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**Mystical Politics as *Contradictio in Adjecto*:
Thoughts on the Margins of Aristotle
Papanikolaou's Recent Book**

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*This article is an expanded critical review of the book *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (2012), written by Aristotle Papanikolaou, a contemporary Orthodox theologian. The article contains analysis of key assumptions and arguments of the author of the book, who looks at the political regime of liberal democracy from the perspective of Eastern Christian ascetic theology. The position of the author of the book is considered through a possible distinction between several models of Christian political theology: a theology of “using” (the political) versus a theology of “participating” (in the political) versus a theology of anachoresis (withdrawal from the political). Papanikolaou’s interpretation of traditional asceticism as compatible with liberal democracy is criticized, as well as his overall support of a certain type of political regime, which seems arbitrary, as the author avoids any formulation of a specifically Christian political ideal as opposed to the secular philosophical foundations of contemporary statehood.*

Keywords: political theology, liberal democracy, asceticism, theosis, divine-human communion, virtue of love, individual ethics, social ethics, Orthodox culture.

Reviewed Book

Aristotle Papanikolaou (2012). *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. — 248 pages.

Contemporary Orthodox theology is not strong in the area of “political theology.” It cannot claim as its own figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, or Stanley Hauerwas — Christian theologians who offer more-or-less systematic reflections on topics of “the political” and who set the corresponding theological agenda. Within the framework of Orthodox theology, politics is not typically addressed.

There are several reasons for this. First, “political theology” emerged as a distinct disciplinary realm quite recently (in the second half of the last century) — in connection with several Christian theologians’ “definitive” acknowledgement of the fact that politics had become unmoored from its past theological foundations and even its past theological connotations, having become an autonomous sphere demanding theological consideration from without. Second, until very recently the political contexts of Orthodox theology did not permit acknowledgement of “the political” as a separate object of theological thought: neither the Orthodox Russian Empire, nor the Ottoman Empire, nor the communist empire involved the presence of a separate “political sphere” outside the general structure of what was, in essence, a totalitarian authority. Third and finally, within the realm of Orthodox-oriented thought, the topic of political theology was for a rather long time farmed out to the genres of popular commentary and so-called religious philosophy, which made theology’s wresting away of the topic a distinct task that was by no means easy.

At the same time, the circumstances noted above cannot serve simply as the “justification” for the absence of modern Orthodox political theology. The reasons for this absence are deeper than historical circumstances or “contexts.” They must be sought above all in the specific character of the Orthodox theological tradition itself. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to explain why a fully “modern” political context, such as the one in which the Orthodox diaspora of the twentieth century in the West lived, did not produce a body of theological-political thought consistent with this context (again, one that was beyond the boundaries of so-called religious philosophy).¹

1. Here one can recall the lamentations of Vladimir Varshavsky, who in his book *Nezamechennoe Pokolenie* (The Unnoticed Generation), which surveyed the intellectual history (including Christian intellectual history) of the Russian émigré community in the twentieth century, noted the essential absence of Orthodox political theology

Against this comparatively recent historical backdrop, the new theological “offering” from the American Orthodox theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou is more than merely interesting and provocative. It can be said that his book, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*,² represents the first more-or-less systematic Orthodox work on the topic of “political theology” that contains not only the author’s views on the relevant questions, but also a survey of the corresponding “tradition.”

It is important to note that this work, strictly speaking, should not be considered “diasporic” or even narrowly confessional, insofar as Orthodoxy has a rather robust presence on the American confessional map and Papanikolaou, while elaborating upon the Orthodox approach, engages in an intellectual dialogue with “political theologians” belonging to various Christian denominations. The work’s diasporic character is found only in the fact that Papanikolaou’s position is shaped, above all, by the American political context, which is quite distant from the situation of political transition (or to put it better — political indeterminacy or incompleteness) in which theologians living in historically Orthodox countries find themselves. This aspect ought not to be ignored, insofar as every intellectual reflection, however consistent it may be, is always realized in a context and contains in itself, among other things, reactions to this context. The logic of thought, including theological thought, encounters, so to speak, the “logic of life,” and when it comes to “political life,” this encounter is all the more pertinent to the persuasiveness of the conclusions produced by the thinker.

