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Theological Heritage

Theology, Interpretation, and Synodality

An Interview with the late Metropolitan of Pergamon, John D. Zizioulas

Editor's Note: This interview is published here for the first time. It contains the transcript of a December 2014 conversation in Kifissia Greece, between Metropolitan of Pergamon John D. Zizioulas and Bishop of Los Angeles Maxim Vasiljević, Andrej Jeftić (now WCC, Faith and Order Committee Director), and Marko Vilotić of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University in Belgrade (Serbia). The discussion focused on questions about the role of hermeneutics in theology, provoked by a text by the late Fr. Matthew Baker (+2015), "Being, Interpretation, and the Last Things: Zizioulas and Heidegger," a chapter of his Fordham University dissertation on *Neopatristic Synthesis and Philosophical Hermeneutics: Orthodox Theology Encounters Historicism.* A version of this chapter has been published in Andrew T. J. Kaethler – Sotiris Mitralexis (eds.), *Between Being and Time: From Ontology to Eschatology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019) as "Zizioulas and Heidegger: 'Eschatological Ontology and Hermeneutics.'" This text appears to be one of the instances in which Zizioulas acknowledges the significant importance of *hermeneutics* itself and (ultimate) *existential concern(s)* as the criterion through which someone should read tradition and address modern challenges. The latter part of the interview addresses issues related to the upcoming Great and Holy Council, which took place in Crete in 2016.

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Part A: Theology and Hermeneutics

Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas (henceforth JZ): One of the things that struck me as I was looking at that chapter by Matthew Baker is that Yannaras, who has such an affinity with me, did not use eschatology in his thinking, even though Heidegger influenced him. So, I was trying to see in that chapter whether Matthew Baker has any observation about this, but he doesn't. ... So, what else have you noted in Baker's criticisms?

Well, he also says that you somehow don't appreciate consciousness, and knowledge, and rationality, I think. Right? And I assume that you agree.

JZ: He's right. [Laughter.] He's right. It's part of the whole thing we were discussing: that history is the ground of knowledge, unless you speak of an illumination that comes to you. You know, Pannenberg's main idea was the relation with history. And therefore, if you take that as your starting point, then you have a kind of knowledge which depends on history a great deal. And since I don't see history in this way, but rather as a kind of conflict between life and death, I cannot see the importance of knowledge.

Yes, he says that, for example, for Heidegger, knowledge is constitutive to the very being of the human being. That human being is a being that understands. As for you, knowledge is a kind of non-ontological category, secondary to existence.

JZ: I would distinguish between epistemology and ontology. I think it's a weakness, from my point of view, of the Western mind in general (it's also Platonic in a sense) that cannot escape the identification of ontology with knowledge. The ancient Greeks also identified *einai* and *noein,* being and understanding.

Yes, he says at one point, I think, that you identify knowledge with communion, but that you hesitate or purposely do not want to identify knowledge with being. But that you do at some point,

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and he quotes a chapter from your* Lectures in Christian Dogmatics,[1] *in which you do identify knowledge with communion.

JZ: Yes. It's a different thing to identify knowledge with communion; it becomes a different thing. It doesn't become ontological *per se* as knowledge, which is just transcended by ontology. Of course, I don't deny knowledge, but I deny pure knowledge as such. But knowledge emerges; for example, I keep saying that love produces knowledge, you know, because you love. But you cannot say you "know" simply, pure and simply. You don't know. So, you don't know outside of communion. But communion is something bigger than knowledge. Therefore, I don't identify knowledge with communion strictly speaking; I relate knowledge to communion. Unfortunately, it won't last [laughter].

And with regards to your approach to the fathers and the patristic texts, at one point he recognizes that there are two distinct steps which can be considered as two distinct steps, or two aspects of the same process. One discovers the content of patristic thought, and the other interprets it in the contemporary framework. But he asks if that can be considered as two steps, or two aspects of the same process?

JZ: That's a very important question.

That's what I wanted to ask. There's a criticism that says that you neglected —he quotes someone called Augustine Casiday who says that "Zizioulas neglected to take the opportunity to clarify his thinking about the historical ways of theology and thus to explain how we can recognize identical theological content in different modes of expression . . . how meaning can exist stably across history despite the changing forms of that meaning."[2] And then Matthew Baker says that these criticisms are not without justifi-

[1] Ed. by Douglas Knight-Katerina Nikolopulu (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2011). —Ed. note.

[2] Augustine Casiday, *Remember the Days of Old: Orthodox Thinking on the Patristic Heritage* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 150–151, 153–155. —Ed. note.

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cation and that they "raise questions, at least, regarding the notion of textual meaning being recoverable 'pure' by way of historical method, without a simultaneous act of application or productive appropriation." And so, he does agree that this criticism is not without justification.

JZ: So, how would you form the question now?

The question would be, if I understand it correctly, that they tend to agree with you that it is important to understand the meaning of the texts of the fathers and to try to convey that same meaning in the new culture, in contemporary means. But they think you didn't clarify how we do that: how it is possible, or if it is at all possible, to transfer the same meaning into a completely different form, language, whatever.

JZ: Indeed, I have not clarified it enough. But the answer I would give now, without having thought very deeply about it, is that what unites the old with the new is a basic existential concern which is common to both the old and the new. And I would use that as a link between the two. So, I would try in the old to find what existential concern lies behind it, or underneath it. And then connect that concern with the present time and seek —that's very important for me—to know how the present time, or the culture in which we are speaking, answers that question, and then try to connect the old with the new, or to put the old in the framework of the new. As you know, for example, today's culture answers the question of life and death, which is a fundamental existential question, in a way that's expressed, for example, in art. Then you have to put the tradition of the fathers, what they say about the same question, put it in the form of how they would answer these questions in the present-day culture. I start from the assumption—let's put it like that—that the human being basically has the same existential concerns in all cultures and all ages. Does this answer the question?

