OmegAlpha II:2 Autumn 2026, 127–132
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/e279xn02
Book Review
Published: 2026-11-10

What Is Man? Theology Encountering Biology and the Physical Sciences by John D. Zizioulas. Edited by Maxim Vasiljević. Alhambra, California: Sebastian Press, 2026. xv + 158 pp. ISBN 978-1-964233-42-0.

This volume collects lectures and essays by Metropolitan John, including previously unpublished material, with publication dates spanning 1997–2026. These texts address the problems of the modern human condition in a world deeply influenced by scientific culture and technology. A distinctive feature of the volume is that the fundamental ideas of Christian anthropology and personhood developed by Metropolitan John, and presented in now-classic theological works such as *Being as Communion* and *Communion and Otherness*, are placed within the context of the dialogue between theology and modern science, particularly biology, psychology, ecology, and physics, as well as contemporary developments in computer technology and artificial intelligence.

The central concern throughout these discussions is the human being, since the tensions and misunderstandings between modern science and traditional theology begin and end with the single articulating agent of both science and theology: the human person. Methodologically, therefore, the problems discussed in this volume ultimately converge upon the central question underlying both theological and scientific accounts of the world: the human being and the ambivalence of the human condition, situated between an openness to infinity and the capacity for an experience of God, on the one hand, and existence as a physical and biological organism confined within the conditions of earthly nature, on the other.

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Metropolitan John traces the historical drama of the divergence between theological and scientific articulations of the world to a gradual separation of knowledge from wisdom, knowledge of the world from love for it, the mastery of nature from humility as an epistemological condition of science (5), and the objectification of individual natural phenomena from their participation in an implicate order associated with harmony and design.

Metropolitan John argues that these tensions arise from a deficiency in modern anthropology, which has departed from the understanding formulated within Christian theology and, in particular, Greek patristic thought. Characteristically, he develops this position by invoking the Fathers' understanding of the human being as a unity of body and soul, constituted through relationality to God and to the rest of creation. This also implies a distinctive role for the body, which mediates this relationality through its consubstantiality with the physical constituents of the universe. At the same time, the distinctive feature of the human being created in the image of God is freedom and the capacity to formulate the purposes of life and, through them, to discern purposes in nature.

Freedom, however, creates the dangerous possibility of turning against nature by subordinating it to human needs shaped by a loss of relationality to the other and by a failure to remember humanity's dependence upon God. What is endangered here is not humanity alone but the whole of nature. As Metropolitan John clearly states, "Even in the kingdom of God the human being can only be conceived as part of the survival of the physical world" (23–24). The physical world, the universe, planet Earth, and earthly nature thus constitute necessary conditions for the very possibility of being human, including the distinctive human experience of God and the possibility of deification itself (25). Earthly nature thereby acquires a sacramental dimension, elevating any abuse or neglect of nature to the level of sin (54). Humanity's responsibility to care for nature consequently becomes integral to the fulfilment of its theological vocation.

Modern humanity is empirically united by scientific advancement and technology. In this respect, science and technology become ecumenical issues for dialogue among religions because, under all possible scenarios, a common "anthropology becomes ... the central focus of ecumenism in our time" (27). Metropolitan John repeatedly returns to patristic anthropology as a "golden" standard for defining the human being and for preserving the distinctive uniqueness of human nature within creation. His discussion encompasses theological, socio-historical, cosmological, eschatological, and Christological perspectives. Without a proper understanding of humanity, one cannot adequately understand either the meaning of human actions or the consequences of human knowledge.

The central issue here concerns the underlying cause of the present state of sin, understood as humanity's inability to overcome decay and mortality (34). Metropolitan John maintains that even moral perfection cannot deliver humanity from the state of sin. Consequently, departures from patristic anthropology, whether grounded in modern psychology or in technological definitions of the human being, remain implicated in the fundamental condition of sin understood in terms of mortality.