Before turning to Papanikolaou’s main argument, a few general remarks on political theology need to be made.

Political theology is theological contemplation of the political — in the sense of both theorization of political topics from a religious point of view and substantiating religion’s relationship with concrete political forms and phenomena. In other words, we are dealing with a theology that numbers among the so-called theologies of the genitive case,³ which take the “second step” posterior to theology in the proper sense, as interpretation of doctrine. To interpret from a religious standpoint not only the natural-cosmic, but also the social-political dimension of the world is an undertaking that

consistent with this context. He was only able to cite several of the most general reflections of S. S. Verkhovsky and Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (see 154–62).

2. In the title, one reads the deliberate contrast with the self-designation of the contemporary Christian theological movement of “radical orthodoxy.” A separate, rather polemical, segment of the book is dedicated to one of the movement’s leaders, John Milbank.
3. The term “theology of the genitive case” is used to refer to applied modes of theology (theology of culture, theology of nature, etc.), but also to individual currents within Christian theology of the twentieth century (“theology of the death of God,” Moltmann’s “theology of hope,” “liberation theology,” among others). Here, the former meaning of the term is intended.

is at least possible and, from the point of view of several theologians, also necessary within Christian theology (which will be discussed herein as well).

In the current case, the most general question is the one on the religious valuation of politics or, to put it better, on the value of the political from the religious point of view. Various attempts to answer it can be made. The first point of divergence is *whether it has value or not*. For a religious life is most possible at a distance from all politics, even if it is not impossible when combined with some involvement in politics — but religious life is best realized in the mode of anachoresis, that is, “withdrawal” from the world or out of the world, which presupposes as the primary goal of religious practice the mystical (“secret,” non-public) communion “of the soul with God.” The political context for this practice is irrelevant, and, correspondingly, there is simply no such thing as Christian political action, nor, therefore, is there a political theology substantiating it. But insofar as a political context for religious life exists all the same (Christians cannot “withdraw from the world” and ought not to withdraw from it⁴), this could be called, to put a fine point on it, a unique form of parasitism, with religion living off of politics: the political is tacitly acknowledged, but it is not supposed to prevent religion from pursuing its objective.

However, this option has not been the only or the dominant one in the history of Christianity — indeed, it has been rather secondary. For the Christian church from its beginnings (or at least from the end of the brief Judeo-Christian period) has been oriented toward ministry, indeed toward a “total” mission that, speaking in modern terms, encompassed all of society and all societies (“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” — Matthew 28:19), that is, it entailed the Christianization not only of the individual sphere, but also the social and therefore the political sphere as well. Christianization of this sort did indeed occur in a certain part of the ancient world, engendering a corresponding political theology, that is, a specific Christian understanding of both contemporary politics and of the political as such.

To return to the theoretical formulation of the question, a positive theological response to the question of the religious valuation of politics brings up, in its turn, the following point of divergence: to *use* politics or to *participate* in politics. “Using” politics connotes that politics is a sphere that ought to work for religion, as it can assist religion in the attainment of specifically religious goals. Correspondingly, politics has religious value insofar as it fulfills a religious function, even if in a

4. See the words of Jesus’s so-called pontifical prayer to the Father regarding his disciples: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15. We have quoted the NRSV in this English translation instead of translating directly from the Russian. — The editors).

manner that is complementary in its relationship to religion itself (the Church). “Participation,” in contrast, entails something else, namely the acknowledgement that politics is one of the spheres of religious activity. Correspondingly, participation in politics ought to be predicated upon (for religious actors) certain religious ideas, norms and criteria.

