

An Interview with Prof. Aristotle Papanikolaou¹

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Aristotle Papanikolaou is a Professor of Theology and Archbishop Demetrios Chair in Orthodox Theology and Culture at Fordham University. He is author of the books *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, 2012), *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, 2006); and co-editor of numerous others, among them: *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges-Divergent Positions* (London, 2017), *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine* (New York, 2017), *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York, 2013), and *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars* (New York, 2008).

Dear Prof. Papanikolaou, thank you very much for taking the time to give me this interview.

My pleasure.

You belong to a new generation of theologians, who are motivated by a desire to bring Orthodox theology and the Church into a constructive relationship with modernity and the secular world. In your opinion, what are the essential presuppositions for such a relationship?

An essential presupposition is our Orthodox faith. When we speak about a constructive relationship with modernity and with various forms of thinking in other disciplines, sometimes it can sound as if we are maybe surrendering to a certain unorthodox, worldly spirit. But that is not we are trying to do. For sure, the engagement with non orthodox forms of thought raises questions for us that we did not think about before. But that is very consistent with the patristic tradition. When you preach the Gospel (you can see this even in Paul's Letters), people ask questions and then you have to give answers. You have to think about your faith in the proclamation of the Gospel. I want to be very clear that we want to think *within* the tradition. We want to think *as* a tradition, as my mentor David Tracy once said. We are not trying to think outside of tradition; we are not trying to correct it; we are not saying that other forms of thought are things we need to correct our tradition in any way. However, we recognize that sometimes questions get posed to us (e.g., about women in the Church or about how to relate to politics) in ways that perhaps we have not quite thought through as we should. So, we want to think within the tradition confronting the questions that are posed to us, but also recognizing those aspects in other disciplines that we think coincide with the truths of our own tradition. That could also help us to amplify, to elucidate, to rich and deepen it very much in the

¹ The interview was conducted via video call.

same way that the Fathers thought that hypostasis could elaborate the understanding of God and the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.

There are Orthodox clerical and lay actors who fiercely reject the Church's engagement with secular modernity as being a submission of Orthodoxy to the dominant values of Western liberal democracy and of market economy. How do you respond to that?

There is a kind of internal theological debate about what are the essential elements of Orthodoxy, from which if we deviate our Orthodox identity will somehow be affected. To use an extreme example: there are some (they are in the minority) who would argue that to wear the kalymavchi is part of the tradition, so you cannot change it. We know as scholars that this is a late development. So, what are the legitimate things that we can discuss and debate, maybe even revise? I think here is the real heart of the debate, because within the tradition with people with whom we disagree in terms of their engagement with modernity, there exists so much on which we do agree; for instance, on the Councils, on forms of the liturgy, the sacraments, the Canons, the authority of the Scriptures and of the Fathers of the Church. There are some people who might call engagement with modernity an accommodationism. But I do not see how if you affirm all those things mentioned above, you are an accommodationist. People from the outside would actually see such an attitude as very conservative. My position is that the core, non-negotiable elements are the dogmatic claims that we say about Jesus Christ. I would admit that many things like the development of liturgy have developed around that core theme. I do think that it is possible to think about, rethink, maybe even revise certain aspects of the Church that have a certain historical continuity as long as such an attitude affirms those claims about the divinity and humanity of Christ. For instance, the Canons are different than dogmas. The Canons are thought about and reflected throughout time and history. If in fact the dogma is about pointing to us what we can be as human beings in terms of being deified, the canons are means for us to move in that direction. Given historical time, change, information and other developments, we are always thinking about how we should structure our lives in such ways that they move us toward deification. So, I think that the Canons are things that can be revised. But there are many people in the tradition who would say that if we revise them we are surrendering to an unorthodox spirit. That is an internal theological debate that we are having: One sees any kind of change as a betrayal; the other sees continuity (i.e, the dogmatic tradition of the Church) and discontinuity, recognizing that history moves and changes. If our Orthodox identity really is about God could become humans and humans could become God, then I do not think engagement with modern questions and modern forms of thought, in any way or in any form, threatens that core belief.

In your books, you employ theological concepts that are traditionally imbued with a transcendental meaning (e.g., theosis, mysticism, asceticism) as a key to the achievement of various mundane objectives, be it personal or socio-political ones. In a nutshell, how can transcendence and immanence be reconciled in practice in a balanced way?