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Yes, it does, especially the final part of what you said. I think that's the clear answer.

But I think there is something more to be addressed. If we take that the first part of this process is to discover the content of patristic thought, the meaning of patristic texts, and then the second step is to correlate it to the contemporary framework, then we are neglecting the fact that the very process of discovering the meaning, or discovering the content, or discovering the existential concern, is by itself a form of interpretation. And I think that's the point that this objection is trying to raise. Because if we distinguish these two things as two separate steps, then we somehow admit that there are (as it was said) "pure" meanings or "pure" facts, just as in the historical sense that there was a notion that there is some "pure" meaning [of the past] or historical fact.

JZ: I reject that.

Yes, yes, you reject that? And Baker also states that you reject that, with regards to the historical sense. But the objection is that with regards to discovering the meaning or the content of patristic thought there's a problem, because it hasn't been stressed enough that this discovery is also a process of interpretation.

JZ: Why not? Interpretation has all this "back and forth": it doesn't have to be from there to here; it can also be from here to there. It's a kind of communion of ages and cultures, *via* the existential concern. Because not everything the fathers say applies to that. For example, the content of patristic thought concerning, let's say, anything that the fathers say that doesn't relate to the existential concern, is not interpretable. You cannot interpret. It's just … old stuff which is destined, so to speak, to die with the past. I can't think of good examples now, but you can find many examples of things that the fathers have said.

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Yes, when they use their contemporary cosmology or something like that.

JZ: Yes. That's all gone … Or when St. Paul says there are three layers in the world and …

Yes, the water above the heaven and the water below.

JZ: And I cannot interpret that.

And there's no need to do –
JZ: And there's no need to do that. But there's no need to preserve it either. And I don't think you preserve it. Because what happens is that if you preserve it, then you have to relate it to the present somehow.

But you can relate it to the present by saying that the fathers cared about the latest scientific developments of their time.

JZ: In a negative way? Being informed? I see, yes …

I think it's a good thing, because today some Orthodox theologians tend to disregard science and as something which is not important for us, and we see that the fathers really cared about contemporary developments, and they tried to use it to explain the Christian message to the world. So that is something that could help us.

JZ: Yes … So, I think there is an answer to the problem, the question that Matthew Baker raises, concerning this problem. But it's not given in my work. It's been given just now. That's the good thing about this criticism, that it forces you to answer new questions that you hadn't thought of before.

So, you would consider the process of discovering the meaning of patristic texts as also an interpretation, not a step before [the interpretation].

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JZ: But you must immediately qualify the word "meaning" by referring to the existential concern. That is the meaning. Because you can find other meanings, but you cannot interpret other meanings. The only meaning of the patristic words, or the Scriptural words, that you can interpret is the one that is related to the existential concerns of the human being, which are common to all ages. And therefore, you have a link to relate the past to the present. And also, the future. That is a very interesting question [raised in Matthew Baker's chapter]: what is the role of the future in this interpretation, or of the eschaton? But it is implied, of course, in the fact that the existential needs *are*, they never die, they are always there, and that they get an answer from eschatology. And then you transfer that to the present. So, the interpretation is not, as with Heidegger and Gadamer,[3] simply a relation between the past and the present, but is also a relation of the past, the present, and the eschaton. The eschaton is involved in that. In other words, you must have a sort of criterion or a ready-made answer from the future.

Well, if the existential concerns are in the center of this process of interpretation, and if they are common to the past and the present as well, then what's genuinely new in our interpretation is supposed to develop in the contemporary framework?

JZ: The "new" is the new form that you give in the new context, the answer that you give to the concern in a different way than was given in the past, in a different form.

So, it's the same answer, it's the same concern, but the form of the answer is different.

JZ: Yes. But the form is taken from the material of the present culture.

Do you believe that the concern itself is determined by the interpreter's framework?

[3] (1889–1976) and (1900–2002) respectively.

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JZ: No. The concern is a stable thing: it goes from the beginning to the end. It is something that resulted from the fall of the human being with all its consequences. That's why Heidegger is really a great philosopher for me, because he got that point—that existence is an existence unto death. And that is a common concern that runs through all ages. I don't think there has been any time in history where the human being has not existed in that way—not only the human being, but the world as a whole. And therefore, interpretation doesn't bring anything new to that affair. Interpretation is an adaptation of, yes, the answer to that concern, by a different means. I mean, if you answered that simply in the way that it was answered by the fathers, let's say, or by the New Testament, then a modern man today will reject immediately the answer to the concern, because he doesn't accept the framework. And that is the tragedy if you don't have hermeneutics. If you don't have hermeneutics, you kill the message; you kill the answer to the existential question. The fathers or the New Testament did not intend to give something that could be killed; they intended to give something that would survive. Therefore, hermeneutics is so crucial for the survival of the message. But hermeneutics needs a criterion. You can't get the answer to the existential question without a source from which to get it. When you say there is an answer to the question of life and death, how did you get that answer? Where from? Unless you have eschatology, you cannot give an answer. That's why the hermeneutics, I think, of Heidegger, simply ends up with no hermeneutics, or an endless interpretation with no goal, except death.

And would you agree that there might be some existential concerns besides the most universal ones, like the question of life and death, some existential concerns that are determined by some cultural or temporary framework? So that we can use the most universal concern—the question of life and death—and the answer to it, to also answer and address those contextually dependent concerns?

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JZ: Critically. If you use the real existential concerns as your basis, then immediately certain "existential concerns" of a certain culture appear to be not ultimate. And therefore, maybe we should qualify and instead of saying "existential concerns," we should say *ultimate* existential concerns, because there are some existential concerns which are not ultimate.

I mean, for example, gender equality was not an existential concern in first-century Judea, but it seems to be today.

JZ: It seems to be today. And one must ask whether it can be regarded as an *ultimate* existential concern, or it's simply *thought of* as an existential concern without really being so. So, hermeneutics is always a critical endeavor also. You clarify what is existential and what is not.

