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Making Explicit What Is Implicit: Hermeneutics in the Theology of Metropolitan John Zizioulas

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Abstract

This paper examines the hermeneutical principles of Metropolitan John Zizioulas and his understanding of theological interpretation as a dynamic, relational, and eschatological act. For Zizioulas, hermeneutics is not a secondary interpretive exercise but the very condition of living theology. It arises from the inner demand to render patristic teaching existentially relevant—answering the question "so what?" that follows any mere repetition of doctrine. Zizioulas differentiates hermeneutics from epistemology, focusing not on the limits of knowledge but on the contextual reception of meaning. Scripture, in his view, functions as a living medium of encounter, requiring interpretative engagement within the liturgical life of the Church. Doctrinal expressions, such as those of the Ecumenical Councils, are understood not merely as historical artifacts but as relational events grounded in communion. Without this engagement, the Fathers become a "dead tradition," confined to historical curiosity. Zizioulas critiques static readings of the patristic tradition and urges a living engagement with the Fathers that responds

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to contemporary existential concerns. His hermeneutical method is shaped by an eschatological horizon in which the resurrection of Christ illuminates both past and present. He calls for a theology that remains faithful to the tradition while actively engaging with modern philosophical categories.
Keywords: Georges Florovsky, John Zizioulas, eschatology, hermeneutics, resurrection, tradition, existence, epistemology

Introduction

Is the future essential for understanding the past—and do Christians need Gadamer to recognize this? Hans-Georg Gadamer's contributions to contemporary hermeneutics are undeniably profound, especially in highlighting the temporal and anticipatory dimensions of understanding.[1] Yet, long before Gadamer, Christians were already navigating a tension far deeper than modern hermeneutical dilemmas: Should they regard the events of Christ—above all, the Resurrection—as self-evident historical realities, or as eschatological truths whose meaning awaits confirmation in the fullness of time? St. Paul, centuries before modern philosophy, introduced the future as a hermeneutical key when he declared, "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised" (1 Cor 15:16). His insight was not merely rhetorical; it revealed a profound theological logic that only now is being fully appreciated. Paul saw the Resurrection not as an isolated miracle but as the beginning of a collective destiny—a "pre-resurrection" of the whole body with its Head. In the Resurrection of Christ, the *future* of the world has already begun to unfold, becoming a hermeneutical lens through which the present and past are reinterpreted.

Following what was said above, this study explores the hermeneutical principles of the late Metropolitan John Zizioulas, with

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989) is one of the most important works of the 20th century on the philosophy of humanistic studies.

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particular attention on the existential resonance of his interpretive vision. Just as St. Paul introduces the future as a key to understanding the Resurrection, so too does Zizioulas approach Christian truth as something grasped only within the horizon of eschatological fulfillment. Interpretation, for him, is not a static reading of past events. We begin by examining Zizioulas' understanding of knowledge, the horizon of interpretation, and the dynamic nature of understanding itself. Central to this inquiry is his view on the formulation of faith and the role of Scripture—not merely as a repository of truths, but as a living medium of encounter, intricately bound to the interpretive act. It has been noted that Zizioulas is clearly striving to interpret *biblical* faith—and above all, the apostolic *kerygma* of Christ's Resurrection.[2]

Along this same line, the interpretation of Zizioulas himself demands a hermeneutical effort akin to the one he applies to the Tradition. As Dario Chiapetti has noted, the first difficulty in approaching Zizioulas "consists in the unsystematic nature of Zizioulas' reflection, which requires patient exegetical and hermeneutical work on his vast, fragmented production, which in some cases is not easy to find."[3] Accepting, as Chiapetti further suggests, the very hermeneutical principle Zizioulas employed when reading the Fathers—namely, that a systematic theologian must "make explicit what is implicit"—we too are called to make explicit what remains implicit in Zizioulas himself.[4] This insight of Chiapetti helps us to answer the question of "the function of ἑρμνηνεύειν" for Zizioulas.

[2] Speaking on the Book of Revelation at the Patmos Symposium I (September 20–27, 1995), Metropolitan John stated: "[I]t must be underlined that it is the theology of the book that matters in the end, not its symbolism. The book must be approached hermeneutically—that is, with reference to its diachronic existential significance. The book intends to put forward messages of ultimate significance for the life of the world, and it is to these that we must turn our attention." (*Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning and Ecological Ethos*, eds. John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis [London: T&T Clark, 2021], 32).

[3] Dario Chiapetti, *The Father's Eternal Freedom: The Personalist Trinitarian Ontology of John Zizioulas* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2005), xiv.

[4] Chiapetti, *The Father's Eternal Freedom*, xv.

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From there, we will turn to Zizioulas' existential reading of the Nicene, Chalcedonian, and other conciliar formulations of faith, examining how his entire project unfolds in the light of *from implicit to explicit*. This guiding principle shaped the way he drew out doctrinal expressions that transcend mere historical context and point to truth as a relational and ontological event. In this light, we will distinguish between what Zizioulas sees as the existential or diachronic dimension of theological meaning and the contextual or epochal, arguing that for Zizioulas, truth arises not from cultural accommodation but from communion—a mode of being that both remembers and anticipates the eschaton. Although readers do not need a full diachronic account of the development of Zizioulas' hermeneutical thought, we will outline the main trajectory of his views to demonstrate their development. This outline will identify the key elements of his understanding of hermeneutics, drawing from his relevant articles only what is necessary to support our thesis.

By adopting the eschaton as his criterion, we will try to see how John Zizioulas discerned what is compatible and what is incompatible with eschatological hermeneutics, in line with his overarching project of making explicit what is implicit. In his work, Metropolitan John stresses that theology must address not abstract "perennial" questions, but the *urgent concerns* of today—identity, individualism, freedom, death, ecology, technology, gender, embodiment, injustice, and the crisis of meaning. His distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics becomes crucial. Namely, Zizioulas recognizes that while epistemology investigates the nature, origin, and limits of knowledge by asking "What is knowledge?", hermeneutics explores the theory and art of interpretation, particularly how meaning is understood within historical, linguistic, cultural, and contextual frameworks, by asking "How do we understand meaning?"

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The Unfolding of Zizioulas' Engagement with Hermeneutics

Metropolitan John began his engagement with hermeneutics early in his academic career, and his entire theological method reflected this concern. What truly shaped his approach was its *aporetical* character—it consistently invites reflection, yet resists final definition. This openness runs throughout his thought, offering space for depth rather than closure. In his *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* (1984–85),[5] he includes a subchapter titled "Theology and Hermeneutics," which opens with the striking line:

> The task of *re-stating* Scripture and Christian doctrine is termed "hermeneutics." *All theology is a matter of hermeneutics*, that is, of deciding how to receive and re-state the teaching of Scripture for the Church and the world. Scripture is *silent until it is read and interpreted* to the world, so we could say that all Christian teaching is simply interpretation of Scripture. Christian doctrine would be no more than an archaeological artefact until the Church goes on to interpret and re-state it for the world.[6]

In these lectures, Zizioulas even suggests that the holy sacraments function as a hermeneutical tool. "The sacraments witness to the indivisible and inexhaustible mystery of Christ, and cannot therefore be regarded as an individual topic, but rather as the hermeneutic by which we can approach ecclesiology as a whole."[7]

Yet from the outset, Zizioulas remained critical of "hermeneutics" when approached in isolation—detached from ecclesial life and communion—as is often the case in individualistic, Protestant frameworks.

[5] *Μαθήματα χριστιανικής δογματικής* [Lectures in Christian Dogmatics] (Θεσσαλονίκη: Υπηρεσία Δημοσιευμάτων, 1985). Available for download at www.oodegr.com/oode/dogmat1 [Last date of access: January 2014]

[6] Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, eds. Douglas H. Knight and Katerina Nikolopulu, (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 3. Emphasis added. He made a similar remark concerning Tradition: "A tradition which is not interpreted in dialogue with the present and the future is dead …" ("The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6:3 [2015]: 12).

[7] *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 4.

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> The Gospel is not just another book. If we study the Bible outside the gathered congregation, in Western-style bible studies, we will only gain what Protestants have gained by this method. We must move away from our preoccupation with hermeneutics and instead understand words as summonses, and as icons that open us up to reality. The Bible speaks to us in quite a different manner when we hear it read in Church than when we read it at home. When the Gospel enters the Church we make the sign of the Cross and kiss it, welcoming it as Christ himself.[8]

Fidelity and Relevance

Long before the contemporary explosion of interest in hermeneutics, Zizioulas was already articulating a vision of theology in which doctrine is inseparable from existence. In his 1982 study on the existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology,[9] Zizioulas affirms that Church dogmas must not be viewed as mere logical formulations, but as truths with "direct and decisive implications for our existence." For him, "dogmas in the Orthodox Church are life"—a revelation of "extreme frontier states of existence" touching on "questions of life and death."[10] If theology fails to articulate their existential relevance and instead treats dogmas as untouchable axioms, it risks turning Orthodoxy into a lifeless system, irrelevant to the modern world. The task of dogmatics, at every level of instruction, is therefore to disclose how dogmas speak decisively to the human condition.[11]

Clearly, Zizioulas' work in systematic theology is marked by an approach that interprets faith and the Church's dogmas through an

[8] *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 159.

[9] "Χριστολογία καὶ ὕπαρξη. Ἡ διαλεκτικὴ κτιστοῦ-ἀκτίστου καὶ τὸ δόγμα τῆς Χαλκηδόνος," *Σύναξη* 2 (1982), 9-20; English translation: "Christology and Existence: The dialectic of created and uncreated and the dogma of Chalcedon," in *Synaxis: An Anthology of the Most Significant Orthodox Theology in Greece Appearing in the Journal Synaxi from 1981 to 2002*, vol. I (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2006), 23–61.

[10] "Christology and Existence," 23.

[11] Cf. "Christology and Existence," 23.

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ontological lens.[12] In an article he wrote in 1991, he was adamant that that accepting a dogma "purely and simply because that is what an Ecumenical Council has decided," without recognizing that "a dogma actually reveals a truth on which our existence depends," amounts to doing a disservice to theology. For this reason, he insisted: "Theology is not obliged merely to describe dogmas and present the form they took in the past. It also has the duty to *interpret* them, so that it becomes clear how and why our existence depends on them."[13] Any interpretation of dogmas, according to Zizioulas, requires both "a precise knowledge of the content" at the time of their formulation—essentially historical research—and the task of "transmitting the dogma to our own times." This is what the Church Fathers did with Scripture: "Dogmas themselves were in reality nothing other than interpretative commentaries on the truth of the Gospel."[14] They did not aim at "adding some new truth," but expressed the Gospel's meaning for their age. Dogmas possess "an exegetical coherence" with each other and with Scripture. "If one removes from dogmas their interpretative character," he warns, "one fossilizes them and restricts their authority to a legal and confessional context."[15]

Building on this, the interpretative transmission of tradition, according to Zizioulas, cannot occur "without using the language and concepts" of the receiving generation. Rejecting this outright is "conservatism of the wrong sort."[16] "Such conservatism was not exhibited by the Fathers," who introduced terms like ὁμοούσιος, "but rather by their opponents." Likewise, neither the "distinctions between essence and energies" nor the terminology of Maximus the Confessor stemmed from "the spirit of conservatism." Thus, dogma

[12] "The approach that characterizes my research and studies in systematic theology is that of an ontological hermeneutics of the faith and of the Church's dogmas." (John Zizioulas, *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον* [Athens: 1993], 46. [In Greek.]

[13] "The Being of God and the Being of Man: An essay in theological dialogue," *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, ed. Gregory Edwards (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2010), 18. The text appeared first in Greek as "Τὸ εἶναι τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου," *Σύναξη* 37 (1991), 11–31.

[14] "The Being of God and the Being of Man," 18.

[15] "The Being of God and the Being of Man," 18.

[16] "The Being of God and the Being of Man," 18.

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must be interpreted by "explicating the old concepts and terms into contemporary concepts" in a way that "does not betray the spirit of the dogma," but "interprets it faithfully."[17]

And so, Metropolitan John concludes his exposition of the hermeneutical method by affirming that it is precisely this "faithfulness of interpretation" that must be "the criterion in each case," not interpretation as such. At this point, "the well-intentioned question" arises about "whether and to what extent it is possible for the dogma of the Holy Trinity to be conveyed in a way that is meaningful in an age of intense and widespread humanistic 'personalism' such as our own."[18] This same criterion must also be applied to patristic and even Byzantine theology.

In his effort to interpret the dogmas of faith ontologically—"to consider them as answers to the fundamental existential questions of the human being"—Zizioulas has focused on the relationship between Hellenism and Christianity "as the source and means of hermeneutical understanding of the Christian faith."[19] He argues that "Orthodox Dogmatics in particular cannot be understood without a deep knowledge of how the Greek spirit assimilated the preaching of the Gospel."[20] "The encounter between the Gospel—initially marked by a Semitic-Jewish mentality—and Greek thought was neither easy nor straightforward."[21] In his study published in the *History of the Greek Nation*,[22] he shows how "the ontological question," which had long "preoccupied Greek thought," and "its related cosmological interest," came "to be united with the biblical spirit," which was "more historically than ontologically or cosmologically oriented."[23] The Greek Fathers, especially the Cappado-

[17] "The Being of God and the Being of Man," 19.
[18] "The Being of God and the Being of Man," 19.
[19] Zizioulas, *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 46.
[20] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 46.
[21] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 46.
[22] "Ἑλληνισμὸς καὶ Χριστιανισμός, ἡ συνάντηση τῶν δύο κόσμων," in *Ἱστορία τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Ἔθνους*, vol. VI (Athens: Ἐκδοτικὴ Ἀθηνῶν, 1976), 519–559. Forthcoming English edition: *Hellenism and Christianity. The Meeting of Two Worlds*, ed. Nikolaos Asproulis, trans. Fr. Gregory Edwards (Doxa and Praxis: Exploring Orthodox Theology, WCC Publications, Geneva 2025).
[23] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 47.

