

**The Mystical as Political:  
Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy**  
**Aristotle Papanikolaou**

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012 (238 pages)

In *The Mystical as Political*, Aristotle Papanikolaou seeks to construct a political theology rooted in the Orthodox Christian conviction that all of creation, and humanity in particular, was created for communion with God. He begins by offering a helpful survey of political theory in the Orthodox tradition, focusing especially on Eusebius of Caesarea, Saint John Chrysostom, the Emperor Justinian, Vladimir Soloviev, and Sergius Bulgakov, *inter alia* (chapter 1). In the following chapters, he addresses the relationship between church and state (chapter 2); personhood and human rights (chapter 3); divine-human communion and the common good (chapter 4); and honesty, forgiveness, and free speech (chapter 5). In the process, and refreshingly for an Orthodox writer, he also engages Western theologians and philosophers—including William Cavanaugh, Jacques Maritain, Stanley Hauerwas, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, to highlight only some of the more prominently featured—acknowledging their genuine insights while, nevertheless, criticizing what he sees to be various shortcomings. *The Mystical as Political* represents a careful and irenic, though not uncritical, Orthodox Christian approach to political theology, ultimately offering a positive appraisal of liberal democracy and human rights. Although essential reading on the subject with much to commend it, it has several shortcomings of its own. I will only address two instances of one particular problem here.

The major flaw is not necessarily so much in what Papanikolaou affirms as it is in what he dismisses and neglects. The result is an overemphasis on the particular over against the general, the dynamic and the uniqueness of persons over against the static and the common nature of humanity. I offer here two examples: his treatment of personhood in the Orthodox tradition and his affirmation of the concept of the common good from the perspective of divine-human communion.

First, while going to great lengths to establish the *hypostatic* and *ecstatic* nature of persons as relational, unique, and irreducible to essence (drawing especially from Vladimir Lossky, Christos Yannaras, and John Zizioulas), Papanikolaou mentions the concept of humanity as made after the image of God only once in the same chapter, and that only to dismiss it as a proper theistic ground for natural rights (117). Traditionally, in the Christian East the *imago Dei* is a key point of theological anthropology, especially the Orthodox distinction between image and likeness. A helpful summary can be found in the work of Saint John of Damascus: “the phrase ‘after His image’ clearly refers to the side of [human] nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas ‘after His likeness’ means likeness in virtue so far as that is possible” (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 2.12). Notice that the first refers to natural capacities (“mind and free will”), while the second refers to a dynamic and relational reality (“likeness in virtue so far as that is possible”). In emphasizing the latter, it seems that Papanikolaou has neglected the former. Each per-

son, indeed, is a unique *hypostasis*, but he fails to consider fully that each *hypostasis* is a particular *enhypostatization* of an *ousia* or nature—in this case humanity—that also has significant bearing on questions of human rights and political theology more broadly. In an effort to avoid depersonalization, he implicitly dehumanizes human persons by failing properly to attend to their common human nature. Put another way, in affirming that persons are irreducible to essence, which is true, he treats essence as if it therefore has no significance, without sufficiently substantiating such a methodological jump.

Second, this defect in *The Mystical as Political* comes up again in a different form when Papanikolaou considers divine-human communion, natural law, and the common good. He writes,

The notion of the common good is often associated with the natural law tradition. While I agree [with other writers] that the notion of divine-human communion does not allow for a nature-grace split, I will also demonstrate how it does lead to a non-natural law affirmation of the common good internal to a political community, distinct from though not separate from the good of divine-human communion. (133–34)

He later writes that “the realism of divine-human communion leads to a natural law-like conclusion without the natural law or, at least, a particular understanding of natural law” (142). At this point, it seems that perhaps he is not entirely opposed to the concept of natural law. He seems to admit that his analysis of the common good in the light of divine-human communion is compatible with a concept of natural law that leads to an understanding of the common good “as emerging from [Christians’] metaphysical commitments, even while simultaneously maintaining a prophetic distance” rather than one that “ignores Christian presuppositions” and is “a product of ‘public reason’ that is imposed on Christians” (158).

This concept, to him, would be ultimately different from the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of natural law that he characterizes as “dividing nature and grace in attempting to theorize a political space that is universalist in scope without referring explicitly to the Christian understanding of divine-human communion” (157). However, Aquinas’s tenet that *gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat* (*Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 1 a. 8 ad 2) does not *divide* nature and grace so much as it distinguishes and *joins* them: nature, itself a product of grace by its creation, exists and realizes its *telos* only in and through grace. Natural law, discernible through—though not merely the product of—reason and conscience, is publicly accessible and an important foundation of public discourse. However, to conceive of it as opposed to divine-human communion would be to conceive of it untraditionally. Indeed, in the Orthodox tradition, Vladimir Soloviev notably employs natural law, the common good, and divine-human communion in his work *The Justification of the Good*; the concepts are not incompatible to him at least, a point that Papanikolaou overlooks.

What emerges from all this is that Papanikolaou’s own view of what would be a proper concept of natural law, though perhaps not wholly untraditional, seems to be falsely set in opposition to the common Roman Catholic concept, and—even more unfortunately—he leaves it unexplored. Indeed, his position toward natural law is ultimately ambivalent.

His failure to employ and conceptualize such an important concept for political theology from a specifically Orthodox perspective is a lost opportunity for dialogue. In addition, the combination of this with his general neglect of the *imago Dei* detrimentally skews his political theology.

Nevertheless, the flaws of *The Mystical as Political* do not wholly detract from its merits. It is, indeed, essential reading and puts forward a challenging and uncompromising affirmation of human dignity, personhood, and politics colored by the light of the Orthodox concept of divine-human communion, while admirably endeavoring not to confuse the ecclesial with the political nor neglect the ascetic and relational reality of human community and love.

—Dylan Pahman  
*Acton Institute*

## Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder's Trinitarian Theology of Culture

**Branson Parler**

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Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder is best remembered as the author of *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), an effort to set forth a distinctive christological ethic predicated on the assumption that Jesus' life is normative for our social and political life. Although Yoder's efforts have been criticized over the decades by, especially, Reformed theologians, Branson L. Parler, a theologian at Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has written an engaging and sympathetic analysis of Yoder's thought that is well worth reading and reflecting on.

Parler's principal aim in this volume is to dispel what he views as misconceptions Reformed Christians have concerning Yoder. In so doing he gives almost a Kuyperian reading of Yoder, showing how seriously the latter takes creation and its redemption in Jesus Christ. In Yoder, creation and redemption are continuous, such that "what God desires of humanity's cultural life in creation does not contradict what God desires of humanity's cultural life in redemption and reconciliation" (25). Parler is at pains to emphasize this because Yoder's critics, perhaps reading him through his better-known protégé Stanley Hauerwas, have often accused him of focusing too much on the church at the expense of the larger society.

After setting out his thesis in the introductory chapter, Parler surprisingly departs from the principal subject of his study and devotes his second chapter to an analysis of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr on Christ, creation, and culture. Admitting that his readers might well skip to chapter 3 to pick up the main line of his argument, Parler takes up a topic that might better have been dealt with in a separate volume. Nevertheless, this chapter is valuable in that it shows rather convincingly that the Niebuhr brothers, often