There are, thus, these two religious understandings of the political — as subordinate to religion (religious goals) and as autonomous, that is, as that external medium in which religion is called upon to act through its adherents (here it is important to note: to act, so to speak, imperatively, independently of the result of this reciprocal action). In other words, these are two understandings of religion itself. In the case of “using” politics, religion (Christianity) is understood as something larger than politics and something, consequently, that can and should encompass politics in itself — throughout the entire course of sacred history (or, “the history of salvation”). In the case of “participation,” religion conversely is juxtaposed with politics, which preserves its autonomy, and thus religion itself is understood as one such autonomous sphere, out of whose space a reaction to politics should issue; that is, these are religiously grounded actions within a politics that is, in essence, non-religious.⁵

One further aspect of the topic concerns the question of whether a Christian political ideal is possible. In the case of “using” politics, yes, it is possible (and it exists, in different variants); in the case of “participation,” no, it is not possible (owing to the shared autonomy of the religious and political spheres). In this, the following should be noted: the fact that the political is transformed in the course of history changes nothing in religion’s relationship with it from the perspective of a “political ideal.” This is so because if such an ideal is present, history’s divergence from it does not destroy the ideal itself, and if an ideal is absent, political history always remains external to religion.

This theoretical detour was necessary to “position” the work under review from Papanikolaou within the space of possible political theologies. His general position is as follows: he assesses politics *positively* and views it as a sphere of religious *participation*. In this, however — it is important to highlight — the source justifying such political participation for Papanikolaou is a specific theology rooted in the Eastern *mystical-ascetic* tradition. Thus, the key “theological move” made by Papanikolaou consists in

5. Here, we are abstracting from concrete historical situations. It is clear that the autonomy of politics (above all, in relation to religion) is a modern phenomenon. At the same time, until Constantine’s “conversion” to Christianity, politics was also an external and autonomous sphere; what is more, it was precisely Christians who at that time completed a “mental” secularization of the state insisting that they could be politically loyal — while not acknowledging the religious (“Pagan”) elements and justifications of political authority.

the transfer of the fundamentally apolitical and, in essence, individualistic logic of the “mystical communion of the soul with God” into the intersubjective sphere of political life. This move, one that is hardly trivial, has as its goal substantiation of Papanikolaou’s main thesis, which states that, from the perspective of Orthodox theology, “liberal democracy” is the best modern political regime (in the present case, let us place the expression “liberal democracy” in quotation marks since Papanikolaou’s understanding of it is most general, essentially providing no specification whatsoever).

At first glance, Papanikolaou’s main thesis appears nonsensical. There is the ancient Thebaid anchorite traversing the solitary path of spiritual struggle to gain God’s extraordinary grace — and then there is the modern citizen living in a liberal-democratic society? What does the “practical metaphysics” of the Orthodox understanding of theosis have in common with the post-metaphysical conception of the liberal freedoms and rights of man?

Indeed, the *aim* of Eastern Orthodox mystical asceticism is outside the political and indifferent to it, insofar as it is oriented toward one goal: salvation of the soul of the ascetic himself/herself through “union with God.” In order to extend this individualistic aim of “deification” into the political space, Papanikolaou presents a chain of argument consisting of three links.

First, he explicates an understanding of theosis (deification) in a manner that leaves to the side the meaning of “the bestowal of grace [*oblagodatstvovanie*]”⁶ and brings to the fore the processual aspect, so to speak: divine-human communion. For his purposes, he turns this expression into a *synonym* for deification. Thus, “theosis,” instead of being the name of an event that takes place in the sphere of “practical metaphysics,” becomes above all a correlative, or relational, category denoting the significance of one of the parties involved in the “divine-human communion” — the human. Further, Papanikolaou emphasizes that divine-human communion, understood as askesis, as “spiritual action,” is above all exertion, “achievement,” that is, it demands from man purposeful activity. Put differently, “theosis” here is fundamentally divested of its quietistic connotations and does not signify passive reception of sanctifying grace; on the contrary, it presupposes an active relationship with “the Other.” Finally, the content of this activeness is elaborated upon through an understanding of asceticism as “a tradition of thinking on how to fulfill this commandment [to love God], which is *theosis*” (3). In this sense, asceticism arises from the necessity to *learn* to love — God and one’s neighbor — practicing that openness in communion that grants access to love of God. Asceticism is thus

6. That is, the making of man into a “partaker [or sharer] in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) — following the formula of “becoming by grace that which God is by nature.”

removed from the framework of the narrowly conceived “asceticism of ascetics” and presented in an expansive sense — as the path to fulfillment of the general Christian vocation “to learn how to love” (4), insofar as obtaining the virtue of love means achieving deeper communion with God (197).

