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Review Essay

# Time, Freedom, and Being: John D. Zizioulas on the Christianization of Hellenism

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John D. Zizioulas, *Freedom and Existence: The Transition from the Ancient to Christian Hellenism*, trans. M. Vasiljević (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2024), 174 pp.

In the spirit of Tertullian's renowned ancient question, "Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?", we find a critical lens through which to examine the intricate historical origins of Christianity. While it is undeniable that Jesus Christ, along with the remarkable deeds of God, serves as the foundation of the Christian Church and faith, Church historians have faced significant challenges in providing a clear account of the early roots of this new faith. The obscurity of the period in question complicates this endeavor. Furthermore, the dominant intellectual trend of the time—Hellenism—played a pivotal role in the gradual formation and development of the early Church. Concurrently, the essential contributions of the Hebrew spirit, which provided the primary historical context for the emergence of Chris-

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tianity and its initial engagement with the surrounding Hellenistic culture and philosophy, have become an increasingly important consideration for historians seeking to uncover the historical roots of the early Church.

This book, initially published in Greek in 2018 but based on a series of public lectures delivered in 1983, features the late Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas of Pergamon (1931–2023). In it, he systematically explores the interpretive relationship between Hellenism and Christianity.

The book is structured in two parts. The first significant section comprises five chapters that detail the gradual and often painful transition from ancient Hellenism to Christian Hellenism. While thorough historical research into the first three centuries informs this discussion—drawing on Zizioulas's earlier work, "The Meeting of the Two Worlds" (1976, originally in Greek, with an English translation in 2025)—the author aims to address "issues of worldview" (12) within the context of Greek identity and the profound influence of Christianity on Greek culture (13).

In the first chapter, titled "The Transition from Ancient Greece to Christianity," Zizioulas outlines the contrasting mentalities and worldviews that needed reconciliation during this encounter, before delving into the key historical developments that defined their initial interactions. He begins by highlighting the essential characteristics of Hellenism, emphasizing that it is primarily "aesthetic" (18), rooted in the observation of the world. This focus on observation is reflected in central concepts of Greek philosophy, such as image, idea, vision, and *theoria*, all of which are tied to this fundamental aspect of the Greek mindset. A common thread among all ancient Greek philosophical schools was the pursuit of understanding the true essence of phenomena: "to know the truth, you must search… the substance of a phenomenon" (20), as it provides a stable foundation for knowledge.

According to Zizioulas, the Greek perspective is inherently antihistorical, as it suggests that history cannot provide a "stable basis," characterized instead by continuous change (21). He emphasizes that, for the Greeks, every event possesses some reason that explains it, constituting its cause and truth (21). The primary concern of

Greek thought is ontology or the nature of existence. In contrast, the Hebrew spirit begins with the observation of history. Zizioulas notes that "for the Hebrew, knowledge is not a matter of theory, but… of hearing" (21), reflecting a fundamentally different mentality that takes history seriously. For the Hebrew mind, history is understood as a series of meaningful events, where the truth of existence always encompasses the 'new' and the 'novel' (23). It is not merely a repetition of past occurrences, akin to Florovsky's concept of "cyclophoria." For the Hebrews, the future—not the past—represents the realm of truth (23).

Zizioulas posits that Christianity emerged intrinsically from the heart of "Palestinian Judaism," indicating its clear Judaic roots. However, the message about Christ quickly spread to the Greek world, which was the dominant intellectual milieu of the time. Reflecting the historical emphasis in Judaism, both Paul and John underscore the historical and eschatological dimensions of early Christian thought. In addressing the questions surrounding the divinity of Christ, Christians confess His divinity in a "non-philosophical… way" through acts of worship. This response, however, was not readily accepted by the Greeks, who were in search of "wisdom" (1 Cor 1:22). Consequently, a new phase in the relationship between Greeks and Christians emerged, sparking lively discussions that would endure through the ages, culminating in Harnack's critique of an "acute Hellenization" of the Gospel. Zizioulas briefly recounts the debates of the 2nd century between the philosopher Celsus and the Apologists—who, though not always successful (as seen in the cases of Justin and Origen), endeavored to address external challenges. For Zizioulas, the core issue lies in the dichotomy of viewing the world as either beings or events, as nature or history. This perspective led to critical questions: "How and why does the world exist?", the concept of human freedom within the world, and primarily "the question of death." These inquiries will serve as essential discussion points for the subsequent chapters of the book.