Metropolitan John associates this impoverishment of the human condition with an insufficient appreciation of patristic insight into humanity. Yet such insight cannot simply be appropriated literally. A contemporary hermeneutics of patristic thought is required if it is to be situated meaningfully within present socio-political, scientific, and technological contexts. Here, patristic ideas concerning the relationality of humanity to God, other human beings, and nature become particularly important, since they can be brought into dialogue with contemporary scientific developments in comparative biology and anthropic cosmology. Christology is especially significant in this respect, insofar as the very fact of the incarnation of God is inseparable from earthly and cosmic conditions.

A particularly important topic in the volume is bioethics, especially questions arising from genetic engineering, reproductive

technologies, and cross-species modification, which threaten "a disappearance of the fundamental distinction between person and nature." Metropolitan John identifies several conditions necessary for safeguarding personhood (77), insisting that "what is left now to the Church is to influence bioethical decisions as much as she can. In so doing she has to compromise the ideal with the feasible, her view of the human person with the actual trends of science" (78).

Another subject that occupied Metropolitan John for many years, and which was repeatedly addressed in his contributions to ecological forums, is the environmental crisis and the preservation of nature for the sake of fulfilling the vocation theologically entrusted to humanity. The degradation of the natural conditions of human existence and the real possibility of extinction—the disappearance of *Homo sapiens*—are linked to the domination of technology. This is not merely a practical problem. According to Metropolitan John, it is an anthropological and theological problem, manifesting a profound crisis of civilization that has defined humanity apart from God, apart from nature, and apart from communion (142). If technology is not situated within the relational character of human existence, it ceases to serve humanity; instead, humanity becomes enslaved to it.

With regard to modern information technology, the development of the internet, and artificial intelligence, the principal problem identified by Metropolitan John is the threat of losing living communion within human society. One particularly original aspect of his analysis is the danger of depriving human beings of a future because information concerning previous states and periods of their lives can be preserved indefinitely within digital networks, thereby enslaving them to memory (143). If memory becomes permanent and inescapable, it can effectively displace communion, profoundly altering the human condition by distorting the meaning and possibility of freedom directed towards transfiguration.

One might add that the development of artificial intelligence has already intensified this difficulty for theology. Knowledge ac-

quired through an individualistic engagement with AI agents, isolated from genuine communion, risks substituting an apparent access to something radically new for genuine creativity. Metropolitan John reiterates his earlier point that the wisdom of communion and love can be lost within such a vision of the world. Once again, what is at stake is the human condition itself and humanity's capacity to fulfil its primary vocation of deification and the transfiguration of nature.

Assessed within the context of the continuing dialogue between theology and science, the book makes a significant contribution by introducing distinctive Eastern Orthodox dimensions into this dialogue. At the same time, it raises several questions concerning the modern human condition that invite further development.

One such question concerns bioethical problems surrounding birth control and genetic intervention in the human condition. These cannot be separated from the problem of planetary population and the finitude of the material resources required to sustain more than eight billion embodied human beings. The bioethical question therefore becomes inseparable from an ecological one: the need to maintain a viable balance between technologically organized human society and the finite physical resources of the Earth inevitably raises difficult questions concerning demographic growth and the means by which it might be addressed.

A second issue concerns the implications of contemporary anthropic reasoning in cosmology. Although anthropic considerations emphasize the profound physical continuity between human beings and the cosmos, the necessary physical conditions for the emergence and existence of humanity—and hence for the human experience of God—do not by themselves establish sufficient conditions for humanity's distinctive microcosmic status. The anthropic perspective therefore does not directly resolve the theological question of humanity's place within creation.

An additional difficulty emerges from modern cosmology itself. According to the standard cosmological model, approximately 95 per cent of the universe's total matter-energy content is at-

tributed to dark matter and dark energy, neither of which is identical with the ordinary visible matter constituting the Earth and human bodies. This raises a profound theological question concerning the relationship between the geocentric particularity of the Incarnation and its claimed cosmic universality. How is the incarnation of the Logos-Creator of the entire universe, occurring within an extremely restricted sector of physical reality on Earth, to be understood in relation to the universe as a whole? Here one encounters the more general tension between the geocentric specificity of God's revelation to humanity and the theocentric universality of theological claims.

What Is Man? thus offers a range of stimulating ideas that invite theologians, philosophers, and scientists to advance further in their attempts to comprehend both the meaning of human existence and the character of reality as a whole within a genuinely holistic framework.

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