OmegAlpha II:1 Spring 2026, 51–74
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/5572f495
Original Paper
Received: December 2, 2025 | Accepted: February 12, 2026

Implicit Disparities: Some Differences between Christos Yannaras' and John Zizioulas' Thought

Sotiris Mitralexis

Abstract
Christos Yannaras (1935–2024) and Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon (1931–2023) are undoubtedly among the most original and significant Greek voices in twentieth-century Orthodox theology. Both remained intellectually active well into the dawn of the twenty-first century, up until their repose. Belonging to the same generation, the theology of Yannaras and that of Zizioulas is frequently compared, and terms such as theology of the person, ontology of the person, or Eucharistic ecclesiology are often applied to both—rightly so, at least to a certain extent. This is due not only to their substantial and genuine affinities but also to their shared effort to confront and move beyond the theological mentality that preceded their emergence in Greece. Many of their premises and themes are strikingly similar: person and nature, substance and hypostasis, communion and otherness, the Church as Eucharistic community, eros and ek-stasis, and so forth. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to assume that we are dealing with one and the same

Sotiris Mitralexis
University College London Anthropology
London, UK
Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies
Cambridge, UK
E-mail: s.mitralexis@ucl.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5373-1662

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits use, distribution, reproduction, and adaptation in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

theology. I would summarize their differences as follows: (a) apophaticism versus eschatology, together with their respective inclusive and exclusive expressions; (b) transcending the limitations of nature versus transcending nature as such; (c) human love versus metaphysical eros; and (d) the monarchy of the Father in relation to the triad of substance–activities–hypostasis. As I hope to demonstrate in this paper, these differences are significant, and the theological implications that arise from them are even more significant.

Keywords: Christos Yannaras, John Zizioulas, apophaticism, ekstasis, nature, activities, eros, Eucharistic ecclesiology, prosopocentric ontology, eschatology

In acquiring an overview of the development of Orthodox theology during the second millennium—its peaks, lows, silent phases and bursts of "originality–as–tradition"—it is not difficult to be convinced that what these two thinkers have brought to (Greek) Orthodox theology and its sophistication (notwithstanding its shortcomings) has given rise to one of the most important theological eras after the fourteenth century. This is not too fanciful of a statement, especially if one takes into account the centuries-long involuntary slumber of Orthodox theology during Ottoman times.

Belonging to the same generation, the theology of Christos Yannaras (1935–2024) and that of John Zizioulas (1931–2023) are often compared, and titles such as the "theology of the person," the "ontology of the person" or "eucharistic ecclesiology" are sometimes applied to both—and, up to a certain extent, rightly so: not only due to their actual and very substantial affinities, but also in approaching these theologies over and against the mentality that preceded their emergence in Greece. Many of their premises and themes are indeed strikingly common: person and nature, substance and hypostasis, communion and otherness, church as eucharistic community, eros and ekstasis (or, in Yannaras' preferred hyphenation, ek-stasis), and so on.

Tracing Similarities and Divergences: Introductory Notes

Besides their shared historical context, common sources, overlapping vocabulary, and shared focal points—especially concerning personhood, communion, and ecclesiology—less work has been done on their *divergences*, even if Yannaras and Zizioulas articulate distinct theological visions whose differences are not merely stylistic or rhetorical but ontological and methodological, with far-reaching implications. Furthermore, to label them together as "(the) Orthodox personalists" is to commit a double sin, since they have both voiced repeatedly their dislike for the label "personalism," which forces them into a tradition of thought (or a variation of it) from which their theology does not originate and with which they do not really converse. Namely, the notion of *person* in personalism—i.e., individualism, human subjectivity, free will, internalisation, "only persons are real," the Roman Catholic personalism of the Wojtyłian variety—and their use of the term πρόσωπον point to two substantially different and largely unrelated realities. Even if there is substantial overlap, the distinction between "personalism" and the "theology of personhood" is not merely semantic. Western personalism—whether in its Roman Catholic (Maritain, Mounier, Wojtyła), Protestant (Brunner), or philosophical (Scheler, Buber) variants—typically grounds personhood in consciousness, interiority, rational agency, or relational capacity as properties of the individual human being. The person is conceived primarily in psychological or moral-anthropological terms, often emphasizing dignity, rights, and subjective experience.

By contrast, the theology of personhood developed by Yannaras and Zizioulas, following Lossky and the Cappadocian retrieval, grounds personhood ontologically in hypostatic existence: the irreducible mode of being that constitutes reality itself, not merely human subjectivity. Πρόσωπον here signifies not an individuated subject but the ek-static, relational principle that actualizes being through communion, transcending the opposition between individual and universal. Personhood is not conceived pri-

marily in terms of individual subjectivity but as ecstatic relationality, freedom from lapsarian natural necessity, and ontological communion. Where personalism risks reinforcing a metaphysics of substance with personalist attributes, the theology of personhood attempts to overcome substance-ontology entirely by making the person the ultimate ontological category—a move rooted in Trinitarian and Christological dogma rather than anthropology. Historically, while both movements emerged partly in response to modernity's depersonalizing tendencies, they share no *direct* genealogical link, even if indirect links abound. Western personalism arose from post-Kantian idealism and phenomenology; the Orthodox theology of personhood arose from patristic *ressourcement* and the ecclesiological turn of 20th-century Russian theology, albeit in implicit dialogue with certain varieties of personalism and in response to them. Their convergent vocabulary masks divergent metaphysical commitments. This is a difference that, while not central to the aims of the present article, warrants brief acknowledgment in order to avoid conceptual confusion.