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cians and St. Maximus the Confessor, achieved a "creative synthesis of the concern for history with that for ontology,"[24] from which the theological edifice of Greek Orthodoxy emerged.

Speaking on the witness of Orthodox women,[25] Zizioulas noted that the Church is "called today to offer explanations to the modern world"—something it was "not required to do in the past." He observed that "the argument of tradition" is "no longer sufficient," since tradition is "incarnated within the cultural context" of the Church "in every age and place," according to "criteria that are not merely historical" but theological. Therefore, "past positions of the Church" that were "based solely on cultural reasons" cannot be carried over "uncritically to all eras and cultural contexts" without proper theological "justification." "Theology, as the criterion-bearing function of the Church," is called "to shed its light on issues" such as "the role of women in the Church and in society,"[26] especially as society rapidly shifts its cultural assumptions.

Considering the Meaning: Truth and Communion

In his effort to interpret the dogmas of faith hermeneutically, Zizioulas focused as early as the 1970s on the concept of truth—one of the fruits of the creative synthesis between the biblical and Greek spirit in patristic thought. In his study "Truth and Communion,"[27] he argues that "the concept of truth is linked to ontology, to history (and its related eschatology), and to the notion of communion"—that is, relationship and community. This position, as noted by commentators, has broad implications.

[24] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 47.

[25] Zizioulas, "Μαρτυρία καὶ Διακονία τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Γυναίκας μέσα στὴν Ἑνωμένη Εὐρώπη. Προϋποθέσεις καὶ δυνατότητες," in ed. G. Lymouris, *Ἡ Ὀρθόδοξη Γυναίκα στὴν Ἑνωμένη Εὐρώπη. Πρακτικὰ Διορθόδοξου Εὐρωπαϊκοῦ Συνεδρίου* (Katerini: Epektasi, 2001), 85–108. Cited here from John D. Zizioulas, *Κόσμου λύτρον: Τὰ Ἀγαθονίκια* [Ransom for the World: The Agathonikia], (Megara, Greece: ἐκδ. Εὐεργέτις, 2014), 213. [In Greek.]

[26] "Μαρτυρία καὶ Διακονία τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Γυναίκας μέσα στὴν Ἑνωμένη Εὐρώπη", *Κόσμου λύτρον*, 213.

[27] "Verité et Communion dans la perspective de la pensée patristique grecque," *Irénikon* 50 (1977): 451-510; also in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 67–122.

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(a) Greek patristic theology "possesses all the necessary foundations to enter into meaningful dialogue and spiritual encounter with modern post-Einstein physics and its philosophical implications."[28] The search for truth in "the indissoluble relationship between space and time," and "essence and event," becomes "a common ground between theology and the physical sciences." From the outset, Zizioulas opposed the idea—held by many Orthodox theologians—that there are "two" truths, insisting instead that "there are not 'two' truths (one religious/theological and one scientific), but rather one truth."[29] The consequences of this, he argues, are "of immense importance and significance."[30]

(b) Likewise, "the concept of truth cannot be isolated from its *social* content."[31] The bond between truth and communion means that "theological and sociological truth must ultimately coincide"—even if dialectically. "If truth is a matter of relationship," not only cosmologically but personally, then "systematic theology clearly carries substantial *sociological* implications."[32]

In his "Truth and Communion"[33] John Zizioulas offers a Christological reorientation of history, challenging both Hebrew linear historicism and Greek abstraction by affirming that truth is encountered within history as the person of Christ. By referring to Christ as the Alpha and Omega, "the New Testament has transformed radically the linear historicism of Hebrew thought," making the end of history in Christ present here and now. His phrase "the end of history in Christ becomes already present" points to a pro-

[28] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 47.

[29] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 47.

[30] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 48.

[31] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 48. See also, "In its current experimental research, quantum physics has broken down almost every barrier and autonomy between subject and object, and so has opened new avenues in epistemology. Structures are in flux and we do not yet know what their final form will be. What is certain, however, is that the isolationism that has defined the relationships between the fields of knowledge is starting to yield." *Illness and Healing in Orthodox Theology* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2016), 6–7).

[32] *Σταδιοδρομία καὶ ἔργον*, 48. Emphasis added.

[33] Zizioulas, "Truth and Communion," in *Being as Communion*, 67–122. We quote from John D. Zizioulas, *Truth and Communion*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2021).

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leptic hermeneutics, where the future is sacramentally present, and interpretation becomes participation in an unfolding communion. In declaring that "a historical being is the truth," it also "hurls a challenge to Greek thought," as it is "in the flow of history and through it ... that man is called to discover the meaning of existence." Zizioulas issues a "hermeneutical warning": to be "faithful to the Christological character of truth," we must "affirm the historical character of truth" and "not despise it for the sake of its 'meaning.'" He finds reactions against certain "demythologizing" readings of the New Testament "clearly justified." Yet, he warns that if "by this 'historicity' of the truth we understand a linear, Jewish historicism," where the future is merely "a reality still to come," then "we are departing radically" from the New Testament conception of truth.[34] Rather than extracting abstract meaning, Zizioulas insists on the historical, *kairotic* nature of truth.

Here Zizioulas offers a critical reflection on Origen's approach, which is significant for our study. "The interpretation of the Scriptures in Origen likewise implies an idea of truth which is essentially Greek." While Origen affirms the "historicity of the biblical events," what ultimately matters "when interpreting the Bible is the *meaning* of these events."[35] Even "the cross of Christ is the symbol of something higher," and "truth resides in the meaning of things"—once grasped, the events "lose their importance." Interestingly, "this leads Origen to place the accent on eschatology," though one "oriented not towards a consummation of history, but towards the eternal significance of events."[36]

Zizioulas' analysis thus opens the way for a nuanced conceptual parallel between Origen and Hans-Georg Gadamer, as both see interpretation—not mere historical recall—as the means by which truth emerges, and both locate *meaning* in the enduring significance of events rather than in their temporal occurrence alone. Of course, this is a complex issue that cannot be fully addressed here.

[34] *Truth and Communion*, 71.
[35] *Truth and Communion*, 76.
[36] *Truth and Communion*, 76.

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Closely related is Zizioulas' reflection on revelation, which he sees as central to the issue: "revelation always unifies existence" through a meaning that is "singular and comprehensive,"[37] linking created and uncreated rationality. One critique of Origen, he notes, is that "if he undermined the historical Christ, it is because he was preoccupied above all with revelation."[38]

Maximus' approach "makes history meaningful because it possesses a πέρας, that is to say an end in the positive sense of this word ("fulfilment")."[39] "The truth of history is identified thus with the truth of being simply because history is the movement of being towards and from its end which gives it meaning."[40]

That the meaning is *re-acquired* in the light of new concerns is seen in Zizioulas' reference to Aristotle's encountering the Nicene Creed. According to Metropolitan John, our existential concepts are to be "eschatologized"—here is probably the first time he uses this verb. The Church acts as a transformative agent in culture. By embracing history and culture, the Church effectively "baptizes" them with the aim of "eschatologizing" them. "History and culture are accepted but at the same time *eschatologized*, so that truth shall not be subjugated through being incarnated in history and culture."[41] Within its ecclesial context, the Church repurposes certain terms and concepts borrowed from Greek culture for dogmatic objectives, such as καθολικὸς (catholic), πρόσωπον (person), and ὑπόστασις (substance), thereby altering their original meanings (for historically and culturally, they are Greek words).

> Would Aristotle have understood their meaning, had he been given the Nicene Creed to read? He would have if the words were history and culture solely. If not, as one has the right to suspect, then something crucial must have happened to these historical and cultural elements through the fact of their being associated with the thought-structure and life of the Church. It is in this sense that we would understand faithfulness to dogmas. Not because they rationalize

[37] *Truth and Communion*, 77.
[38] *Truth and Communion*, 77–78.
[39] *Truth and Communion*, 95.
[40] *Truth and Communion*, 59.
[41] *Truth and Communion*, 117–118.

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> and set forth certain truths or the truth, but because they have become expressions and signs of communion within the Church community. Communion, being relational, is inescapably of an incarnational nature, which is why it actualizes truth *hic et nunc* by accepting history and culture. At the same time, there is a prophetic and critical element in truth as communion. This comes about through the acceptance, not the rejection, of historical forms. Christ, the truth, is judge of the world, by the very fact of having taken it upon Himself.[42]

Epistemology and Its Limits

From the outset of his academic career, researchers observed that John Zizioulas' theology did not rely on syllogisms derived from first principles. Instead, his work formed an organic whole, interrelating various doctrines with the lived experience of the Church. Zizioulas also favored using "direct and contemporary language, transcending the wooden language of sermons, religious moralism, and psychological interpretations of faith."[43]

When once asked about the difference between him and Heidegger—for Heidegger, knowledge is constitutive of being itself (the human being is a being that understands), while for Zizioulas, knowledge is a kind of non-ontological category, secondary to existence—he responded as follows:

> I would make a distinction between epistemology and ontology. I believe that this, from my perspective, is the weakness of the Western mind in general (also Platonic in a certain sense), which cannot avoid the identification of ontology with knowledge. The ancient Greeks also identified "*einai*" (being) and "*noein*" (understanding).[44]

John Zizioulas deliberately avoided over-systematization, often frustrating the attempts of others to schematize his thought. However, this did not imply disorder. On the contrary, his strength lay

[42] *Truth and Communion*, 118.

[43] Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Remarks on When God Dies," public discussion, Byzantine Museum of Athens, February 5, 2010. These remarks remain unpublished.

[44] Unpublished remarks.

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in demonstrating the relational order between God, humanity, the Church, and the world. His theology aimed to represent the communion between God and human beings, realized within the Church. It was in the Church's liturgy that all human and divine realities were brought into proper relationship through Jesus Christ. For Zizioulas, the order of theology focused on the relationship between God and the world, rather than the revelation of ideas.

Among the authors who address the relationship between epistemology and ontology, one of the earliest studies on Zizioulas (and Lossky) is Aristotle Papanikolaou's 2006 book, which directly engages this question.[45] Because Papanikolaou gives sustained attention to the Eucharist as the primary hermeneutical and ontological context of Zizioulas' thought, a separate treatment of this theme is not required here; rather, it will be addressed within our discussion of the key differences between Gadamer and Zizioulas. "In the eucharist one 'knows' truth, i.e., God, insofar as one participates in truth and, by so doing, is truth, i.e., acquires God's mode of being."[46] According to Metropolitan John, "knowledge and communion are identical." As Nikos Asproulis[47] rightly observes, Zizioulas consistently resists epistemology taking precedence in theological discourse. For him, the danger lies in reducing theology to rational knowledge based on historical events alone—what he calls "a collection of information and knowledge" processed through the intellect. Zizioulas insists that "[t]he safest theology is that which draws not only from the Economy, but also, and perhaps mainly, from the vision of God as he appears in worship."[48] Apostolic preaching, he

[45] Aristotle Papanikolou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), esp. 30–44.

[46] Papanikolou, *Being with God*, 32.

[47] Nikolaos Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού και το Μυστήριο της Εκκλησίας: Γεώργιος Φλωρόφσκυ και Ιωάννης Ζηζιούλας σε διάλογο* [*The Mystery of Christ and the Mystery of the Church: George Florovsky and John Zizioulas in Dialogue*] (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press & Volos: Volos Academy for Theological Studies, 2023), 283.

[48] Here Asproulis refers to J. D. Zizioulas "Pneumatology and the Importance of the Person," in *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 190.

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further argues, "must be situated in the Spirit to become life, not just words," and cannot serve as an external criterion over the Church.[49]

Asproulis identifies the core concern: Zizioulas rejects "self-sufficient epistemology"—the Enlightenment-born notion that reason is the ultimate means to theological knowledge. Instead, Zizioulas calls for an ontology grounded in communion, where theology arises not from autonomous rationality, but from ecclesial life and participation in the Spirit.[50]

We will address Zizioulas' treatment of "meaning" more fully in the context of his critique of Pannenberg. For now, it is sufficient to note that, for Zizioulas, "the historical future" serves as "an *epistemological* tool with which to understand the past (the idea of destiny, finality, etc.)," but it cannot provide "the basis for an *ontology*." As he concludes poignantly, "it may give *meaning* but not *being* to the past."[51] An epistemology that fails to account for the end—the omega of existence—cannot truly illuminate the beginning, the alpha, and even less so the meaning of history.

