

Journal for the Study of Metropolitan John Zizioulas' Theology

VOLUME I № 2 AUTUMN 2025
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print)
ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)

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John D. Zizioulas

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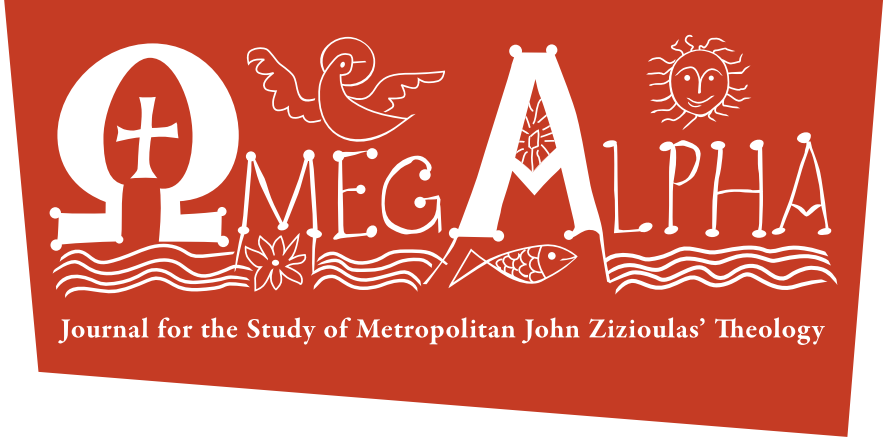
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Publisher
St. Sebastian Orthodox Press
1621 West Garvey Avenue • Alhambra, California 91803, USA
omegalpha@zizioulas.org • https://omegalpha.zizioulas.org

Printing
Birograf COMP, Belgrade, Serbia

OmegAlpha is published in two issues per year.
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)

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Editorial

Hermeneutics has undeniably played a central role in human intellectual reflection throughout history. For example, the Genesis story (chapters 1–2) about the creation of human beings and their relationship with God in the Garden of Eden illustrates that, even in this early context, humans engage with God and nature through their interpretive frameworks. They make decisions about following God's commandments based on certain underlying assumptions. Thus, any approach or interaction with the surrounding reality—whether involving other human beings, society, culture, non-human creation, or the divine—constitutes a hermeneutical endeavor, whether consciously or unconsciously.

At the same time, humans seek to interpret aspects of reality that extend beyond what can be empirically verified, particularly through the strict sciences. This reflects a natural yearning for transcendent truth and a desire to grapple with the unknown.

If hermeneutics is about understanding the meaning and truth of history and existence, then theology—specifically, the theological interpretation of history and existence—occupies a special place within this multi-layered perspective. As has been pointed out, "theology is the origin of hermeneutics," indicating that any hermeneutical approach remains connected to its theological roots. Therefore, the discussion about the role of hermeneutics in contemporary theology, particularly in Orthodox theology, is of critical relevance.

Historically, Orthodox theology has been hesitant to adopt the various hermeneutical tools available, primarily due to its adherence to a narrow understanding of the patristic tradition that

sometimes acted as a barrier to serious theological inquiry. However, in recent decades, important conferences (such as those at Volos, Greece, and Fordham University, New York, in 2010) and various publications have highlighted that hermeneutics is a path Orthodox theology must explore to address the challenges posed by the modern world, which is vastly different from the medieval context.

In personal conversations with the late Metropolitan of Pergamon, John D. Zizioulas, he acknowledged the profound relevance of hermeneutics for the success of theology in our time. Consequently, Orthodox theology must define its own hermeneutical criteria to be used not only in reading its own sources and tradition but also in engaging in dialogue with the surrounding reality.

The second issue of the journal aims to explore aspects of the theological hermeneutics of Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, critically addressing contemporary issues and challenges. It also includes unpublished material relevant to Zizioulas' understanding of the topic.

Nikolaos Asproulis
Editor-in-Chief

OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 7–39
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/kfbv9y58
Theological Heritage

Theology, Interpretation, and Synodality

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

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

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Part A: Theology and Hermeneutics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: That's a very important question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: I reject that.

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: And I cannot interpret that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[4] Philemon 1:16.

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

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

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

Yes, I purposely didn't mention political theology.

