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Solidarians and Sectarians: Conflicting Visions of the Nation in Athenian Orthodox Charity

Over Greek coffee in a downtown parish events hall one spring afternoon, an aging priest who oversaw one of the largest parish soup kitchens in the city spoke to me of his belief in Christians' unparalleled "skill" as both givers and recipients of charitable aid. Railing against the influx of migrants into Greece and the ways the Church of Greece had changed to accommodate their care, he painted a picture of his alternative vision: a Church returned to its ethnoreligious roots through a recognition of "Christian superiority". Though his words smacked to me of rising Christian nationalism seen in other parts of the world (and indeed Christian nationalism within Greek Orthodoxy is a well-studied phenomenon), they stood in contrast to claims I had heard from other priests and practitioners during the course of my long-term fieldwork in various Athenian charitable centers. These people spoke instead of ecumenism, solidarity, and the holiness of every human. Through their charitable actions, which I understand as part of the liturgical practices through which they "shouted themselves into existence" (Heron 2018) as a people, they forged relationships across lines of ethnicity, class, and religious belief.

For all their differences, however, what all of my interlocutors had in common was a deep-rooted theological justification for their beliefs and ensuing care practices. Both the exclusive ethnoreligious framing of a Greek (Orthodox) nation and the more inclusive framing of a nation built on solidarity amongst fellow men rely on arguments around love, sincerity, and theosis – a belief in humanity's journey towards divinity. This ethnographic reality reveals a theological one. While Orthodox theologians, such as Thomas Hopko and Aristotle Papanikolaou, are keen to highlight the potentialities of Orthodoxy for shaping a more just world, many Orthodox theological principles are in fact capacious enough to house both inclusive and extraordinarily exclusive visions of community and national belonging. This paper attends to this capaciousness, outlining its inflections in my ethnographic fieldwork, considering the possibilities and limitations of Orthodox theology, and ultimately arguing that the tension between different Orthodox visions of the nation is at the heart of the Church of Greece's (re)negotiation of its revised role in contemporary Athenian society.