Returning to the problems of comparison, the claim that these theologians articulate a *completely* different theology with merely superficial similarities is equally lacking in accuracy to the claim of an enforced "hypostatic union" of their theologies. It is interesting to note that the *differences* that are most often invoked when such a differentiation is articulated are in themselves problematic: while there are disparities, these are usually anything but the ones usually highlighted. As one such problematic portrayal has it, Yannaras affirms Hellenism and the continuity thereof through its discontinuities as a central axis of his thought, leading to a focus on Greece and Greeks, while Zizioulas is a much more ecumenical theologian, without Yannaras' anti-Westernism, and so on. A number of scholars have created extensive literature on this erroneous juxtaposition. Not to put too fine a point on it, but both theologians are—and are not—equally "Hellenocentric" and/or "anti-Western," assuming the latter term has any semantic content or purchase in the twenty-first century. After all, Yan-

naras is the author of "Towards a New Ecumenism,"[1] and Zizioulas, a disciple of Georges Florovsky and his "Christian Hellenism," has (a) authored a book *Hellenism and Christianity: the Encounter of Two Worlds*[2] (b) never downplayed—either as a scholar or as an important actor in the ecumenical movement—the doctrinal and theological differences of the Orthodox Church to other churches and traditions, and (c) is imbued with the same sharp and perhaps oversimplistic critical stance against Augustine and his legacy as Yannaras. Yes, there are crucial differences between Yannaras and Zizioulas—but anti-Westernism versus ecumenical openness is certainly not one of them, save perhaps for a difference in rhetorical style.

The question of style must be taken into account in studying these two thinkers comparatively, for their careers have been very different. After his undergraduate studies in theology, Yannaras pursued philosophical studies leading to a PhD in philosophy from Paris IV–Sorbonne and eventually embarked on a teaching and professorial career in academia, in philosophy. Apart from Greek, his working language was primarily French rather than English, thus accounting for the indirect, mediated access that most Anglophone scholars have to his work. Zizioulas, however, embarked on a professorial career in theology, teaching at British universities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, and King's College London) and wrote directly in English, achieving a different kind of visibility as far as Anglophone academia is concerned. After his ordination in 1986, he played an important role in the ecumenical movement representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate. These two quite different trajectories account for a difference in *style* and focal points in publishing output, which however should not be mistaken for the *substantial* differences that indeed do exist. There

[1] Christos Yannaras, "Towards a New Ecumenism," *Sourozh* 70, November 1997: 1–4.

[2] John D. Zizioulas, *Ἑλληνισμὸς καὶ Χριστιανισμός: Ἡ Συνάντηση τῶν δύο κόσμων [Hellenism and Christianity: The Encounter of Two Worlds]* (Apostoliki Diakonia tis Ekklisias tis Ellados, 1976); reprint from John D. Zizioulas, "Ἑλληνισμὸς καὶ Χριστιανισμός: Ἡ Συνάντηση τῶν δύο κόσμων ["Hellenism and Christianity: The Encounter of Two Worlds"], in *Ἱστορία τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Ἔθνους [History of the Greek Nation]*, vol. 6 (Ekdotiki Athinon, 1976).

are also different *themes* in their work, which cannot be taken as substantially differing characteristics. For example, Yannaras develops a sharp contradistinction between the phenomenon of religion and the ecclesial event,[3] and while this is not to be found in Zizioulas' *oeuvre*, it would be quite compatible with his theology and thus not a real difference. Other differences are methodological and only to be inferred from a comprehensive study of their works rather than located in explicit formulations. For example, Zizioulas formulates a *top-down* theology, starting with what we know about God and eventually leading to a study of man and the world, while Yannaras engages in a *bottom-up* enquiry, starting with a phenomenological observation of humanity and the world to reach ontology proper and God.

As Aristotle Papanikolaou correctly notes, "Zizioulas and Yannaras are contemporaries, but Yannaras was the first of the two theologians to form a developed theology of personhood in his small book *On the Absence and Unknowablility of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (1967 in Greek),[4] and then more fully in his *Person and Eros* (1970 in Greek).[5] Zizioulas' first attempt at a developed theological account of personhood appeared in 1975 in the article 'Human capacity and human incapacity.'"[6] We have, thus, a more or less common trajectory of the appropriation of notions of personhood deriving from the Russian diaspora (Vladimir Lossky in particular) and the Fathers into a full-fledged ontology of personhood (or prosopon-centrism, to distinguish the term from "mainstream" personalism). This was started by Yannaras and then continued by Zizioulas, with the former repeated-

[3] Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*, trans. Norman Russell (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013).

