OmegAlpha II:1 Spring 2026, 115–120
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/xnphha61
Book Review
Received: 18 February 2026 | Accepted: 26 February 2026

Knowing as Willing: The Ontology of Person, Nature and Freedom by John D. Zizioulas. Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2025. xviii + 180 pp. ISBN 978-1-964233-15-4.

I would like to start with an apocalyptic scenario: Imagine a world destroyed by nuclear war, and after its rebirth, the only surviving book from the Zizioulian corpus is the one we are discussing here. This book, without exaggeration, would be sufficient to introduce the major themes of his theology to an audience seeking existential meaning in our critical times.

The book consists of only ten chapters, most of which have previously appeared elsewhere, while a few are published here for the first time (6, 8), including the first chapter, which also gives the book its title. The title itself may sound unusual to our theological ears, as it does not immediately point to a traditional theological topic like Christology or ecclesiology. However, a closer examination of the table of contents reveals the profound theological significance of all the texts within it.

This book represents the fundamental characteristics of Zizioulas' theological vision. It begins with an ecumenical character, as most of the texts engage in a continuous dialogue with significant inter-Christian figures from major Christian traditions, ranging from Aquinas, Luther, and Dietrich von Hildebrand to Jürgen Moltmann. Similarly, the book reflects the author's profound dialogical ethos: he engages with various aspects of the secular world, such as modern scientific advancements and key achievements in art, always demonstrating respect and openness towards human creativity.

The same approach applies to his interactions with both ancient and contemporary philosophy, which consistently influences his thought. He follows the paradigm established by the great fathers of the early church, who were in constant dialogue with their intellectual surroundings.

Zizioulas has often faced criticism for allegedly manipulating historical sources to support his arguments. While there may be valid reservations regarding his interpretations or understanding of these sources, he cannot be criticized for lacking historical sensitivity. A thorough examination of his texts reveals that most often a brief historical overview of the topic precedes a systematic exploration, which is the core aspect of Zizioulas' work. Although he does not identify as a dedicated historian, he consistently strives to ground his arguments in a careful review of historical sources. However, we must acknowledge that, as has been said, "everything is interpretation." This means that any interpretation involves the selection and application of a set of hermeneutical criteria shaped by one's own perspective.

The book presents a mosaic of major themes that have characterized Zizioulas' work throughout his career. These themes include trinitarian theology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and an emphasis on ontology as the appropriate language of theology. Zizioulas explores the theology of personhood, freedom, and love as central tenets of both the divine and human experience. The overarching structure of the book is influenced by an existential perspective: for Zizioulas, theology must be relevant to humanity across all times, or else it risks becoming a dead end.

Throughout the book, Zizioulas draws upon the insights of his lifelong patristic heroes, such as the Cappadocian Fathers, Maximus the Confessor, and Athanasius of Alexandria, to support his key arguments. However, it is important to note that his engagement with the thought of Aquinas and Luther is not as robust—a limitation he openly acknowledges (chs. 6, 9).

In the first chapter, Zizioulas addresses the question of divine will, which is closely tied to the concept of Truth and the God-world relationship. After a brief historical exploration of the top-

ic, he concludes that the world is a product of God's will rather than His substance. This perspective leads to significant implications regarding God's knowledge of the world, which he asserts is eschatological. He writes, "knowing as willing amounts to knowing the beginning through the end" (10). In response to accusations that he diminishes the significance of history in theology, Zizioulas argues that "history and time, as such, are part of God's original ... will" (14). He elaborates that "history is the place where human freedom is exercised, where both good and evil operate," while noting that all historical events will eventually find their "ultimate truth in the eschata" (14–15). This eschatological dimension in Zizioulas' theology serves as the guarantee of Truth.

In the second chapter of the book, Zizioulas explores a topic close to his heart: the relational definition of ontology. He begins by contrasting the Cappadocian and Augustinian approaches to relational ontology, a distinction that may seem outdated today. He expresses his hesitancy regarding the use of substance language and emphasizes the significance of incorporating the idea of cause into the ontology of God. This incorporation ensures that the intra-divine relations are causal, meaning that one person, specifically the Father, holds a dominant role within the divine essence. Throughout this chapter, Zizioulas engages in dialogue with modern science, including physics and the "Anthropic Cosmological Principle," in an effort to find common ground regarding the nature of the world through the lens of relational ontology. A critical question that remains open is whether there is a place for a personal element, specifically the person of Christ, as the connection that could align the relational ontology of God with that of the world.