Well, for example, we can use that example, the issue of gender equality. Although we might not qualify it as an ultimate existential concern, it nevertheless remains one of the big issues of our time.

JZ: Yes, but the problem is that it can overshadow to the point of extinction the real existential concern, if it is not very critically approached.

So you don't mean that we are supposed to overthrow or not deal with it, but to deal with it, having in mind that it's not ultimate?

JZ: Not only that. It's not ultimate. I have it in mind that by dealing with it, we may actually destroy the real and the ultimate ontological concern. If, for example, I make gender equality an ultimate thing, I may be led to a position where I destroy love and life. Because usually concerns that are not existential and ultimate, and are regarded as ultimate, are expressed through ethics. And ethics is a very dangerous path from that point of view, because it may absolutize this not ultimate concern in a way that would make it sacrifice the ultimate concern.

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So it seems to me that you would rather not deal with it at all.

JZ: You can deal with it, but with caution, and certainly not absolutize it. Because there is *something* of the ultimate concern in all these things. You can just keep these things because of the presence of the ultimate in them. For example, equality of gender has the positive aspect that you respect the other regardless of one's natural characteristics. And this is very important, as an ultimate concern of communion and life, and also of the Kingdom, in which there will be no distinction between the sexes.

Maybe we could say that the answer or the right approach would be to try to find the elements of these fundamental and ultimate concerns in these contextual concerns. So, if, for example, someone cares about the question of the equality of genders, just because he's bothered or he doesn't know what to do with himself, then it's not so important. But there are still societies where women fight for their equality because their life is threatened, and then we can say in these societies, we as Christians are supposed to fight for their rights because it is a matter of life and death.

JZ: Well, I wouldn't say it's a matter of life and death. And that is the criticism I would make. I would say it's a good thing and something worth fighting for, but not with the conviction that you are dealing with a matter of life and death. And it's important to bear that in mind, because otherwise you are absolutizing it.

Yes, but there are societies where women cannot vote, or cannot work, or cannot even live. For example, until recently in India, they burn women alive in some villages when their husbands die, because they are not allowed to live longer. So, you cannot tell them it is not a matter of life and death, because it is: they are fighting for their right to live.

JZ: St. Paul said that it doesn't matter if you are a slave, but treat the slave as your brother —that's what he writes to Philemon.[4]

[4] Philemon 1:16.

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And he points to a position in which you relativize. And for so many centuries, the Orthodox Church lived within a culture that did not value the equality of gender. And I don't think it was a wrong interpretation.

So, your main objection to the various contextual theologies, so-called "liberation theology," black theology, and so on, would be that they treat some concerns as ultimate existential concerns, which are not, and that's the problem.

JZ: Well, exactly. And this, of course, can take the form of putting into danger the authentic ultimate concerns. For example, you kill someone in order to fight … and how can you enforce without …? That's another problem. Our friend [Aristotle] Papanikolaou[5] is trying to handle this, but it's a very difficult thing to handle. You are obliged to be ethical, and to a certain extent political, and if you are political, immediately you are obliged to enforce—enforce what you think is right. And by enforcing that, you have to turn it into law. And by turning it into law, you lose the ultimate concern of the human being for freedom. It's a mess. It's very difficult. Aristotle [Papanikolaou] doesn't get out of this problem very easily.

Yes, I purposely didn't mention political theology.

JZ: Well, politics is the only thing that's in the hands of us human beings, to put into practice concerns which are not ultimate but are regarded as ultimate.

I agree with what you say. It's hard for me to understand how we can judge what are essential concerns. For example, in liberation theology, how can we know that it does not reflect the same ultimate concern as ours? Because we agreed that the ultimate value is love, which St. Paul says is the only thing that will survive. Maybe it's precisely because of this love that they are fighting for

[5] Archbishop Demetrios Chair in Orthodox Theology and Culture, Co-founding Director, Orthodox Christian Studies Center (New York). —Ed. note.

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their near ones, for the ones they love. So not because they want to fight poverty for ethical reasons, for political reasons, but because of love.

JZ: Yes, exactly what I'm saying. I'm saying that I accept it as a positive thing, with a *warning*. If you take out the warning, then I disagree.

Okay, okay, then we completely agree.

JZ: The warning is that you have to put into danger the ultimate concerns, the basic ultimate concerns, in order to apply them. That's part of the historical—

Yes, but there's another kind of danger that I think is very present in the Orthodox Church, at least in Serbia: that people tend to misunderstand your position, at least in a full manner. They say we don't care about social problems, social injustice—we don't care about anything, we just care about eschatology. That's completely wrong, and that's not your position.

JZ: That's not my position. Some people draw that conclusion from my position, but it is not actually my position. The warning I mentioned—as part of any argument on these matters—inclines me personally (out of a certain idiosyncrasy) toward non-activity. Yet I have never objected to those who actively struggle for these causes. And I always object to the attitude of the Church, for example, or of a culture, which does not appreciate the importance of these fights, the existential importance. No, I look at them with great respect. But because I, in a sense, have a prophetic attitude. What is a prophetic attitude? To foresee a time of consequences of what you're doing, the future consequences. In every ethical or political act, I immediately see the negative consequences. Then I stay away, because I'm not a practical person at all.

I wanted to ask you one more question regarding our previous discussion, when we spoke about contextual theology and existential concerns. My question is: would you admit to some extent that—

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with regards to this notion of existential concern as being the most important thing when it comes to interpreting the fathers in the contemporary framework—were you to some extent influenced by contemporary philosophies? For example, existentialist philosophy? Or do you think it is somehow a natural thing to be considered? Because you said yourself you were not aware of the influence of Heidegger, but now admit it when you read it in Baker's paper. So maybe some influences that affect us are not all recognized by ourselves.

JZ: I'm not sure I understood your question.

If we take the existential concern to be the absolute criterion by which we can determine—

JZ: The ultimate existential concern.