It is a good question. When the Orthodox talk about theosis they talk about it with the examples of saints that seem to be supernatural heroes. I do think that to be in the presence of God, we can go beyond what is expected. But at the same time an extraordinary understanding of theosis takes our attention away from simple, everyday manifestations of being united with God. In the end, the Church Fathers tried to make sense of this union with God in terms of the virtues, so that we can become more loving persons (loving of our neighbor and loving of God). There is a Christian materialism in this sort of embodiment of the virtues, in this trying to become more loving, in the relationship to ourselves, to God, to other human beings, to nature and to the world, in the sense that the material reality is created so that it can bear the presence of God. It is not in competition with God, it is not a Manichean dualism against God. It is iconic, sacramental. If that is the case, then we have to think about participation in God in terms of greater or lesser degrees, not in terms of 'this is it or not', 'Seraphim of Sarov is theosis, everything else is not'. I really think that theosis can be manifested in many different kinds of ways; you can do the work of God in your home, in your workplace, to your family, to your community. As I say, we should make theosis more 'worldly'. This means seeing it not always as this kind of extraordinary, super power, but as something we experience in regular, everyday life. Put differently, not everybody has to feed the bears in order to be united with God. People in their everyday life can be examples of theosis; for instance, when they struggle with their own fears, their own anxieties, impulses, compulsions, when they try the best they can to aesthetically become more self-reflective in ways that they can have a better relationship to themselves as images of God, to other human beings and to God. Also we have to think about what theosis means in terms of situations that the Fathers never talked about. What does it mean for someone who is disabled or suffers from post traumatic stress disorder to be in theosis? What does it mean for someone with severe Down syndrome to be in theosis? If theosis really is about union of the material world with God, then every single atom, even the tiniest kind of element within our bodies has to be deified. It is not just a transcendence, a super hero thing. It is being in the world. That is why I also think the Church has to think about it when it tries to think about politics as well. The Church sometimes advances what I call untheotic politics in the world.

Western Christian Churches have historically developed a strong engagement with the world, often at the expense of their spirituality. Is worldliness (in the sense of secularization) an unavoidable negative side-effect of socio-political involvement? If not, how can the Orthodox Church avoid this development?

David Tracy once said to me that the Orthodox may have an advantage because they never went through the historical stages of Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism. The Orthodox like to say that the main mistake of Western Christianity was the denial of theosis, but that is false, as we have tried to show in our work at the *Orthodox Christian Studies Center*. There is a strong tradition of theosis within Catholicism, and even many Lutherans are trying to identify it within the writings of Luther. That may be debatable, but at least they are trying to identify it. At some point within Western Christianity they became obsessed with the idea of justification, which in many ways was the root cause of Reformation itself. Under the influence of the Reformation, the Western Christianity forgot about theosis. This forgetfulness of theosis became more intensified when modern thought and modern

rationality tended to make something like theosis into a rational concept. The idea that God can be united with Newtonian machine-like world seemed odd. So, the focus became on individual salvation, on individual soul. At certain trajectory of Christianity within the West became the main way to engage with modernity, especially when the main question for modernity became one of epistemology: how do you know or how can you claim that God's self can be revealed to you? There are other theologians recently like John Milbank who have made the claim (even though I disagree with them in many things) that one of the main greatest mistakes is that somehow within our Christian tradition this theotic, participatory way of understanding the God-world relation got forgotten. I personally think that within the Russian tradition when Orthodox theology was revived, one of the amazing things was that they turned again to this concept of theosis, especially in the work of Soloviev. I also think that this happened as a result, quite ironically, of the influence of German idealism. In my opinion, within the Western trajectory certain theological things started to happen that forced a different kind of engagement with modern thought. The Orthodox were somewhat spared from that initially because of the Ottoman Occupation. Also Russia did not have quite yet the intellectual tradition to deal with modern thought. However, by the 19th century, the Russians were responding to that in a very fruitful way. You can see that in the writings of Sergei Bulgakov. It may sound a little bit simplistic, but one thing that the Orthodox can offer is to think about our engagement with modernity in a way that draws on this unified thread of our tradition: the emphasis on transcendence and immanence; the affirmation that we are created to unite ourselves with God; the sacramental character of materiality. All these things can result in a much more open kind of engagement with modern discourse.

We are living in an age of continuous crises, which increase existing inequalities and produce high levels of stress and anxiety worldwide. People turn to religions for consolation and hope; in a word, for meaning. Can the Orthodox Church function as such a refuge from harsh reality? Could it mobilize a dynamic protest against the structural causes of human suffering?