Across the span of his theological writings, Zizioulas consistently demonstrated that theology must engage contemporary questions in concrete and intelligible ways. He does this in his reflections on art, especially with the "presence-in-absence" paradox.[52] In *Being as Communion*, he further develops the distinction between biological and ecclesial hypostasis, arguing (by drawing on Dostoevsky) that authentic freedom entails receiving one's existence as a gift, a truth implicitly expressed in the adolescent's protest, "Who consulted

[49] Asproulis, *The Mystery of Christ and the Mystery of the Church*, 283.

[50] "Therefore, for our theologian, Revelation—without being confined to an epistemological (in this case, *gnoseological*) perspective—acquires a new meaning that allows it to be released from a narrow or rather exclusive (derived from epistemology?) embrace with History. Yet, it is not thereby transformed into a theoretical, metaphysical reflection. Instead, it retains its salvific function through the Eucharist." (Asproulis, *The Mystery of Christ and the Mystery of the Church*, 285).

[51] Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2023), 24. [Original emphasis.]

[52] John D. Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), 401–448.

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me?"[53] Finally, in his exploration of the question "Who am I?",[54] Metropolitan John contends that the particular person's quest for ontological primacy finds its fulfillment only in communion with God.

Deepening the Hermeneutical Vision

As John Zizioulas' thought matured, his engagement with hermeneutics became increasingly attuned to contemporary concerns, prompting further reflection on the role of interpretation in theology, science, and ecclesial life.

In this context, one may consider Zizioulas' 2012 lecture, "*Scientia* versus *Sapientia*: The Importance of Wisdom in Scientific Research,"[55] delivered at the House of Letters and Arts in Athens. Opening with T.S. Eliot's line, "Where is the wisdom we lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we lost in information?", Zizioulas questioned whether knowledge alone suffices for humanity's well-being. While recognizing the promise of science and technology, he warned of their potential dangers when divorced from wisdom.

To bring the discussion into the context of contemporary developments, Zizioulas identifies a pressing concern in "the domination of information over knowledge" and the "hypertrophy of the former owing to the hegemony of technology." In an age shaped by computers and the internet, people increasingly "receive more information than they can actually absorb" or "critically evaluate," resulting in "a diminution of peoples' ability to critically evaluate" the data presented to them—a phenomenon with far-reaching consequences for both life and thought.

Exploring the relationship between knowledge, information, and wisdom, Metropolitan John examined historical perspectives from classical Greece, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the patristic and medieval periods, as well as modern and contemporary thought.

[53] *Being as Communion*, 51.

[54] "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in Ch. Schwöbel and C. Gunton (ed.), *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 33–46.

[55] This paper is unpublished.

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He echoed Gabriel Marcel's observation that the decline of wisdom is a historical phenomenon that must be addressed in the context of scientific progress. In his concluding remarks, the author posed vital questions: Can wisdom set limits on scientific knowledge? Can it influence scientific methods and technology? He asserted the necessity of recovering wisdom, arguing that only through this recovery can science transform from a potential threat to a blessing for humanity and the natural world.

The Task of the Systematic Theologian

At the heart of John Zizioulas' theological method lies a distinctive hermeneutical approach: the task of the systematic theologian is to uncover and articulate what is implicit in the language and thought of the Fathers. In his pivotal essay "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor,"[56] Zizioulas draws a critical distinction between the historian, bound to the literal word of tradition, and the theologian, who must risk interpretation in order to render patristic thought meaningful in the present. This interpretive act does not depart from the Fathers but seeks to remain faithful by addressing questions they themselves did not face, yet which emerge naturally from their vision.

In interpreting the connection between the concept of the individual and phenomena such as self-love, division, and the absence of communion—as perceived in the Fathers—Zizioulas highlights that St. Maximus "relates ἄτομον—not πρόσωπον—to nature as the outcome of a process of division, and, although he does not say that explicitly, he thereby points to the relation between nature and individuality also at the existential level."[57] This prompts Zizioulas to formulate an *anthological* phrase:

[56] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," *Knowing the Purpose of Creation Through the Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Sebastian Press and The Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Belgrade, Los Angeles, CA – Belgrade, 2013), 85–114. Republished in the most recent author's book *Knowing as Willing: The Ontology of Person, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2025), 65–95.

[57] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," 108.

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> The task of a systematic theologian who tries to be faithful to patristic thought is precisely *to make explicit what is implicit* in the expressions of the Fathers.[58]

Zizioulas is careful to add that this marks the point where a systematic theologian "differs from the historian," as the latter "must limit himself to what is explicitly said by the Fathers."[59] Zizioulas then proceeds to a significant observation: theology, he insists, must have the courage to engage with "*questions which the Fathers had not raised in their time*."[60] He immediately acknowledges, however, that "this is no easy task." Thus, to interpret Maximus—or any Father—is to engage not merely in textual analysis but in a theological reading shaped by the horizon of communion.

> Yet, the work of the historian, too, is not conceivable without hermeneutics. "Pure" history, without the intervention of the historian's horizon of thought is impossible, as is pointed out by H.-G. Gadamer … : "understanding (the past) is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well."[61]

As this is subtle and crucial, let me say it again: Zizioulas never treats theological disciplines in isolation. Dionysios Skliris notes that Zizioulas' dogmatics are not "dogmatic" in the strict sense, but stem from hermeneutics. In other words, they do not consist of a priori *axiomatic* assumptions[62] but rather offer a vision of what future salvation might look like.[63]

[58] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," 108. Emphasis added.

[59] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," 108.

[60] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," 108. Emphasis added.

[61] "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor," 109. We will later observe where Zizioulas diverges from Gadamer and other reception theorists, particularly in their claim that the plurality of interpretations implies the absence of inherent meaning in texts, or that meaning arises solely from the reader's engagement with the text.

[62] Cf. Alan Brown, "On the Criticism of Being as Communion in Anglophone Orthodox Theology," *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 35–78.

[63] Dionysios Skliris, *Ἀγαπῶμαι, ἄρα σκέφτομαι: κεφάλαια θεολογικῆς ἐπιστημολογίας καὶ ὀντολογίας* [*I Am Loved, Therefore I Think: Chapters in Theological Epistemology and Ontology*], (Athens: Armos, 2021), 296.

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The term "hermeneutics" had a more prominent role in the last two decades of Metropolitan John's life. One of the catalysts for this was the thought of Fr. Matthew Baker. Zizioulas was always eager to find words of praise for young theologians whenever he observed a perceptive theological point in their work:

> Matthew Baker forced me to answer new questions which I hadn't thought of before. He somehow entered into the deepest of my intentions. ... Most of the other people just don't. I never thought of writing something on the question of hermeneutics, but now Matthew Baker has made me feel the need to do that.[64]

A fruitful moment in Zizioulas' engagement with Fr. Matthew Baker's thought was a theological conversation in Kifissia (December 2014) between Metropolitan John and three theologians, centered on hermeneutical questions from Baker's dissertation chapter, "Being, Interpretation, and the Last Things." The transcript remains unpublished, though Baker's paper was later published.[65]

Since Baker's prompt, Zizioulas began to reference "hermeneutics" more frequently in his writings, a development that culminated in his magnum opus, *Remembering the Future*. Before turning to that study, however, let us briefly consider several other works in which he addressed the question of hermeneutics.

On November 4, 2015, John Zizioulas delivered a thought-provoking address titled "The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe" at Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich. Zizioulas pointed out that Orthodox theology should not merely reiterate tradition but actively engage in interpreting it within the context of the present and future.

> [T]he task of Orthodox theology is not simply to repeat the Tradition; it is also and, I would say, primarily to interpret it. And interpretation, as H.-G. Gadamer has taught us with his hermeneutics, is to engage the past in dialogue with the present, or even the fu-

[64] Based on conversations with Metr. John Zizioulas.

[65] "Zizioulas and Heidegger: 'Eschatological Ontology' and Hermeneutics," in *Between Being and Time: From Ontology to Eschatology*, eds. Andrew T. J. Kaethler & Sotiris Mitralexis (London: Fortress Academic 2019), 99–124. (*Editor's not*e: The transcript of the Kifissia conversation mentioned here is published in this Fall 2025 issue of *OmegAlpha*.)

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> ture. A tradition which is not interpreted in dialogue with the present and the future is dead and cannot offer anything to culture and civilization.[66]

In this paper, Zizioulas links the interpretive process in the Church to Pneumatology. While Christology "links the present with history," he argues, "the role of the Holy Spirit is to bring 'the last days,' the future, into the present (cf. Acts 2:18)," so that the same Spirit "thus interpret[s] history in the light of the actual existential concerns of the world."[67] Zizioulas does not approach hermeneutics as a merely technical or secondary matter; rather, he *grounds it in the very structure of theology itself*. For him, interpretation in the Church is not simply historical exegesis or doctrinal repetition, but a living event of divine–human communion shaped by the presence of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.

"The End Is Where We Start From"

Another occasion for Metropolitan John's engagement with hermeneutics arose during an international theological conference at the University of Geneva.[68] In his presentation Metropolitan John observed that both philosophy and theology tend to view reality *protologically*—as something that arises, exists briefly, and disappears. In his characteristic style, he reversed this framework by proposing an ontological reflection grounded not in origins, but in the end—that is, in eschatology. Drawing on St. Maximus the Confessor, he called for an eschatological ontology with far-reaching implications for our understanding of the past, tradition, hermeneutics, and ethics.

[66] "The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6:3 (2015): 12.

[67] "The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe," 12.

[68] Zizioulas, "The End Is Where we Start From: Reflections on Eschatological Ontology," in *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, eds. C. Chalamet, A. Dettwiler, M. Mazzocco and G. Waterlot, (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH 2017), 259–278. The idea for the conference on eschatology (October 22–24, 2015) emerged from a prior event, where faculty members began rethinking traditional Christian representations of "the end" in light of developments in the natural sciences.

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In this paper, Zizioulas included a subchapter on "Eschatology and Hermeneutics,"[69] noting that "there has been a wide and seminal discussion in our time" around two key questions: a) whether "what we call 'reality' can be conceived as complete and finished," and b) whether even "historical facts can remain unaffected by the process of hermeneutics." While he alluded to Heidegger as the initiator of this shift, it was primarily Gadamer, through *Truth and Method*, who challenged the notion of a closed and complete "fact."[70]

Zizioulas offered a critique of theology's stance toward philosophical hermeneutics, using the familiar Orthodox slogan "back to the Fathers" as a case in point. He began by asking, "What is the position of theology towards philosophical hermeneutics?"[71] In his view, Orthodox theology appears to take "no notice of it in its theological method," as evidenced by the way modern Orthodox theologians often treat tradition. The slogan "back to the Fathers," which "appeared at a time when historicism was thriving," was embraced enthusiastically, leading theologians to "turn dogmatics essentially into history of dogma," overloading it with "quotations from patristic sources" without attempting to interpret it in contemporary categories of thought. Zizioulas also addressed criticisms he had received, noting that "any attempt at hermeneutics is usually met by 'serious patristic scholarship' with the accusation of 'anachronism' and 'existential influence.'" This, he argued, reflects an attitude in which "the sayings of the Fathers or the historical facts could be conceived in themselves apart from their interpretation by us today." Such an approach, he warned, results in "a conservatism that turns tradition into a 'passed'" and ultimately "dead reality," disconnected from genuine appropriation by the human being in the present.[72]

Zizioulas noted that both the Old Testament and the early Christian communities operated with a hermeneutical "method." Already in the Old Testament, "prophecy was essentially an act of

[69] "The End Is Where We Start From," 271–273.
[70] "The End Is Where We Start From," 262.
[71] "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.
[72] "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.

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hermeneutics"—that is, the word of God and the actual events of history were "placed in the light of their future meaning." "The Holy Spirit inspired" the prophets by revealing to them the "last things." For this reason, "the early Christian communities retained the ministry of prophecy,"[73] applying it both to their Christology (cf. the Synoptic Gospels) and to the Eucharist (cf. Revelation, the Didache).

This hermeneutical dynamic continued into the patristic era. According to Zizioulas, "Tradition always meant in the patristic period interpretation." He cited several examples: the Council of Nicaea did not hesitate to "introduce the unbiblical term ὁμοούσιος to interpret the biblical Christology;" likewise, "each Council interpreted the previous ones," though "in its own terms." He further observed that there is scarcely a single Greek Father—"with the exception, *perhaps*, of St. John of Damascus"—who does not "engage in recasting the teaching of previous fathers in a contemporary conceptual framework."[74] For instance, St. Maximus the Confessor places Chalcedon in a cosmological context and even "alters to the point of correcting" the teachings of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite.[75]

John Zizioulas underscores the need for hermeneutics by invoking the concepts of "judgment" and "verification." He explains that "the past always needs the future" for one fundamental reason: "to verify and confirm it as true," and further, "by renewing it so that it may become existentially relevant in each time and place." Within the framework of "the totality of history"—since, as he notes, "the Judeo-Christian tradition operated with a view of history as a totality"—there will be "an ultimate and final future" that will "judge" and "purify history as a whole." The Eschaton, he concludes, will be "preceded by apocalyptic" in the sense of "judgment."[76]

Zizioulas brings his reflection to a close by drawing a striking distinction between hermeneutics and apophaticism. Hermeneu-

[73] "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.
[74] "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.
[75] Cf. "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.
[76] "The End Is Where We Start From," 272.