Yes, yes—whether something is of importance or not, do you think this presupposition is built upon or somehow influenced by existential philosophy?

JZ: I haven't thought of that, but yes. But what is existential philosophy? There are so many existential philosophies. If you contrast it with idealism, for example, yes, it has much in common [with my thought]. Because idealism is a fixation on some historical formation or idea—it's absolutized, without a reference to the ultimate existential concerns. On the other hand, it could be understood as ideal when you bring the answers to the existential concerns from the *eschata*, when you bring love, for example, as the answer and the criterion, it's a kind of idealism, when you have a fixed criterion which cannot change. So, it's difficult to answer this question of existentialism. Because existentialism, for example, Heideggerian existentialism, just stops with the diagnosis of existence, it doesn't claim to give any answer.

You said yourself several hours ago that you feel yourself close to Kierkegaard (1813–1855). He's also an existentialist.

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JZ: Yes, Kierkegaard also does not give an answer either. He has a different diagnosis, of course.

So, your answer is not the same as theirs, but the very concern, the question, is pretty much similar.

JZ: The question is, yes. The either/or of life and death, that's essential, it's absolutely fundamental. So, there are many things in common, but there may also be differences from existentialism.

Of course, of course.

JZ: I don't mean to classify my position in these terms, I think it's unfair, it doesn't really represent—

Oh, no, I didn't want to classify it as—

JZ: But there are people who do.

But besides, the existentialists themselves did not want to be called existentialists. Heidegger rejected the term very fiercely. Only Sartre admitted it and then rejected it.

JZ: Yes. But have we given a satisfactory answer to the questions we raised about hermeneutics?

We are satisfied. You clarified. It's just a pity you haven't written this down somewhere, at least yet, because many people would gain great benefit from hearing it. Because you know how popular you are, for example, in Serbia, and there are so many people who know almost everything about you or understand you very well, and they are saying things which have almost nothing to do with what you really think, and that is a problem.
JZ: Well, that is a real problem.

And there are some clever young people now who tend to reject your theology, or some aspects of it, because they think that this is your theology—that is, what these other people affirm and teach—and it's not the case, and that's a pity.

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JZ: Well, what can you do? We're human beings ... we're limited.

I think that methodologically, or generally speaking, the biggest problem is that it is always impossible to mention everything, as you yourself said. And you always emphasized things that you consider to be more important. And then some people, some of your readers, tend to conclude that everything else doesn't matter, or that you deny everything else—as is the case with person and nature, or the subject we have now discussed. And this is just not the case. It's just that you chose to pay more attention to the things that you consider crucial, and it doesn't mean that you deny all the rest. But many people do not get that.

JZ: Yes, I know. But I cannot help that. I thought that Matthew Baker sometimes somehow enters into the deepest of my intentions ... most other people just don't. What I said today, for example, *can* be drawn from what I've said before, from what I've written, but nobody can—

Of course, because you know what you thought while writing it.

JZ: They expect *me* to spell it out. But I expect *them* to find it. Because I am limited by space and time, and my life. It is not enough to explain myself fully. So, somebody must explain me. That's again a hermeneutical process, and it's a very difficult process. Hermeneutics can be wrong, can get things wrong. Because you can misinterpret someone or something that you want to interpret. But certainly, hermeneutics is not for everybody. I don't think you can expect just anybody to do it. It takes such a creative process, procedure, that very few people can achieve that.

A question about hermeneutics. If there are different ages in history, and some figures of different ages have different interpretations—for example, of Maximus the Confessor—and if there is a clash between different interpretations, should we judge the interpretation solely in terms of what is genuine for our time, or also for faithfulness to the original? How do we balance this?

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—That was also my question. Because some modern or postmodern hermeneutics say that the author's meaning is not the final meaning and the only meaning of the text, and we are free to find other new meanings. But I was wondering where to put the limit? Or is it possible to put a limit, and to say that this new meaning has nothing to do with what the author wanted to say and is illegitimate?

JZ: Well, I think the question, the way it was phrased, needs reconsideration. For example, if you take the idea of hermeneutics as it was presented by Heidegger or by Gadamer, it's not even possible to raise the question of what Maximus thought—there's no way of doing that. This is historicism—in a sense, it is all wrong. So, the question you put fails.

On the other hand, there is a legitimate concern behind that question, and that is the question of fidelity and of the extent to which you are free really to draw a conclusion of your own, without any fidelity to the past. And therefore, the question is valid, provided that you give up any attempt to reconstruct the past, as a past, as a fact. Then you are presented with the issue (which I explained before) of having to ask the question of what Maximus' concern was in saying these things. And the fidelity would not be to the way he said it, but to the concern behind it. And therefore hermeneutics, in my view, is to raise the question of the existential concern—the ultimate concern of a text of an author of the past—and relate it to the present situation, in which again you have to ask what *is* the existential concern, and see how the present situation interprets, or presents, or answers the same existential concern, and with what truths it presents it.

A good example would be how the Greeks interpreted the Gospel once the Gospel was preached to the Greeks. The Gospel was dominated historically by Judaism: it was a Jewish thing. Christ was a Jew; he was speaking to the Jews, and even Paul was a Jew, and the first Church was a Jewish community. And at some point, the Gospel had to be preached to the Greeks. Now, it's interesting how the Greeks reacted to that. The Greek culture could not accept the resurrection from the dead, and when Paul

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preached resurrection, the Greeks said, "nonsense." And so, it needed hermeneutics to be accepted by the Greeks; otherwise, the Greeks rejected it. And what was the hermeneutic? That the resurrection is an answer to an ultimate existential concern that the Greeks also had, though they answered it in a different way, with a different culture. And therefore, what the fathers did was to say: never mind, we will adopt the Greek culture, and we will answer the same existential question that the Jews had when they spoke of the resurrection, or the divinity of Christ, and so on. And that required a really creative job, which not everybody could do.

