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Review Essay

How to Be Real: Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism by John Zizioulas

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John D. Zizioulas, *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism*, ed. by Hieromonk Vasilije Gavrilović (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2024), 220 pp.

Metropolitan John Zizioulas's *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* is a timely and essential book for Orthodox Christians—and all thinking Christians—today. A more fitting title might be *How to Be a Real Human Being*.

Why?

This isn't your typical Zizioulas book. We all know him as a brilliant theologian, but here, he reveals his heart. His exploration of what it means to be a person is shaped not only by deep theology but by lived relationships. He draws heavily on St. Maximus the Confessor, Staretz Silouan the Athonite, but, above all, Elder Sophrony of Essex–his own spiritual father. This revelation surprised me. Zizioulas didn't just admire Fr. Sophrony; he was forged by his influence. Their bond runs so deep that *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* devotes seven (!) sermons to his memory and teachings—a fitting tribute to

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the man who helped form one of the greatest theological minds of our time.

This little book isn't about "being human" in some abstract sense. Becoming real is about how we exercise freedom, act in love, and become fully human through our relationships. To put it simply: only love is real. Only love makes us real. Only love makes us a real person.

And that means—gulp—we must become ascetics. But not in the sense of rejecting the world out of self-hatred or seeing the cosmos as evil. Asceticism liberates us from biological necessity, freeing us to exist in loving communion rather than being ruled by survival instincts and self-interest. Personhood isn't defined by competition–where every transaction is a zero-sum game–but by self-giving love, modeled on the Trinity. The ascetic ethos is a struggle to overcome ego and individualism so we can become beings *in* communion rather than beings *in* isolation. As Zizioulas puts it:

> "The meaning of asceticism consists in the fact that, the less one bases his existence on nature, on essence, the more he exists as a Person." (p. 163)

For Zizioulas, a person is not just an individual but a being whose existence depends on communion. Fr. Sophrony calls this the "hypostatic principle," rooted in the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity (p. 56). Just as God exists in relationship, so must we. The Trinity is a communion of divine persons, and human personhood is only real when it transcends individualism. Biology enslaves us to necessity, but love frees us from fear, self-centeredness, and even death itself.

Becoming a real person is an act of freedom, love, and Eucharistic communion. For Zizioulas, the Church is the only place where this new way of being is realized. By eating Christ's body and drinking His blood, we are transformed from fractured individuals into real persons in Him. To be a person is not merely to exist—but to exist *in love, relationship, and divine communion.*

At just 218 pages, this book is dense and rich. But for modern readers, one question stands out: What does it mean to be a real human being? That's where I'll focus my review.

"If you would be perfect..."

For Metropolitan Zizioulas, the Christian monk is the most real human being, strange as it sounds. By renouncing self-sufficiency and embracing radical communion with God and others, the monk embodies self-emptying love (*kenosis*). In withdrawing from the world, monks paradoxically become more connected to it—carrying the suffering of others in prayer and standing in solidarity with the abandoned. True personhood, they show, is not autonomy but self-giving—existing only in relationship, just as God does.

When St. Anthony heard Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel—"*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor ... and come, follow me*"—he took them personally. Unlike the rich young ruler, he obeyed, selling everything and heading to the desert. In doing so, he reshaped the Christian faith for the next 1,700 years.

Modern readers often reduce Jesus' teachings to moral platitudes—"*Consider the lilies,*" "*Do not be anxious about your life.*" But Jesus wasn't preaching a carefree existence. He was announcing God's imminent Kingdom, the urgent call that drove the early Church: "*Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.*" As Zizioulas insists:

> "The Sermon on the Mount is completely incomprehensible without eschatology." (p. 48)

Without understanding the monk's radical orientation to the Kingdom, we misunderstand their role in the Body of Christ. Their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience witness to the coming *Eschaton*.

