularism, church and state relations, religious fundamentalism). It also sought to contextualize the message of the Gospel in our time, to ensure the constructive role of Orthodoxy in the public sphere, and to highlight the prophetic and eschatological dynamic of the Orthodox Christian tradition in the dialogue with the anthropological, political and other parameters of (Western) modernity.

Among the aims and the domains of active presence of the Volos Academy, one should list:

- a) the promotion of contemporary Orthodox theology and its opening towards the contemporary challenges of the (Western) modern and post-modern world;
- b) the publication of a series of important works to promote the interactive and ecumenical character of Orthodox theology;
- c) the critical discussion of urgent issues and problems faced by Christians in our time (such as the issue of Christians in the Middle East, the challenges of pluralism and secularization, the New Age religious movements, gender issues as well as the position and role of women in the Church);
- d) the training of religious education teachers in the New Curricula of the Greek Public Education and their acquaintance with modern pedagogical methods and practices, and the continuous training of the clergy and laymen of the Diocese of Demetrias in Volos with the aim of offering the most proper pastoral approach to various modern theological and wider cultural issues;
- e) the organization of various events, conferences, and seminars. The Volos Academy has organized, either on its own or in cooperation with renown theological institutes, university faculties and other institutions from Greece and abroad, a series of conferences, seminars and events both for the experts and for the wider public, in order to study with sobriety and respect, but also with the necessary critical dimension, the aforementioned topics as well as issues related to eminent figures and currents of contemporary Orthodox theology, and especially those that have decisively contributed to the flourishing and advancement of theology.

**What is the actual influence of the Volos Academy in church affairs? Does it represent also a prevailing and influential current of theological thought within the Greek Orthodox field?**

The influence of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies within the Greek Orthodox context should be considered as extremely important. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that one of the major achievements of the Volos Academy during the years of its operation was its contribution to the shaping of a fresh theological agenda of contemporary Orthodox theology, first in Greece and then worldwide, by bringing to the fore topics (e.g., modernity, traditionalism, religious nationalism, political theology, critical engagement with our tradition) that other theological institutions avoided to raise for different reasons. The role of Orthodoxy in the context of (post)modernity, the position of women in the Church, the status of religious education and the Church in the public sphere, the authority of the Church Fathers today, and the imperative of liturgical renewal along with the need of a lively and creative involvement of the Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement, followed by a constructive and well-documented critical approach to the past of

Orthodoxy, were some of the topics that have been seriously debated for the first time as a result of various activities (conferences, seminars, publications) organized by the Volos Academy. This is not just my personal and—one could argue—biased account, but one that has already been documented in the international bibliography. It suffices here to mention just one example: the well-documented study by Trine Stauning Willert, *New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

**There are Orthodox hardliners of varied provenance who reject the theological positions and the overall trajectory of the Volos Academy as deviating from traditional Orthodoxy, as the products of pure intellectualism, and even as heresies. How do you respond to these criticisms and accusations?**

Indeed, there exist certain groups inside “traditional” Orthodoxy, which accuse the Volos Academy as deviating from the mainstream understanding of Orthodoxy. There are also many from different backgrounds (both traditionalists, but also in certain cases few from the open-minded side) who criticize the Volos Academy of not following the faith of the Fathers and preferring to compromise with the demands of modernity. If one would like to reply to these accusations, one needs to stress the importance of hermeneutics in our era. If we all agree that the Church is the ark of salvation, then we need to find possible ways of interpreting the Good News, the Gospel, in a way relevant to the existential needs of the people of today.

This means that we should use all the available hermeneutical tools so as to make the message of the Church reliable and attractive to a world that seems to be indifferent to the glorious past of Orthodoxy, or to its long tradition. By putting under scrutiny the given customs and traditions of the Church, one does not ignore or cancel the massive contribution of the past generations (e.g., the Fathers) to the conceptualization and consolidation of our faith. In contrast, by applying a “hermeneutics of suspicion”, what one tries to do is to show the existing gap of *Zeitgeist* between the two eras that obligates us to find ways to consider the significance of this long tradition for our quite different context. This by no means is a betrayal of our faith, but rather an attempt towards its revitalization.