That's why we admire the fathers, that's why we cannot leave them behind us: they managed to answer. And this is, of course, my clash with Pantelis [Kalaitzidis][6] in Volos: he thinks that our culture today is entirely different from that of the time of the fathers. And I think that's not true. Our culture is basically still Greek, because the fundamental concern is ontological.

To be. To be?

JZ*:* Yes, to be. And so, the Greek fathers are still needed for us. But there have been modifications. Western culture is not just simply concerned about being, it is an understanding of being in terms of *actus purus*, of acts, and therefore, you have to adapt it. But I wonder whether I have answered the question?

Not completely. Our point was to ask how to judge regarding different interpretations. If we agree with you about ultimate concerns, and we have five different interpreters of Maximus' thought, and one says, Maximus meant this, and this was his ultimate concern, and then two hundred years later another interpreter says something completely different, reading the same text, and the third interpreter and the fourth one, what do you say about that?

[6] Pantelis Kalaitzidis is the director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies. —Ed. note.

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JZ: You can't say it's an entirely different thing if you are raising the question of the ultimate concern behind Maximus.

But it's not so easy to recognize this concern. For example, there are many people reading your work, and they would not agree on the ultimate concern behind your work.

JZ: Because they haven't looked for it.

Maybe they have.

JZ: No, they haven't looked for it. Certainly, they haven't looked for it. And certainly, Maximus is also interpreted in different ways because we don't look for the existential concern behind it. We spend years and years of research, which is of course legitimate, historically, in a *historicist* way. I think it is not really meaningful.

And what do you think is the concern of Maximus?

JZ: Well, take what he says about the divisions of this world. And these divisions are to be healed. That's the ultimate concern behind it. Or take *logos* and *tropos*. Of course, you can write pages and pages about how he uses these terms. But if you want to interpret, to have a hermeneutic, you cannot do it simply philologically. You have to ask what the existential concern is behind distinguishing between *logos* and *tropos*. And it is a very important existential concern of one and the other, of many, of being and otherness, and communion. And that's really what you will interpret if you want to have a hermeneutics of Maximus. That's why hermeneutics [in theology] is not the business of patrologists and historians. It's the business of dogmatics and dogmaticians—doctrine must be a hermeneutic. The same thing applies to doctrines, the established dogmas—you have to interpret by asking the existential question. Otherwise, to repeat the Creed in its words—everybody does that.

But now I'm troubled with this notion that we are asking questions about the concerns behind the texts. Because previously

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we've said that we've already stated what are legitimate ultimate concerns. So, from that point of view, we are just discovering what are the various forms of answers to those ultimate concerns—we are not discovering the concerns themselves. We are already equipped with the notion of what is important and what is of ultimate concern when reading the text. So, now I'm troubled with the thought that we are discovering some author's ultimate concern.

JZ: We discover it behind the author. Because any author says several things. But if he says something in response to the ultimate concerns that we have as human beings, that will survive through hermeneutics. But the other things are not destined to survive, and they can be dispensed with. I'll go as far as that.

So actually, we are operating with a set of concerns, and then looking for their matches in a text, say, of a father, trying to match our own, or universal, human existential concern with the way an author deals with it in his own text.

JZ: Yes. And also, that's not the whole story. That's half of the story. Then you have to do your own transmission. So, both Heidegger and Gadamer are right in saying that every hermeneutic is a creation of something new. In this respect, you don't simply repeat. But the new is not a change of the concern.

So, the concern is universal.

JZ: I would say. So, there's something stable, but the stability lies in the existential concern. I'm not sure that Matthew Baker sees things in this way, of ultimate concerns—I don't remember having seen anything of this kind.

I think he doesn't speak explicitly about—

JZ: How does he view hermeneutics?

I think that he has recognized your intention, because after recognizing the objection concerning the question of how to interpret

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the same meaning in a new form, he quotes your text where you say, "If we believe in some dogma purely and simply because that is what an Ecumenical Council has decided and not because that dogma actually reveals a truth on which our existence depends, then we are doing a disservice to theology."[7] So I think he understood what you were pointing to.

JZ: Does he accept that quotation?

He does. After the objection from Augustine Casiday, he says there is something in this objection, but then, if I understood it, he tries to find an explanation in your work, and this would be what he found, and I think he's right. So it's good.

JZ: But the whole mechanics, so to speak, of doing that … I don't think I said that, and I don't think he says that. I mean, how do you do it [how to interpret the same meaning in a new form]?

He just says there are some objections that you did not explain that well, but then he finds some clues, and good ones. He also quotes that you say that some Orthodox theologians regard the interpretation of dogma as a "'Protestant' peculiarity,"[8] and that it is wrong, because the fathers of the Church did the same, and interpreted dogmas all the time. So, he's good.

When we were in Pozarevac (Serbia), you spoke about apophatic and cataphatic theology. Then, during the discussion, you said that the apophatic doesn't make any sense without the cataphatic in theology. So, my question is vice-versa: do you think that cataphatic theology without apophaticism is problematic, or insufficient?

Yes, I would say that. It works both ways.

[7] "The Being of God and the Being of Man" [1991], *One and the Many*, edited by Gregory Edwards (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2010), 18. —Ed. note.

[8] Cf. Zizioulas, "The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God" [1995], *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 72, fn. 59. —Ed. note.

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It works both ways. But on what do you base that? Practically and liturgically, we can say, yes: you chant all the hymns, but at a certain point, you start to sing the "Terirem," meaning you demonstrate the inability to say everything. Or in the liturgical space you have the altar and the iconostasis which serve as concealment, and you can say that this both reveals and hides something. But with theological words, for instance, in a sermon or theological writing, how would you say that apophaticism is necessary?

JZ: I see, because the word is cataphatic?

Yes.