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tics, he argues, is "constantly needed in theology" due to "the 'iconic' character of historical truth."[77] It is not, he warns, a method "by which we arrive at the past through the elimination of anachronism and prejudice," as historicism once claimed. Rather, it is "a way leading to the future," to ultimate truth, "through an act of discernment" applied to its "iconic" form. He adds that hermeneutics is "not the same as apophaticism," since "the latter seeks the truth beyond its 'iconic' form," in a "cloud of the unknown." Thus, "the future truth we seek in hermeneutics" is "no other than the eschatological one"[78] hidden within the historical.

To distinguish his position from that of Heidegger, Gadamer, or postmodernism, Zizioulas insists that theological hermeneutics "does not lead to endless interpretation."[79] Unlike philosophical hermeneutics, Christian eschatology affirms a definite eschaton, which "puts limits to the universality of the hermeneutical problem conceived by philosophical hermeneutics."[80] What, then, is the hermeneutical "horizon" for Zizioulas?

> The hermeneutical "horizon" is the presence of the eschatological Christ with his Kingdom, the final overcoming of evil and death already present in history in "iconic" form and expected to come in glory in the future.[81]

As a continuation and deepening of his hermeneutical approach, Zizioulas turned to Luther's teaching, seeking to develop a Reformation hermeneutic that transcends its historical setting and reveals its enduring existential, ontological, and ecclesiological significance. In one of his final papers, Zizioulas places "hermeneutics" at the very center of his inquiry, using the term within the title of his study[82] exploring Martin Luther's doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone)

[77] "The End Is Where We Start From," 273.
[78] "The End Is Where We Start From," 273.
[79] "The End Is Where We Start From," 273.
[80] "The End Is Where We Start From," 273.
[81] "The End Is Where We Start From," 273.
[82] "Sola Fide: A Hermeneutical Approach," in *Theological Anthropology, 500 Years After Martin Luther: Orthodox and Protestant Perspectives*, eds. C. Chalamet, K. Delikonstantis, J. Getcha & E. Parmentier (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 3–16). Republished in John D. Zizioulas, *Knowing as Willing: The Ontology of Person, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2025), 1–19.

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through a hermeneutical lens. Invited by the University of Geneva, Metropolitan John delivered the keynote address at a symposium on December 10, 2017, commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In this essay, he examines Luther's emphasis on faith as liberation from the constraints of reason and historical facticity, drawing out its implications for ontology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. "I hope to offer some suggestions toward a hermeneutic of the Reformation in an existentially relevant theology."[83] The paper also discusses the eschatological dimension of faith, questioning Luther's staurocentric focus and advocating for a greater emphasis on the resurrection and the future-oriented nature of faith. Finally, it examines the ecclesiological implications of *sola fide*, exploring the relationship between individual faith and communal belonging in the context of the Church.

> This is the challenge of *sola fide* that extends beyond the sixteenth century historical situation and calls for a hermeneutic that can give the Reformation an existential significance also for our time.[84]

This approach contributes to a hermeneutic of the Reformation and holds existential relevance for contemporary theology.

* * *

Among the personal notes found in the archives of Metropolitan John is a manuscript titled "Hermeneutics and the Word of God."[85] In it, Zizioulas contrasts classical and biblical notions of divine speech with the modern hermeneutical tradition. Drawing from sources like Plato (*Symposium* 203a) and the Old Testament, he affirms that in both, God speaks and man interprets—with the Word of God preceding hermeneutics. In this framework, hermeneutics is not Truth itself but merely a *method*—a position Zizioulas sees as shared by theologians such as Barth and Torrance, and perhaps Matthew Baker. He then makes a striking turn: "In this sense, Christianity is not a religion of Revelation."[86] Unlike reli-

[83] "Sola Fide: A Hermeneutical Approach," 4.
[84] "Sola Fide: A Hermeneutical Approach," 4.
[85] "Hermeneutics and the Word of God," *Archives of Metropolitan John Zizioulas*.
[86] "Hermeneutics and the Word of God."

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gions of revelation, Christianity—through the Incarnation—transforms hermeneutics from method into truth.

> The Incarnation of Christ makes hermeneutic Truth and not method, for it makes the Word of God part of history and therefore subject to hermeneutics right from the start. In the Incarnation the ultimate concern of humanity conditions God's word, since *now God speaks from within humanity's concern* as expressed in its historical existence and not from outside it. The incarnate Word is a Word *already* interpreted, not a Word to be interpreted. It is interpreted in certain cultural terms; it is conditioned by history (e.g., the history of the Jewish people). In the Incarnation we encounter the first theological hermeneutic, the very paradigm of hermeneutics.[87]

This unfolds vividly in the Emmaus account: before revealing himself in the Eucharist (Lk 24:30), the *risen* Christ, bringing the eschata into history, "explained (διερμήνευσεν)" the Scriptures to the disciples (Lk 24:27). Luke's use of the technical term for hermeneutics highlights that Christ's risen presence is itself an interpretive act, revealing the Word from within history. All Christ's appearances to his disciples after the Resurrection have this dimension: by the entrance of the *eschata* into history, the past is "interpreted" and understood.[88]

It is now time to explore the convergences between Gadamer and Zizioulas on meaning and interpretation, before turning to their differences on truth, tradition, and doctrine—opening a hermeneutical dialogue between philosophical and theological horizons.

The Future Horizon of Doctrine: Florovsky, Gadamer, Pannenberg, and Zizioulas

Over the past five decades, hermeneutics has generated an extensive and ever-growing body of literature. In an age marked by the fracturing of meaning and the privatization of belief, the magiste-

[87] "Hermeneutics and the Word of God."
[88] Cf. *Remembering the Future*, 19.

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rial work by Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*,[89] challenges the constriction of Christian doctrine to individualistic assent, critiquing what he sees as a characteristic reductionism in certain modern approaches. Thiselton's reflections are steeped in the long hermeneutical tradition, from Schleiermacher's *dialectic* of explanation (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*), to Ricoeur's notion of textual mediation and the surplus of meaning.[90] Both Thiselton's and Zizioulas' aim is to use a study of hermeneutics to bring doctrine *alive*,[91] although Thiselton is a scholar steeped in "hermeneutical theory." But in the work of both of them, we glimpse a vision of doctrine as an ongoing dialogue—an ecclesial event that requires listening and the courage to be drawn into a truth not of our own making. Doctrine, for both Thiselton and Zizioulas, is not merely propositional data to be affirmed or denied—it is communal wisdom, born of revelation, lived experience, and ecclesial memory.[92]

Thiselton advances the conversation with his own theological nuance, arguing for an "enlarged epistemology"—a theme richly resonant with the insights of Bernard Lonergan,[93] who offers the beginnings of a hermeneutic of Christian doctrine. Thiselton pays close attention to the interpretive act, noting that theology must take seriously both the *pre-understanding* of the interpreter and the otherness of the doctrinal subject matter. He distinguishes between two kinds of hermeneutical horizons: one that arises from the readiness of the subject to engage, and another that emerges

[89] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

[90] *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, xix.

[91] Both Thiselton (*The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, xvi) and Zizioulas ("Christology and Existence," 23) endorse a deeper *interaction* between *hermeneutics* and *doctrine* believing that it helps rescue doctrine from its marginalization and abstraction from life, restoring it from the perception of mere theory to a dynamic expression of lived truth.

[92] Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, xvii; Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics,* 4.

[93] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958). Also, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972).

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from the doctrinal reality itself, insisting on its own integrity and resisting the imposition of alien frameworks. This distinction echoes Zizioulas' own insistence that theology must be rooted in the Church's own horizon of meaning—a horizon shaped by Pentecost, not the Enlightenment.

Anthony Thiselton turns to Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and draws attention to a crucial contrast Gadamer articulates—between seeing theological issues as abstract, free-floating "problems," and encountering them as "questions" arising from lived, historical, and dialogical experience. Thiselton names this the posture of "fresh eyes," a hermeneutical openness that returns problems to the soil of motivation and meaning. Theological reflection, then, is not a forensic dissection of concepts but an awakening to the questions that life—and ultimately God—asks of us.

From Venerable Relics to Living Wells: Zizioulas and the Hermeneutics of Florovsky

Some have concluded that Zizioulas' hermeneutics was influenced by Paul Tillich,[94] given that he studied under him for a semester at Harvard in 1956. Yet, what stands out—in light of these claims—is that Tillich's influence is not clearly evident in Zizioulas' later development. While certain early studies may contain echoes of Tillich, who famously redefined God as the focus of our "ultimate concern," Zizioulas diverged significantly. For Zizioulas, hermeneutics is indeed shaped by existential concern, but not one centered on projecting human aspirations onto the divine. Unlike Tillich, whose thought at times equates God with the depth of human experience,[95] Zizioulas remained rooted in the tradition of the Church, where the primary reference of theological statements is

[94] Idara Otu, *The Eco-Theologies of Thomas Berry and John Zizioulas: Intimations for Ecological Justice*, Master's Thesis (Toronto School of Theology, 2012), 47. Also, M. Baker, Matthew Baker, "Zizioulas and Heidegger," 108.

[95] "Philosophy formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 61.

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not the human condition but the Word of God, who addresses humanity from beyond itself. His reading of the "ultimate concern" is not a continuation of Tillich, but a more ecclesial and Christocentric interpretation of the Creed's affirmation: "for us men and for our salvation."

Another Harvard scholar left a more enduring mark on Zizioulas' hermeneutics: His understanding of tradition is sharply challenged by the towering—perhaps the greatest—figure of 20th-century Orthodox theology and patristic scholarship, the late Father Georges Florovsky. The late Fr. Matthew Baker rightly observed that "Zizioulas appeals directly to Florovsky for his understanding of neopatristic synthesis as an 'existential,' always contemporaneous task of 'dogmatic hermeneutics.'"[96] Indeed, while Zizioulas' emphasis on cultural engagement and response to "existential" questions may echo Tillich, it is, in substance and method, more deeply aligned with Florovsky. We will see later that in his reflections on "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World," Metropolitan John identifies a series of urgent anthropological and existential *concerns*—ranging from the crisis of personal identity, individualism, and distorted notions of freedom, to modern anxieties surrounding death, suffering, and the ecological degradation of creation.[97] Theology, he insists, must address not abstract humanity but the concrete challenges of our time, including technological control, gender and human embodiment, social injustice, and the erosion of meaning, offering an eschatological vision rooted in communion, sacramentality, and the patristic tradition. The real question for Zizioulas is: how can we remain faithful to the patristic tradition without reducing it to either nostalgic repetition or a modern appropriation devoid of context?

A hermeneutics of fidelity and relevance, as suggested by Florovsky, refused to divorce "fact" from "meaning"—both belonged to

[96] Matthew Baker, "Neopatristic Synthesis and Ecumenism," in: *Faith Seeking Understanding: The Theological Witness of Fr Matthew Baker* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2021), 182.

[97] On this see Nikolaos Asproulis, "The Eschaton as Mystery and Problematic: Exploring John Zizioulas's Eschatological Vision," *The Wheel* 36 (Winter 2024): 32.

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the given reality of the Church.[98] The Church historian, always also a theologian, was called to bring personal commitments into dialogue with a broad historical awareness, avoiding anachronistic language and interpreting each age on its own terms.[99] Florovsky warned that the "argument from antiquity" could be misleading when reduced to casual citations, disconnected from their theological and historical context.[100] Patristic theology, he reminded us, was marked by an "existential" character, "if we may use this current neologism."[101] Historical vision, being retrospective, allowed modern interpreters to grasp dimensions of the past unknown even to those who lived it.[102] Yet it remained "utterly misleading" to isolate dogmatic statements from the total perspective that rendered them meaningful.[103] While "the ultimate" does not belong strictly to historical study, no theologian or historian could avoid raising *ultimate* questions without reducing their work to mere chronicle.[104] Florovsky saw in modern "hyper-eschatologism" a dangerous retreat from the historical and theological task—a return to Hellenic anti-historicism, which denied the lasting value of temporal action.[105]

To those familiar with Zizioulas' thought this sounds familiar. Zizioulas argues against theological methods that simply repeat the Church Fathers' words without addressing the specific needs of each generation or community. He insists on engaging the patristic tradition dynamically and contextually, making it relevant to the Church's present reality.

[98] *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 25.

[99] "The Authority of the Ancient Councils," 93.

[100] *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 98.

[101] *Bible, Church, Tradition*, 108.

[102] "What was a future for the people of the past, is now for historians a past. … Historians know more about the past than people of the past themselves were ever able to know" ("The Predicament of the Christian Historian," 45).

[103] Georges Florovsky, "Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church," in *Aspects of Church History*, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont: Nordland; Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1972-1989), 11–30.

[104] "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," 51.

[105] "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," 65.