**Recently, at the occasion of the celebrations for the 200 years since the Greek Revolution of 1821, the Volos Academy has organized four round table meetings under the general heading “Orthodox Christianity and the ‘other’ in Greece, in 2040”, which have brought together clerics and scholars to discuss controversial but topical issues, such as the relations between Hellenism and Orthodoxy, the character of modern Greek identity, secularization, and the presence of Islam in Greece and in Europe. The common thematic thread running through these discussions was the issue of alterity, namely the relation to the “other”. What are the main ideological and structural reasons that have brought the issue of alterity to the fore?**

Two were the main reasons that brought to the fore the issue of alterity. On the one hand, the massive flows of immigrants and refugees (mainly from the Middle East and Islamic countries) especially since 2015, as a result of the war situation in Syria, the new political developments in the wider region, and the ambiguous relationship

between Greece and Turkey. In its majority, the local Greek population welcomed these people, expressing most of the times their solidarity. There existed, however, certain voices, both within the Church but also outside, that appeared to be quite hesitant if not negative towards the idea of the integration or inculturation of these people, because of the real or alleged threat of losing the country's ethnic and religious homogeneity.

On the other hand, the rise of the neo-Nazi party "Golden Dawn" in 2012 until its decline in the parliamentary elections of 2019, as well as certain voices of national and religious fundamentalism, contributed in a negative way to the increasing relevance of alterity as an issue which had to be addressed within the public sphere, from various perspectives (political, social, religious etc.). Although Greek society remains more or less a homogenous society, the recent refugee and immigration crisis triggered a deep discussion about the place of the "other" within it. This is a topic that needs to be seriously discussed in the upcoming years, to the extent that Greece is one of the main countries in Europe exposed to refugee and migration currents.

Before concluding my answer, allow me to mention that the Volos series of roundtables mentioned above has attracted not only a Greek, but also a serious international attention: the French Catholic Ecumenical journal *Istina*, in its first issue of 2022, has published in French translation the papers of these roundtable meetings under the title: "L'Orthodoxie et les 'autres' dans la Grèce de 2040: Académie théologique de Volos, 6-27 septembre 2021."

**How can Orthodox theology contribute to the recognition of the importance of "otherness"? How should the official Church deal with discourses from within its ranks that construct the "other" as both religious and national enemy?**

Orthodox theology has already much contributed to the recognition of the importance of otherness. It suffices here to mention the theological work of important contemporary thinkers such as Metropolitan of Pergamon John D. Zizioulas, Christos Yannaras, and the late Metropolitan of Diokleia Kallistos Ware. As you may realize, the problem is not with the theological reflection on alterity and otherness, but with the pastoral and practical reception and implementation of such a theology, which has deep roots in the Bible and the overall Christian tradition.

Remaining faithful to the well-known admonition by St. Paul "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 28), as well as to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37), Orthodox theology needs to update the message of the Gospel, which has at its core the unconditional love for each other, for the neighbor who is an image of the truly and *par excellence* "Other". Christians, faithful to the teaching about the Holy Trinity and its anthropological implications, are called upon to remember in our encounter with the "other" the imperatives of the theology of personhood, recognizing the "other" as a constituent element of ourselves, of our Christian existence.

The Eucharist—the common supper of the people of God beyond all forms of discrimination based on nature or biology—could again inspire and incarnate the

spirit of sharing, justice, and hospitality or teach through the renewing and liberating ecclesial ethos how to welcome the otherness of the “other”.

**In many predominantly Orthodox countries, the Church continues to perceive itself as the “ark of the nation” and as a central institution of the state. What are the implications of such a self-understanding for its role in the diverse, pluralistic and open environment of the globalized world? How can it avoid the “temptation of Judas”—to use the title of one of your articles? Can the Church relate to the (post)modern world without accommodating itself to the secularizing spirit of the times?**

The relation between the Orthodox Church and the various national identities remains a crucial issue both for its self-understanding and its engagement within a pluralistic, multi-cultural, and (post)modern society. The “temptation of Judas,” that is the replacement of the history of salvation by the history of national revival, and the subsequent adoption by the Church of the national narrative and mythologies, constitute, as I maintained in many of my writings, the more serious theological and ecclesiological challenge the Orthodox Church faces during the last centuries.

