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The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy

Aristotle Papanikolaou

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Theosis, or the principle of divine-human communion, sparks the theological imagination of Orthodox Christians and has been historically important to questions of political theology. In *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, Aristotle Papanikolaou argues that a political theology grounded in the principle of divine-human communion must be one that unequivocally endorses a political community that is democratic in a way that structures itself around the modern liberal principles of freedom of religion, the protection of human rights, and church-state separation.

Papanikolaou hopes to forge a non-radical Orthodox political theology that extends beyond a reflexive opposition to the West and a nostalgic return to a Byzantine-like unified political-religious culture. His exploration is prompted by two trends: the fall of communism in traditionally Orthodox countries has revealed an unpreparedness on the part of Orthodox Christianity to address the question of political theology in a way that is consistent with its core axiom of *theosis*; and recent Christian political theology, some of it evoking the notion of "deification," has been critical of liberal democracy, implying a mutual incompatibility between a Christian world view and that of modern liberal democracy.

The first comprehensive treatment from an Orthodox theological perspective of the issue of the compatibility between Orthodoxy and liberal democracy, Papanikolaou's is an affirmation that Orthodox support for liberal forms of democracy is justified within the framework of Orthodox understandings of God and the human person. His overtly theological approach shows that the basic principles of liberal democracy are not tied exclusively to the language and categories of Enlightenment philosophy and, so, are not inherently secular.

"Aristotle Papanikolaou's *The Mystical as Political* is a stellar contribution to the analysis of Orthodox thought and also to current debates about theology and politics. For too long scholars in the Western academy have failed to engage the resources and insights of Orthodox theology. This book aptly shows those resources and insights in a way that marks a genuine advance in thought. *The Mystical as Political* rewards its reader with fresh insight into the complex relation between faith and politics. Papanikolaou is a rising star on the theological scene. This book deserves wide readership as a crucial theological contribution to debates about our political and personal lives." —**William Schweiker, University of Chicago**

"In *The Mystical as Political*, Papanikolaou not only guides readers through the rich legacy of Eastern Orthodox political thought, from the formative struggles of the pre-Constantinian era to the post-Enlightenment, post-Ottoman, and post-Communist challenges encountered today, but also presents a

compelling argument that Orthodoxy's goal of 'divine-human communion' can—and should—include core elements of modern liberal democracy and the human rights tradition. This study signals a new phase in political theology for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, and it secures Papanikolaou's place as one of today's leading Orthodox thinkers and theological bridge-builders." —**Perry T. Hamalis, North Central College**

“Aristotle Papanikolaou’s *The Mystical as Political* will be the standard Eastern Orthodox text in classes on theology and politics. It evinces a thorough engagement with the current debates in theology and politics, a rich awareness of the theological issues at stake, and a crisply distinctive position of its own. It will be enormously educational for classroom use, as well as being an immense contribution to the scholarly conversations on these matters.” —**Charles Mathewes, University of Virginia**

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