This chain of argument allows Papanikolaou to construct a new understanding of “the ascetics of divine-human communion,” which affords him the opportunity to transition to political theology (more accurately, to the political theology of participation) while remaining within the framework of Orthodox discourse and, further, drawing upon its treasure trove — the Eastern mystical-ascetic tradition.

Characteristic summary statements include the following.

Insofar as this ascetics of divine-human communion is performed always in relation to the other, then politics must be reconceived as an ascetical practice. (...) Politics are the forms of practices that humans engage in when relating, in Christian language, to the stranger (197).

Insofar as politics can be construed as an engagement with the neighbor/stranger, then politics must be considered as one of the many practices within an ascetics of divine-human communion. The political community is not the antithesis of the desert, but one of the many deserts in which the Christian must combat the demons that attempt to block the learning of love. In no other field is the temptation to demonize the neighbor more compelling or more seemingly justifiable than in the field of politics; in no other space than in the political, then, is the Christian more challenged to fulfill the commandment to love (4).

The politics-as-asceticism that the Christian will perform will contribute to shaping a political space that looks something like a liberal democracy. By liberal democracy, I mean nothing more than a political space shaped by a common good that embodies the principles of equality and freedom, with the former including social and economic equalities, and the latter including religious freedom facilitated by church-state separation (198).

While recognizing that the fullness of the Christian vision is a church that exists eucharistically, the Christian attempt to embody a eucharistic mode of being in the world recognizes that the political is not the ecclesial; that how a Christian exists in the world affects the form of the political space; that the political space serves a purpose distinct from, but analogous to the eucharistic understanding of the ecclesial. The political space that structures relations in such a way that they mirror a eucharistic understanding of the eccle-

sial, especially in terms of relations that realize the inviolable uniqueness of all human beings, is a liberal democracy. Since, however, the political is not the ecclesial, that political space must structure those relations through human rights language, and, without some notion of the common good, which is revisable and debatable, the principles of freedom and equality embedded in a liberal democracy will simply implode upon themselves (199).

Papanikolaou's theological project elicits two primary questions, which are related to one another: (1) on the logical validity of the reconceptualization of Orthodox asceticism that he proposes and (2) on the logical persuasiveness of his conclusion, according to which it is liberal democracy that best corresponds to "ascetic" theology.

Beginning his argument with asceticism and how "theosis" is understood is undoubtedly a very effective and "profitable" step for an Orthodox theologian highlighting, so to speak, the "authenticity" of his thought. However, Papanikolaou removes "asceticism leading to deification" from the mystical-ascetic space proper and *identifies* it (through his understanding of the "ascetics of divine-human communion") with "relationship" [*otnoshenie*], which represents a radical shifting of accents. For Christian askesis is above all an individual religious practice, and "relationship" is only one of its aspects; moreover, this is not relationship *in general*, but specifically with a transcendent God. Ascetic openness to a deifying God does not simultaneously mean openness to any other person — to "the stranger." The ascetic withdraws into the desert precisely in order to escape the "mass of strangers" and to remain alone with God. The commandment to love one's "neighbor," of course, remains, but the ascetic path leads precisely *away from* one's neighbor (originally, the monastery was not cenobitic, that is, centered on communal living). Askesis is asocial, and therefore fundamentally apolitical.