I strongly believe that a constructive interaction of the Orthodox Church and theology with the imperatives of modernity and postmodernity is not something deplorable, but rather a desirable request that could lead to a creative encounter and synthesis for the benefit of both sides. On the other hand, the Church should always remain faithful to its authentic mission, that is the joyful announcement of the coming kingdom of God. As a consequence, the Church must inspire, embrace and sanctify every moment, every society and every historical and cultural formation, extending in time and space the salvific dimensions of the incarnation of the Word and Son of God. Constant references to obsolete historical and national forms, either of byzantine or post-byzantine origin, as well as the identification with principles and practices of an agricultural, traditional, pre-modern society constitute a pastoral and theological problem of premium importance for the Orthodox Church.

To sum up, the prophetic voice of the Church should avoid any politicized and militant religious discourse that ignores the gospel principles of defending the weak and fighting against social injustice. In the meantime, it should also boldly discredit populist arguments and conspiracy theories, adopting the practice of self-criticism and, if necessary, also the willingness to adapt or even change its paradigm according to the concrete needs of the day.

**Why is it so difficult for the Orthodox Church to canonically allow for the ordination of women? Is the revitalization of the historical female order of the deaconesses the highest point of its reform policy on this issue?**

This is so mainly due to historical reasons, but also to a certain “conservative” mind developed throughout centuries, especially during the period of Ottoman occupation. For those aware of contemporary European history, Orthodoxy did not go through the major historical and intellectual developments that have taken place in Western Europe, such as Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, the French Revolution,

and many more. As a result of the Ottoman occupation, which lasted for 400 or even 500 years, Eastern Orthodoxy remained under the impact of pre-modern models of organization of society and life, such as patriarchy, agrarian civilization and economy. This situation led to a serious reluctance and defensive stance against various modern ideas coming from the West (such as liberal democracy, human rights language etc.). While, theologically speaking, there is no doctrinal reason to deny the ordination of women, historical customs and local traditions prevent Orthodoxy from adopting such a practice. Even the reestablishment of the historical female order of the deaconesses, existing in Byzantium until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, appears to be a difficult issue, despite the many positive recommendations or even decisions of relevant Orthodox synodal bodies.

There has not been any serious discussion among the Orthodox regarding the nature and the origins of the differences separating us from Christians of other traditions; that is, the effort to distinguish and discern which of the differences we have with Western Christians (Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants) touch the very core of the ecclesial faith and which ones are a mere reflection or an expression of the cultural, social or political context of each place and time. The example of the recent canonical practice of women's ordination, adopted by the mainstream Protestant Churches, as well as by the Anglican and the Old Catholic Church, but strongly rejected by the Orthodox Church, is an indicative one and high revelatory of the above problem.

In recent times, the Orthodox have tried to respond to the challenges posed by the feminist movement and feminist theologies on many occasions, particularly at the Rhodes Consultation in 1988, which mainly focused on the elaboration of arguments against women's ordination. Despite this overall negative Orthodox attitude, in more recent years the opinion has gained ground (even among distinguished Orthodox hierarchs and theologians) that, apart from the argument of "tradition", there seems to be no other serious theological reason hindering the ordination of women.

As early as 1968, John D. Zizoulas (now Metropolitan of Pergamon in the Ecumenical Patriarchate), maintained that "on the question of the ordination of women, Orthodox theologians could find no theological reasons against such an ordination. Yet the entire matter is so deeply tied up with their tradition that they would find it difficult in their majority to endorse without reservations the rather enthusiastic statements of the paper". For his part, the late Metropolitan of Diokleia Kallistos Ware (Ecumenical Patriarchate), in a book written in collaboration with the late French Orthodox theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, had to recognize that, in the light of patristic anthropology and of Orthodox theology, there are no serious theological arguments against women's ordination, except the argument of "tradition". The same conclusion is reflected not only in lay theologians' writings such as Nikos Matsoukas or Konstantinos Yiokarinis, but also in some of the papers of the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (Diocese of Sourozh, Moscow Patriarchate), and the majority of the papers and the "Common Considerations" issued at the end of the two consultations of Orthodox and Old Catholic theologians on the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry, held in Levadia, Greece (February 25-March 1, 1996), and Konstancin, Poland (December 10-15, 1996), and organized with the blessings of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and His Grace Antonius Jan Glazemaker the Archbishop of Utrecht. From its side too, the Volos Academy discussed this issue in its "Gender and Religion—The Role of Woman in

the Church” series of public lectures during the academic year 2002-2003 (cf. <https://bit.ly/3g1v0jI>; <https://bit.ly/3MtmjuL>; <https://bit.ly/3rTqA0Y>). I personally had the opportunity to contribute to this issue on different occasions. I also maintained that there are no theological reasons opposing the ordination of women and tried to explain the Orthodox reluctance to this new canonical practice by referring to historical reasons and social conservatism, as well as to a certain static understanding of church tradition (cf., for example, <https://bit.ly/3Td7RZZ>; <https://bit.ly/3TjxVmx>).