[4] Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. Haralambos Ventis (T&T Clark, 2005).

[5] Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).

[6] Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Elizabeth Theokritoff and Mary Cunningham (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 237–38; Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 105.

ly asserting his agreement with the prosopo-centric outputs of the latter, particularly the early ones, like Zizioulas' "Personhood and Being."[7] However, in that work Yannaras is criticized for subjugating the Fathers to Heidegger,[8] downgrading Yannaras' 1970 dissertation, i.e., the very source of this particular prosopocentric understanding of theology and philosophy of which "Personhood and Being" is such a fine specimen, as wholly subjecting patristic thought to Heidegger's ontology, thereby alienating it from its source. (In my opinion, the cited arguments bear little relevance to Yannaras' actual text, and one would be hard-pressed to find in it the basis for Zizioulas' charges or Zizioulas' differentiation therefrom.) Therefore, from this common starting point diverging pillars of their worldviews began to emerge.

(a) Apophaticism versus Eschatology

Apophaticism may be uncontroversially described as one of the main pillars of Yannaras' thought. Taken as a comprehensive epistemology rather than as the *via negativa,* apophaticism is "(1) the denial that we exhaust knowledge in its formulation; (2) the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifiers with the knowledge of what is signified; and (3) the symbolic character of every epistemic expression: its role in bringing together atomic experiences and embracing them within a common semantic boundary marker, a process which allows epistemic experience to be shared, and once shared to be verified."[9] Apart from denoting the relative character of every formulation this has certain implications, particularly for the created/uncreated distinction that Yannaras likes to illustrate using two well-known quotes by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The first, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (*Tractatus* 5.6), means that humanity has no

[7] John D. Zizioulas, "Personhood and Being," in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

[8] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 44–45, note 40.

[9] Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, trans. Norman Russell (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 9.

language for what is not and cannot be within its immediate experiences: we have no language for the *un*created, save for the knowledge that it is not constrained by the limitations of createdness. We cannot have a precise language either for the life of the Trinity or for our eschatological state, this being beyond our current horizon of experiences: we only have Christ's promise and our hope, as well as some hints and indications from the life of the Church. Yannaras sees the second Wittgenstein quote as cementing the fundamental ontological difference between God and creation:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world. (*Tractatus* 6.41)

This lying *outside* the world entails its apophaticism, as well as a very strong created-uncreated distinction. This *stance* towards knowledge and language (in general, and in particular in the case of God and eschatology), bringing experience and shared experience to the forefront, permeates the totality of Yannaras' thought.

Zizioulas *does* acknowledge apophaticism (see e.g., "The Apophatic Approach"[10]), but does not elevate it to a primary guiding principle in his thought. An element that plays an equally central role in his thought to that of apophaticism in Yannaras is *eschatology*, and particularly the fact that the true ontological state of beings will be revealed in an eschatological *future* that has not yet come to pass. His posthumous book is precisely about this: *Remembering the Future*,[11] in which he proposes an eschatological ontology. Consequently, the question of how beings will be in their eschatological state acquires a central position in his thought as the ultimate criterion of everything.

[10] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 89–92.

[11] John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology* (Sebastian Press, 2023).

In discerning Yannaras' and Zizioulas' differences, apophaticism and eschatology have not been paired coincidentally. It is precisely Yannaras' *apophatic* stance that makes him suspicious of speaking in detail about an eschatological future in which we have very little information, save for the certainty that it cannot be quite like anything our *current* experience indicates, and for the hope that it will entail a degree of participation in God's uncreated life. On the other hand, it is precisely Zizioulas' eschatological orientation that allows him to base his thought on that unknown and radically different future, on "what no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, and has not entered into heart of man, what God has prepared for those loving Him" (1 Cor 2:9). To put it differently, the eschatological horizon in Zizioulas analogically functions as an apophatic stance, since it entails a pushback against absolute certitude in the here and now. In many ways (though not all), Zizioulas' eschatological cataphaticism is his apophaticism, whereas Yannaras' apophaticism discloses his implicit eschatological horizon.

One would expect that Yannaras' apophaticism would disallow certain elements from being incorporated in his theology, being beyond language, while eschatological cataphaticism would embrace everything. Interestingly enough, however, the opposite is sometimes the case. It is Yannaras' apophaticism that leads him to an *inclusive* theology, since tares are not to be uprooted from the wheat field, for we will not know for certain which is wheat until the final eschatological harvest: "for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest," according to the tares among the wheat parable (Mt 13:24-30) that Yannaras so often cited. On the other hand, eschatology (*and* eucharistic ecclesiology) can be employed in a Zizioulian framework in an attempt *not* to include certain things in one's theology, based on their supposed absence in the eschatological state. For example, Zizioulas himself openly downgrades "theologies of marriage."[12] Thus a difference of im-

[12] John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (T & T Clark, 2006), 58–59.

port here between Yannaras' and Zizioulas' legacies lies in the capacity of the latter to implement eschatology in an exclusionary way, whereas the apophatic priority has an inherent tendency to exclude the exclusion, since the alternative would be quite cataphatic indeed as a gesture. The example of marriage suits us in moving on to an important point of divergence: the two thinkers' stance on human *eros*. Before proceeding to this, however, we shall first allude to an important yet subtle distinction between the two: their stance on *nature*.