Thus, the very identification of "the ascetics of deification" with "divine-human communion" in the broad sense represents a failure of logic. This is also evinced by the fact that Papanikolaou shoehorns into the principle of "divine-human communion," understood thusly, the most varied positions and views (regarding the relationship between church and state/society), including those of Eusebius, John Chrysostom, the Cappadocian Fathers, and then — Vladimir Solovyov and Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (see the chapter "Orthodox Political Theology through the Centuries"). Further, he critically expounds upon the "ethnotheology" of the interwar Romanian intellectual, Nichifor Crainic, and the anti-democratic tendencies observed in Orthodox churches today (in Russia, Romania, Serbia, and Greece). He ultimately comes to the following conclusion:

The logic of divine-human communion shaped the Orthodox political imagination in predominantly two ways: (1) an openness to a variety of forms of government so long as it prioritizes the Orthodox Christian faith toward a predominantly Orthodox Christian culture, seeing such permeation of Orthodoxy in the space of culture and politics as entailed in the logic of divine-human communion; and (2) an affirmation of a liberal democratic form of government, in which church-state separation is seen as a liberation for the church that allows for the free realization of the divine presence in the materiality of creation.

To this, Papanikolaou adds:

There is a consensus that no aspect of creation can be isolated from the divine presence, that is, that divine-human communion is not limited strictly to the human person, even if it relies on the response of the human person (53).

Papanikolaou's attempt to "unfurl" the ascetic understanding of theosis thus leads him to an extremely broad formulation of the question of the relationship between the divine and the human, which forfeits the evidentiary force needed to confirm his own position. For "asceticism" in and of itself does not give rise to "liberal-democratic" political theology since it can be interpreted in various ways.

Furthermore, politics — and the state in particular — are placed here in the sphere of "the materiality of creation" (or are designated an "aspect of creation"), which, to put it mildly, is debatable from both the theological and the secular point of view. If the world-universe can in fact be understood as the "material," or the "material medium," for human life, then the world-polis can be understood as a particular "structure of life," woven, of course, out of immaterial relationships and connections. The materiality inherent in it is not a structure-forming principle, but merely the *material of culture*, which by definition is immaterial. And this materiality is of human, not divine, creation.

Liberal democracy, if it works in concrete contexts, can be designated as the *political medium* in which Christians live. Papanikolaou rightly contends that, although this political medium does indeed rest upon its own secular foundations, it *can be* conceived by Christians as the *topos* for Christian "politics," that is, Christian political action in the paradigm of participation. However, this possibility alone is still not justification for liberal democracy as such — since other positions are also possible (and do exist), including Christian justification for various forms of authoritarianism and other non-liberal and non-democratic political regimes. The problem here is that typologically these various positions, some wholly contradictory, are in agreement since they are all options equally justified from a reli-

gious point of view, and the political theology of “participation” has no logical advantages whatsoever over the political theology of “using” politics.

We now return to the logic/context schema identified above. Papanikolaou accurately notes the fact that in postwar Orthodox — diasporic — theology (which on the whole was “on the rise”) issues of political theology were absent. He writes:

It is not exactly clear why the movement in theology identified with a “neopatristic synthesis” ignored questions related to political theology. Even though hundreds of thousands of Orthodox poured into the United States, a necessity for reconciling Orthodoxy and American democracy was never felt to be urgent as it was for Roman Catholicism. (...) The Orthodox seemed to have no problem theologically with their new democratic surroundings, both in the diaspora and in Greece (45–46).

In the present case, it is important to note not only how theological logic “works,” but also how context works. By all accounts, they work arbitrarily and independently of one another. One could dare to assert that Papanikolaou’s main thesis is shaped above all by the context in which he is absorbed, as he proceeds from a presumed need *to reconcile* his political context (the American political system) with his religious faith. His logic appears thereby “arbitrary” insofar as the corresponding argumentation is only one possible variant within the framework of Orthodox theological discourse. And the fact that leading Orthodox theologians of the past century (of Russian heritage, above all) who lived in the same American context did not concern themselves with questions of political theology must be explained by the “arbitrariness” of their theological logic. As is also the case with Papanikolaou, this logic was rooted in the ascetic “tradition” (or the liturgical one for Alexander Schmemmann), but despite this (or perhaps precisely because of it?) its exponents “had no problem theologically with their new democratic surroundings.”