In the subsequent chapter titled "God and the World," Zizioulas revisits the fundamental cosmological perspective of the Greeks. The terms "cosmos" or "nature" encapsulate the "totality of the sta-

ble characteristics of each being that enable us to recognize and define it" (41). This cosmos is influenced by the gods, who serve as the guardians of its "order, harmony, and symmetry" (43). Drawing on his familiarity with ancient Greek philosophy, Zizioulas highlights Plato as a significant innovator in both his cosmological and theological views, particularly in contrast to the Pre-Socratic philosophers. By introducing the notion of the world's creation by a deity—who is also identified as the mind, or Logos (44–45)—Plato marks a departure from the understanding that equates the divine directly with nature itself. This shift heralds a new era in Greek cosmological thought, which would become a pivotal issue in subsequent centuries. For Zizioulas, the critical question that arises from Plato's approach is to what extent "is the world the result of God's free will" (47). It is widely recognized that, despite his attempts to distinguish the Creator God from the cosmos, Plato ultimately portrays this deity as a mere "painter" (47), implying that the Creator remains, in some sense, constrained by preexisting materials in the act of creation.

Zizioulas emphasizes the significance of Philo (Iamblichus, Neoplatonism) as an important intermediary between the Hellenic tradition and Christianity. Philo's efforts to "reconcile Platonism with the Bible" are well-documented, leading to his assertion that God the Creator does not fashion the world from preexisting matter. Instead, he proposes that the Platonic ideas transform into thoughts within God's mind. Moreover, in Neoplatonism, "the world is now regarded as an extension of God" through the process of emanation. This concept has profound implications for the interplay between Hellenism and Christianity, particularly regarding beliefs about the eternity of God, which stands in stark contrast to biblical faith. In this framework, God is seen as not entirely free; rather, the existence of the world is said to "determine the existence of God eternally."

For Zizioulas, this issue poses a significant challenge to the early Church Fathers. Given that their intellectual backgrounds were rooted in Greek and Jewish thought, they struggled with the close connection between the world's existence and God, as this relationship seemed to threaten God's freedom. We have already noted the unsuccessful attempts by figures like Justin and Origen, who sought

to address the Greek philosophical questions of their time through a Christian lens, often finding support in Plato. Zizioulas characterizes this trend as "the Hellenization of Christianity" (53).

However, this was not the only possible response to the Greek questions. Another group of early Church fathers was more successful in overcoming the challenges posed by (neo) Platonism regarding the relationship between God and the cosmos. In discussing the various developments, Zizioulas emphasizes the significance of perceiving the world as a consequence of "not so much God's knowledge but rather God's love" (54). He regards this original idea, as proposed by fathers such as Irenaeus and Athanasius of Alexandria, as a "key to the entire understanding of the relationship between Greek thought and Christianity" (54). According to Zizioulas, these fathers, through a creative interpretation of the Johannine verse 1:3 (which states that the world was created through the Logos of God), managed to dissociate the Logos from merely being an aspect of God's intellect. Instead, this Logos is understood as "the Son of God, with whom God is eternally connected by a bond of love" (56). Thus, while the world remains bound to God, it is not in an obligatory sense but rather through love, which does not compel God to create the world. Zizioulas asserts that "knowledge presupposes love and freedom" (58). In essence, the "world exists because someone freely and out of love chose to create it" (59), a concept conveyed doctrinally as "creation ex nihilo" (59). For Zizioulas, this development signifies a fundamental shift in our perception of the world: "the world is [now] recognized as a gift arising from the freedom of a person" (60).

In the next chapter, Zizioulas addresses the issue of freedom, which he considers essential to understanding the being of both God and humanity. Through an examination of Plato's work, Zizioulas argues that "the chief characteristic of man becomes his tendency... to conquer nature and elevate himself above the laws of nature... It is his tendency for freedom ... Man is a seeker of freedom from any necessity" (66). In the ancient world, maintaining harmony within the cosmos was paramount, often requiring the sacrifice of human freedom (68).

Zizioulas contends that the need for freedom is not an external factor but a fundamental aspect of human existence. Unlike the per-

spective of freedom in Greek antiquity, which is largely tied to politics or morals, Zizioulas emphasizes that freedom primarily pertains to ontology, referring to "something absolute" (67). In this context, he indirectly engages with the modern debate surrounding anthropocentrism from an ecotheological viewpoint. Ecologists frequently argue that humanity's centrality in the world is a significant contributor to the climate crisis. This perspective promotes a more eco-centric worldview, positioning human beings as just one of many species in the world and diminishing their unique dignity and value.

While it is true that humanity's understanding of its role in the world has contributed to the current climate crisis, this view risks undermining the biblical message itself. The issue lies not in the central role of humanity but in the manner in which that role has been understood and received over time. Zizioulas observes that "the man in ancient Hellenism becomes a microcosm within the macrocosm … for the sake of which (the world) (man) exists" (69). By doing so, he subtly points to contemporary deep ecology theories that reduce both the role and responsibility of humanity in environmental degradation.

Conversely, the biblical worldview posits that "God's purpose was to make the entire world for the sake of man,… as ruler and representative of the world" (70). Although such a statement may be considered politically incorrect today, it reflects the vision of the biblical tradition, which requires careful hermeneutical work to convey the intended message amid the ecological crisis.