(b) Transcending the Limitations of Nature versus Transcending Nature

Since John Zizioulas' understanding of the person/nature divide has become perhaps the single most important basis for critique against his system (see, for example, Nikolaos Loudovikos' response[13]), and since Yannaras is quite often thought of as maintaining exactly the same divide (as, for example, Loudovikos[14] and Larchet[15] have argued), something which a closer inspection of his work would relativise, an accurate comparative reading of Yannaras and Zizioulas on this subject would require a special and long treatment of its own, surpassing the length of this article. Here we can only dare to attempt a very short allusion to the subject, merely in order to identify it as a point of divergence and to support our exposition of further points of divergence.

Both Yannaras and Zizioulas maintain that human substance/nature, created *and fallen* as it is, dictates individualistic needs of preservation and dominance and is moribund—but that humanity, being made in the *imago Dei*, has been gifted with the capacity to transcend nature's individualistic prescriptions and to attain

[13] Nikolaos Loudovikos, "Person Instead of Grace and Dictated Otherness: John Zizioulas' Final Theological Position?" *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (2011): 684–99.

[14] Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self,* Vol. 2, *Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era* (Brepols, 2019), 271–335.

[15] For example, Jean-Claude Larchet, *Personne et nature* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2011), 207–396.

the relationality and self-transcendence that point to the *uncreated* divine mode of existence. Humanity can actualize being as communion, love and *personal* presence, not just as particulars of a given created, fallen and moribund nature.

It is important to note here that both Yannaras and Zizioulas have drawn inspiration perhaps primarily from Maximus the Confessor among the Church Fathers. For Maximus—as both thinkers know—the word nature points to *prelapsarian* human nature (as in the "logos of nature," *inter alia*), and thus a human person's goal is to retrieve *natural* will by having their gnomic will align with it, rather than nurture a gnomic will led astray from the natural will, as one would say in Maximian jargon. While, in a *bona fide* reading, Yannaras and Zizioulas refer to nature *as we know and encounter it*—i.e., as postlapsarian/fallen, moribund nature leading to death, with their "nature" corresponding more closely to, for example, Maximus' gnome-led-astray or simply sin—and *not* to Maximian prelapsarian "nature," they are both not always clearly aware of that.[16] (In this, a divergence subtler still can be discerned: while both thinkers explicitly advocate a creative but faithful appropriation of the Fathers and the spirit of the Fathers in order to answer new questions rather than merely repeat the letter of their legacy, John Zizioulas would be perhaps less enthusiastic than Yannaras in hearing arguments that positions of his might in varying degrees *contrast* with patristic writ-

[16] See e.g., John D. Zizioulas, "Person and Nature in the Theology of St. Maximus the Confessor," in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor,* ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Sebastian Press, 2013). Or see how he adapts Maximus' insights in Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 65: "In speaking, therefore, of being 'according to nature,' Maximus means this: the authentic and true way of being is that which conforms to the hypostasization of human nature in the hypostasis of Christ, which will be realized when nature is purified from the passion of death, that is, when communion and otherness will coincide ontologically in the eschata. The 'logos of nature' for Maximus denotes not nature as such but nature *personalized*. Not emphasizing this may lead to two fundamental misunderstandings of Maximus' theology: (a) that the Fall and sin, including death, are simply the result of a deviation from a previous natural state of existence; and (b) that the authentic form of existence amounts to conformity to nature as such (nature being an ultimate ontological notion)."

ings or Maximus in particular.) Here, Nikolaos Loudovikos has tirelessly worked to apply a corrective vis-à-vis a more properly Maximian understanding of nature in the case of both Zizioulas' and Yannaras' writings, albeit in an occasionally truculent style,[17] and his insights should, in my opinion, be considered required reading in the reception of, and response to, Yannaras' and Zizioulas' theologies, in all their commonalities and differences. While Loudovikos' critique rightly applies to both thinkers, a subtle difference lies in the fact that Yannaras' 'system' does not require a nature *at large* to escape from, but the transcending of fallen nature's limitations, without however aligning with a Maximian understanding of the glory of nature.

Even though this is not the place to expand on the subject, their divergence on their understanding of nature can be oversimplified as follows: while with *ek-stasis* Christos Yannaras refers to the person transcending the *limitations* of nature (of *fallen* nature, i.e., or nature *as we come to know it*), the limitations inherent in the state we encounter her, John Zizioulas describes the person as transcending *nature itself*. Zizioulas' person/nature distinction can be described as a sharper one than that of Yannaras'. Our treatment of the third major point on love and marriage will indirectly help illustrate this further.