At the same time, context has its impact. Liberal democracy, however widely it is defined, is a “fact” in some societies (including American society) and is not a “fact” in other societies (in the present case, “Orthodox” societies in the ethnocultural-religious sense). Context may give rise to a “logic of justification of context” — including the logic of “using” politics, as in the second case, all the more so since this logic has a long theological tradition. In this, it is important to bear in mind that the logic of “participation” is not stimulated by current political contexts in Orthodox countries, and it is therefore perceived in them, rather, as *notional*, that is, as a “logic without context.”

Thus, for example, Papanikolaou’s assertion that Christian politics ought to be determined by the Christian encounter with the “stranger” and that identity politics is idolatrous is comprehensible and is justified in the “diaspor-

ic desert.” However, this works poorly in spaces where “Orthodox culture” is dominant, where for Orthodox Christians the religiously marginal and other “culturally foreign elements,” rather than citizens as such, are “strangers.”

It comes across as ambiguous when Papanikolaou asserts that *insofar* as the eschatological character of the church requires a missionary medium, it entails a pluralism of religion and worldview in society. Papanikolaou himself indicates that, while ancient political theology (that is, the theology of “using politics,” as with Eusebius and Chrysostom), which welcomes Christianization of the political for the sake of “placing people on the path to salvation,” is paternalistic (to use modern terminology), it is not totalitarian, as it has as its goal divine-human communion, which is impossible without free participation on the human side. This means that the modern liberal understanding of freedom, which gives rise to pluralism, has parallels with “Christian antiquity.” However, this understanding is also fundamentally dissimilar since in antiquity it was a *different* freedom and a *different* pluralism. The eschatological striving for eternal salvation (most clearly expressed precisely in askesis) simply does not view “the political” as its referent. And “pluralism” in this case does not refer to the field of politics, but to the individual *will* (on the one hand, many human wills; on the other, various manifestations of will “within” the subject itself); “freedom” refers to the constancy of the subject’s fundamental decision “to be with God” (which can be called a fundamentally positive freedom). In other words, the space of salvation is located in a different dimension than the space of politics, and there is no (theo)logical connection between them.

A much stronger move by Papanikolaou is his appeal to the evangelical commandment to love. Following Papanikolaou’s logic, “simultaneity” in the ascetical and political dimensions emerges here since this commandment requires *learning* to love, and therefore practicing Christian communion with “the other.” However, the theological concept of “love” (that is, the corresponding theological virtue, alongside “faith” and “hope”) is not as fruitful within the framework of political theology as it may appear at first glance, as it gives rise to more than a few problems.

Without a doubt, not only ethics but also ontology is intoned in the evangelical commandment “to love one’s neighbor as oneself.” Love is not simply “the name of God,” but also the “dynamic structure” of the triune divine being itself (in the case of the Trinitarian interpretation of the New Testament assertion that “God is love” — 1 John 4:8), and precisely here we have the germane idea of “relational personalism.”⁷ However, the *theological* problem

7. Papanikolaou assiduously expounds upon the theology of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, on which he essentially relies, juxtaposing the Orthodox understanding of the person and the secular conception of human rights.

consists in the notion that, while the divine persons/hypostases co-subsist in the space of a common and flawless “nature,” human persons/hypostases co-exist in the conditions of “ontological discord” between a unified nature and a multitude of persons, that is, in a fallen, flawed “political” (interpersonal) space. Here, each person answers for himself and cannot directly answer for the community of persons on the whole. Correspondingly, the concept (commandment) to love is imperative above all for the individual person. This commandment is truly ascetic, insofar as it is directed toward the person, but one that is not at all political. Christian love (agapic, caritative) is an individual virtue, not a “value” within social ethics. Even in the space of intra-societal church life, love is a spiritual imperative, not an active organizational principle. Politics is above all a form for the organization of human social life that cannot be realized on the basis of maximalist appeals/imperatives. Of course, with the aid of the commandment to love, one can conceptualize and establish Christian *relationship* and *action* in the political sphere — in the paradigm of “participation” (as Papanikolaou does) — but one cannot justify any form of polity (political existence), including liberal democracy.