Despite the fact that canonical matters in Orthodoxy have always been subject to revisions and changes, insofar as they do not affect the fundamental doctrines of our faith, that is, the Trinitarian or/and Christological doctrines, and the growing consensus among distinguished Orthodox theologians regarding the non-theological character of “Orthodox” arguments against women’s ordination, it is clear that the Orthodox Church is constantly refusing to seriously consider and discuss this issue, appealing to the criterion of “tradition”. This is in fact identified with the structures and perceptions of the patriarchal societies of the Middle East, in which Orthodoxy has mainly been shaped and to which it owes its historical and cultural physiognomy to a large extent. In addition, as is well known, the adoption of women’s ordination by the Old Catholic, Anglican, and mainstream Protestant Churches, and its rejection by the Orthodox Church constitutes a source of serious discordance and friction in their ecumenical relations. With regard to the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the Old Catholic Church, it was even one of the reasons for failing to achieve full sacramental communion, despite the initial theological agreement reached between the two churches in 1987.

If the Orthodox Church could be criticized for its rejection of a “new” canonical practice on the basis of its fixation on non-theological/cultural factors, the Western Churches on the other hand, which have adopted the ordination of women, could in their turn be criticized for their lack of ecumenical sensitivity, since they had not tried to raise this issue in their dialogue with the Orthodox Church prior to the final adoption of this practice. In addition, by adopting women’s ordination without taking into account Orthodoxy’s difficulties in this matter (even if of cultural order), mainstream Western Churches demonstrated once again their Eurocentric/West-centered spirit and their feeling of cultural superiority and sense of progressiveness, insofar as they had expected that Eastern Christians could walk within a few decades a journey for which Western Christians needed many centuries including the landmarks of Enlightenment, modernity, and post-modern pluralistic societies.

**There is a lively discussion in the Roman Catholic Church in Germany in favor of administrative reforms that will provide bishops and lay people equal voting rights. Would you support or oppose such a development for the case of the Orthodox Church? And on what grounds?**

The question of an active and constructive participation of the laity in the life of the Orthodox Church is one of the key issues that the Volos Academy has put forward since the very beginning of its activity and gave prominence on various occasions such as during the academic year 2004-05, when it organized a series of lectures dedicated to this issue (cf. <https://acadimia.org/pentaetia-2000-2005/329-2002-2003>).

Without overlooking the distinction between the priestly and lay ministries within the Church—and by priestly ministry I am principally referring to the administration of the sacraments—I must also highlight the theological principle of the priesthood of all believers, or in other words of the universal priesthood, received through the baptism by all the members of the Church, according to the Orthodox theological tradition. Nevertheless, one has to stare the current situation of the Orthodox Church right in the face and courageously admit that a clergy-ruled—and especially the bishop-centered—model regarding the understanding of the ecclesial life and the administration of Church affairs predominates.

It is beyond the scope of this interview to expose the causes of such a development. Suffice it to note that the examples of missionary activity, liturgical and social practice and the conduct, manners and habits of the early Christian communities in general, in which there was no rough distinction between the sacramental and the charismatic aspect, should remain an inspirational model for the reactivation of the lay participation in the Church life. It is noteworthy, however, that models of lay participation or even of equal voting rights between bishops and lay people are not totally unknown to the Orthodox at different periods of time, and in connection to various political contexts. Starting from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Romanian Orthodox Church, and going to the more recent cases of the All Russian Church Council of 1917-1918, the Orthodox Autonomous Churches of Finland and Estonia or to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, and the former Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the parishes of Russian tradition (Rue Daru), one can find a very rich variety of lay participation in Church life and administration. Even in the highest ecclesiastical instance of Eastern Orthodoxy, that is the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, during the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, one can find a strong lay participation in the voting and the overall administration of Greek Orthodox communities.

However, lay participation is not the panacea for all the problems and challenges the Church is facing today. Even worse, this participation can be used for political influence or for the adoption of fundamentalist ideas and practices. The “popular reactions” against Ecumenism in a number of Orthodox Churches, and the strong “anti-hierarchical” reactions during the Covid-19 pandemic unfortunately confirm this last claim.