(c) Human Love versus Metaphysical Eros

Drawing on Patristic sources, both thinkers stress the importance of love, ἀγάπη, ἔρως, as the mode of existence of the Trinity, and as such, the perennial importance of relational self-transcendence for the constitution of the person as πρόσωπον. This is of fundamental ontological importance for both of them. However, we witness in Yannaras a correlation thereof with human love, as we know and experience it, that we do not find in Zizioulas.

It would be fair to say that for Yannaras, the self-transcendence prompted by human, conjugal love is the *par excellence* manifesta-

[17] See Loudovikos, "Person Instead of Grace and Dictated Otherness."

tion of humanity's *personal* capacity among and between human persons. While the mode of createdness entails the limitations of egocentricity, and as such death, it is the capacity to love as planted in humanity that points to the possibility of a *different* mode of existence, one closer to its Trinitarian prototype: the love and relationality of the divine hypostases. This understanding of human *eros* as reflecting humanity's capacity to transcend the egocentric limitations of createdness and to reflect God's uncreated communion of existence is most lucidly illustrated in his almost poetic *Variations on the Song of Songs*.[18] Seeing that Zizioulas does not, of course, reject human love, in order to discern the contrast between the two it is helpful to consult certain passages from Yannaras' essay "In praise of marriage," where he underscores the *ascetic* nature of marriage in juxtaposition to monasticism, adapting certain insights from St. Isaac the Syrian's writings on monastic life:

> [In conjugal life,] the sharing (more correctly: the communion) of life and existence "has the Holy Trinity as its teacher." ... The way of life and salvation (the mode by which the human person can become "sound,"[19] or complete, can participate in the plenitude of existence) is the imitation of triadic loving freedom, the kenotic self-denial of Christ: a withdrawal, in the case of the created human being, whether sought or unsought, from the autonomy of the ego, a sharing of the ego, a voluntary or even involuntary act of humility. ... Marriage (*syzygia* in Greek) is submission to the yoke (the *zygos*) of the will of the other, a sharing of the self, of life, of everyday existence, of the body and of desire, with the other. That is how it is, too, for the monk, except that in his case the "other" is a very specific practice of ecclesial asceticism that is embodied in a loving obedience to the person of the abbot, of the spiritual elder—and sometimes, perhaps, directly to the person of the Lady Theotokos, to

[18] Christos Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, trans. Norman Russell (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005).

[19] "Sound" here alludes to Yannaras' remarks on salvation as completeness—σωτηρία: σῶος— the plenitude of existence, entailing the absence of finitude, i.e., death.

> the person of Christ. With this personalized ascetical practice the monk shares his will, his food, his bodily toil, his hope. The same secret belongs to marriage: the humbling of egocentric need—it is this that banishes from the struggle any suspicion of seeking reward. The exclusion of any eventuality of recompense, the complete (but erotic, that is, ecclesial) surrender and offering of the self, in time bears fruit "automatically," giving the monk the grace to be "separated from all and united to all"—the sharing of a life and existence "that has the Holy Trinity as its teacher." Usually, says Isaac from experience, this grace is given when the ascetic life has been practised for many years without any response and the ascetic (whether married person or monk) despite being sunk in despair does not give in. Such persons persevere in their faith and trust. "In praise of marriage" means that we should manifest marriage as the measure and model of the ecclesial struggle, both the struggle of the married couple and that of the monk.[20]

As alluded to above, it is well known that Yannaras maintains a sharp distinction between the relational person and his freedom on the one hand and nature/instinct with its limitations on the other—however, not as sharp as Zizioulas'. What we witness here is an affirmation of human conjugal love, with all of its instincts-driven and carnal connotations, as a potential pathway to ascetic achievement due to the very humility engendered by the difficulties of sharing one's daily life and needs, as a blessed asceticism of marriage. Yannaras will comment that this is particularly the case with childbirth, in which self-transcendence and escaping egocentricity is often both involuntary and inescapable—like, for example, when very young children wake their parents up in screams and crying numerous times during a single night (an optimal argument in favour of celibacy, by the way)—thus creating conditions decidedly more ascetical than those of many monks' daily

[20] Christos Yannaras, "In Praise of Marriage," *INTAMS Journal for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality* 16, no. 2 (2010): 216–18.

lives, enforcing humility. For Yannaras, human *eros*, marriage and childbirth open a pathway towards *personal* existence and the acquisition of self-transcendental relationality, the communion of life. Love as self-transcendence on the one hand and egocentric instincts, individualistic sexuality and power struggles within the couple on the other are inseparable, forming an indivisible continuity—"like the tares among the wheat."