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

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

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

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

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

Okay, okay, then we completely agree.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: The ultimate existential concern.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, of course.

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

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

JZ: But there are people who do.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be. To be?

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: Because they haven't looked for it.

Maybe they have.

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

And what do you think is the concern of Maximus?

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, the concern is universal.

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

I think he doesn't speak explicitly about—

JZ: How does he view hermeneutics?

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

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

JZ: Does he accept that quotation?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: I see, because the word is cataphatic?

Yes.

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

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

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

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

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Part B: Theology and Synodality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Would the diaspora be a subject for making canons?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Does it happen here in Greece that Catholics get rebaptized?

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

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

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

That's their understanding of schism.

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

I think that they would go for the first option.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: We can only have one with their presence.

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

JZ: This is a big problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JZ: We can't do anything else …

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

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

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

Is that the first time?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will you be concelebrating during the synod?

JZ: Oh yes, certainly, of course.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can some future ecumenical council change that?

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

Maybe we can now let you take some rest.

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

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We noticed!

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

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OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 41–102
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/rpxebq56
Original Paper
Received: 1 July 2025 | Accepted: 14 September 2025

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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OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 103–137
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/nhqe3e17
Original Paper
Received: 13 March 2025 | Accepted: 12 July 2025

Monarchical Interdependence: A Zizioulian Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Richard René

Abstract
This article examines the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability through the lens of John Zizioulas's theological anthropology. While Western thought, shaped by libertarian ideals, has habitually framed vulnerability as weakness, recent philosophers—especially Judith Butler and Erinn Gilson—have recast the concept as an openness to affect that enables both flourishing and harm. Yet, Butler and Gilson remain constrained by empiricism, and as such, struggle to reconcile human vulnerability with agency. Zizioulas's anthropological hermeneutic provides a way forward by interpreting vulnerability in light of his trinitarian theology. Specifically, his account of the monarchy of the Father as "inconceivable" without the Son and the Spirit provides a divine model for human vulnerability as both interdependent and free. In light of this model, Zizioulas reframes Butler and Gilson's reappraisal of vulnerability as a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis" (the tragic inability to transcend our created nature subject to death), and free, loving interdependence with God in Christ through the

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eucharistic communion of the Church (the "ecclesial hypostasis" or "communion in otherness"). Zizioulas's account also addresses the question of agency in vulnerability by proposing *kenosis* as a continual ascetic self-denial to receive the other and let the other truly *be* other.
Keywords: anthropology, vulnerability, eucharistic ontology, John Zizioulas, Judith Butler, Monarchy of the Father

Introduction

The past quarter century has thrown the undeniable fact of human vulnerability into sharp relief. Under the influence of ever-accelerating globalization, the global community has never been more aware of our susceptibility to the effects of war, economic crises, natural disasters, climate change, and communicable diseases. In response to this heightened awareness, philosophical, legal, and cultural discourses in the West have increasingly invoked the concept of vulnerability as the basis for political intervention in the lives of those seen as particularly susceptible to injustice, inequity, and others forms of harm.[1] Yet, Western culture has continued to treat vulnerability as nothing more than, "liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity."[2] This pejorative view finds an unfortunate reinforcement in the etymology of the English word;[3] more importantly, it is underwritten by a philosophical and cultural construct of the ideal of human life rooted in what has been called "the liberal subject,"[4] but what may be more accurately termed the "*libertarian* subject," who exists and acts as an atomistic individual be-

[1] For a useful multidisciplinary survey, see Kate Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone, and Nick Emmel, "The Many Faces of Vulnerability," *Social Policy and Society* 16, no. 3 (July 2017), 497–510. See also Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–18.

[2] Mackenzie, et. all, *Vulnerability*, 5.

[3] Ca. 1600, from Late Latin *vulnerabilis* "wounding," from Latin *vulnerare* "to wound, hurt, injure, maim," from *vulnus* (genitive *vulneris*) "wound."

[4] Martha Albertson Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (July 2008), 10–12.