**You have argued that the complete separation of church and state in Greece may push the Church at the hands of religious fundamentalists. Could you please explain the reasoning behind this position? Are you satisfied with the current system of relations? If not, what kind of concrete changes do you propose?**

No, absolutely not, I am not satisfied with the current system of church-state relations in Greece, and especially the way it is applied to both sides. Again, here history played a major role. Yet, starting from a theological perspective, I would like to remind of the radical biblical distinction between God and Caesar (cf. Matthew 22: 21; Mark 12:17), and the implications deriving from this distinction, and among them the distinct secular realm belonging to the latter, as well as the eschatologically

inspired relativization of every worldly power or reign (cf. John 18:36; Hebrew 13:14). However, since the historical compromise made by the Church with Constantine the Great (and later with Theodosius the Great) during the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the vision of the Christian empire, the model of the Byzantine *symphonia* has prevailed for centuries, and in many traditionally Orthodox countries, it remains until now the ideal model for the church-state relationship. Modernity, nonetheless, surpassed the so-called Constantinian “paradigm” and inaugurated a new era, in which there is or it should be a clear distinction between secular and religious sphere, a distinction, which, as I mentioned, is actually of Christian origin, and has been applied almost exclusively to settings with a Christian past.

Yet, all the current issues related to secularization and the relationship between the state and the church in Greece can be traced back to the problems left unresolved and to the addictions bequeathed to us by the Byzantine *symphonia* and the Ottoman occupation period, which rendered the Ecumenical Patriarchate part of the administrative apparatus of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the former assumed ethnarchic and political functions, and the Church was forced to deviate from its primary mission, and to deal with issues alien to its nature, such as the preservation of language and ethno-cultural identity. It is impossible to understand the reactions and the logic behind the current arguments of the institutional Church in Greece without a thorough knowledge and understanding of what happened at that time. Crucial questions, such as that of ecclesiastical property or the claim for a political and even national role on the part of the established Church, find their origin and their explanation there. It is therefore theologically obvious that the Church must be freed as soon as possible from the burdens of the idealization of the Byzantine and the ethnarchic role it had assumed under Ottoman rule. The Church cannot respond to the challenges of secularization, pluralism and modernity/postmodernity by borrowing arguments from the past and by idealizing previous cultural forms or by defending an allegedly “Christian” culture, a “Christian” society and, by extension, a “Christian” city, state and homeland.

For their own part, secular intellectuals should also stop thinking metaphysically on the basis of abstract ideas and principles and approach with imagination and creativity the complex Greek reality, which differs in many ways from that of Western Europe, and especially from that of France. If in the French case for historical reasons the nation-state and secularism were constituted through the break with the Roman Catholic Church and the expulsion of religion from the public space, in the case of Greece, the nation-state was established with the significant contribution of the clergy and after a revolution, namely the national uprising of 1821, which had, among other things, the characteristics of a popular religious movement. All this rendered the Church a *de facto* and later *de jure* part of the public sphere, yet at the same time absolutely subject to and dependent on the State after the proclamation of the autocephaly of the Church of Greece in 1833 (recognized in 1850), its secession from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and its subordination to state control. Let us not forget that in order to define who the Greeks are, the first National Assembly of Epidaurus, in the first Constitution of the insurgent Greece in 1822, had stated that “Greeks are those who believe in Christ”. Still at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the national rivalries around Macedonia, the distinction between Bulgarians and Greeks will be made again on the basis of religious criteria (the Greeks were those belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Bulgarians those belonging to the

Bulgarian Exarchate). During the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey (1923-24) imposed by the Lausanne Treaty after the “Asia Minor disaster” of 1922, religion was again the main basis, since it was impossible to define differently and in a secure way the identity of the populations that had to be exchanged. Indeed, there were a number of Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christian populations in Asia Minor, especially in Cappadocia and the Western Pontus region, and, on the other hand, many Greek-speaking Muslims in Macedonia, Epirus and Crete. This example alone makes it extremely difficult to consider religion in our context a private matter, regardless of the social (and therefore public) character inherent in the existence and functioning of religions in general.