Zizioulas' theology is subtly different, but indeed different on that point. I believe that Yannaras would be happy to subscribe to Zizioulas' carefully phrased paragraphs on the matter; however, I also believe that their stressing different aspects and limitations of the subject entails differing implications, if one were to extend their arguments. Exalted as Zizioulas presents love and *eros* between human persons, he also insists on seeing childbirth as, essentially, *giving birth to death*, engendering a member of the species destined to die. Some hints on his view of childbirth, the fruit of erotic communion, as almost exclusively biological reproduction and the perpetuation of the species can be witnessed in *Being as Communion*, in a subchapter fittingly entitled "From Biological to Ecclesial Existence": "this biological constitution of man's hypostasis suffers radically from two 'passions' which destroy precisely that towards which the human hypostasis is thrusting, namely the person. The first 'passion' is what we may call 'ontological necessity.' Constitutionally the hypostasis is inevitably tied to the natural instinct, to an impulse which is 'necessary' and not subject to the control of freedom."[21] He continues: "This 'failure' of the survival of the biological hypostasis is not the result of some acquired fault of a moral kind (a transgression), but of the very constitutional make-up of the hypostasis, that is, of the biological act of the perpetuation of the species."[22] Not only would Yannaras agree, but he cites that very passage in *The Freedom of Morality*.[23] Zizioulas continues: "All this means that man as a biological hy-

[21] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 50.

[22] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 52.

[23] Cf. Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elizabeth Briere (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 186.

postasis is intrinsically a tragic figure. He is born as a result of an ecstatic fact—erotic love—but this fact is interwoven with a natural necessity and therefore lacks ontological freedom. He is born as a hypostatic fact, as a body, but this fact is interwoven with individuality and with death."[24]

While for Yannaras *personal*/prosopic eros and natural sexuality are interwoven, like tares and wheat, Zizioulas disjoints them so forcefully that one is left to wonder if human love *as we know it* is indeed affirmed:

> For *eros* to be a true expression of otherness in a personal sense, it must be not simply *ekstatic* but also and above all *hypostatic*: it must be caused by the free movement of a particular being and have as its ultimate destination another particular being. This cannot be the case either in the sexual or in the 'platonic' form of *eros*. In the case of sexual *eros*, the erotic movement stems from the self and is dictated by the laws of nature. It is neither caused by the Other nor is it directed ultimately towards the Other. Thus, in the case both of the sexual and of the platonic *eros*, the other is shown to be an epiphenomenon and not a constitutive ontological factor. Although the erotic movement appears to be related to one particular being, this being is not unique in an absolute sense; rather, it is "used" as a means to an end, be it the satisfaction of a natural drive and purpose, or, in the case of Platonism, the participation in an idea.[25]

However, while im-personal love and eros is condemned, *so is love for one particular person*, as this is seen as exclusive of loving all others (rather than as a tutorial in Trinitarian existence, as we could say is the case in Yannaras):

> Now, the claim to otherness as absolute uniqueness which is built into the concept of *eros* can very easily be understood as a claim to *exclusiveness*: if the beloved one is absolutely unique and the only truly and absolutely Other, is there still

[24] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 52.
[25] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 71–72.

> a place for other particular beings to be Other in a true sense? Exclusiveness presupposes individualism and can make sense in the case of *eros* only if the erotic relationship is dictated by nature and is conceived and experienced psychologically rather than ontologically, as is in fact the case in our common experience.[26]

Loving *one* person thus signifies individuality and death, and is dictated by fallen nature, instincts and egocentricism, as one does not equally love *everybody*—which begs the question on the extent that such a view relates to our human experience of love. We see here how premises that would be *agreeable* in a Yannaric point of view become *disagreeable* when their conclusions and implications are reached. Studying the following longer quote from Zizioulas on how "each human being is born" in juxtaposition to Yannaras' "In praise of marriage" is a case in point:

> Biological birth involves the deception that the otherness that emerges from it is ultimate ontological otherness: human nature brings forth particular beings whose particularity springs from the death of other particularities and is constructed in such a way as to produce other particularities at the expense of its own particularity. This is exactly what sexual reproduction is about. The biological mechanism of human reproduction consists in a law of nature preceding the emergence of the particular being and uncontrollable by it, according to which every particular being coming into existence is "tuned" to bring about other particularities which would secure the survival of the species, that is, of the general. This mechanism is tied up with a process of death, that is, of the disappearance of the particular in the common, of the hypostasis in nature. This must be taken seriously by theology, as it coincides fully with the views of the Church Fathers. The veneration and almost religious exaltation of human reproduction among Christian theologians and even official Churches, who produce "the-

[26] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 72–73.

> ologies of marriage," and idealize "natural law," can only be explained by the loss of ontological concern in theology and by a consequent blindness to the reality of death. … The birth of a particular human being, being as it is the product of a mechanism of death, cannot but lead into a conflict between person and nature at the ontological level.[27]