I would say that it could mobilize a more activist *critique*. The problem is that it has become too reactionary. The possibilities for Orthodoxy in many ways are the same to the possibilities of any kind of religious form of thinking or even any ideology: it could develop a dualistic, 'us' vs. 'them' mentality, or it could try to more charitably engage with current realities. In the latter case, you critique these realities, but you try to identify what you think is good and what ultimately needs some kind of revision. There is no question that the Orthodox can offer constructive, activist critique to the current realities. Although the Orthodox vision of the Kingdom of God will never really match the political realities, it can push them to move towards more just and accountable patterns of relationship. Greek theologians Pantelis Kalaitzidis and Athanasios Papatheanasiou raise the question why we do not have liberation theology in Orthodoxy. I think Orthodoxy has the resources to develop something like that. The problem is that the institutional Church too often tries to take a stance of defence against the modern world. Also it tends to side with regimes that will privilege it, something that is to its detriment. Unfortunately, that is what we are seeing in the post-communist situation; the Russian Orthodox Church backed itself into a corner now and it is actually something like a department of the state in the Russian

government. It cannot do anything without ultimately coordinating with the government. The latter sees the Church as advancing its own interests around the world. We see that possibility also in Serbia; probably not in Romania, where there is still independence. The Church in Greece remains still a very powerful cultural and social force and it has a great deal of independence in its relationship to the state. In general, the Church tries to negotiate these various relationships. In some Orthodox countries there is a kind of defensive stance against modernity on behalf of the Church, but also a willingness to cooperate with 'totalitarian' type of regimes in order to secure its own privileges.

An Orthodox Church without gender hierarchy and hierocratic structure of power: Is this vision a utopia? A dangerous innovation? Or just an issue of enhanced equality that is to be expected in the future?

I do not think that hierarchy is the problem. You need leaders and a chain of command. The problem with the institutional Orthodox Church is that there is not enough accountability. It cannot simply be the bishops and the Synod, because you need to keep everyone accountable. The Church is an institution and suffers from many of the problems that any institution has. It had problems throughout the centuries. We know that there are scandals and problems within the Church. The Holy Spirit is not going to keep the Church from having power problems and scandals. In my opinion, there is no Eucharist without the people. It is impossible for the bishop and the priest to simply have their own Eucharist by themselves. Even if there are multiple priests, you still need the lay people. The Church has to develop stronger structures of accountability, which also enable communion, as much as this is possible at the institutional level.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has produced a strong debate over the mode of distribution of Holy Communion. On the one hand, there are those who reject any change as being a profanation of the divine mystery. On the other hand, there are those arguing that the literal perception of Holy Communion as 'medicine of immortality' and the usage of a single shared spoon amid the coronavirus pandemic put at risk public health. What is your own position on this controversial issue?

We have to think within our tradition about how to respond to this issue, because it entails also modern science. Honestly, I do not think that there was enough really good theological reflection on this issue. Maybe we had an opportunity to really think theologically about this and maybe do it in such a way that was not quite so contentious. However, certain decisions had to be made by the bishops about what to do in the churches. There are many ways we can look at this issue. There is a pastoral dimension; people who maybe were a little nervous but really wanted to commune. There is a historical issue; in fact, there have been many ways in which Communion has been distributed. So, the idea that it *has* to be within one spoon is an extremely dubious claim historically. Then there is the Christological issue; what is to mean to commune with the Body and Blood of the Christ? Is it really the case that the power of divinity makes it impossible to transmit an illness? By that logic, why then when I commune I still have cancer? Why I still die? Where is the theological reflection on

that? I am not trying to avoid your question. The people who say we should use multiple spoons are accused as not really believing that this is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. That is not true. I have communed in a Church that used multiple spoons; I did not feel that I was not receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. What has convinced me about multiple spoons is this: Listening to the science about what the virus is, the virus itself is not technically what is causing illness and death. The virus is affecting the way our organs in our body work, causing physical distress and that physical distress – depending on who you are – can lead to death. The virus may affect the lungs at certain human beings, causing breathing issues, but it is not the virus *per se* that is causing death. The death is being caused by the complications as a result from the virus in the lungs. So, what is being conveyed with the Holy Communion is technically not a death-causing agent. It is something living, something that (like all of us) is trying to stay alive. The people who are making claims that the Holy Communion does not pass on anything that is dying, there are not quite accurate in terms of how they are describing of what is actually being transmitted. The virus is technically not the death-causing agent.

Apart from the so-called ‘goods of salvation’, Orthodox Churches provide a sense of national identity. At the same time, they are also currently attracting people of other nationalities and religions. Conversion to Orthodoxy is not an unusual phenomenon nowadays. What is your impression from the situation in the USA and particularly in the context of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese there?

Unfortunately, Orthodoxy is becoming very attractive to the most socially conservative persons in the USA. The ones who are converting to Orthodoxy are usually previous Evangelicals, bringing a certain ‘either/or’ spirit; basically, for Evangelicals the Bible is the Word of God and you do not need anything else. Then they convert to Orthodoxy and move the bar from the Scriptures to a later period, for instance to the 9th century.

Why does this happen? Do they find something in common with Orthodoxy?