The problem of the fall is closely related to this discussion. "Here, man does not fail because he struggles to transcend what is natural, but because he becomes enslaved in it" (71). Therefore, sin is understood as "missing the mark." Humanity will be redeemed from sin not by longing for a lost paradise but through an eschatological perspective that redeems time (72).

For the ancient Greeks, the solution to human tragedy lay in "self-concentration through contemplation and purification," which can be seen as a means of escaping the material world and history. In contrast, Christianity introduced a new understanding of time, where the solution is not found in the past but is anticipated in the

future. For instance, St. Irenaeus emphasized that time is fundamentally good since humanity is called to exercise freedom within it and to progress toward the future.

For the first time in the history of ideas, it was proposed that a future event—the Christ event, which serves as "the criterion of the resurrection"—defines the truth of past events. Zizioulas asserts that "truth lies in the future," a theme significant to him that he further explores after 1985 in his work *Being as Communion* and especially in his posthumously published magnum opus, *Remembering the Future* (2023). This new understanding of time was articulated further by mature patristic theology, which suggests that the concept of time is closely intertwined with the concept of freedom. "Time is a gift from God that liberates," indicating a significant shift in Hellenism during its Christianization process, where time now takes precedence in addressing the human problem over space.

By emphasizing time as the framework within which everything occurs, relationships with others emerge as the defining criterion for exercising freedom within time. This idea leads us to the well-known assertion by Zizioulas that being can only be understood as communion – that is, as an ecclesial event. He inspiringly argues that "the Church… is a space for practicing love." In other words, "if there is no salvation outside the Church, there is no solution to the human problem outside of relationships with others, outside of love."

Zizioulas shines in this discussion. He posits that love is not merely a fleeting sentiment influenced by human desire; rather, it is fundamentally an ontological and existential issue intertwined with the concept of freedom. This leads to a pivotal question: "Can love embody freedom, and can freedom be truly absolute?" Zizioulas emphasizes the importance of this inquiry. He delineates three distinct forms of love—biological, ethical, and aesthetic—all of which are, to varying degrees, constrained by necessity and the laws of nature. For Zizioulas, such constraints represent a burden on human existence.

In this context, he argues that Christianity offers a transformative understanding of love in conjunction with freedom. This redefinition serves as the Christian response to the biological notion of love that characterized both the ancient and modern worlds. Further-

more, the biblical concept of loving the sinner challenges the ethical viewpoint that dictates, "one cannot transcend the bounds of morality." The same can be said for aesthetic love, which emphasizes harmony and symmetry. In contrast, church iconography presents a different notion of beauty, one illuminated by the transformative light of the future.

Ultimately, Zizioulas suggests that while both Christianity and Hellenism strive for an ontological interpretation of freedom, their conclusions diverge significantly. Yet, one fundamental issue remains unresolved: How can we address the "problem of death".

This is the topic of the next chapter. As has become clear so far, the language that Zizioulas uses in his interpretation of the encounter between the two worlds is ontological. He has faced criticism for employing a somewhat generic version of ontology throughout his work, and there is some truth to this critique. However, it is essential to understand that theology addresses not merely a peripheral aspect of being but fundamentally focuses on issues of life and death. This perspective is central to Zizioulas's use of ontological language when addressing various existential problems.

The question then arises: "How is it possible for a person to be absolutely free when death exists?" Zizioulas views death in ontological terms as the "submission of man to the laws and necessities of nature." Here, we encounter a rather negative perception of nature, seen as a burden that must be overcome or even extinguished altogether. This aspect of Zizioulas's work has attracted considerable criticism, although a more moderate understanding of the topic can be found in his later writings.

In exploring how ancient Hellenism approached the issue of death—from Homer's perspectives to Plato's notions of the "immortality of the soul" and the divine origin of the soul in Orphic thought, where "any fear or turmoil in the face of death is absent"—to Aristotle's belief that "man survives only as a species and not as an individual," Zizioulas then shifts to the biblical perspective, where "death is a result of sin." This reflects the idea that "death is directly related to freedom," and that it "contradicts God's will." While the ancient Greeks and contemporary individuals may perceive death as a natural phenomenon, from biblical and patristic perspectives, death is

seen as an "unacceptable" reality—an "enemy" that undermines the inherent dignity of humanity. In contrast to Socrates, who faces death with calmness and joy, Christ is depicted in anguish (Matthew 26:38), praying to the Father. This distinction between the two worldviews is quite revealing.

What, then, is the Christian response to the problem of death? Zizioulas suggests that "Christ addresses the issue of the corruption of the human body in relation to sin, and thus to freedom" (93). He notes that "death is the result of a historical event" (94). Although many critics have argued that Zizioulas does not sufficiently emphasize history, a closer examination of his work reveals that for him, history is the sole context in which death can be overcome through a specific historical event: the resurrection of Christ. Thus, he asserts that "salvation is a matter of events, not nature" (95).