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ing, self-sufficient and self-reliant.[5] Set against this ideal, identifiably vulnerable groups (such as women and minorities) are "others" whose vulnerabilities are nothing more than weaknesses to be dominated, controlled, and exploited.[6]

Parallel to the popularization of vulnerability is an emerging field within anthropological philosophy that challenges the pejorative understanding of the concept, and affirms its constructive role in a flourishing human life.[7] Most notably, Judith Butler has taken decisive steps to reappraise the condition as more than a necessary affliction, but the potential for our responsiveness to the world.[8] Philosophers of vulnerability have since refined Butler's insights, distinguishing between inherent vulnerability and its situational forms, which can be exacerbated or mitigated through legal or political means.[9] As a concept, inherent vulnerability has come to be redefined as a condition of openness to affect that is beyond a person's control, experienced in ambiguous ways, and resulting in uncertain outcomes. Yet, philosophers of vulnerability continue to grapple with how inherently vulnerable human beings can still exercise meaningful agency as a vital part of flourishing, tending instead to rely on a binarism that opposes agency to passivity, thus reinscribing the association of the latter with vulnerability.[10]

[5] Catriona Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability," in Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 42. See also Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

[6] Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory 26 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 85–92.

[7] Brown et al., "The Many Faces of Vulnerability," 504–505.

[8] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), 34, 55. See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 22–29.

[9] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 7-9; Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 36–38; and Erinn Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (May 2011): 308–32.

[10] See Alyson Cole, "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique," *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (May 2016): 260–277.

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Contributing to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability is an emerging effort to re-evaluate the concept through a theological lens.[11] Scholars from Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions have constructed comprehensive anthropologies that uphold the vulnerability of Jesus Christ, his exposure to the world from birth to death on the cross, as the basis for human flourishing in vulnerability.[12] However, these accounts could benefit from a contribution that 1) more fully treats vulnerability as ambiguous—liable to wellbeing and harm—even as it serves a constructive end in flourishing, and 2) theorizes more fully how the inherently vulnerable human beings possess the capacity for agency. Such a contribution, I will argue, can be found in the modern Orthodox tradition, which has so far offered few significant contributions to the field.[13] Specifically, I will make the case that a careful reading of the anthropology of John Zizioulas provides a constructive theological "companioning" for the Butlerian philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability.[14] Zizioulas's "top down" her-

[11] For an overview of theological responses to vulnerability, see Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas, eds., *Exploring Vulnerability*, V&R Academic (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

[12] Some prominent examples include Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008); Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

[13] An exception to this paucity is Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn's excellent study, which in any case focuses on disability, rather than vulnerability per se. See Myroslaw I. Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (Toronto: Novalis, 2013). For a more recent contribution to the field to the Orthodox theological engagement with vulnerability, see Petre Maican "Vulnerability and Solidarity: An Improbable Connection," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 55–67. See also Richard René, "Absolute Vulnerability: A Contemporary Orthodox Anthropology in Dialogue with Judith Butler, Erinn Gilson, John Zizioulas, and Sergius Bulgakov" (Ph.D., Toronto, ON, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, 2024).

[14] William Desmond, "Superiority beyond Interiority," *Louvain Studies* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2021), 200–202. Analogies to Desmond's "companioning" approach can be seen the correlational method developed by Paul Tillich. See especially Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 59-66. David Tracy has built on Tillich in proposing his own revised model. See especially David

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meneutical premise for anthropology offers a teleological vision of vulnerability that enriches the philosophical accounts, whose hermeneutics are limited to the empirical forms of the vulnerable condition. Specifically, Zizioulas's neopatristic trinitarian theology—particularly his account of the monarchy of the Father as "inconceivable" without the Son and the Spirit—provides a divine model for human vulnerability as both interdependent and free. In light of this divine model, Zizioulas's thought reframes the Butlerian view of vulnerability as ambivalent and ambiguous in terms of a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis,"[15] the tragic inability to transcend our created nature subject to death, and free, loving interdependence with God in Christ through eucharistic communion, that is, the "ecclesial hypostasis"[16] or "communion in otherness."[17] In addition, Zizioulas's account responds to the question of agency in vulnerability by proposing *kenosis* as a continual ascetic self-denial to receive the other and let the other truly *be* other.[18] Yet, Zizioulas's "top down" hermeneutical framework also has its limits, his emphasis on the human *telos* as "ecclesial hypostasis" tending to instrumentalize the biological hypostasis, reducing it to a platform for staging the event of personhood. As such, the Butlerian philosophy of vulnerability provides an empirical grounding for Zizioulas's theological reappraisal.

Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 45–46.

[15] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 50. Henceforth, *BC*.

[16] Ibid.

[17] John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 9. Henceforth, *CO*.

[18] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6, 83–84, 302–305. See also "Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought," in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 150; and "Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. III," *King's Theological Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 5.

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The Philosophical Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Before turning to Zizioulas, it is worth examining in more detail the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. A watershed in this movement is Judith Butler's reflection on the 9/11 attacks and the United States' subsequent "War on Terror," in which she breaks new conceptual ground by redefining vulnerability as inherent to the way our identities are formed in a fundamentally and continually relational matrix:

> Given over from the start to the world of others, [my body] bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. . . . Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[19]

Although Butler associates vulnerability here with violence (since violence most sharply reminds us of our core vulnerability), she is clear that "the body's vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability." [20] Further, our "unwilled proximity" to the world "animates responsiveness" in ways that are both negative and positive.[21]

Although Butler has been criticized for emphasizing violence as a site of vulnerability,[22] her insight is a seismic shift in the reappraisal of the concept as ambiguous, rather than purely negative. Further, Butler makes an important distinction between precariousness, which is a universal ontological feature of all human life, and precarity, which is "a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differently exposed to injury, violence, and death."[23] Precarity is indeed destructive, and should be eliminated, reduced, or mitigated, if at all possible. By contrast, precariousness is inherent to all human beings; as a core suscepti-

[19] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.
[20] Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 66–67.
[23] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

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bility to the outside world, it can result in harm, yet it is also vital to our "feeling of aliveness."[24]

Feminist scholars have since built on Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity to construct a taxonomy of vulnerability, identifying the former as "inherent" and the latter as "situational" forms.[25] Most recently, Erinn Gilson has adopted this taxonomy to bracket the situational vulnerability and make room for a more constructive definition of the concept (linked to core ontological realities).[26] Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's ontology,[27] as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology,[28] Gilson offers a fully-fledged, reappraised definition of ontological vulnerability as,

> first, a condition of potential the experiential reality of which is undetermined; second, a fundamental and shared underlying condition of openness to alteration; third, a condition that cannot be characterized as homogeneous, but is manifest in a variety of forms and kinds of experiences; fourth, the nature and value of which are both ambivalent and ambiguous rather than determinatively and inevitably negative.[29]

These three features of Gilson's definition are worth expanding on. First, vulnerability should not be understood as necessarily reducible to certain expressions. Simply put, the phrase "being vul-

[24] Ibid., 55.

[25] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 7–9.

[26] Ibid., 37.

[27] Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 96, and *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 208. My understanding of Deleuzian concepts is indebted to Taylor Hammer, "Difference and Creativity: Virtuality and Actualization in Deleuze's Reading of Bergson," *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 60–61.

[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 263, and *Phenomenology of Perception* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 380. See discussion of this concept in Dimitris Apostolopoulos, "Intentionality, Constitution and Merleau- Ponty's Concept of 'The Flesh,'" *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (September 2017), 682; and Rajiv Kaushik, "The Secondary Passivity: Merleau-Ponty at the Limit of Phenomenology," *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, no. 1 (March 2021), 66.

[29] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 140.

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nerable" should not necessarily imply that one is vulnerable *to* anything. Rather, the concept needs to be seen as possessing a real existence distinct from how it is actualized. To this end, vulnerability is a *potentiality*: an undetermined virtual openness that enables change. Second, vulnerability cannot be a quality that some possess to a greater degree than others; rather, it must be *univocal*. Vulnerability must be shared by all beings, not as a property, but in and through their individual differences in relation to one another, that is, their interdependence. This ensures that vulnerability is not a natural or fixed quality that can then be applied to some and not to others, but a universal mode of being that is open to affectation in differing relations. Yet vulnerability is not a homogeneous property that manifests itself identically for all; it is therefore also *equivocal*, emerging out of a particular individual's situation and relations with others, and thus, irreducible to others' experiences of the vulnerable condition. Equivocity also means that what comes from our experiences of vulnerability—its results—are ambivalent, in that they cannot be determined in advance; moreover, these experiences are ambiguous in that they are bound up with one another within the same capacity to be affected.