Albert Schweitzer, the great Lutheran theologian, argued that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who expected history to end soon. His radical ethics—"*Turn the other cheek,*" "*Sell all you have*"—made sense in that urgent expectation. But when the world didn't end, the Church had to adapt His teachings for the long haul of history.[1]

[1] For the most thorough treatment of this subject, see Christopher M. Hays, *When the Son of Man Didn't Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016). No, Jesus of Nazareth was not a failed prophet. As Jonah bitterly realized, prophecies can be conditional rather than mistaken. God always gives us time to repent. We shouldn't read Mark 13 and Matthew 24 as strict timetables

Yet a 2,000-year "delay" doesn't faze the vigilant monk—or any of us called to live for God's Kingdom. The *Eschaton* is not measured by clock time (*chronos*) but by God's time (*kairos*). As Zizioulas explains:

> "The monk behaves as if the end has already begun. All the virtues of the monk—poverty, self-restraint, love for enemies—are unthinkable without eschatology. Only the end frees these virtues from irrationality." (p. 48)

How does a monk experience the end times? By flipping everyday life upside-down. Their vows place one foot in the *Eschaton*, living as if death is already defeated.

Several chapters in *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* serve as a bishop's exhortation to monks: do not "secularize" your vocation. A monk is not a lone seeker pursuing salvation while the world burns. His journey is not the isolated mysticism of Plotinus—"*the flight of the alone to the alone.*" Nor is it, as William James put it, "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude.*" A monk's vocation is to serve the Body of Christ.

But all charisms, even monasticism, are temporary. Only love never ends (1 Cor 13:8). And love must never be self-love. True love is *kenotic*. It is how we become persons.

"Shake off the mother of passions, self-love (φιλαυτία)"

One of the most powerful themes in *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* is Zizioulas's warning about the dangers of φιλαυτία—self-love.

> "The main work of the monk is to root out—what Saint Maximus calls—self-love!" (p. 26)

Zizioulas repeatedly emphasizes that φιλαυτία is the greatest obstacle to true personhood and communion (κοινωνία) in the Body of Christ. Drawing from St. Maximus the Confessor, he describes self-love as existential isolation—turning inward instead of opening to God and others. This self-centeredness leads to fragmentation, sin,

but as calls to urgency, faithfulness, and repentance. That is why we still pray, "*Thy Kingdom come*." Extra time is a blessing, not a curse.

and even death because it disrupts the relational nature of being. For Zizioulas, personhood is not self-contained but given and received in loving relationship.

As bishop, he reminds monks that asceticism is pointless unless it leads to genuine love for others. The root of all evil is φιλαυτία. We can struggle against vices and passions, but unless we overcome self-love, they will keep resurfacing.

> "As long as self-love is maintained, we come back to them in another way and in another form, from another path." (p. 27)

Self-love isolates us from God and others, trapping us in an autonomous, self-referential existence. To break free, we must embrace *kenosis*—self-emptying—modeled after Christ. This transformation happens through ascetic struggle, Eucharistic participation, and a life of love.

Most importantly, when we root out *φιλαυτία*, we make space for God and our neighbor.

> "In order to possess everything you must lose everything. You must empty yourself of yourself and reach nothingness, so that the grace of God can enter the void you leave. God does not enter when the self is full of itself. There is no space." (p. 126)

When we are full of ourselves, there is no room for God. To truly live and love, we must empty ourselves—only then can we welcome God and others into our lives.

"Keep thy mind in hell and despair not"

One of the most striking aspects of *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* is how often Zizioulas repeats St. Silouan's cryptic words: *"Keep thy mind in hell and despair not."* At least five times, he returns to this paradox. But rather than just quoting it, he unpacks its meaning—as both self-emptying (*kenosis*) and hope.

I remember the first time I heard a newly ordained Orthodox priest try to explain it to a group of equally new converts. Fresh from chrismation, we were eager to grasp what made Orthodoxy distinct. Nothing seemed more bewildering—or unsettling—than being told to *keep our minds in hell*. It felt hopeless. Neither we nor the priest seemed to understand what it meant.