Hellenism did not deliver its final verdict. The Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul proved to be particularly appealing to early Christians, who often lacked the philosophical tools to engage with the pressing questions of their time. For Christians, the material world and the human body also possess the capacity for salvation. In order to embrace the idea of the soul's immortality, Church Fathers had to clarify this notion by emphasizing the creatureliness of the soul itself. As Zizioulas poses the question, "If the immortality of the soul is understood as implying an inherent quality within it that guarantees its immortality, this would negate God's freedom," a proposition difficult for the Christian mind to accept. The Church can only support the view that God's will determines the soul's immortality. The definitive answer to the problem of death is found in the resurrection of Christ, which transcends even a moderate interpretation of the immortality of the soul. Zizioulas states unequivocally, "Death was abolished by Christ's resurrection." However, is this enough to address the issue of death? No, since humanity remains burdened by death. If that's the case, what more must be done to ultimately triumph over this "ultimate enemy"?

A notable perspective on immortality was presented by St. Irenaeus, who posited that "immortality is granted only by the Spirit" (100). According to this church father, immortality "takes on a distinct form of adoption," signifying a special relationship—a bond of

love established through baptism within the church (100). It is within the Church that "the life of God himself circulates," embodying a life of free and unconditional love (101). Through the divine Eucharist, this life of God is offered to all who partake and willingly contribute to the community. In this regard, the Eucharist is understood as "the medicine of immortality" (101). However, immortality in the Christian, Eucharistic context encompasses more than this. "The existence of man, the acquisition of his personal identity ... constitutes a fundamental aspect of what we refer to as immortality" (101). Moreover, Zizioulas suggests that "immortality is achieved through liberation from the necessity of the 'fallen' nature."

The series of these lessons concludes with the final critical step: the concept of the person. John Zizioulas is one of the most innovative theologians of personhood in contemporary Orthodoxy, alongside Christos Yannaras. He has established the concept of personhood as a central hermeneutical tool in the church's mission within a Western context. Following his mentor, the late father Georges Florovsky, Zizioulas argues that "the concept of person is the most important fruit of the meeting between Hellenism and Christianity."

By stating this, he does not deny that the concept of the person is present in ancient Greek thought. Through his exploration of ancient tragedies, Zizioulas observes that, although a person is merely a "mask," it is still tied to humanity's struggle with necessity, which is understood as freedom. The challenge, then, is not whether the concept existed in the ancient world, but the absence of an absolute character, which constitutes the main issue. In other words, the problem is ontological rather than merely political or moral, as was the case with the concept in its Roman application.

Well-grounded in the historical development of the concept (for example, in the works of Tertullian and Sabellius), Zizioulas turns to the Cappadocian Fathers, who, by identifying person with hypostasis, achieved what he refers to as an "ontological revolution." This significant advancement ascribes a new ontological status to the concept of person. With the Cappadocian shift, "the person is no longer a secondary element in existence but an absolute concept," which "cannot exist in isolation... but is communion." Simultaneously, by

acquiring this ontological status, the person is recognized as "something unique and unrepeatable."

Zizioulas concludes the chapter by asserting that the most significant outcome of the intersection between the two worlds is the patristic understanding of the person. This understanding, he argues, encapsulates the core message of the Gospel by enriching the Greek ontological language through the influence of the Hebrew spirit.

The book is accompanied by three short texts in the appendix. The first text explores the primary themes of the book, focusing on the encounter between two worlds through the lenses of cosmology and anthropology, as seen through the works of the three hierarchs of the church: St. Basil, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nyssa. The second text, titled "The European Spirit and Greek Orthodoxy," examines the spiritual implications of modern Greece's entry into the European Union. The final text, "Key Issues for the Mission of the Church in the New Millennium," was published in Greek in 2009 and discusses the contemporary role of theology. It emphasizes the importance of theology in equipping the church with essential guidelines to discern which cultural expressions faithfully embody the Gospel and which represent an "another gospel" (164). In essence, Zizioulas highlights the necessity for theology to first nurture and then provide the church with hermeneutical criteria that will guide it through modern challenges.

This book is of significant importance, representing one of the least detailed yet systematic discussions of the encounter between Hellenism and Christianity, a meeting that fundamentally transformed human history. It is not an easy read, as it requires a solid understanding of historical context and familiarity with the philosophical and theological traditions of at least the first three to four centuries. While it may lack certain academic rigor—such as thorough engagement with secondary literature and generalizations that could benefit from further elaboration—the work's origin from one of the last great theologians of our time makes it essential reading. Bishop Maxim Vasiljević's translation into fluent English provides readers with an extraordinary opportunity to embark on a journey through the historical roots of the Church.