JZ: Difficult question. How can the word be apophatic? I never thought of that before, so let me think as I speak and speak as I think. I think that the easiest answer I can give to that is that the word without the liturgical context is not the Word of God. That's why I always insist that the sermon should be after the Gospel and *not* after the Liturgy. Because what you do with the sermon is a cataphatic job, but then immediately you admit that that's not the end, or that's not all. This has to be transcended into an apophatic word which doesn't speak with words, but speaks with sacrifice, with love, and communion. So, one answer to your question would be to say that the cataphatic needs the apophatic, and therefore it needs to be complemented by something. Now, if you want to see the apophatic *in* the cataphatic, that's very difficult, because language is bound by *cataphasis.* That's why the fathers had to invent a language with the use of "*hyper*": because they couldn't use the word *ousia* without adding *hyper-ousia*; because the word itself did not lend itself to apophatic use. Otherwise, if the word *-ousios* could convey something apophatic, they wouldn't have the need for *hyper-ousios*. It's an addition—it's like adding to the sermon the rest of the liturgy.

So, when I say to you that there isn't an apophatic without a cataphatic, I mean you cannot really say *hyper* without *ousia*. It's this sort of apophatic mysticism of Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) that I never understood. The whole history of salvation is made redundant—it's simply used to move to the apophatic.

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I have a question with regard to our previous discussion. Recently, objections have been made to the program of neopatristic synthesis, that it somehow represents patristic thought as having a unique content. There have been objections to the notion of the "patristic mind," which Fr. Georges Florovsky [1893-1979] deployed—that somehow all of their thought is leveled out and not many differences in the voices of the fathers are respected enough. What would you say to that objection?

JZ: Well, again, I will use the previous approach to the fathers in terms of existential concern. I think the fathers differ from one another in many respects in the way they interpret the existential concern, but the existential concern is the same. And they give the same answer to the existential concern, although expressing it in different cultural ways. So, the fathers remain wholly united in this way, because they have transferred the Gospel to the Greek culture. I think the patristic era must be defined in terms of Greek culture. And I regard Western culture as Greek culture. So, in a sense, the 14th century is also a part of the patristic. And, of course, many people say the fathers continue even today. But yes, I don't know how they mean that; some people mean different things by that. But theologically speaking, any attempt today, any *successful* attempt, to express the Gospel in today's cultural terms is patristic. I mean, whoever does that is a father of the Church, there's no doubt about that. So, in this sense, the patristic period continues. So instead of saying "post-patristic," as Kalaitzidis speaks, we can speak of the continuation of the patristic period. But we don't have today the same thing the fathers did; although they could do it today, they don't—we don't have them. And of course, even the fathers did not simply succeed in doing that. It's not so simple. Their contribution arose from real discussion and conflict. Maximus was not accepted for a long time, and his contemporaries for a long time had opposite views. And the same thing with all the fathers. There cannot be fathers without heretics. And the fathers emerged out of dialogue with heresy. And therefore, until it is established that the truth is on this side, you cannot have the concept of the father. That's why in contemporary times, for example today, you cannot say who is a father.

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Part B: Theology and Synodality

Because we don't have enough heretics, maybe. [Laughter].

JZ: We have enough heretics, enough discussion, and we have enough controversy. Just as they had at that time. Well, at that time, of course, again, it was not the contemporary situation that confirmed who a father was; it was later on. But even so, there was at that time a mechanism of confirming: the synodical system of the Church, synods and so forth. Today, we don't have that mechanism; we've killed the mechanism. So, I don't think that we'll have fathers today or in the future.

Unless we revive the mechanism. Which you are trying to do.

JZ: Yes, I think, when speaking of that mechanism, one of the questions in the back of my mind—and I put it to the patriarch when we were together in Geneva, and it's a question he hadn't thought of before, and nobody had thought of before: what is the authority of this Holy and Great Council that we are preparing for in 2016?[9] Can it pronounce that this is true and this is false?

Do you already have a plan on who's going to be invited? I mean precisely who? Obviously not all the bishops, but who will choose the participants?

JZ: Again, that we are organizing it doesn't guarantee that we … We want to have a synod, but for what purpose? We don't even expect this council to issue canons. Can there be a council without canons? In the early Church, this was impossible. The synod was expected to pronounce itself on matters of faith and also to say, "This is the last word, take it or leave it."

[9] Metropolitan John refers here to the preparation of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church which was finally convened in Crete in June 2016. —Ed. note.

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Would the diaspora be a subject for making canons?

JZ: Well, the diaspora … nobody is ready to change the status quo.

But maybe there could be some … anyway, in the Byzantine synods there were some decisions which were not immediately applied, but they gave some sort of guideline which was applied afterwards. So maybe if there were some canons for the diaspora, maybe they would not be applied immediately, but they would create—

JZ: Yes, but if they were not applied immediately, there is no authority in that.

But remember, after the First Ecumenical Council (325), there was an outbreak of Arianism. Arianism was very powerful.

JZ: Yes. But the Church decided to set limits and to say that those who do not accept our decisions are outside. But are we ready to do the same thing today?

Even the emperors were Arians. Even Constantius, who was the emperor, was Arian afterward, after the death of Constantine the Great, even though the First Ecumenical Council had already taken place. And there was a historical struggle until the victory of the [Second] Ecumenical Council.

JZ: Yes, but this did not prevent the Church from setting the limits—you may be the emperor, but you're outside. This inside and outside is something we don't seem to care very much about. We've left it to those who are not bound by synods to decide whether they are inside or outside, and the synod does not declare who is inside and who is outside. Can you rebaptize the Catholics and Protestants? Maybe we can. Although the canons are clear—we put in the texts now the paragraph that says that we have to apply the 92nd canon of Trullo. It says very clearly that we don't rebaptize.

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Does it happen here in Greece that Catholics get rebaptized?

JZ: So, what do we do with people who rebaptize? That is the question of the authority of the council. The council says that you must expect everybody to obey; otherwise, it's not a council. But we've lost this in the meantime, because conciliarity and synodality have been neglected, and we've lost the importance of synodality. They just decide for themselves what is right, what is wrong. And sometimes they give the authority that the council has to certain people who, because of their holiness, or whatever, can speak the truth—the various *gerondas* [elders] and so on. And so, the council is useless. We are in a mess.

