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## Archbishop Anastasios of Albania: An Eastern Orthodox Example of Peace from a Religious Tradition Embroiled in Wars

*Albanski nadškof Anastasios: vzhodnopravoslavni  
primer miru iz verske tradicije, zapletene v vojne*

**Abstract:** In recent years, several disputes between Orthodox churches over jurisdictional and politico-ideological matters have raised questions about Eastern Orthodoxy's commitment to peace. However, as a Christian denomination, Eastern Orthodoxy is theologically centred around the fundamental Christian values of love and peace. To illustrate how Eastern Orthodoxy can inspire a life devoted to peace, this article focuses on Anastasios Yannoulatos (b. 1929), the current Archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church, whose life constitutes a concrete Eastern Orthodox example of peace. Firstly, Archbishop Anastasios' life story and core theological ideas are presented, and secondly, his contribution to peace is briefly highlighted.

**Keywords:** Eastern Orthodoxy, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, peace, war, mission

**Izleček:** V zadnjih letih je več sporov med pravoslavnimi cerkvami glede pristojnosti in politično-ideoloških vprašanj sprožilo vprašanja o zavezanosti vzhodnega pravoslavja miru. Vendar pa je vzhodno pravoslavje kot krščanska veroizpoved teološko osredotočeno na temeljne krščanske vrednote ljubezni in miru. Da bi ponazorili, kako lahko vzhodno pravoslavje navdihuje življenje, posvečeno miru, se ta članek osredotoča na Anastasiosa Yannoulatosa (r. 1929), sedanjega nadškofa albanske pravoslavne cerkve, katerega življenje je konkreten vzhodnopravoslavni primer miru. Najprej so predstavljeni življenjska zgodba in temeljne teološke ideje nadškofa Anastasiosa, nato pa na kratko še njegov prispevek k miru.

**Ključne besede:** vzhodno pravoslavje, albanski nadškof Anastasios, mir, vojna, poslanstvo

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Although in Western Europe, North America and elsewhere, Eastern Orthodoxy is a minority religion little known to non-Orthodox individuals, there are almost 260 million Eastern Orthodox believers around the globe, making Eastern Orthodoxy the third largest Christian denomination today (Pew Research Center 2017). Its faith and tradition stretch back to the apostolic era, and Eastern Orthodoxy is widely admired for its mysticism and liturgical richness.

In recent years, however, certain ecclesiastical disputes within Eastern Orthodoxy have sparked discussions on its ability to manifest peace in practice.<sup>2</sup> As a Christian denomination, Eastern Orthodoxy naturally emphasises love, often demonstrated by peace, and the Orthodox liturgy is, among other things, where the centrality of peace in Eastern Orthodoxy is revealed. The text of the divine liturgy, which is traditionally, though most probably incorrectly, attributed to St. John Chrysostom (c. 349–407) and is used throughout the Orthodox liturgical year for the celebration of the Eucharist (Quasten 1986, 472), is replete with references to peace. In the prayers preceding the main text of the divine liturgy, for instance, being at »peace with all« emerges as a prerequisite for every Orthodox priest who desires to administer the Eucharist (*Service Books of the Orthodox Church* 2010, 5). Furthermore, in the main text of the divine liturgy, God is implored to grant peace to people's »lives« and the entire »world« (2010, 24.54). Notwithstanding this, Eastern Orthodoxy does not consistently succeed in manifesting peace through its conduct. The dispute between the Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem »over the jurisdiction of Qatar«, which led them to »sever communion in 2014« (Siecienski 2019, 102), as well as the Moscow Patriarchate's ideological support for Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine (Elliott 2022) and the Russian Orthodox Church's involvement in the global culture wars as an opponent of LGBTQ+ rights (Stockl and Uzlaner, 2022)

1 An earlier version of this article was published online in Dutch as »Aartsbisschop Anastasios van Albanië: voorbeeld van vrede« on Radboud University's *Platform Oosters Christendom* in April 2024, but this is the first time it appears in English.

2 See, for instance, the panel discussion titled »Russian World: Ideology as Theology«, organised by the *Wheel Journal* on April 23, 2024, which is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhbsH-NNY2JY> (accessed 13/5/2024).



are some examples, highlighting Eastern Orthodoxy's inability to manifest peace in practice.

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to imply that Eastern Orthodoxy, taken as a whole, fails to practice peace. Understood broadly as the »lack of open violence« and, importantly, the effort of creating the »conditions for society to live without fear or poverty« (Richmond 2023, 9), peace is manifested by several Orthodox churches and persons, even if their stories do not always appear in the news. One such person whose story forms this article's focus is Anastasios Yannoulatos, the current Archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church. My aim in what follows is to shed light on Archbishop Anastasios and his contribution to peace. To do so, I will first outline the early and middle stages of Anastasios' life, tracing the genesis and development of some of his core theological ideas, and then discuss the later part of his life until today.