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In his essay on Florovsky's theological contribution,[106] Metropolitan John revisits the crucial question: "How can we make the Fathers speak once again in our age?" That is, how can their teaching be expressed "in the language and with the concepts" through which "people express themselves in a specific age" and "particular culture?" He recalls how the Fathers "transmitted the biblical tradition in their own time" by adopting terms—such as essence, nature, hypostasis, and person—"borrowed from the age in which they lived." Just as the "Christianization of Hellenism" required the "adoption of Greek philosophical concepts," so too, the transmission of patristic teaching today must pass through "the concepts and dilemmas of the time and culture" in which it is proclaimed.[107]

Zizioulas presents Florovsky's method with clarity: it is, he says, "insufficient to collect and cite passages" from the Fathers or merely "to explore the meaning of the words of the Fathers in their age." Rather, "there must be a hermeneutic of the Fathers." He emphasizes Florovsky's distinction that "hermeneutics differs from exegesis": while exegesis simply "conveys the meaning of their words from one language into another," hermeneutics involves something deeper. Referring to Florovsky's "iconic study," "The Predicament of the Christian Historian" (in honor of Paul Tillich), Zizioulas notes that Florovsky, drawing on Benedetto Croce, sees the historian's task as "hermeneutical"—that is, creating "a dialogue between individuals of one generation and those of another."[108] This dialogue "poses questions and seeks answers." Zizioulas then identifies "the hermeneutic approach of the Fathers": we must pose "questions that emerge from our own time," even if these "did not define the patristic period" (e.g., "bioethics, psychology, social relations in a technological age"). For the answers of the Fathers "to bear any meaning

[106] "The Diachronic Significance of Fr. Georges Florovsky's Theological Contribution", in *The Living Christ: The Theological Legacy of Georges Florovsky,* eds. J. Chryssavgis and B. Galaher (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 37–50. The conference in Constantinople in 2019 marked the fortieth anniversary of the passing of Fr. George Florovsky.

[107] "The Diachronic Significance," *The Living Christ*, Kindle Edition.

[108] "The Diachronic Significance," *The Living Christ*, Kindle Edition.

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for modern man," Zizioulas concludes, they must "adopt the concepts and categories of our contemporary age."[109]

In his paper "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World,"[110] Zizioulas offers a critical analysis of the widespread tendency among certain Orthodox theologians to treat patristic texts as untouchable artifacts—repeating them without interpretation, and avoiding engagement with contemporary philosophical categories. For Zizioulas, what is required is the application of hermeneutics to patristic theology. This highlights "the need to *interpret* patristic thought" by "applying to patristic scholarship what is today called *hermeneutics*."[111] The historicist refusal to bring modern questions to ancient texts undermines the very vitality of tradition (a "false approach to tradition"). Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Zizioulas affirms that understanding the Fathers involves a fusion of horizons—where the questions of today ("the 'horizon' of our own concerns") meet the insights of the past. Patristic anthropology, then, only speaks meaningfully to the modern world when its original insights are reinterpreted in light of contemporary existential concerns ("the fusion of the horizon of the past with the horizon of the present") shaped by our "existential concerns and questions."[112]

> It is only by applying this method that we can arrive at the relevance of patristic anthropology for our time. The fathers developed their anthropology in response to the challenges of their time. If their views are to have a relevance for our time they must be placed in relation to our own contemporary questions. It is only in this way that they will avoid being turned into a "venerable relic," to use Fr.

[109] "The Diachronic Significance," *The Living Christ*, Kindle Edition.

[110] "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World," *Philotheos* 19.2 (2019): 204–217. He identifies "patristic fundamentalism," akin to the biblical fundamentalism seen in some Protestant traditions. Against this, he appeals to the legacy of Fr. Georges Florovsky, who famously rejected both servile repetition and static preservation of patristic thought. True renewal, Florovsky insisted, demands not retreat into a theological museum, but a living return to the sources—a drawing from the wellspring, not the relic case.

[111] "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World," 205.

[112] "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World," 205.

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> Florovsky's illustration, and become a "well of living water" from which we may quench our thirst."[113]

"Knowledge of the Fathers," Florovsky writes—and Zizioulas quotes—

> "cannot be achieved by any servile repetition of the Patristic letter, as it cannot be achieved by Biblical fundamentalism either... servility is alien both to the Bible and to the Fathers. They were themselves bold and courageous and adventurous seekers of the Divine truth. ... No renewal is possible without a return to the sources. But it must be a return to the sources, the Well of living water, and not simply a retirement into a library or museum of venerable and respectable, but outlived relics."[114]

Ultimately, for Zizioulas, our own concerns are not abstract; they are the concrete, lived realities that patristic anthropology must engage through a dynamic hermeneutic, transforming ancient wisdom into a well of living water for today's world. By addressing the urgent concerns of today—identity, individualism, freedom, death, ecology, technology, gender, embodiment, injustice, the crisis of meaning, to name a few—one can clearly affirm that far from neglecting or dismissing history, Zizioulas engages with it deeply and reverently. Being "eschatocentric" does not render Metropolitan John "anti-historical." To illustrate his deep regard for history, we offer here selected insights from his 2006 address, "The Spiritual Trust of an Epic."[115]

"The Spiritual Trust of an Epic."

Contrary to some interpretations that accuse him of "anti-historicism," this address reveals a robust appreciation for the spiritual depth, moral ethos, and existential significance of *historical* events, particularly those that involve sacrifice, faith, and the shaping of collective memory. This speech offers compelling evidence that his theological vision does not reject history. He views history not as a

[113] "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World," 205.

[114] "The Legacy and the Task of Orthodox Theology," in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, eds. Brandon Gallaher & Paul Ladouceur (London: T&T Clark 2019), 190.

[115] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας" [The Spiritual Trust of an Epic], *Πρακτικὰ Ἀκαδημίας Ἀθηνῶν*, τ. 81 (2006), B, 109-126. [In Greek.]

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static chronicle of past events but as a dynamic space where spiritual ethos,[116] cultural memory, and liturgical presence converge. Far from espousing an abstract anti-historicism, Zizioulas champions a hermeneutic of history—Christocentric and eucharistic—that honors its sacrificial depth, embodied faith, and enduring meaning. Zizioulas' engagement with history is profound and reverent. He speaks of moments when seconds are charged with the significance of centuries, affirming that historical events are not merely factual occurrences. He speaks of a magnificent spirit endured throughout the Greco-Italian War that continued into the German Occupation.[117] The Epic of 1940, for him, is a military chapter but also a spiritual event, to be interpreted both through material causality and through the lens of faith and ethos. He clarifies: "The faith that steels biological endurance does not always need to be conscious. It may stem from a way of life, an ethos, formed within a spiritual and cultural environment, and this is exactly what happened in the case of the Epic of 1940."[118] The courage and endurance of the Greek people were born from a historically transmitted ethos of faith, which formed a people who confronted death not with despair, but with *levendia*—a nobility of spirit forged in the crucible of historical witness. This historical piety is made tangible in the memory of the Panagia, in the chaplains who served at the front, in the liturgies offered amid ravines, and in the reverence for ancestral graves. For Zizioulas, the homeland is sacred not for geopolitical reasons but because it bears the memory, blood, and reverent struggles of those who loved and died for it—it is history made flesh.[119]

> Epics cannot be transformed into everyday life. They are the exaltations of a people at particular moments in their history. Yet they leave behind a trust, a legacy, for their descendants to manage according to their will.[120]

[116] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας," 111.
[117] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας," 111–113.
[118] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας," 114.
[119] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας," 114–115.
[120] "Τὸ πνευματικὸ καταπίστευμα μιᾶς ἐποποιΐας," 119.

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The heroic actions of the past are not isolated events; they form a *heritage* (καταπίστευμα). The Orthodox Church, through its saints, martyrs, and liturgical life, cultivates an ethos that gives depth and meaning to historical suffering and resistance. The land becomes sacred not for political reasons, but because it holds the memory and sacrifice of ancestors. Martyrs, in Zizioulas' theology of history, are central—they embody a form of existence that refuses to let death have the final word.

Zizioulas Meets Gadamer: Points of Convergence and Departure

The broader perspective gained from the preceding discussion on Florovsky and Zizioulas opens the way for deeper insights into the relationship between Zizioulas and Gadamer. I will highlight those moments in Zizioulas' work where he explicitly distinguishes his position from Gadamer and others; however, readers do not need a full exposition of the hermeneutical tradition and may skip those sections. We can say that Zizioulas adopts the view that, after Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, no Orthodox theologian can approach tradition as before. In Gadamer, Zizioulas finds an ally: one who believes that understanding must expand beyond abstraction or rationalism, toward a lived and integrated knowledge—what the Christian tradition has called *sapientia*. Significantly, Zizioulas agrees with Gadamer that understanding a text involves recognizing that *its meaning extends beyond the author's intent*. Remember Zizioulas' remark: *Would Aristotle have understood their meaning, had he been given the Nicene Creed to read?* In Gadamer's words, understanding is not merely reproductive but always a productive activity. Zizioulas also affirms that interpreting the same element of tradition at different times can never be identical due to temporal distance. Like Gadamer, Zizioulas challenges a monolithic, undifferentiated, or rigid conception of tradition.[121] As Gadamer notes, future generations will inevitably

[121] Zizioulas holds that Tradition has to be "interpreted in a way that would make it relevant to the existential needs of humanity. It is no longer enough to preserve our Tradition. Our forefathers did that very well. We must not make Ortho-

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understand a text differently from its author. Thus, tradition comprises a vast array of interpretive possibilities. To Gadamer's idea that having a "horizon" means not being limited to the immediate but seeing beyond it, Zizioulas would assent, a principle reflected in his theology.[122]

Metropolitan John repeatedly insisted that true theology does not begin with detached observation but with a *meeting*—with the eucharistic event, with Scripture, with the living memory of the Church. It is in this encounter that the questions arise. It is a dialogical act, echoing Gadamer's conviction—borrowed from Collingwood—that we only truly understand when we grasp the question to which something is the answer.

Anthony Thiselton highlights how Gadamer's hermeneutics challenges the illusion of "timeless, unhistorical rationalism."[123] Instead of imagining that doctrinal truths float outside history like fixed stars, Gadamer speaks of the "fusion of horizons"—the dynamic meeting of the past and the present in interpretive engagement. This, too, resonates with Zizioulas' thought: the Church is the space where the horizon of Pentecost fuses with the concerns of today. "If prophecy makes no sense without history, since it is nothing but an interpretation of it, equally history ceases to be history unless it has a meaning, that is, unless it is somehow linked with prophecy."[124] The eucharistic assembly, the Fathers, the lived communion of the saints—these are not frozen artifacts, but living interlocutors. Doctrine, in this light, is not preserved in abstraction but received through participation.

doxy an exotic religion, as it appears to so many Western Christians. We must engage in its interpretation in the light of today's and tomorrow's basic existential concerns." ("The Orthodox Church and the Third Millennium," *The One and the Many,* 401). To be faithful to that tradition, "we must be prepared to open up the frontiers of theology to other sciences and cultural concerns." (Zizioulas, "Faith and Order: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *The One and the Many,* 383).

[122] Cf. Zizioulas' previous remark on the Book of Revelation: that this book should be read with a hermeneutic lens, focusing on its enduring existential meaning. Its purpose is to convey truths of ultimate importance for the world, and these deserve our attention (*Priests of Creation*, 32)

[123] *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 5.

[124] *Priests of Creation*, 33.

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Gadamer's emphasis on *application* as an integral part of interpretation also finds deep echo in Zizioulas. For Zizioulas, application is not an afterthought to doctrine but its existential grounding: "truth" is never merely a concept, but a *life*, transfigured in Christ and communally embodied. In this way, Gadamer's view of understanding as fundamentally historical and life-related aligns with Zizioulas' theology of being, which places the person not as an isolated knower but as a *relational* being, always embedded in a historical and ecclesial context.

Drawing on Gadamer, we can distinguish two kinds of hermeneutical horizons. The first arises from the interpreter's *readiness to understand*—a precondition of humility and expectation. The second, more profound, horizon is that of the doctrinal subject matter itself, which demands that the interpreter approach with reverence, allowing the otherness of the theological content to speak on its own terms. In this way, doctrine becomes a dialogical unfolding, a continuous act of *anamnesis* and *prolepsis*—remembering and anticipating, retrieving and reinterpreting. This is illustrated in the theological insights of Justo González who observes that the Christian doctrine of creation did not arise from abstract inquiries into cosmology, but from *thanksgiving*—from doxology, not deduction. "Creation," González writes, "is not so much about the beginning of things as it is about their meaning."[125] Such a statement could easily have been penned by Zizioulas himself, for whom creation, like doctrine, is not a static object of analysis but a relational gift, revealed and interpreted within the liturgy of the Church.

> Accepting that my existence is a gift moves my heart to overflow with gratitude as soon as I become conscious of my existence. Thus, the awareness of being, and ontology, becomes eucharistic in the deepest sense of the term: an act of grace, of thanksgiving. ... [T]here are no liturgical prayers that did not include, first and fore-

[125] Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Alban, 2006 and Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 49.

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most, a thanksgiving celebrating existence itself, the fact that the world exists.[126]

Hermeneutics thus begins with an encounter—with otherness. For both Gadamer[127] and Zizioulas, such an encounter confronts us with what is unfamiliar, compelling us to recognize the historical and contextual limits of our own understanding.[128] Zizioulas would nod in agreement and say: "[T]he other is not to be identified by his or her qualities, but by the sheer fact that he or she is, and is *himself* or *herself*. We cannot discriminate between those who are and those who are not 'worthy' of our acceptance. This is what the Christological model of communion with the other requires."[129]

Having examined their shared emphasis on meaning and interpretation, we now turn to the key differences between Gadamer and Zizioulas—especially in their views on truth, tradition, and doctrine—thus initiating a hermeneutical dialogue between philosophical and theological horizons.