Two decades later, I picked up *Love's Work*, the final book by philosopher Gillian Rose, written as she was dying of ovarian cancer. To my shock, she opened with St. Silouan's admonition. Then it clicked. Of course, she would resonate with his words—her mind was already in hell. Denial was not an option. Some well-meaning friends with good intentions urged Rose to "*think positive*," "*everything happens for a reason,*" but she rejected such platitudes:

> "This is the counsel of despair which would keep the mind out of hell. The tradition is far kinder in its understanding that to live, to love, is to be failed; to forgive, to have failed, to be forgiven, for ever and ever. Keep your mind in hell, and despair not."

Since reading Rose, I've learned to keep my reservations about St. Silouan's words to myself. And yet, even now, I'm never quite prepared to be told to *keep my mind in hell*.

For Zizioulas, this paradox defines the spiritual life. We must fully confront sin, suffering, and despair (*keep your mind in hell*), while holding onto God's mercy and love (*despair not*). Christian existence is a tension: we face the world's brokenness honestly, yet remain open to grace.

Zizioulas argues that St. Silouan's statement only makes sense within Christology. Christ Himself descended to the depths of hell—yet triumphed over it.

> "This phrase becomes awfully nihilistic outside of Christology. If taken out of context, it can lead to suicide. Hell is a passage, not a destination. There is no detour if we wish to reach heaven and the Kingdom of God. Christ himself went through this experience. Because of this, it does not lead to despair." (pp. 56–57)

This is the only interpretation of St. Silouan's words that I have ever found even remotely convincing. It calls us to stand with the lost and forsaken, just as Christ did. As Zizioulas notes:

> "Our age is more conscious of tragedy, kenosis, and nothingness than Byzantium." (p. 57)

That's putting it mildly. Flannery O'Connor observed that *"If you live today, you breathe in nihilism … it's the gas you breathe."* The abyss has become a cliché. But the abyss is no joke.

Rather than retreating into despair, Christians are called to stand in solidarity with those who feel abandoned by God. We must never forget Christ's cry from the cross: *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*

Zizioulas describes this solidarity:

> "You identify with all mankind, especially in their fallenness. By doing so, you gain true humility and cease to be proud. At the same time, you feel sympathy for all sinners—including your enemies—loving them existentially, not because of a moral imperative, but by participating in their suffering. Christ did all this. Without it, Christology would be empty doctrine."

Christians have no business judging the world. Instead, we are called to suffer with it. Christ's descent into hell is the ultimate act of *kenosis*. He embraced the godforsaken state of fallen humanity, entering the isolation of death. But His resurrection shattered the finality of that abyss, opening the way to communion with God.

For Zizioulas, this reveals a profound truth: Hell is not a destination but a passage (*p. 56*). True existence is not found in isolation but in being drawn into the life of the Trinity. *"Keep thy mind in hell"* means walking the path Christ Himself took. He *is* the Way (John 14:6), and the way of suffering is the only road to true life. There is no other way that is real—no other way to be fully human.

"It shall not be so among you..."

Reading *Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism* through the eyes of the famous German sociologist Max Weber, you see a classic case of *charismatic authority* (monks) versus *traditional authority* (bishops).

To be clear, Metropolitan Zizioulas is no tyrant; he is wise and discerning. Yet, the age-old tension between bishops and monks remains unmistakable. He describes the bishop's role in the Church this way:

> "There is nothing that expresses the Church in her fullness as much as the Divine Eucharist. Where there is Eucharist, there is the Church. The presider of the Eucharist—the bishop—thus becomes the center of the Church. Everything must have his blessing and pass through him in order to become Church. Otherwise, they are extra-ecclesiastical actions." (pp. 44–45)

Metropolitan Zizioulas sees bishops and monks as having distinct but complementary roles in the Church. He urges us to understand these roles in terms of *ontology*—a weighty and often unfamiliar word to most people. But what exactly does he mean by it?