I think there are many different reasons. One minor reason – and this is a very strange reason – is that they see Orthodoxy connected to Russia. They see traditional values being promoted in Russia, and perceive of Putin and the Russian Church as the new international saviours of Orthodoxy and of the civilization of Christianity. There are people who have this kind of idealized view of Russia and of nationalism. Otherwise, Evangelicals are students of the Bible; they start seeing the latter in context, that there are other Christian writers about it. As a result, their understanding of authority shifts a little bit. But it is still one deeply rooted within historical authoritative sources within Christianity. After their conversion, they still carry over a dualistic view of the world and they become one of the biggest promoters of a certain kind of social conservatism within Orthodoxy. So, converts to Orthodoxy in the USA are primarily – not exclusively – among conservative Evangelicals.

To return to your previous question: One other thing that is happening in the USA, and in Orthodoxy as well, is that the children of immigrants are not as active as their

parents used to be. The kind of cultural Christianity that we saw in the Orthodox Churches has really strongly diminished. This development led a little bit more to a stronger conservative spirit. Not necessarily in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese *per se*. I think they are the only ones who have not necessarily been affected by this. But definitely in the Orthodox Church of America, in the Antiochian Orthodox Church.

The modern world is characterized by conflicting ideologies and a relativization of values. What are the possible implications for the Orthodox Church, particularly with regard to its values that are perceived as absolute, and its overall presence in the today's pluralistic public sphere?

The biggest challenge for the Orthodox Church is to discern that political community is not the Church. It is a community that is structured so that people of different beliefs and ideas can live together. The Church usually wants to have a privilege, to have the priority. This usually means to enforce its own morality in that public sphere. The biggest challenge for the Church is to affirm a democratic political community and yet recognize that it simply cannot impose the morality that somehow sees as authoritative within its own ecclesiastical community. There is not a single one Orthodox Church in the world that speaks against democracy. But somehow they are not willing to really fully embrace what is entailed when it comes to promoting and supporting democratizing structures. Of course, this remark does not concern all the Orthodox Churches. In Greece, for instance, the Church does promote democratic structures. But even there there is sometimes a lack of discernment about what they should fight for and what they should not. For instance, it was against the issue of civil unions. Why should the Church care if two people of the same gender or not form a contractual relationship with the state? No one believes the argument that somehow this will ruin society, because it has not. In fact, it confirms many values that the Church supports like commitment and trust. So, it is one thing for the Church to be against that within the ecclesiastical community, but it is another thing to go in the political sphere where there are people with different views and different understandings and to basically try to enforce its own view. The Church has to recognize that in the political sphere maybe it should not get involved in this issue or, if it is a democratic structure, let the people decide if that is what they want. The Church should not overreact. It would have much more respect and legitimacy, if it approached such issues in this way. But we see that sometimes it takes an antimodern, antiliberalism attitude, feeling that otherwise it betrays its own values. I disagree with that. I think that the Church should be more discerning of how to relate to the public sphere and not to expect that its own position will always be privileged within that sphere. As regards relativism, there is no relativism. Democratic ethos implies a certain kind of minimalist morality, a minimalist common good. In my opinion, these arguments about relativism are simply empty rhetoric. The Church is too afraid that if it does not fight against these developments in the public sphere, its position will ultimately be weakened and that Christianity will decline. But we are living in a different time, where the Church's relationship to the state in the public square can no longer be seen as a privileged one like it used to be.

And one last question: In the last three decades there has been a considerable interdisciplinary research and knowledge production on Orthodox Christianity. Is this just a trend or there are deeper reasons that can explain this interest?

I think that there are serious reasons behind this interest. The postcommunist reality has forced people to study Orthodoxy more closely, because they see Russia using Orthodoxy in geopolitical ways. There is also an honest recognition that Orthodox Christianity has been understudied. In the past, people thought that they were talking about the Orthodox, but they usually were just talking about the Catholics and the Protestants. Let me give you an example. There was a very big project in the USA called *Fundamentalisms Observed*, which produced a series of big volumes edited by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby. Orthodox Christianity was not mentioned once or maybe very little. I just think that they thought to themselves like ‘we are studying Christianity, so whatever we discover about the Protestants and the Catholics would be the same for the Orthodox’. It just did not occur to them. Now there is much more awareness. I also think that if we study Orthodoxy a little bit more historically and critically, it opens up possibilities for us of ways of thinking about how to be Orthodox. This will help us to overcome a narrow understanding of Orthodoxy that does not allow us to think, reflect and even revise things. It is thus a very positive trend. In theology, theosis is becoming a really big topic. In many ways, we succeeded in waking up the rest of the world to this beautiful concept that could really maybe help us change people’s ways of thinking about Christianity and its relationship to the world.

Thank you very much for this interesting interview. My best wishes for continued success to your valuable research.

Thank you for your questions.

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