For Zizioulas, sexual reproduction and biological birth—taking with it the human love that prompted it and made it possible—is fully and inescapably dictated by nature *at the expense of* the person. The very notion of a "theology of marriage" is an object of scorn and frustration. For Yannaras, sexual desire can indeed be hellishly individualistic, indeed the mode of death; but at the same time, "like wheat and tares," it is the human person's capacity to love erotically, a reality so inescapably interwoven with sexuality, that includes within it a sign, a symbol, of the Trinitarian prototype's communion of existence—and ecclesial marriage can be blessed ascesis, leading the couple to the life of the Trinity, a life of love through self-transcendence. If one takes Zizioulas' rationale in this context to the extreme, one would be excused to wonder whether forms of human love without the capacity and implications (or the motives and hope) of childbirth and procreation, without kneeling to the appetites and necessities that nature and species dictate, would be human love *par excellence* in contrast to conjugal love, whether they could be considered forms of *personal* love devoid of the dictatorship of nature's commands. Yannaras, on the other hand, celebrates the transcendental, ekstatic capacities inherent in the *natural* drive that leads human beings to love one another erotically—a drive sown into humanity for the *natural*, species-driven goal of procreation. This natural and animal drive has within it the potential to be affirmed *and transformed* into self-transcendence—a love that has been initially prompted by natural attraction for the purposes of procreation, but which can transcend it (if not annul it, as far as the instinctive nature thereof goes)—to arrive at a state that "has the Holy Trin-

[27] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 57–59.

ity as its teacher," in St. Isaac the Syrian's words. Thus, Yannaras affirms the very *natural* basis of eros, which is to be transformed either "horizontally" into marriage or "vertically" into solitary asceticism, as a seed sown in us that grants us the capacity to be led back to the "supernatural" Trinitarian prototype of love and eros.

(d) The Monarchy of the Father and the Substance-Activities-Hypostasis Triad

In this fourth distinction I will bundle up two seemingly different issues, which however implicitly relate to the same general difference in the two thinkers' ontologies—one issue that figures prominently in the one's thought but not in the other's, and vice versa.

The first will be merely hinted at and refers to Zizioulas' underscoring of the monarchy of the Father (μοναρχία τοῦ Πατρός),[28] a Patristic notion. Yannaras is in full agreement with that and often remarks how Zizioulas' "Ἀπὸ τὸ Προσωπεῖον εἰς τὸ Πρόσωπον"[29] reminds theologians that for Greek Patristics and Eastern Christianity, "God" does not refer to the *substance* of God, but of the person/hypostasis of *the Father*, who begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit and is the only cause of their existence. Yannaras' and Zizioulas' voices are in unison as far as the monarchy of the Father is concerned. However, there is a question to be raised about how certain *implications* of a particular understanding of that monarchy of the Father are being employed by Zizioulas, particularly in the case of Orthodox ecclesiology—implications that are wholly absent in Yannaras' works. To cite an example of the contemporary debates analogically invoking the monarchy of the Father in various ways, much has been said concerning the vision of primacy within Orthodoxy that is articulated in then Metropolitan Elpidophoros of Bursa's "primus sine paribus," [30] *first without equals*—a text that is largely the fruit of discipleship in Zizioulas'

[28] A very basic example: Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

[29] Zizioulas, "Personhood and Being."

[30] "First without equals: A response to the text on primacy of the Moscow Patriarchate. By His Eminence Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, Metropolitan of Bursa," June 2014, https://ec-patr.org/primus-sine-paribus-pantisis-e-s-t-per-proteioy/.

theology, but that also fleshes out the implications thereof to a much greater extent than Zizioulas' own texts do, while remaining quite faithful to them. Arguably, what is merely a hint in Zizioulas' books is a bold statement in "primus sine paribus." This view of Orthodox ecclesiology and primacy relates to and derives from Zizioulas' particular understanding of the monarchy of the Father both explicitly and implicitly. To oversimplify, both Zizioulas and Yannaras underscore the Trinitarian monarchy of the Father, yet the implications projected by theologians from Zizioulas' particular understanding of the monarchy of the Father onto the question of ecclesiology and the global organisation of the Church seem to be wholly absent in Yannaras' ecclesiological understanding.

On the other hand, what figures prominently in Yannaras' philosophy and theology but does not in Zizioulas' is the importance of the activities/energies (ἐνέργεια). Yannaras does not so much focus on God's uncreated activities, which he accepts and sees as following naturally from an understanding of the role of activities, but on the general and perennial importance of the activities, apart from substance as the mode of homogeneity and the hypostasis as the particular manifesting otherness, for theological and philosophical ontology. Activities are that which is common to the essence and particular to the hypostasis, and which at the same time manifest both the substance and the hypostasis. As Yannaras asserts: (a) We acquire cognitive access to the essence through its activities as its common mode of existence, as the sameness of the particulars' nature. (b) We come to know each particular, each hypostasis, as a manifestation of its essence, while the essence itself is known through its particular existential realizations. (c) We come to know the activities as the modes that signify the essence, but also as the othernesses which constitute the particular as particular. "The essence is distinct from both the activities and the particular, as it is through the activities that the essence's sameness of nature and the otherness of the particular is manifested, and as it is through the particular that the essence is

recapitulated and manifested but not exhausted."[31] To mention an example, smiling (to smile), or laughing (to laugh), is an activity of the human essence and nature—it is to be found in every human being, in every particular manifestation of 'humanity.' But each human person manifests smiling or laughing, i.e., smiles and laughs, in a completely unique way, in a way that actualizes (not merely reveals, but actualizes) his essence as a hypostasis, in a way that actualizes complete otherness. The activities, being distinct from both the essence itself and the hypostasis itself, belong to the essence but actualize the hypostasis. The activities (ἐνέργειαι) are hypostatically manifested activities of the essence.[32]