The third chapter of the book addresses a vital topic: freedom within God's being, a subject dear to the late Metropolitan John. After providing a historical overview of how this issue emerged in patristic theology, citing the debate between Athanasius and Arius, among others, Zizioulas culminates his argument with his favorite Cappadocian father, Gregory Nazianzen. According to Zizioulas' interpretation of Gregory, "the Father constitutes freely

not only the hypostases of the Son and the Spirit, but also of Himself" (37). This association of God's freedom not with His substance but with divine personhood brings forth a delicate issue that underscores some inherent ambivalence in Zizioulas' thought. He states, "In the case of God, there is no antinomy between nature and person, precisely because the divine persons do not derive from divine nature but from a divine person (the Father)" (37). Throughout the volume, Zizioulas consistently addresses critiques that claim that he divides the divine being into a nature-person dialectic, favoring person over nature or equating nature with necessity and person with freedom. Those familiar with his body of work recognize these tensions in several of his texts.

The persistent challenge is that linking nature to person as its causal source opens the door to the criticism of equating divine nature with necessity, much like created nature. He argues that "in God … there is no conflict between substance and personhood. Had it not been for the Trinity, God would have been a necessary being" (38). Whereas, by definition, divine nature is characterized by necessity: "It is the Trinity that makes God free from the necessity of His essence." (38).

In many chapters of the book, Zizioulas engages critically with prominent figures in Western theology, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, particularly concerning the relationship between the Trinity and the economy (47).

The following chapter, while primarily discussing the relationship between the Trinity and the Church, is also significant for exploring the topic of God's presence in the world. In this chapter, Zizioulas emphasizes the importance of icons and materiality as the means through which God is manifested in Christ within the world. He states, "Through the person of Christ, God is present in all of creation, not only in humanity. If we remove icons and symbols from the Church, we strip away both the presence of God in Christ and the very anthropology of the material world" (62–63).

In chapter five, Zizioulas responds to his critics regarding the relationship between nature and person, drawing on the works of Maximus the Confessor. He delves deeply into the Maximinian

corpus to assert that a person is "the possessor of the nature" (70), rather than the other way around. This is indeed a bold statement, and Zizioulas supports it with strong Christological evidence (78) based on his interpretation of Maximus. However, confusion arises regarding the extent to which a unified understanding of nature exists between God and humanity. In both cases, nature is defined in terms of necessity, which contrasts with the freedom of the person. Zizioulas carefully navigates this issue, positing a "hypothesis" in his argument to justify attributing necessity to divine nature. He suggests that this nature could be perceived as "before" the divine persons. However, this leads to a dead end, as there is no succession or time in the divine being (88–89).

One important point to emphasize is found in chapter eight, where Zizioulas presents what he calls "existential ecumenism." He describes this as the effort to connect the search for Christian unity with the deeper existential concerns of human existence (134). This type of ecumenism adds to the "ecumenism in time" discussed in the work of Georges Florovsky, while also needing to be linked to an "ecumenism of martyrdom." This connection aims to unite all Christians around "ultimate existential predicaments, such as life, death, freedom, and dignity" (134).

Overall, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in serious systematic theology from an Orthodox point of view. Although it addresses complex and delicate theological and philosophical topics, the author's language reflects a strong commitment to the existential dimension of theology as it pertains to the essence of humanity and our relationship with God. While the work is of high quality, it is not speculative; instead, it is profoundly existential, engaging with the fundamental issues of life and death. This conviction, though somewhat implicit, highlights the author's understanding of theology and the Church's mission in our time, giving meaning to humanity's ongoing quest for truth.

This book encompasses all the key themes of Zizioulas' thought, ranging from ontology as the language of theology to dialogue with modern physics, as well as his internal tensions, particularly regarding the nature-person dialectic, which is a challenging issue

in Orthodox theology. Zizioulas is recognized as a theologian of freedom—unlimited and absolute—that is always expressed in terms of an "erotic ontology," which affirms the otherness of the other and his dignity. We must commend the compiler of this volume, Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic, for his careful and successful selection of texts, which provide an excellent introduction to Zizioulas' theology.

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