In this context, a clarification is necessary: By what precedes, my purpose is not to support the stagnation, the immobilism or the perpetuation of the present situation, but to show, on the one hand, the complexity and specificity of church-state relations in Greece, and on the other hand, to affirm the need of offering creative and original solutions, instead of copying and transferring mechanically foreign models. Many argue that with the changes in recent years and the adoption of measures favoring religious freedom and individual rights, the separation of church and state is essentially consummated, and this without a revision of the Greek Constitution. I am listing below some of the steps taken towards the separation and secularization of the state: the removal of the mention of religious affiliation from personal identity cards; the alternative of civil marriage; the oath of honor alternatively to the oath on the gospel; civil unions for heterosexual couples in 2008 and for homosexual couples in 2015; the legal possibility of a homo-parental adoption; the institutionalization of cremation; the introduction of civil funerals; the abolition of provisions on places of worship; the construction of an Islamic mosque in Athens; and many more.

The crucial question is what we expect from the debate on church-state separation: the legitimate strengthening of religious freedom and human rights, the abolition of all forms of discrimination, or the separation of church and state at all costs? Let us not forget that there are countries in Europe without a separation of church and state that respect human rights in an exemplary way (e.g., Great Britain and some Scandinavian countries), while on the other hand there are countries whose “secular” or “laïque” socio-political system brutally violates human rights—Turkey, Hungary and Russia are among them. Moreover, what is the purpose of separation? Democratization through the secularization of institutions and the state or the secularization and de-Christianization of the still religiously observant Greek society? These are not necessarily the same thing, and it is a mistake to think that the separation or secularization of institutions will automatically lead to the reduction of the influence and impact of the Orthodox Church on Greek society. Moreover, what does it mean to be a “secular” state with reference to Greece? For example, will the Greek state ever cease to be interested in the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Holy Mountain Athos, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of the Middle East (Alexandria, Jerusalem and even Antioch), the Greek Orthodox Archdioceses of America and Australia, or in the election of the future Archbishop of Athens and of all Greece?

Looking at the ongoing dialogue on secularization and state-church relations, one cannot help but think that, insofar as the Church continues to have a significant social influence and resonance in Greece, it is futile to expect that, unless it renews and modernizes itself from within, there will be gradual changes in society. And these

cannot happen without a broader dialogue between church and society (and not only with the state and exclusively about ecclesiastical property and clergy salaries). This cannot succeed if the state and civil society as a whole are not involved in this dialogue, and aim only at getting rid of the Church as soon as possible by emphasizing the demand for separation at all costs, without asking themselves in whose hands they will leave the institutional Church with its considerable social influence and what political orientations the latter will be tempted to adopt without the institutional break of the democratic state. It would be a grave mistake, at this stage, to cut off from the public sphere an institution such as the Church that is not known for its performance in financial management or for its transparency, democratic procedures and social accountability; and to leave it outside the legal control and framework guaranteed by the democratic state, just in order to say that the Church has been finally separated from the state, and that an allegedly progressive secular demand has thus been realized.

On the other hand, if the Church is to speak to modern people and to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world of today—and not to the irrevocably obsolete world of yesterday—, it is now urgent that it begins to become fully aware on its own (without this being imposed on it from outside or from above) of the reality of manifold pluralism; and to understand that it is time to complete the cycle of the Constantinian era and that its adherence to the existing pattern and its pursuit of a specific/privileged role in Greek society is a sign of anachronism, a lack of prophetic charisma, and a way of escaping history. From this perspective, it should be a priority to move beyond an ethnocentric, nationalist discourse, to abandon once and for all dreams of returning to the theocratic models, the Byzantine Empire, the “Great Idea” or any other romantic anti-modern versions of a “Christian society”. Theocracy and neo-nationalism are the constant temptations of Orthodoxy, not its true identity, and are nothing but secularized forms of eschatology. Therefore, they cannot express the self-conscience and the “political theology” of the Church.

However, the political and legislative basis for the distinction between the secular and religious spheres, between Caesar and God—in other words, the separation of state and church or the clear institutionalization of their distinct roles respectively—must be carefully prepared by both parties, ensuring not only that the state is freed from the Church, but also that the Church is not left to the control of its most conservative and fundamentalist tendencies. In this light, while the elements that guarantee synodality (at least at the level of the bishops) must be preserved in the current Charter of the Church of Greece, a sustained effort must also be made towards the following objectives:

- substantial rehabilitation of synodality at all levels (parish, diocese, global);
- participation of the laity in the life of the Church and worship;
- improvement of theological formation among candidates for the priesthood and active clergy, as well as among the faithful;
- transparency, accountability and sound management of church finances.