## **1 From birth to mission theology**

The port city of Piraeus in the Athens urban area, Greece, marks the beginning of Archbishop Anastasios' life journey, as it was Piraeus where, in 1929, Anastasios was born to a »pious Orthodox family« (Veronis 1995, 122). During his formative years, Anastasios was raised within the Eastern Orthodox faith and regularly attended the services of the Greek Orthodox Church. However, Anastasios was not passionate about the Eastern Orthodox faith in his youth: it was science rather than religion that fascinated him. As he explained in a 2015 interview, though, his fascination with science gave way to a deep interest in the Eastern Orthodox faith after witnessing the chaos and destruction wrought by the »Nazi occupation of Greece« (Ejdersten 2015, para. 6). When Anastasios was a twelve-year-old secondary school student during the Second World War, the Nazi German army invaded Greece in 1941 and held the country occupied under inhuman conditions until 1944. In those years, thousands of Greeks were massacred by the Nazi forces and their collaborators, and Greece suffered two deadly »war-induced« famines (Liakos and Doumanis 2023, 157.160). Primarily because of »German plundering«, Greece did not have enough food for its population, and so many Greeks were dying of hunger that »wheelbarrows carried the dead to mass graves« while those who were



alive »begged for food« and some reportedly resorted even to »cannibalism« to survive (Liakos and Doumanis 2023, 158.160).

These horrible events understandably shocked young Anastasios, who, attempting to make sense of them, turned to his native Eastern Orthodox faith (Veronis 1995). For Anastasios, the message of love and »eternal peace« he found in Eastern Orthodoxy was the antidote to the evils of war, and, yearning for peace, he embraced the Eastern Orthodox faith wholeheartedly (Ejdersten 2015, para. 6). Not surprisingly, then, after finishing his secondary schooling, Anastasios pursued a bachelor's degree in Eastern Orthodox theology at the University of Athens, which he completed in 1952. During his undergraduate studies, however, Anastasios realised that due to nationalistic sentiments, the Orthodox Church of Greece and other Orthodox churches in the Balkans served their local Christian populace almost exclusively and avoided engaging in missionary work abroad (Veronis 1995). To Anastasios, this demonstrated a perversion of the Eastern Orthodox faith because the Orthodox Church's self-understanding as the »one, holy, catholic and apostolic church« was not to be seen merely as a rhetorical emphasis on its »apostolic succession« but as a »duty« to share in the »apostolic mission« (Yannoulatos 1989, 82). Specifically, Anastasios believed that the Orthodox Church's apostolicity implies that all Orthodox faithful are expected to imitate Christ's apostles and strive to spread God's love to the »whole world« and not only to the Christians within their local communities (Yannoulatos 1963, 301).

Anastasios felt so strongly about this that he decided to devote his life to missionary work, which he viewed as the practical expression of the Orthodox duty to spread God's love to all in an apostolic fashion (Yannoulatos 1989). As a result, in 1954, Anastasios joined the Zoe Brotherhood, a semi-monastic Greek Orthodox society of theologians, where he mainly conducted missionary work for Greece's youth (Veronis 1995). Furthermore, in 1960, he founded the »Porefthentes« inter-Orthodox mission centre, whose chief goal was to train Eastern Orthodox missionaries for service outside Orthodox-majority countries. At the same time, Anastasios desired to become a foreign missionary, so, in 1964, he was ordained a priest and moved to Uganda, Africa, to serve in that capacity. However, his stay in Uganda ended abruptly because he soon contracted malaria and returned to Greece on doctor's orders (Veronis 1995). This, nonetheless, did



not dash Anastasios' missional aspirations. In Greece, he realised that since he could not work as a missionary overseas, the best way to advance the cause of mission was to develop a robust Eastern Orthodox mission theology, which could »pave the way for others« to become foreign missionaries (Veronis 1995, 123). To develop such a theology, Anastasios continued his education on a postgraduate level. Between 1965 and 1969, he studied History of Religions, Ethnology, Africanology, and Missiology at the German universities of Hamburg and Marburg, while in 1970, he received his doctorate from the University of Athens, Greece (Albanian Orthodox Church, n. d.). Moreover, alongside his studies, Anastasios became actively involved in the ecumenical movement, seeking to enrich his Orthodox missiological perspective by meeting missiologists from »other Christian traditions« (Veronis 1995, 123).