Simply put, *ontology* studies what something truly is—not just how it looks or behaves, but what makes it real. For Zizioulas, personhood is not just a matter of psychology, ethics, or social roles—it is rooted in our very being. To be a *real* person, in the fullest sense, means to exist in loving relationships, just as God exists as a communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Zizioulas uses *ontology* to challenge the idea that we are simply isolated individuals or just products of biology. He argues that true existence—what it really means to *be*—is found only in free, personal, and loving communion. This is modeled after the perfect relationship of love within the Trinity (*perichoresis*, or the divine dance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

This ontological framework helps us understand why Zizioulas insists that the bishop is not merely an administrator but an icon of Christ within the Church. The Church is not just an organization; it is a living communion, and the bishop is at its heart, uniting the faithful and leading them sacramentally.

The monk, on the other hand, has a different but equally vital role. While the bishop safeguards the unity of the Church, the monk serves as a radical witness to the Kingdom of God, living in detachment from worldly concerns.

Tension arises when bishops reduce monasticism to mere obedience or when monks reject the Church's authority in favor of their own personal spirituality. The ideal relationship is one of mutual respect: the bishop keeps the monk connected to the Church, while the monk challenges the bishop—and all Christians—to remain faithful to the ultimate goal: union with God.

That's the theory. But how does *ontology* play out in real life? Zizioulas describes the bishop as an *icon* of Christ, reflecting divine reality in the Church's life:

> "The bishop represents Christ; the presbyters, the apostles; the deacons, the angels. The Church is surrounded by iconography, not

> just visually but in its very structure. But what does 'icon' mean? This is a deep theological and philosophical question, one that common sense struggles to grasp." (pp. 167–168)

We know what happens when our leaders act like petty tyrants instead of humble servants. We've seen bishops who mistake their role for imperial rule—wearing the dignity of office like a lost Byzantine crown. They don't act like shepherds but hirelings. They don't love their flocks, but abuse them. They fleece the sheep instead of feeding them.

But Metropolitan John raises a profound question. What does a true icon of Christ look like? We don't need to look any further than Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, of blessed memory (1929-2025). Now he was a true icon of Christ. Greek by birth, his shining example radiated the light of Christ in Africa for over twenty years (in the 1960s-1980s) first as a missionary and then Archbishop of East Africa. Then in 1992, he became Archbishop of Albania. It was Anastasios who led the Orthodox Church's revival after decades of brutal communist oppression. Through his wisdom, humility, and perseverance, he transformed the Orthodox Church in Albania into a thriving spiritual and social force. The Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis described Archbishop Anastasios well in his eulogy:

> "He dared to hope… Courage and hope were the two compasses that always guided him on his marvelous journey of faith. He became a beacon of love and service, of kindness and simplicity, of persuasion and effectiveness. He became a diplomat of love. I remember when he would say, with a smile on his face, 'We gather the stones thrown at us by those who fight against our work and we use the stones to build churches and schools.'"

Well done, good and faithful servant. He exemplified what authentic Christian leadership should look like. His life was not spectacle but loving service. He demonstrated genuine kenotic leadership—self-emptying, Christlike service—through his humility, sacrifice, and tireless dedication to the Albanian Orthodox Church and its people. When cursed, he blessed. He repeatedly stressed that Christians must never have enemies. When slandered, he never tried to justify himself. Instead, he carried his cross with humility, patience, and forgiveness. He exemplified the words of our Lord:

> "But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10:43-45)

Archbishop Anastasios showed us what it truly means to be human.

Conclusion: "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt"

If you're willing to receive it (Mt 11:14), *The Velveteen Rabbit* is the perfect conclusion to this review of Metropolitan Zizioulas's book. But to understand its message, we must become children again.

In this scene, the Skin Horse is the wise *staretz*, and the Velveteen Rabbit is his eager but naïve disciple:

> "What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day...
> "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."
> "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.
> "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."
> "Does it happen all at once... or bit by bit?"
> "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time... Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

The Skin Horse understands the cost of *kenotic* love. True personhood isn't found in autonomy but in self-giving communion. Love that suffers—modeled after Christ's self-emptying love—shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency and opens us to real existence.

Suffering love is the only way to become fully real. It is the only way to become godlike. Because God *is* love, and love alone endures.