At the end, it would be a mistake to adopt, under the pressure of current events, hasty solutions that do not correspond to the history and reality of the country, such as the unconditional adoption of the French model proposed by some (i.e., hostile church-state separation, transformation of the Churches into cultic associations and legal

persons of private law). For then, in the purely religious domain, the Orthodox Church of Greece would be captured by fundamentalist circles, while being threatened with fragmentation—there is also the precedent of the Old Calendarists. In the political field, there is also a risk for new social unrest, a new political and cultural divide, and even the emergence of an extreme right-wing political party that would declare itself favorable to the Church or would be guided by it (or rather, by its most extremist and conservative currents).

**We are all living through hard times due to the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Why religions, and Orthodox Christianity in particular, have offered fertile soil for the development of related conspiracy theories and science denial, and this despite the statements in favor of medical protective measures (e.g., vaccination) officially endorsed and made by Orthodox Church authorities?**

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has revealed some tensions within global Orthodoxy that have hitherto remained dormant and waiting for the right condition to unfold. On the ultra-conservative side, two tendencies have emerged that unite large groups of clergy and laity. The first tendency is a new kind of conspiratorial fundamentalism, which argues that the ultimate goal of vaccination is to establish a world government led by the Antichrist, which will be able to completely control human behavior. The second tendency that has arisen is a mentality of martyrdom that promotes resistance against the “atheist authorities”, which are supposed to call for apostasy from Christ.

This kind of discourse became during the pandemic very common in the sermons and preaching of certain clerics. It is possible that the closure of churches, protective restriction measures, and the image of a powerful state imposing its position on the Church affect the collective conscience of many believers, who tend to see enemies of the Church everywhere. All of a sudden, thus, bishops who obeyed government orders and put as priority the protection of the life and the health of their flock became part of the archetypal image of the apostates, while monks and clergy who opposed government and official ecclesiastical authorities were considered to be the “true and genuine Orthodox” believers. Lack of critical thinking, defective catechetical process, taking over of ecclesial life by monastic *milieus*, individualization of religious beliefs and practices, distrust towards official church authorities, and a kind of a religious persecution syndrome are some of causes of such problematic behaviors.

We should, however, notice that this is not the only ecclesial reaction to the pandemic. During this difficult and unprecedented experience bishops, clergy, monks, theologians, and lay people witnessed to a compassionate, open-minded, and yet faithful to the tradition Church, which tried to avoid a new divide between faith and science. From our part as Volos Academy, we organized a series of webinars and published papers, columns, and articles to enlighten the people of God and to push out the fear and the reactionary ideas and practices, while in 2020 we also proceeded to the publication of a collective volume (in Greek, edited by Nikolaos Asproulis and Nathaniel Wood) titled: *“Time for Action”: Orthodoxy Facing the Coronavirus Pandemic.*

**And one last question: Could the Orthodox Church benefit from practices and experiences of other Christian Churches/faith communities and religions or this may lead to a situation of religious syncretism that will adulterate the identity of Orthodoxy, as numerous Orthodox ultra-conservatives claim and fear?**

A significant danger and a great temptation, if you wish, for the Orthodox Church, for which the ultra-conservative circles you have mentioned have a great share of responsibility, is the prevalence of an ahistorical and ethnocentric understanding of the Church that leads to an overemphasis on the Church's "national mission", and to the perception of Orthodoxy in terms of a "besieged castle". This conception is being implemented at the expense of its ecumenical and consequently trans-national and eventually eschatological perspective. In that sense, the contacts and relations between the Orthodox Church and the other Christian Churches/confessions and religions, in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect cultivated by the theological and inter-religious dialogues as well as the Ecumenical Movement during the recent decades, can help in this direction.

To be more specific, the adoption of an ecumenical ecclesiastical discourse, free from the constant reference to the nation's sacredness and the patterns of the Constantinian period, is not only a request of fidelity to a genuine Orthodox tradition, but also a necessary condition so that the Church could surpass social conservatism and anachronism. Moving away—following the example of Abraham— from confessional and ethnic self-sufficiency and taking the path towards meeting the "other" is the necessary existential experience that could lead both the believers and the Church as a charismatic community and as an institution to a sound spiritual life and theology.

**Thank you very much for this rich and interesting interview. I wish you every success in all your activities and research endeavors.**

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