For his dedication to mission, in 1972, the Orthodox Church of Greece appointed Anastasios as bishop of Androussa and entrusted him with directing its missions department. Furthermore, the University of Athens installed Anastasios as a professor at its divinity school. As a bishop and university professor, Anastasios concentrated his research on the History of Religions and Missiology, remained involved in the ecumenical movement, and contributed to numerous conferences organised by the World Council of Churches (Veronis 1995). At one such conference in 1975 that took place in the Armenian city of Vagharshapat, Anastasios introduced the missiological concept of the »Liturgy after the Liturgy« which is now widely used in theological scholarship (Tsirevelos 2022, 50–52). With this, he stressed that the eucharistic liturgy, much revered by Orthodox Christians, remains incomplete as long as it is not extended to the »everyday life of the faithful«. Since during the liturgy, the faithful spiritually connect with Christ and His love, Anastasios pointed out that the liturgical service can only be completed when, after the end of the liturgy, the faithful serve society at large in a Christ-like manner (Yannoulatos 2007, 129–131).

## 2 From mission theology to missional praxis

Until 1980, Anastasios was based in Greece, where he served as a theology professor and director of the Church of Greece's missions department,



yet 1981 signalled a turning point in his life. That year, having faced a severe internal crisis, the missionary Orthodox Church of East Africa was »on the verge of collapse«, so Anastasios was called to become its acting archbishop and help reorganise its mission (Veronis 1995, 124; Tritos 2011). For Anastasios, this was both an opportunity to put his missionary ideas into practice and a second chance to fulfil his desire to become a foreign missionary; hence, he took up the challenge and moved to East Africa. There, his work centred primarily on Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (Tritos 2011), where he built many new churches and trained indigenous clergy, thus strengthening the local church community. However, Anastasios' work in East Africa was not aimed exclusively at Christians. Motivated by his ideas that the Orthodox faithful are obliged to spread God's love to all people and serve society at large, Anastasios strove to make East African societies a better place and, in only ten years, he managed to open seven healthcare centres and established twelve nursery schools and five primary schools (Veronis 1995). In this way, Anastasios became an active agent of peace because, as noted earlier, peace is not only to be understood as the absence of war but also as the endeavour to create conditions in which societies can live without fear or poverty, which is what Anastasios accomplished through his social work in East Africa.

East Africa, though, was not the end of Anastasios' journey. In 1991, a new challenge, namely Albania, came his way. Although Orthodox Christians had a historical presence in Albania and an Albanian Orthodox Church existed up to the early 1960s (Tsirevelos 2021), things changed rapidly when, in 1967, the Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) declared Albania the world's first »atheist state« and instigated a violent persecution against all religious groups in the country (Payton 2016, 34–35). This persecution lasted until the end of Soviet communism in 1991, and, having been successful in reorganising the East African Orthodox Church, Anastasios was called to relocate to Albania and work towards reestablishing its Orthodox Church. For him, this was not an invitation he could decline. Believing that it is an Orthodox duty to spread God's love to the whole world, he had no choice but to accept. So, in 1991, he moved to Albania, where, in the following year, he was elected to his current position as Archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church (Veronis 1995).



Upon his arrival in Albania, Albanian Orthodoxy was nearly nonexistent, with only twenty-two elderly Albanian Orthodox priests and over a thousand destroyed churches (Ejdersten 2015). Through Anastasios' work, however, the Orthodox Church in Albania has been revived and now has around 460 Orthodox parishes, a theological seminary that has produced more than 150 Orthodox priests, and roughly seven percent of the Albanian population identifies as Orthodox Christians (Roberson 2021). Finally, with Anastasios at its helm, the Albanian Orthodox Church has actively promoted peace within the wider Albanian society by establishing open-to-all essential supplies centres throughout Albania, and by constructing various medical and educational centres such as the Evangelization Orthodox Diagnostic Centre and the Logos University in Tirana (Tsirevelos 2021, 36–40).

## Conclusion

It is clear that, unlike the leaders of some Orthodox churches who fail to practice love and seek peace through their actions, Anastasios offers us an example of embodied Christian love and peace. In one of his books, he maintains that it is imperative for Christians to not only reflect upon God's kingdom of heaven but also devote their energy to revealing God's heavenly love and peace on earth (Yannoulatos 2003), which, to a great extent, is precisely what Anastasios has attempted to do throughout his life. Having practised the missional ideas, which he developed as a student and later a professor of theology, and having undertaken significant social work first in East Africa and then in Albania, Anastasios is a notable Orthodox Christian leader. His life and work tangibly remind us that Eastern Orthodoxy can be a force of peace despite often being involved in wars. My hope, therefore, in these closing lines is that Anastasios' example will inspire Orthodox Christians to renounce war and work for peace.



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