In other words, the theological substantiation for Christian participation in the modern liberal-democratic political “desert” does not provide logical justification for this “desert” itself. And Papanikolaou himself attests to the fact that it is indeed a “desert” when he speaks of the rejection, from a theological point of view, including the Orthodox one, of secular-philosophical substantiations and justifications of liberal democracy (with which, however, he does not want to grapple substantively, consciously limiting himself to the extremely general, if not foggy, definition of liberal democracy cited above).

If one refrains from psychologization and remains within the bounds of ascetic theology, it must be remembered that evangelical love is not an affection or even a disposition, but that “mystical energy” which “was shed abroad into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us” (Romans 5:5). To put it differently, “the event of love” is something exclusive, extraordinary, related to personal existence, that is, an irruption of God into the world through the agency of a concrete person. The social and political consequences of such an “event of love” can be neither forecast nor calculated from the perspective of political order and political dynamics. In other words, “love” in the Christian sense cannot be a constitutive element of a political construction since it refers to a *different* ontological dimension of man, and from the point of view of political theory and practice it represents an “empty concept.” And the modern political principle of the separation of religion (church) and state, contrary to Papanikolaou’s opinion, points to just this.

Let us once again underscore: love in the theological sense may be the “driving force” of the political participation/action of *Christians*, since Christians can make spiritual strivings and “practice love” in the political

space even before grace-bringing divine energy “mystically” imbues these strivings of theirs and brings them to pass (furthermore, without strivings of this sort, *synergy* with a God transcendent to the world is also an impossibility). However, one must not forget that the religiously substantiated practice of this type of “participation” will always be exclusive and marginal on the scale of politics on the whole, that is, it cannot be declared the realization in the political realm of a certain “social ethics.”

Here, there is a patent contrast between the political theology of “using” and the political theology of “participating” in politics; there are also two different notions of the “common good,” to which Papanikolaou himself refers (though on the most general level and while acknowledging various interpretations — see chapter 4 of the book, “Divine-Human Communion and the Common Good”). With the theology of “using politics,” the common good is connected with the presence of elements integrating religion with political life (today, for instance, there are “traditional Christian values”). With the theology of “participation,” by contrast, political life remains fundamentally external to religion (the church), so that the common good is defined not by religious (“vertical”) goals, but by extra-religious (“horizontal-secular”) ones. But in both cases a Christian *social* ethics proves problematic. Attempts to extend traditional Christian ethics as *individual* ethics (both the ethics of askesis and the ethics of love) into the political space lead to a logical contradiction, since social ethics by definition is counterposed to the ethics of the isolated individual. To create a bridge between the two sets of ethics (individual and social) is to carry out a revolution, to create a new synthesis.

Such a synthesis — a synthesis of the Orthodox mysticism of “divine-human communion” and modern liberal democracy — does not take shape in Papanikolaou’s work. And it does not take shape because the “ethics of theosis” (if one recalls his point of departure) cannot be transformed into a social ethics that has political meaning. But, aside from this, this synthesis cannot take shape for the simple reason that Papanikolaou fundamentally refuses to polemicize with the philosophical foundations of secular social ethics, limiting himself instead to “adjusting” discrete Christian elements to fit existing political practices.

Let us once again return to the point made above: the Christian principles on which Papanikolaou relies and which he “explicates” (in dialogue with other Christian theologians) — such as the eucharistic experience of the commonality of unique persons (see chapter 2 of the book, “Eucharist or Democracy?”), the “ascetic” resistance to the sinful passions of rage, hatred and fear, the renunciation of violence, and “truth-telling” in connection with the practice of confession (see chapter 5 of the book, “Truth-Telling, Political Forgiveness, and Free Speech”) — all these principles *can* serve as ori-

entation points for Christian participation in politics (Papanikolaou's pertinent thoughts cannot be presented here in detail, and we refer to the reader to the book itself). And it is fully possible that this "will contribute to shaping a political space that looks something like a liberal democracy." However, these very same Christian principles can also be proclaimed outside of any theoretical or practical connection with liberal democracy.