It is important to note here that for Butler and those who followed her, vulnerability is co-conditional with another concept, namely, interdependence. From beginning to end, humans are dependent on others for identity, growth, and flourishing.[30] Butler points out that since we come into being within the matrix of relationships, our sense of self and otherness is not atomistic, but profoundly interconnected:

> Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. . . . I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.[31]

Thus, we cannot recognize ourselves as subjects apart from others because our subjectivity is "riven from the start, interrupted by

[30] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 2.
[31] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22. See also, *Frames of War*, 44.

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alterity."[32] Moreover, if our lives are dependent, not just on those we know or see (such as parents, siblings, and friends) but also on "anonymous others," whom we may never know or see, then our identities must remain, at least in part, mysterious to us.[33] If there is a boundary that defines a subject as an "I" as distinct from the other as "you," Butler argues, that boundary is "a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness."[34] Because we are fundamentally "given over" to the other, we can be "impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others"[35] and, therefore, "at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."[36] Butler understands this precariousness as our capacity to be "undone by each other," which "testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control."[37] In other words, we are vulnerable to one another because of our inescapable dependence on one another.

While I would agree with Butler's affirmation of human interdependence as an inescapable relational matrix in which subjecthood is formed, this paper will focus on the vulnerable condition itself, for two reasons. First, when we simply assume the meaning of vulnerability, we allow its common negative associations with weakness and susceptibility to violence and other forms of harm to flourish and hinder our attempts to articulate an ethical response to it.[38] To fully grasp the constructive possibilities of interdependence and allow that reality to shape our ethical responses, we need to attend to the significance of vulnerability itself as a complex, multifaceted existential phenomenon.[39] The second reason for considering vulnerability as distinct (but not apart) from interdependence is that the latter operates within the matrix of a

[32] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.
[33] Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.
[34] Ibid., 44.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 20.
[37] Ibid., 23, 46.
[38] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 5.
[39] Ibid., 9–11.

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universal, affectable condition.[40] Simply put, while we recognize vulnerability in the context of dependent (and therefore ethical) relations, our dependent relations are meaningful only within a fundamental capacity to be affected by others. As Gilson puts it,

> If we are not vulnerable, we have no need for ethics, and it is precisely because we are vulnerable—can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy—that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically.[41]

In this sense, ethical behavior is the active and distinctly human response to our inescapable dependence on others. Yet both human interdependence and ethics "live and move and have their being" within a broader affectable capacity, which is shared by both human and non-human beings. As such, a full and accurate account of human flourishing must not only acknowledge the fact of interdependence and offer an ethical response that reflects this fact, it must also make efforts to describe the underlying "ontological condition of our humanity" that gives our dependence on and responsibility to others any meaning at all.[42] Yet, my focus on vulnerability is not a preference over interdependence, as the invocation of the former necessarily implicates the latter. Indeed, the co-conditionality of the two concepts will be important when I consider Zizioulas's contribution to an Orthodox theology of vulnerability.

Agency in Vulnerability?

The reappraisal of vulnerability as ambiguous rather than necessarily harmful has raised a key challenge for scholars in the field, one they have yet to fully address: the question of how an inherently vulnerable human being can exercise genuine agency. Cole has critiqued philosophers of vulnerability for reinforcing the active/passive binary in their conceptions of vulnerable agency "either by redefining passivity itself as dynamic or by arguing that

[40] Ibid.
[41] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*.
[42] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 4–7.

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other ways to inhabit norms have been misrecognized as passive."[43] She points to Butler as representative of the latter tendency, and Gilson of the former.

While Butler's earlier thought on gender suggests that human identity itself is performative, an "act" whose script is predetermined by the culturally normative discourse in which it is embedded,[44] her later work allows for the possibility that within their performatively shaped identities, human beings can act "in new and unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede and exceed us."[45] In this way, as Knight argues, Butler conceives of "a limited form of autonomy, one which involves reflecting on and calling into question the very norms and power relations that form us."[46] Even as we are acted upon and shaped by forces external to ourselves, Butler says, "there's always a certain kind of possibility of becoming otherwise and becoming what is not fully anticipated."[47] Human agency can exist, then, not as the activity of "a state of individuation, taken as self-persisting prior to and apart from any relations of dependency on the world of others,"[48] but rather "from a subjectivity located in a distinct context never wholly of one's making."[49] Our agency is always enmeshed in our exposure to "the world of others," which acts upon us in ways we cannot predetermine or control. By the same token, our exposure and thus vulnerability to others can also be agentic,

[43] Cole, "All of Us are Vulnerable," 270.