Apart from the problem of the diaspora, are there any other problems on which the synod could make decisions that have to do with the life of the Church and the structure of the faith of the Church?

JZ: Well, there are several. I think the question that must be decided on at some point—and Florovsky insisted on this, and he was right—is whether there is schism within the Church or outside the Church, and what does schism mean. All these zealots argue that there is one Church, and therefore, you cannot say the Church is divided. What does schism mean? Does it mean that if you have schism, one is the Church and the other is not the Church?

That's their understanding of schism.

JZ: But if that is their understanding, the schism, for example, we have with the Old Calendarists means that we are not the Church for them. Or it means that they are not the Church for us.

I think that they would go for the first option.

JZ: Yes, but in that case, they were not the Church even before. I mean ... For example, now you have in the Church of Russia the return, or the unity, with the ROCOR. Now, the ROCOR be-

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fore the unity did not recognize the Church of Russia as the genuine Church. Now they join the Church of Russia. And the question is whether they joined the Church, or they joined something else. I think it's nonsense to say that there's no division within the Church. There is division within the Church. And St John Chrysostom says, he uses the expression, *schizein ten ekklesian*.[10] You divide the Church. But of course, they add the ingredient now of heresy, and they say it's not simply a schism, but it's also a heresy. But then the question is, who declares what is heresy? Is there not heresy within the Church? There is always heresy within the Church. There are heretical views all the time. And I was reading in Mansi the acts of the Third Ecumenical Council.[11] It's very interesting. Mansi published the correspondence between Nestorius and Cyril. There was a long time before the matter was settled, and although they were accusing each other of heresy, Cyril always addressed Nestorius in his letters as "my brother and concelebrant in Christ."[12] Always. And not only that, but even when there was a synod in Alexandria which condemned Nestorius there was a letter from Cyril to Nestorius after that, in which he *still* addresses him as "concelebrant." The moment he stops addressing him as concelebrant is after the Third Ecumenical Council. Then you see the correspondence changes immediately. It's an interesting observation if we just observe these stages.

And that's what I want to say to all these crazy zealots. I mean, wait until a council, an ecumenical council, decides whether the Catholics or the Protestants are heretics. Until then, these heresies are within the Church; they're legitimate. The Church is not divided on that basis. But it is divided because there is no eucharistic communion. So, there is division, even if there is heresy, without destroying the Church—the Church is there. So, that's a subject that must be decided synodically, once and for all. But it

[10] "σχίζειν τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν" (Homily 11 on 1 Corinthians). —Ed. note.

[11] G. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, vol. 4 (Florence, 1759).

[12] "To the most religious and beloved of God, fellow minister Nestorius, Cyril sends greeting in the Lord." (Edited and translated by P.E.Pusey, Oxford, 1872.) —Ed. note.

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requires a lot of research, a lot of grueling preparations. And no one is prepared to do this.

And if this synod declared itself to be ecumenical, it would mean that the Western Church is not the Church.

JZ: Yes. If it declares itself to be ecumenical, then the indication is that the West is outside the Church. But that's why it has not been called ecumenical.

And that's why we cannot have an ecumenical council that would declare the Roman Catholic Church to not be the Church.

JZ: We can only have one with their presence.

One problem is if we unite with the Roman Catholics, what will they do with the other thirteen ecumenical councils they had? Will they continue declaring them ecumenical?

JZ: This is a big problem.

This is a big problem. Or shall we accept them? Anyway, I think there are cases in their history where a posterior Roman Catholic council has modified the meaning of something in a previous one. For example, I think the Second Vatican Council has modified some of the extreme—

JZ: Yes, one of the ways out, a solution, would probably be to have this hermeneutic, and to ascertain what was really the intention when they said that the pope is infallible—what did they mean? And this is happening with the Roman Catholics: they are reinterpreting, and that's helpful. Whether they can do that with all the other councils, I don't know. I don't pretend to know. The Immaculate Conception, and what else ...

And would it be possible—because you said that a lot of serious work and research is needed in order to address these questions—to involve, so to speak, professional theologians in the work of

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preparations for this synod? Because that's what Catholics do all the time. Vatican II, for example, had many official theologians who worked in pre-conciliar commissions and at the council itself. Theologians who are not bishops, lay theologians, or just academic theologians who are not bishops at all. And in our Church, I think we only have luck, as in your case, that you are a metropolitan and a great theologian. But most of [the bishops] are not; most of them know nothing of theology. And they're the only ones who will take part in this council. And that is the problem.

JZ: But were all the fathers of the First Ecumenical Council theologians?

Not all of them, of course, but some of them—

JZ: Maybe just one of them. Who dominated the First Ecumenical Council? Athanasius.

Yes, okay, I know. That's great. But is that the best we can do? Should we continue that tradition? Or should we—

JZ: We can't do anything else …

There are so many issues now. We haven't had a council for more than a thousand years, or more, so it's a bit different situation than in the first centuries. It would be helpful at least to have the voice of these theologians heard. They do not have to decide on anything. No one asks us anything. So that's the other issue, of the authority of this council. Because we ask ourselves: who are our representatives of this council? Do they represent what we think we believe? And the honest answer would be: no, they don't. That's why it's hard to recognize and accept this council as something very big and important for our lives. Because we do not even know who will represent our Church, why will these people represent our Church, whose beliefs and whose attitudes are they going to defend—their own or maybe Russian (because they pay them maybe), we do not know that, and no one asks anything, and that's the real issue, I think.

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JZ: Yes, all these things make it difficult. But still, if we want to have a council, you have to apply theology … and we use whatever we have.