It is precisely for this reason that one must pose this fundamental question: To what extent can the "theology of participation" be a full-fledged political theology to begin with? Can any attempt to adapt Christianity to a given political system be considered a Christian political theology?

Naturally, one can accept such a minimalist position within the framework of political theology as a theological "discipline." But its theoretical persuasiveness is not very great. The persuasiveness of the modern "theology of using politics" is *also* not very great, since it is also adaptive, and not strictly theological. Of course, the latter has an advantage insofar as it espouses a political ideal. However, this ideal was handed down to it from the past, and it merely attempts to "apply" it to the contemporary political situation (for instance, reconceptualizing the Byzantine idea of church-state "symphony").

A careful reading of Aristotle Papanikolaou's book prompts the thought that contemporary Orthodox political theory, so as to be persuasive, must be the result of a *clash between the church and society*, but not in separate "Orthodox contexts," rather in the general historical context of the modern (also including the so-called late modern, or postmodern). And in the present case, one cannot forego engaging in theological analysis of secular philosophical substantiations of the political modern (including liberal democracy), to which the church, in disapproval of the same, must counterpose its own, religious, vision of *the political as such*. That is, the church must advance a modern Christian political philosophy and, therefore, also a *Christian political ideal* (but not one that merely represents a version of its premodern variants).

The fact that such a political theology, which is not adaptive, has not emerged within the framework of modern Orthodox theology is apparently explained precisely by the dominance of asceticism and neopatristics within it, that is, by an orientation toward a "theological antiquity" that does not generate theological tasks connected with modern political issues. The modern is viewed not as an essential challenge, but precisely as a "context" foreign to Christianity, both in and of itself and in its philosophical foundations.

This may appear paradoxical, but Papanikolaou's book once again attests to precisely such a state of affairs for "theological matters." Papanikolaou appeals to the "ascetics of divine-human communion" that

he himself constructed as a means of groping about for *parallels* between, so to speak, fundamentally religious ideas and practices on the one hand and modern secular values and practices on the other. Hereby, he admits a logical error when, for instance, he equates “the profound” (the eucharistic theology of personhood) with “the superficial” (the secular conception of human rights — see chapter 3 of the book, “Personhood and Human Rights”). In this regard, he truly demonstrates a *non-radical* view of the political on the part of Christian orthodoxy,⁸ that is, a view that seeks above all the *reconciliation* of traditional, dominant Orthodox theology with a concrete political context.

At the same time, Papanikolaou in his book has done very serious work. As has already been said, this is a very provocative book. It could even be called groundbreaking insofar as Papanikolaou boldly moves from the Orthodox confessional space into the realm of political theology, touching upon a broad range of the corresponding issues and offering solutions to them.

It must be emphasized especially that in this review I was not able to analyze all the book’s themes or all the turns in the author’s thinking — for this, much more space would have been required. I limited myself to consideration of Papanikolaou’s main points and theses, bracketing out exposition and assessment of concrete aspects of his political theology, which is substantively very rich. I appeal to everyone who is interested in Christian political theology in general, and particularly its Orthodox version, to read this book carefully. And I am certain that, for Orthodox theologians who also dare to enter the realm of modern political theology, this book by Aristotle Papanikolaou will be a primary referent, and perhaps even a point of departure.

References

- Milbank, John. (2013). *Beyond Secular Order. The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Papanikolaou, Aristotle. (2012). *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of The Notre Dame Press.
- Varshavsky, Vladimir. (1956). *Nezamechennoe pokolenie [The unnoticed generation]*. New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova.

8. Here, one must draw the reader’s attention to *Beyond Secular Order*, the new book by John Milbank, one of the leaders of “radical Orthodoxy,” which has a direct bearing upon political theology and warrants the most assiduous attention (despite the fact that Milbank, as he has done previously, occasionally becomes bogged down in the “genealogy of ideas” while his own — modern — position remains insufficiently articulated).