Zizioulas does not merely rehearse the insights of Gadamer; rather, his magnum opus on eschatology, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology*—completed shortly before his death in 2023 and published posthumously—offers a rich harvest of a lifetime's theological labor and provides deep insight into his distinctive hermeneutics. Prior to Zizioulas' final work, one might have agreed with Fr. Matthew Baker that "the importance of hermeneutics is expressed but remains philosophically underdeveloped in Zizioulas' oeuvre."[130] However, this judgment no longer holds after

[126] "'Created' and 'Uncreated': The Existential Significance of Chalcedonian Christology," *Communion and Otherness*, 256.

[127] According to Gadamer, "the hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one's own attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts." *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 46.

[128] "The hermeneutical attitude … includes the fundamental suspension of one's own prejudices … keeping oneself open to what is the other … to distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes." (*Truth and Method*, 11).

[129] *Communion and Otherness*, 6.

[130] "Zizioulas and Heidegger," 107.

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Remembering the Future, which is, in fact, wholly dedicated to the theme of hermeneutics and marks a significant deepening of his engagement with it. Zizioulas championed an "eschatological hermeneutics of dogmatics," interpreting theological doctrines through the lens of the ultimate event: Christ's resurrection. This book is written for those who *have accepted* the fact of the Resurrection of Christ and are interested in *the "logical" consequences* that follow the acceptance of this fact: *credo ut intelligam*.[131] This perspective informed his understanding of the human person. His emphasis on the Resurrection, both historical and future-oriented, became a recurring theme in his work, especially from the turn of the 21st century onwards. He argued that Christian doctrines stem from a rigorous interpretation of the core truth: "Christ is Risen," an event encompassing not only Christ's victory over death but also the promise of our own resurrection.

Zizioulas acknowledges that the "emphasis on eschatology in modern philosophy" can be "traced back to Heidegger." In Heidegger's framework, the self-understanding of *Dasein*—the hermeneutics of facticity—always "projects itself toward the future" and, in doing so, becomes "aware of its finitude" ("Vorlaufen zum Tode").[132]

Zizioulas observes that in the Eucharist, we "remember past events by placing them in the setting of the future," allowing the latter to "provide the tone and ambiance in which they are recalled and experienced." For him, this means that "historical events acquire their significance for the present" (becoming "efficacious and creative events") only when "understood and experienced as part of a future event" that "possesses finality" and ultimacy. Thus, the "remembrance of the future" becomes "a hermeneutical tool for understanding and appropriating the past." Crucially, Zizioulas insists that this remembrance "does not undermine history but rather confirms and vivifies it." He concludes with a striking insight: "eschatology and history are not two alternative or opposite ideas but united in the one and the same event."[133]

[131] Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 61.
[132] *Remembering the Future*, 4.
[133] *Remembering the Future*, 11.

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> Christianity, therefore, in all its basic claims and existential implications, depends entirely on the experience of the intrusion of the eschata into history and the interpretation and reception of the tradition *via* its encounter with the future.[134]

Zizioulas intentionally employs, as he says, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's terminology": it is in the fusion of the "horizon" of the past with the "horizon" of the future that the past acquires its true meaning, its *hermeneutics*. Yet he adds a caveat: in Christian theology, the past is not interpreted "by being placed in the horizon of the present," as with Gadamer, but "in that of the future."[135] How, then, does Zizioulas understand the "present"? It emerges from the encounter of past and future either as a *dialectic*, a "κρίσις" (judgment/crisis) in Johannine terms (Jn 2:19; 12:31), an either/or in Kierkegaard's language, or as a *conversion* of the past into an eschatological reality—a pure "Yes" without a "No," a eucharistic "Amen" (1 Cor 1:10) that equals a "sacrament."[136]

This reflects Zizioulas' contribution to the theology of time: time is redeemed neither by escaping into eternity in a Platonic fashion nor by a vertical "mystical" intrusion of the eternal into the present, but "by becoming 'now' the bearer and the receptor of its future, its τέλος," the ultimate purpose of its existence, as St Maximus would say.[137]

The encounter of the risen (eschatological) Christ with his disciples brought the end—understood as purpose—into the present. It thus became the "birthplace" of sacramental reality, in which past events and created realities become icons of the Kingdom and vehicles of immortality, "antidotes to death" in the words of St Ignatius of Antioch—though, for now, "in the Spirit," as an "earnest," evoking both thanksgiving and the longing cry of "maranatha," voiced by the first Christian communities.[138] Contrary to the widespread assumption that the past is recalled independently of the future, Zizioulas insists that "*the remembrance of the past via the re-*

[134] *Remembering the Future*, 12.
[135] *Remembering the Future*, 12.
[136] *Remembering the Future*, 12–13.
[137] *Remembering the Future*, 13.
[138] *Remembering the Future*, 13.

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membrance of the future, which the disciples experienced in their encounters with the risen Lord (Lk 24:30–32), carried with it the giving of the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22) that enabled them to 'interpret' the Christ of the past (Lk 24:27; Jn 14:26) and to foretaste the gifts of the future Kingdom."[139]

And now, John Zizioulas draws the theological conclusion: theology must draw in its interpretative task from the Church's liturgical experience in which the Holy Spirit prolongs in time and space those encounters. Theology must be an interpretation of the ecclesial (eucharistic in particular) experience in which the remembrance (in the sense explained above) of the future (Kingdom) acts as the hermeneutical "horizon" for the appropriation and proclamation of the apostolic kerygma at a particular time and situation.[140]

As already noted, for Zizioulas, the past can only be "interpreted" and truly understood through the entry of the eschata into history. This becomes possible through what he calls "the reversal of time from the future to the past,"[141] made manifest in Christ's post-Resurrection appearances to his disciples.

> All this brings us back to what we already noted concerning the reversal of time from the future to the past brought about by Christ's appearances to his disciples after the Resurrection: only by the entrance of the eschata into history can the past be "interpreted" and understood. This hermeneutical principle which pertains to liturgical time and to Christology must be applied also to the doctrine of creation.[142]

Zizioulas observed that patristic theology is "a work of hermeneutics," wherein the apostolic faith and experience is "appropriated" by "being placed" within the "horizon" of the Hellenic culture in which the Fathers were raised, and through which they were called "to interpret the apostolic kerygma."[143] For him, "Hellenism means philosophy," and it was in this realm that the apostolic faith had to apply its hermeneutics. This was especially difficult with es-

[139] *Remembering the Future*, 13.
[140] *Remembering the Future*, 16.
[141] *Remembering the Future*, 19.
[142] *Remembering the Future*, 19.
[143] *Remembering the Future*, 22.

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chatology, since Greek thought was protological—oriented toward the past, viewing perfection as something at the beginning of history, "or even before it." As such, it resisted the idea that the future could enter history and shape the present. Truth (ἀλήθεια) was seen as "a recollection of what was already there and emerged from oblivion."[144]

How does the modern philosophical turn toward finitude and futurity shape the foundations of hermeneutics? Zizioulas acknowledges the contributions of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer to hermeneutics. "Hermeneutics emerged," he writes, from Dilthey's insight that to understand historical life, one must view "the whole from the perspective of its end."[145] Heidegger adopts this in his notion of "being-unto-death," where "understanding our existence" requires orientation toward "the ultimate." This reveals an "essential relationship" between our finitude and how we interpret "our involvement in the world." As finite beings, we need "the mediation of hermeneutics" to understand both self and world. Thus, our "origin (*Herkunft*)" always "comes to meet us from the future (*Zukunft*)"; hermeneutics presupposes "a kind of eschatology." "The past as authentic history is grounded in the possibility … to be futural. This is the first principle of all hermeneutics."[146]

From this angle, Zizioulas states, "historical events or facts do not possess a 'being,' an ontology of their own." Nietzsche's claim that "there are no facts, there is only interpretation" may apply to hermeneutics, albeit with "important qualifications." In eschatological hermeneutics, "historical facts are not denied but acquire their truth,"[147] their meaning and "wholeness," when seen "from the end of history," rather than in their past "incompleteness and fragmentation." Even for Heidegger, "the end does not negate the past," since "being-unto-death" sends us back to our heritage, enabling a creative response to unrealized possibilities. Gadamer builds on this "productive history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), though "the eschatolog-

[144] *Remembering the Future*, 23.
[145] *Remembering the Future*, 30.
[146] *Remembering the Future*, 30–31. Here Zizioulas refers both to Dilthey and Heidegger.
[147] *Remembering the Future*, 31.

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ical foundation of hermeneutics is not as clear"[148] in his work. Still, for Gadamer, "the future affects the past in a decisive way," as interpretation involves the merging of "the already understood" with "the alien," opening history to "infinite possibilities."[149]

What sets theological hermeneutics apart from its philosophical counterparts, especially in the face of death and the interpretation of history? Zizioulas holds that embracing the Christian faith brings us face to face with "fundamental differences between theological and philosophical hermeneutics," especially as "presented by Heidegger and Gadamer." The first key difference concerns "the way we understand the future as the basis for interpreting history." For Heidegger, "the futurity of being is identical with *death*": it is "our finitude that draws us back to the past" to interpret our existence—since "an infinite being does not need hermeneutics." In contrast, for the Christian faith, it is "the abolition of death by the Resurrection" that "leads us back to the past in order to interpret history." The consequences, Zizioulas concludes, are "existentially important." Heidegger's future leaves us "under the threat of death," always "moving toward the end and never experiencing it as presence," but only as "a *possibility*." Thus, "history is only an *anticipation*," a "not yet" and never an "already." An "already," for Heidegger, "would threaten the temporal character of being," which is foundational to his ontology.[150]

> By entering history, the Resurrection grants it *being-without-death*, thus providing hermeneutics with the "horizon" of *communion* between past and present persons and events, granting life and being to what death naturally divides, turning tradition from a museum relic into a living reality. It is by acquiring a future through the entrance of the Resurrection into history that the various generations and epochs meet one another, forming a common *culture*.[151]

What happens to history—and our interpretation of it—when the future enters it not as death, but as resurrection? According to Zizioulas, there is a clear distinction between a "history of effects"

[148] *Remembering the Future*, 31.
[149] *Remembering the Future*, 30–31.
[150] *Remembering the Future*, 32.
[151] *Remembering the Future*, 33.

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(*Wirkungsgeschichte*) rooted in "anticipation," as in Heidegger, and a "culture and tradition that draw their existence from an entrance of the future resurrection into history." In the first view, history is either "a purely human achievement" or a natural "necessity." In the second, history and its creative effects are "not simply human achievements" but "*gifts of God* coming to humanity" through the "risen Christ," "offered back to God" in gratitude. Thus, the hermeneutical "horizon" becomes "eucharistic," and history, *Christocentric* in its very being.[152]

Zizioulas proceeds to a bold thesis: a truly "eucharistic" hermeneutics allows for "cultural achievements [to] acquire eschatological significance," but only insofar as they are liberated from mortality—from "being-unto-death." Such an eschatological reading of history necessarily entails "the discernment of historical effects," for the coming of the eschaton is not merely affirming but also judging: it brings "the *judgment* of history," a "purification from whatever smacks of death." Thus, cultures and traditions are "not sanctified automatically and generally." Zizioulas firmly opposes the uncritical embrace of history "as it is," a stance he sees in many modern theologians—Orthodox included—calling it "*incompatible with eschatological hermeneutics*."[153]

Zizioulas raises a pressing question: "Is history to be divided into two compartments, as Augustine seems to suggest?"—one "secular" and one "sacred," coexisting sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension? He distances himself from "most of modern Christian theology" on this point, noting that such a dichotomy becomes problematic under the scrutiny of eschatological hermeneutics. For Zizioulas, "history is one," yet in its present condition it remains "ambiguous in its nature," with good and evil still "intermingled."[154]

> The question whether history is "good" or "bad" is a false dilemma, because it is both; it contains being and nonbeing side by side. Viewed from the angle of eschatological ontology, which claims that being is true being only if it is ever-being, history possesses

[152] *Remembering the Future*, 33.
[153] *Remembering the Future*, 33.
[154] *Remembering the Future*, 34.

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truth and being (an ontology) only, however, because of the entrance of the eschaton into its course.[155]

What role does the Church play in eschatological hermeneutics? If the Church is understood as "an eschatological community existing in history" (in the world but not of the world—Jn 15:18; 17:6,14), and if history is "judged" and affirmed ontologically through "the entrance of the Kingdom into its course," then the Church, Zizioulas insists, "provides *by her very existence in history* a hermeneutical tool"—or, as he puts it, a "horizon"—through which historical "events and actions" are "received" and "transmitted" (παράδοσις), that is, creatively interpreted.[156] These are not merely acts between human beings, but acts of communion with God and his Kingdom. By "placing the past in the 'horizon' of the future,"[157] as is done in the Eucharist, the Church "receives and incorporates all historical acts and effects" that fit into this *horizon of communion*, "blesses and sanctifies" them as the body of Christ, and thus "grants certain forms of culture" not merely moral worth but "life eternal, which is true being."[158]

John Zizioulas concludes that "the affinities of philosophical hermeneutics with Christian theology" are only "slowly beginning to become apparent" and have yet to significantly shape theological methodology. Theology, he observes, still largely operates with "a view of tradition"—whether Scripture, the Fathers, or doctrine—as something "formed in the past" with a fixed "ontology," identity, and content. In contrast, eschatology as a hermeneutical key remains "awaiting its full application to systematic theology"—a task, Zizioulas insists, that arises "from the very center of the Christian faith."[159]

Building on our comparative analysis of Zizioulas with Florovsky and Gadamer, our attention now shifts to Wolfhart Pannenberg.