The Church of Serbia presented us in Geneva with a letter from the Patriarch, which was read by Metropolitan Amphilochios (according to Bishop Irenaeus it was written by Amphilochios) in which the Patriarch said that the synod they're preparing must recognize as ecumenical the so-called Eighth Ecumenical Council, of the time of Photios, and also the Ninth Ecumenical Council, the council of the 14th century, of Gregory Palamas. When the letter was read, I said, "Right, but how can this council do that?" Because only an ecumenical council can recognize an ecumenical council. This was fixed as a rule by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, but it was in practice in the past, too. The Second Ecumenical Council was a local council, but it was recognized as an ecumenical council by the Fourth Ecumenical Council. And we are not preparing an ecumenical council, and therefore this cannot be done. But the intention behind that is really disturbing, because the intention is to declare the Roman Catholics as heretics. Because there hasn't been a council that has declared the *filioque*, for example, as heretical. The council of Photius does not say that.[13] And then afterwards, the first time the *filioque* was called heretical was by Mark of Ephesus.

Is that the first time?

JZ: Yes, as far as I know. Was it not?

The filioque was never denounced as a heresy in a synod. What do you say about St. Mark: did he speak as an individual or was this the judgment of a synod?"

JZ: An individual. If there were greater synods after that later, I am not aware of that. But there are many, many bishops involved

[13] Mark of Ephesus anathematizes interpolations to the Creed, though without mentioning the filioque by name. It does not address the filioque directly, nor condemn it as heretical—Ed. note.

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in this [upcoming] synod, many who are preparing. Sometimes I think of them when I go to bed, and I lose my sleep. Will there be a discussion, and what is the purpose of the discussion, since the vote is finally one vote for every Church? I mean, if two bishops, let's say, of the Church of Serbia disagree in the discussion in the end, they will have to vote as one.

And how will decisions be made—by majority vote or by consensus?

JZ: By consensus. That's an ultimatum. Which means that there are many important matters. Because the important matters cannot gain unanimity. You know, the more I think about this synod, the more I think that the only good thing about it will be that it will happen. And we should not raise our expectations.

Will you be concelebrating during the synod?

JZ: Oh yes, certainly, of course.

And what would you say about the issue of primacy? Because many people see it as a major problem for the organization of this council—the clash between Moscow and Constantinople. So many people see the question of primacy as a political question.

JZ: Yes, it has become a political question, yes.

But not just now, but throughout history, the Church that had the primacy was the Church of the politically strongest city. That was the reason why Rome had the primacy and then Constantinople, and then they say today that Constantinople has no power in this political sense.

JZ: Yes, but it was not just that. The criterion was not always and only the political importance of the city. That played some role, but the real justification was centered on the apostolicity of the Church—not in the sense of having apostolic roots, although that played some role, but in the sense of guaranteeing and maintain-

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ing the apostolic faith. These were the five centers in the Church, the pentarchy. This was not based on political reasons. They were the sees from which the other Churches derived, and for that reason, they had the priority.

But the priority among the five was established how? The primacy of Constantinople?

JZ: Again, the criteria had something to do with political importance, but not entirely. For example, Constantinople was second, although of equal honor with Rome, because of political reasons, as it was the capital of the Empire. But not only that, because the other sees were not politically important, and they still had their place one after the other. So, Rome was first not because of the political importance of Rome, but because it was ... well, then you have different interpretations already from the beginning. The Roman bishops used the argument that they were successors of Peter—that appeared after the 5th century. But if you look into the historical evidence we have, some justified it because of the death of Peter and Paul in Rome and the existence there of their relics.

Also, Rome claimed that they remained Orthodox during important conflicts—with the Arians, the Monophysites, the Iconoclasts, and so forth.

JZ: It's not quite clear how the East understood the primacy of Rome, but it's clear that they accepted it. But the justification was never because of Peter's succession—the East never accepted that, they never used that. So why did they accept it as first? It was established, it was accepted as such. I don't know. Now, the thing is that the problem with the Russian Church today is that they don't so much mind the primacy of the bishop of Rome as much as the primacy of the bishop of Constantinople. And they try to weaken as much as possible its primacy at the universal level—they accept it at the local and the regional level, but not at the universal level. And the question is whether there is a *primus* at the universal level or not. And the Russians want to reject that. And also, they

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claim that at the universal level, primacy is established by agreement of the local churches, and it's not something that is stable. And that is a problem. They don't want to give the primacy at the universal level a stability of any kind.

They probably would give stability to the primacy if they were the first. That is a question I wanted to ask you: there are some people asking whether this fight over primacy could be solved by Constantinople resigning its primacy. Are there theological reasons for Constantinople not being able to resign its primacy, or not?

JZ: We have to speak of two questions, not of one. The first is whether we need primacy on the universal level or not. Second, there is the question of whether Constantinople can be replaced with someone else. We have to decide the first question first. And certainly, for me, it's very important to answer definitely that primacy is needed. We cannot have a rotation. There's never been a rotation in the Church, never. There were sees which were permanent in a certain order. And the second question is whether it could be somebody else, not Constantinople. Well, that depends on whether the decisions of the ecumenical councils that give Constantinople the primacy give it a validity that even Constantinople has to respect: it cannot step down. It's something that has been put on its shoulders as a responsibility by the ecumenical councils.

Can some future ecumenical council change that?

JZ: Theoretically, yes. But that has never happened. There was no change; the order that was established was respected. There was never a question of change even in the second millennium. This question is very recent.

Maybe we can now let you take some rest.

JZ: No, I don't need rest. You may need rest more than I do! Maybe our minds need rest, in that we cannot discuss serious theology for a very long time. Although I can, I don't get tired.

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We noticed!

JZ: But I think you are not as strong as I am in this situation! The questions that we have discussed are very important. I hope that you have recorded it. Please note it, because it's very important for my work. Because it's a pity to let it go like that. Because this question of hermeneutics, this is very important. Now [he laughs], I never thought of writing something on that, but now Matthew Baker has made me feel the need to do that.

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