Not only is this an indispensable category for Yannaras, a prerequisite of his philosophy's robust realism, it is also an *apophatic* one: it entails that we come to know a substance (e.g., humanity or catness) and a hypostasis (like Christos Yannaras or John Zizioulas) *not directly, but through their activities*—the common activities of the substance, uniquely realized in each person and thus realizing and manifesting otherness. (We come to know Christos Yannaras because he speaks, thinks, teaches, laughs and loves like Christos Yannaras: we never come to know Christos Yannaras *apart from our relationship with him*, mediated through activities.) Not only God's substance, not only *any* substance, but *any substance and any hypostasis* are known through the perception of their activities, which is to say, *relationally*. While this dimension is absolutely essential to Yannaras' thought, it is hardly present in Zizioulas' theology, who seems to be wary of any system depending too much on any conception of activities/ἐνέργειαι and critical towards the ones which do, like the "Neo-Palamists." As far as this particular divergence is concerned, implications abound. Yet the fact remains: disparities between Yannaras' and Zizioulas' thought are not only to be traced in their different takes on particular topics, but also in elements that figure prominently in one thinker's

[31] Christos Yannaras, *Προτάσεις κριτικῆς ὀντολογίας [Propositions for a Critical Ontology]* (Domos, 1985), 4.21.

[32] Yannaras, *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*, 4.211.

system but are largely absent in the other's, and vice versa, as the previous two examples attempt to demonstrate.

The indicative differences between Yannaras and Zizioulas outlined above reveal not a rupture, but a radiant divergence within a shared luminous horizon—one that beckons us toward a more vibrant Orthodox theology of the person. Far from obscuring the landscape, as schematizations like "the Orthodox personalists" risk doing, these disparities illuminate the fertile dynamism of contemporary Greek thought: apophatic inclusivity blooming alongside eschatological anticipation; ek-static transcendence of nature's bounds intertwining with its outright surpassing; human eros as embodied ascent mirroring metaphysical communion; and the Father's monarchy harmonized with the energies' relational mediation. Such nuances do not divide but enrich, inviting us to discern how Yannaras' phenomenological ascent from the ecclesial event and Zizioulas' Trinitarian descent into eucharistic ontology converge in their fidelity to patristic springs while irrigating new ontological meadows.

In this light, their legacies emerge as complementary facets of a certain very fecund theological era. After all, the similarities are much more pronounced than the points of divergence. With Zizioulas' works long resonant in anglophone halls and Yannaras' now unfurling in fresh translations and novel receptions, an auspicious era of discerning dialogue dawns, where scholars and faithful alike may drink deeply from both wells, forging theologies ever more alive to the Trinity's inexhaustible otherness and communion. In their implicit disparities lies not contention, but an invitation to a theology as boundless as the God it seeks.

References

Larchet, Jean-Claude. *Personne et nature*. Éditions du Cerf, 2011.

Loudovikos, Nikolaos. *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self*. Volume 1: *Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*. Brepols, 2019.

Loudovikos, Nikolaos. "Person Instead of Grace and Dictated Otherness: John Zizioulas' Final Theological Position?" *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (2011): 684–99.

Papanikolaou, Aristotle. "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, edited by Elizabeth Theokritoff and Mary Cunningham. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Papanikolaou, Aristotle. *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2012.

Yannaras, Christos. *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*. Translated by Norman Russell. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013.

Yannaras, Christos. "In Praise of Marriage." *INTAMS Journal for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality* 16, no. 2 (2010): 216–18.

Yannaras, Christos. *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*. Edited by Andrew Louth. Translated by Haralambos Ventis. T&T Clark, 2005.

Yannaras, Christos. *Person and Eros*. Translated by Norman Russell. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007.

Yannaras, Christos. *Relational Ontology*. Translated by Norman Russell. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011.

Yannaras, Christos. *The Freedom of Morality*. Translated by Elizabeth Briere. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

Yannaras, Christos. "Towards a New Ecumenism." *Sourozh* 70, November 1997: 1–4.

Yannaras, Christos. *Variations on the Song of Songs*. Translated by Norman Russell. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005.

Yannaras, Christos. Προτάσεις Κριτικῆς Οντολογίας [*Propositions for a Critical Ontology*]. Domos, 1985.

Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985.

Zizioulas, John D. *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. T & T Clark, 2006.

Zizioulas, John D. "Person and Nature in the Theology of St. Maximus the Confessor." In *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor*, edited by Maxim Vasiljević. Sebastian Press, 2013.

Zizioulas, John D. "Personhood and Being."' In *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985.

Zizioulas, John D. *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology*. Sebastian Press, 2023.

Zizioulas, John D. Ελληνισμὸς Καὶ Χριστιανισμός: Η Συνάντηση Τῶν Δύο Κόσμων [*Hellenism and Christianity: The Encounter of Two Worlds*]. Apostoliki Diakonia tis Ekklisias tis Ellados, 2008.