[155] *Remembering the Future*, 34.
[156] *Remembering the Future*, 34–35.
[157] *Remembering the Future*, 35.
[158] *Remembering the Future*, 35.
[159] *Remembering the Future*, 32.

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Pannenberg, Mozart, and the Future as the Horizon of Truth

The initial and striking impression is that both Pannenberg and Zizioulas regard eschatological ontology as intrinsic to the structure of history and divine revelation. However, their approaches differ significantly: Pannenberg grounds his position solely in the concept of revelation, while Zizioulas, in his pursuit of a framework for eschatological ontology, develops his thought on the basis of the Eucharist and the patristic theological tradition.

Zizioulas perceives a paradoxical structure in the biblical narrative, which can be summarized as follows: a) That which occurs does not attain completion at the moment of occurrence but acquires its full meaning in the future; b) Thus, one must await the future to understand what has taken place; c) Without the arrival of the future to disclose its meaning, the event remains incomplete and unintelligible; therefore, d) the future precedes the past.[160]

The great question is how the relationship between Alpha and Omega is understood in different traditions. It seems that the Eastern Christian tradition is more inclined to view Omega as giving meaning to Alpha. According to Maximus the Confessor, the end (τὰ ἔσχατα) represents the *reason* for which both the past and the present came into being (ὑφέστηκαν). This is a key point that Metropolitan John recognized very early on in Maximus the Confessor's teachings.

Of particular importance for our investigation is Pannenberg's *Jesus: God and Man*,[161] in which he addresses the retroactive nature of the Resurrection and introduces the concept of the *prolepsis* (anticipation) of the eschaton. Pannenberg conceives the eschaton *as a component of history*, although he does not always articulate with precision the relationship between the future and the present. He refers to this as a "continuity from the end" or "a continuity toward the past." His central claim is that the Resur-

[160] See my "The Beginning and the End Are Not the Same," *Theology as a Surprise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 30.

[161] *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

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rection not only confers meaning on Jesus' entire life but also constitutes it as the self-revelation of God.

Within Protestant theology, Pannenberg's assertion of the ontological primacy of the future is original, though related ideas can be found in Jürgen Moltmann, and to some extent in Hegel, Whitehead, Bloch, and Heidegger. The earthly life of Jesus was unique precisely in that it was determined by the event of the Resurrection *before* the Resurrection historically occurred. That is, Jesus' authoritative conduct anticipated, at least generally, the Resurrection and its implications for his earthly life. Thus, Pannenberg maintains that the Resurrection acts retroactively—not only following its historical occurrence, but even prior to it. One of Pannenberg's characteristic formulations reads:

> The creation of all things, even including things that belong to the past, takes place out of the ultimate future from the eschaton, insofar as only from the perspective of the end are all things what they truly are. For their real significance becomes clear only when it becomes apparent what ultimately will become of them.[162]

Despite certain inconsistencies in expression, Pannenberg systematically elevated the eschatological character of the Resurrection to a position of central theological significance. Consider the following statement:

> If the eschaton *towards which all things have their being* has already appeared in an anticipatory way in Jesus, he is, as the one exalted to be the eschatological Judge, also *the one from whom all things come*.[163]

Pannenberg is fully aware of the tension such claims present to common sense. Therefore, he proposes that this conceptual approach is acceptable "only when one perceives the necessity of their emergence from the circumstances of the proleptic appearance of the eschaton in Jesus' history,"[164] acknowledging that the very concept of *prolepsis* is inherently paradoxical.

[162] *Jesus: God and Man*, 230.
[163] *Jesus: God and Man*, 392. Emphasis added.
[164] *Jesus: God and Man*, 157.

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A foundational principle in Pannenberg's system is the identification of *being* with *meaning*; more precisely, *it is meaning that establishes being*. This is a premise that Zizioulas does not adopt. Pannenberg illustrates this with the example of Mozart:[165] during his lifetime, Mozart did not enjoy the recognition he received posthumously. Only later was his genius and universal contribution acknowledged. Here, Pannenberg's point becomes clear: only the cumulative evidence revealed over time discloses true meaning and constructs identity. His *meaning* constitutes his being, but we must note that it constitutes Mozart's identity "backwards," retrospectively. Therefore, to understand what Mozart's works are and what Mozart's meaning is, we must look to the future.

Pannenberg's most profound theological contribution may lie in his assertion that everything pertinent to Christ and Christianity begins with the Resurrection. And yet, despite its historical character, the Resurrection derives its full meaning from the future—particularly from its connection to the eschatological resurrection of all (cf. 1 Cor 15:16).

Zizioulas, for his part, does not begin this discussion from Pannenberg's standpoint,[166] but rather from what he calls a "scandalous" expression in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, where it is proclaimed that in the Eucharist we "remember ... the Second and glorious Coming." One may say that, "the question of hermeneutics is built in to Zizioulas' controlling concern: the Eucharist."[167] For Zizioulas, this "remembrance" of a future event is more than paradoxical—it opens up an entirely new ontological horizon. How, indeed, is it possible to remember what has not yet oc-

[165] See T. Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark 2009).

[166] Cf. Kalaitzidis remark: "[O]ne could argue that Zizioulas reaches the same conclusion as Pannenberg by virtue of a deep and creative interpretation of the patristic (especially Maximus the Confessor) and liturgical (cf. the role of the Eucharist and Pneumatology) tradition of the ancient church, in his effort to go beyond the impasses of the classic protological thought" (Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Eschatology and Future-Oriented Hermeneutics in Contemporary Orthodox Theology: The Case of Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas," in *The Spirit, Hermeneutics, and Dialogues*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, et. al. [Leuven: Peeters, 2019], 169).

[167] Matthew Baker, "Zizioulas and Heidegger," 107.

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curred? Zizioulas answers by pointing to the Eucharist, which from its inception has been understood as a reality that *iconizes* (portrays) the Truth—the Eschaton. Citing St. Maximus the Confessor, Zizioulas notes that

> the "truth" in the words of Maximus the Confessor, is logically prior, since it is this that gives "substance" and meaning to both past and present). The "end" constitutes the "reason" for which both the past and the present "subsist," according to St Maximus [PG 90,621], and in consequence the "future age which does not end" becomes not an effect, as happens in time as we know it after the fall, but the cause of all past and present events.[168]

Zizioulas once characterized the idea of "shadow" as very distinctive from an ontological point of view:

> Everything depends on where the illumination comes from. If the light is behind you, the path ahead of you will be in shadow. If the light is in front of you, then your past is marked by shadow. Here lies the difference between Greek and Christian ontology.[169]

In every Eucharistic experience of the Resurrection as the judgment-truth of this world, the Church, through the Holy Spirit, remembers the Coming One. We find, then, that the ecclesial Tradition already contains an eschatological ontology. Another statement from Maximus' *scholia*—whether his or attributed to John of Scythopolis—is taken seriously by Zizioulas: "Truth is the state of the age to come." In this historical moment, what we possess is an icon of the truth; the past is merely a shadow. The full truth lies in the future.

In examining St. Irenaeus of Lyons, who confronted the theological status of the Mosaic Law—particularly the question, "Was the Law of the Old Covenant good?"—Zizioulas revisits a problem that emerged in the second century in connection with the abolition of Mosaic prescriptions (circumcision, sacrifices, etc.) by the New Testament. Prior to Irenaeus, no theological answer of philosophical depth had been offered. Justin the Philosopher suggested that the Law was abolished because it was bad. Irenaeus, by

[168] *Remembering the Future*, 293.
[169] I draw here on personal conversations with Metropolitan John Zizioulas.

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contrast, affirmed that although the Law was abolished, it was not because it was bad, but because its meaning resided in the future. What arrived later annulled the Law—but not because it was evil. Rather, the Law existed only in light of the future event that gave it meaning and hypostasis. Zizioulas writes:

> The answer given by St Irenaeus remains the basis for Maximus' thinking: a future event (the coming of Christ) can annul an event in the past (e.g., the sacrifices of the Old Testament), not because the latter was evil and had to disappear, but because it existed solely for the sake of the future event, which gives it meaning and substance.[170]

This leads to a forceful claim: the future (not just *any* future, but the eschatological one) is what bestows *hypostasis* and *truth* upon an event. Drawing upon the rich biblical and patristic tradition, Zizioulas undertakes to view this principle in relation to all chapters of dogmatic theology. St. Basil the Great links the "Eighth Day"[171] with the "First Day" of creation because the Eighth Day is identified with the Resurrection: creation without a future is ontologically non-existent. If creation has no future, its being is false.

According to Metropolitan John, if there is no world in the future and no one to bear witness to it, how can it be said that the world ever existed (if it is not recorded in someone's memory)? There is something paradoxical in Paul's statement that *if others do not rise, then neither has Christ risen* (cf. 1 Cor 15:16). If taken seriously, this raises a problem with using the past as a criterion. It is clear that if Christ's resurrection did not occur, there will be no future resurrection. However, shouldn't we also be troubled by the idea that Christ's resurrection is contingent on the future resurrection of the dead? Christ's resurrection is not a self-evident historical event and it required a future (a future that precedes the past).

Another element that Zizioulas strongly considers (and without which he believes ontology is reduced to psychology) is the

[170] *Remembering the Future*, 293.
[171] Basil, *De Spir.* 27.66 (PG 32:189f) quoted in *Remembering the Future*, 289.

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fact that the event of the Resurrection involves the dimension of the *body*. If we want to connect the end with history, then we must use our freedom through our body, which is possible only before death. The story of the rich man and Lazarus[172] convincingly testifies to the irreversibility of history due to/after death. If a theologian does not accept death as something bad (cf. "the last enemy")—since it aims at the destruction of the body—and focuses on something else, then he has lost ontology.

Zizioulas would likely object to Pannenberg's example of Mozart by pointing out that Mozart is a psychosomatic being (not just a soul) and that we need an encounter with Mozart *himself*, not just the *meaning* of Mozart and his work. Seeking only the "meaning" rather than the resurrection of the body reflects the influence of idealistic German philosophy, which ultimately culminated in the "spirit" (which governs everything). The claim that "Mozart's being is constituted (retroactively) by his meaning"[173] is rejected by Zizioulas, as it would entail that Mozart's resurrection could occur without the involvement of his body. For Zizioulas, this exemplifies yet again the conflation—or even the collapse—of ontology into epistemology.

> It is important to include in the eschatological destiny of a work of art, not only the work itself but the person of the artist, as well. For example, the survival of Mozart's music without the survival of Mozart himself would not be satisfactory ontologically. Being (the artist's personal identity, including his or her body) is not exhausted by, or identical with, meaning.[174]

To know that Jesus Christ exists, there must be someone who can confirm it for me. It is essential to remember that towards the end of history, many false Christs will appear (cf. Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22), and therefore, the testimony of the true Apostles is crucial, not only in a historical but also in an eschatological sense.

This is related to a well-known eschatological image that ultimately leads to a gathering centered on Christ, who will be sur-

[172] See Zizioulas, *Receive One Another: 101 Sermons*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2023), 44–47.

[173] Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 79.

[174] *Remembering the Future*, 152.

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rounded by the "Twelve" (or Apostles)[175] who will "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (cf. Mt 19:28; Lk 18:31). In this sense, ontology is neither built on agnosticism nor on mysticism. When Zizioulas points out the necessity of *witnesses*, he is not claiming that they are essential to confirm someone's knowledge, but rather that a future must exist to confirm the *existence*.

Thus, according to Zizioulas, the eschatological perspective is based on a fundamentally different argument. If I do not accept Christ's resurrection, I cannot confirm existence at all.

> Until the Last Judgement, we cannot say with absolute certainty who does not belong to Christ and who is not saved. Let us note the word "not." The argument does not imply that there is agnosticism and uncertainty with regard to Christ and the Church as the sure way to God and to salvation. The agnosticism and the uncertainty concern only those who do not believe in Christ and are not members of his Church.[176]

Zizioulas explains why attributing the eschatological future to God's *will*, not substance, prevents protological and neo-Hegelian theology influences:

> By attributing the eschatological future to the will and not to the substance of the Creator, we exclude the possibility of including the being of God in eschatological ontology (as in Pannenberg). An eschatological ontology based on the will and not the substance of the Creator keeps eschatological ontology clear from any protological elements that may creep into our ontology and, at the same time, from a "theology of history" of a neo-Hegelian type."[177]

According to Zizioulas, this eschatological framework liberates us from the flaws of provincialism and confessionalism, and permanently broadens our perspective to ensure that we do not exclude concern for the unity of people of other faiths or those who doubt and seek the unknown God. For Zizioulas, this was one of the main endeavors of the evangelical mission.

[175] Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 70.

[176] Zizioulas, "The Orthodox Church and the Third Millennium," in *The One and the Many*, 397.

[177] John D. Zizioulas, "The End Is Where We Start From," 264.

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> A Gospel that brought with it respect for history and an eschatological perspective regarding the "ultimate" of history, which has greater significance than the beginning of things, had to become part of a culture that was suspicious of history and considered the beginning of things as a more decisive factor than the end or the ultimate.[178]

For Zizioulas, all theology is already contained in the proclamation "Christ is Risen!" He was not, as M. Baker feared, influenced by Paul Tillich when emphasizing the natural condition of humanity as a *being-toward-death* (in contrast to his other Harvard teacher Florovsky's view of the created order as open to new events). On the contrary, Zizioulas believed that it is only because humans are *being-toward-resurrection* that they can fully realize their true mortality. Dionysios Skliris holds that "Zizioulas gives a bold response to Martin Heidegger by clarifying that Being is attributed to God rather than the world and that humanity is interpreted historically as being-toward-Resurrection rather than being-toward-death."[179]

> When Christ raises the dead young boy at Nain (Lk 7:11f.) the evangelist adds with meaning that after that "he gave him to his mother." The resurrection is a restoration of communion, not simply the revivification of a corpse. We miss entirely its meaning if we regard it as the raising of "individuals," of autonomous entities.[180]

Toward an Ecumenical Hermeneutics

In continuity with his emphasis on the ecclesial and traditional grounding of hermeneutics, while residing in the West and engaging in theological and philosophical dialogue with a wide range of interlocutors, Zizioulas never ceased to emphasize his Orthodox origins and starting point. In his address at a *Faith and Order* consultation with younger theologians, Metropolitan John affirmed: "I

[178] John D. Zizioulas, *Freedom and Existence: The Transition from Ancient to Christian Hellenism—Five Lectures at the Goulandris-Horn Foundation (1983)*, trans. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2024), 160.

[179] *Ἀγαπῶμαι, ἄρα σκέφτομαι*, 21.

[180] *Remembering the Future*, 41.

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happen to belong to a tradition shaped by the Greek Fathers, and I cannot overlook the fact that the theology of these Fathers transformed the culture of their time."[181] Zizioulas candidly expressed his disappointment with those within the Orthodox tradition who, under the banner of fidelity to the Fathers, resist engaging theology with the pressing questions of contemporary culture.

> This makes me feel deeply sorry and disappointed when I come across my contemporary fellow-Orthodox who, usually in the name of faithfulness to the Fathers (!), refuse to open up theology to the challenges of our culture. It is indeed tragic that, in the name of faithfulness to those who were bold enough to introduce the unprecedented and non-biblical ὁμοούσιος to the Creed, we refuse today to apply hermeneutics to tradition, thus condemning it to cultural irrelevance. This means that we must be prepared to open up the frontiers of theology to other sciences and cultural concerns. At a time when all sciences realize that they cannot operate as closed units any longer, theology cannot afford to remain indifferent to the challenges coming from the nontheological world.[182]

For Zizioulas, true faithfulness to the Fathers entails a similar boldness—a willingness to interpret, to risk engagement, and to make the voice of tradition heard in new and often challenging contexts.

In the same paper, Metropolitan John emphasized that "we must intensify our effort to achieve a common interpretation of the Christian faith with the help of a *hermeneutical* re-reception of Tradition."[183] "Vitality and energy" in Zizioulas' writing and in his vision, observes Paul McPartlan, are explicitly connected "with the tradition from which he originates."[184]

If we wonder what all this means for ecumenism itself, Pope Francis recalls, and evidently shares, the view of Metropolitan John that we must fix our gaze on the future rather than the past and ask the Holy Spirit to help us "[remember] new things."

[181] "Faith and Order: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in *The One and the Many*, 383. The meeting was held in Turku, Finland, from August 3–11, 1995.

[182] "Faith and Order: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," 383.

[183] "Faith and Order: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," 383. *Italics mine*.

[184] Paul McPartlan, "Introduction," in Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, xxii.

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Tensions and Seeming Difficulties

While the preceding exploration has sought to retrieve the inner coherence of Zizioulas' hermeneutical vision, it is necessary to acknowledge certain tensions and apparent difficulties that arise from his eschatological approach to interpretation. As Asproulis notes, anyone operating within the framework of "eschatological hermeneutics," by assigning "priority to the post-historical character of the Kingdom," risks arriving at "an absence of dialogical reciprocity." This perspective may imply "passivity on the part of creative beings, thus invoking a polarity between temporality and eternity."[185]

One might argue that Zizioulas' consistent prioritization of the eschaton risks diminishing the formative role of historical development and ecclesial tradition in shaping doctrinal meaning. Yet his detailed reflection on the Greek resistance during the Greco-Italian and Greco-German Wars—the Epic of 1940—reveals a more nuanced view. Interpreting the events through both material causality and the lens of faith and ethos, Metropolitan John praises the courage and endurance of the Greek people, who faced death not with despair but with *levendia*—a nobility of spirit forged in the crucible of historical witness.

John Zizioulas' distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics, though conceptually clear, sometimes results in an artificial dichotomy that sidelines the role of rational inquiry. His legitimate intention is "to articulate Christian theology in a way that will be faithful to the logical consequences of its own assumptions and not contradict them."[186] Yet, the claim that the future grants being to the past raises ontological questions that remain difficult to reconcile with traditional conceptions of historical causality. Zizioulas often assigns alternative meanings to the concept of logic, since the term "logic" can carry multiple meanings. The problem arises, however, when claims made about logic in a conditional or secondary sense are then applied to logic in its proper, technical meaning. An-

[185] Asproulis, "The Eschaton as Mystery and Problematic," 31.

[186] John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. L.B. Tallon (T&T Clark, 2011), 162.

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drej Jeftić noted that "it appears that Zizioulas—and much of neopatristic theology—handles the concept of logic in a rather fluid way, often assigning it negative connotations. This has led to a common assumption in Orthodox theology that logic ought to be triumphantly dismissed."[187] Jeftić holds that "even if certain logical principles cannot be applied to God, such a claim must be argued with clarity, accounting for its serious logical implications. Until then, it is safer to affirm that logic, far from binding us—or God—with rigid constraints, actually frees our discourse by making it *logos-like*."[188] Zizioulas' reference to logic cannot be understood without his reference to freedom.[189]

A few further objections to eschatological hermeneutics may be briefly noted. The strong emphasis on communion and relational ontology occasionally leaves underdeveloped the mechanisms through which this relationality is concretely discerned or enacted. His reading of Origen as overly Greek and insufficiently historical, though compelling, may underestimate the eschatological nuance in Origen's own thought. Zizioulas' theological vocabulary, rich and evocative, can sometimes become opaque, resisting the very clarity that hermeneutics is meant to provide. The dynamic between tradition and innovation in his thought walks a fine line between faithful interpretation and theological reconfiguration. His ecclesial emphasis on the Eucharist as the primary hermeneutical locus, while theologically profound, may underplay the role of personal and scriptural encounter outside the liturgy.

Some critics suggest that while Zizioulas' call for theology to address contemporary issues is inspiring, the tools he offers remain

[187] Andrej Jeftić, "Da li je teologiji potrebna logika?" [Does Theology Need Logic?], *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku: istraživački problemi i rezultati* 11 (2012): 128 [in Serbian].

[188] Andrej Jeftić, "Da li je teologiji potrebna logika?", 128.

[189] Perhaps Zizioulas' insight is instructive here: "The breaking of the logical causal connection" between "sin and punishment" occurs through the "introduction of freedom into ontology," where "personal freedom" intervenes "between cause and effect," transforming "natural causality into personal causality." Just as the world was created "from nothing" by divine will, so too can "freedom remove logical necessity" and introduce "a causality different from that which is 'imposed' … by 'correct reasoning'" (*Remembering the Future*, 250).

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largely theological rather than practical. Yet, Zizioulas highlights forgiveness as a profoundly practical expression of eschatological hermeneutics. "Someone committed murder this morning and … we will say that he is a 'murderer.'" But, he warns, "the word 'is' points to this person's being and in eschatological terms to his ever-being." He rejects the idea that "being a murderer is a permanent part of his identity," insisting that "morality does not determine ontology." Otherwise, forgiveness would be powerless to erase evil, making it eternal—"ontology in this case is subjected to morality," which undermines the resurrection's aim: "the restoration of being."[190]

Although Zizioulas never explicitly outlines a hermeneutical method, one can discern it implicitly in his ontology of *relationality*, particularly where tensions in his work come to the fore. By grounding being itself in relationality, he opens a way of reading texts, doctrines, and practices not as isolated substances but as relational events whose meaning unfolds toward their eschatological consummation.[191] These tensions between protological and eschatological perspectives, or between fidelity to tradition and responsiveness to the present, thus reveal not incoherence but an underlying hermeneutical logic: interpretation is personal, communal, and creative, reflecting the hypostatizing power of relationality itself. Just as art, for Zizioulas, manifests a "presence-in-absence" and creates *ex vetere*, so his implicit hermeneutic draws from tradition to generate new meaning without dissolving its source, always oriented toward a future of communion that alone secures its truth.

[190] *Remembering the Future*, 53–54.

[191] "In speaking, therefore, of relationality in creation, we speak of a *relational ontology*, and, in so doing, we cannot help but employ, implicitly or explicitly, personalistic ideas. The relational structure of creation acknowledged by physical science today cannot maintain its ontological meaning if it remains a purely natural phenomenon subject as it is to the dissolution imposed on it by the laws of nature. If creation is to be truly and ontologically relational, it requires a hypostasization and 'personalization' of its nature." (*Remembering the Future*, 146). Drawing on Polkinghorne's *The Trinity and an Entangled World*, Zizioulas observes that "it is noteworthy that theology and physical science can find a common language in the use of this concept" (*ibid*).

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Instead of a Conclusion: Why hermeneutics?

In this study, we have sought to explore the hermeneutical principles of the late Metropolitan John Zizioulas, with particular attention to the existential resonance of his interpretive vision. From his early academic years, Zizioulas developed a theological method grounded in the conviction that doctrine and existence are inseparable. Long before the current hermeneutical turn in theology, he affirmed that the task of the systematic theologian is to "make explicit what is implicit," treating dogmas not as static formulations, but as interpretive events bearing "exegetical coherence" with Scripture and with each other.

Zizioulas maintained that true fidelity to the Fathers lies in the faithfulness of interpretation, not in mere repetition. Theological hermeneutics, he insisted, must not result in endless relativism, but must be guided by the eschatological horizon of truth revealed in Christ's resurrection. In this light, the Church's engagement with history and culture is not accommodation but transformation—it is the baptism of time for the sake of its eschatologization. While Heidegger understood knowledge as constitutive of being, Zizioulas viewed it as secondary to existence, affirming instead that true knowledge arises from communion, not cognition alone.

The second part of our study examined the future horizon of doctrine through comparisons with Florovsky, Gadamer, and Pannenberg. Zizioulas, like Gadamer, opposed rigid conceptions of tradition and emphasized the importance of confronting new questions—the ones "the Fathers had not raised in their time." In contrast to Pannenberg, for whom being is established by meaning, Zizioulas did not conflate ontology with epistemology; instead, he championed a eucharistic hermeneutics, wherein cultural achievements acquire eschatological value only when they are freed from the dominion of death. His reference to Mozart, in this regard, is not aesthetic ornament but theological signal—pointing to a future where beauty and meaning are fulfilled not in history alone, but in communion beyond history.

Zizioulas' hermeneutics thus opens the way for theology to remain grounded in the Tradition while daring to engage with con-

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temporary questions and disciplines. "In principle Zizioulas does not seem to exclude the possibility of a new theological synthesis by using concepts and categories of thinking taken from the modern philosophy or thought; this new synthesis, however, should preserve the ontological character of theology."[192] It calls us, finally, to intensify our shared interpretive efforts and open the frontiers of theology to culture and science—so that the Church may continue to speak meaningfully in our time, not by departing from Tradition, but by remembering the future. Thus, the hermeneutical discourse of Metropolitan John may be regarded as a *terza via teologica*—a neopatristic synthesis characterized by openness, fidelity, and boldness at its core. In the fusion of these insights—from Gadamer's hermeneutics to Zizioulas' ontology, from Lonergan's epistemology to González's doxology—doctrine emerges as a living word, not a museum artifact. It is not the frozen deposit of propositions, but the ever-unfolding mystery of God with us, God in us, and God ahead of us.

And once we finished this journey, we found something revelatory in the Metropolitan John's personal notes:

> Why hermeneutics? Simply because after exposing the doctrines or teachings of Tradition and the Fathers (they teach this and that), I hear a voice from within me: "So what?" Without answering this question, you turn the Fathers into a dead [tradition], similar to the knowledge of what the Egyptians used to eat or to wear in the year 1000 BC. If history is a *theological* subject, it must be in a relevance to our existence, it must be *prescriptive*, and not just *descriptive*—or, better, "existentialist;" a term which [is used] particularly by Anglo-phone patrologists to characterize someone as "not a patristic scholar." So, in order to be "patristic scholars" one must avoid hermeneutics, but, then, the "so what?" question will hang over our heads, particularly if we want to make the patristic world relevant; "a matter of life or death" (Florovsky's appeal). The risks of hermeneutics: not to say what the Fathers did not say, but to say something *opposite* to what they said. Hermeneutics as applied by the holy Fathers: Maximus on Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory Palamas on Ps.-Dionysius [etc].[193]

[192] Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Eschatology and Future-Oriented Hermeneutics," 175.
[193] "Why hermeneutics?", *Archives of Metropolitan John Zizioulas*.

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