[44] Amber Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics: Judith Butler on Autonomy and the Pursuit of a 'Livable Life,'" *Feminist Formations* 33, no. 3 (2021): 181. For a summary of Butler's theory of performativity, see Zembylas Michalinos, "Butler, Judith," in *SAGE Research Methods Foundations* (London: SAGE Publications, 2020).

[45] Qtd. in Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 181.

[46] Ibid., 182. Catherine Mills makes the same point, arguing that Butler sees agency as "the opportunity to distort and destabilise relations of power in their reiteration." See Catherine Mills, "Efficacy and Vulnerability: Judith Butler on Reiteration and Resistance," *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 32 (July 2000), 271.

[47] Vikki Bell, "New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 1 (January 2010), 150.

[48] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32.

[49] Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 184. Butler describes agency as "a complex choreographed scene with many kinds of elements—social, material, human—at work." See Bell, "New Scenes of Vulnerability," 151.

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in that within "the field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way," human beings possess a conditioned form of autonomy that is "neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting."[50] For Butler, then, vulnerability and agency are not a binary, where vulnerability is a "subjective disposition" characterized by passivity, and agency is a state of individual sovereignty. Rather,

> vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence; indeed, where receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability rather than engaging in its destructive denial.[51]

How one might mobilize the receptivity and responsiveness of one's vulnerability Butler does not fully elaborate. At most, Butler characterizes the mobilization of vulnerability in terms of "practices of deliberate exposure" in which people put their bodies "on the line" in nonviolent resistance to oppression and violence.[52]

Butler's argument that agency is inseparable from vulnerability is a compelling one. That said, her account stops short of providing a fully articulated theory of vulnerable agency. Cole is correct in observing that Butler's account tends to perpetuate the active/passive binary in the sense that Butler sees vulnerability as being mischaracterized as merely passive, when in fact it can also be agentic. Butler carves out a space within the boundaries of vulnerability where agents can reflect, plan, and make choices.[53] This tacitly invokes a discrete "autonomous (pre-discursive) subject"[54] who is certainly inseparable from the conditions within which

[50] Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Leticia Sabsay, and Zeynep Gambetti (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 26.

[53] Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 183–184.

[54] Lise Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place & Culture* 6, no. 4 (December 1999), 340.

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they operate, but who nevertheless transcends those conditions through personal reflection, critique, resistance, etc.[55] Butler goes a long way to undoing the opposition between agency and vulnerability,[56] yet the two concepts in her account remain divided between active responsivity, on one hand, and passive receptivity on the other. How the vulnerable condition might generate agency, and not simply condition it, remains unclear in Butler's work.

Erinn Gilson takes a different tack, seeking to recast vulnerability itself as the matrix of agency. Following Deleuze again, she refers to this form of agency as "becoming," which is "a process of alteration that takes place only through a relationship with another being."[57] Gilson draws on Merleau-Ponty's thought to argue that vulnerability is a "mode of passivity, which can be thought in terms of receptivity rather than simply as susceptibility."[58] This receptive openness is a necessary condition for *becoming*: "nonvolitional affective transformation that occasions new ways of feeling, thinking, and relating."[59]

Following Merleau-Ponty, Gilson says that these transformative events are not merely imposed on us from the outside in a "passivist" fashion; rather, we participate in them, though they do not originate with us.[60] She then draws on Deleuze to argue that affect "makes" us agentic, though the "active forces" operate in our unconscious.[61] As Gilson states, "becomings are necessarily unpredictable, uncontrollable, and their results unknown."[62] While vulnerability as an affective condition can generate agency in the form of actions distinctly our own, the affective condition cannot enable us to consciously exercise agency. Perhaps sensing that this argument risks negating the possibility of agency in vulnerability,

[55] Nelson, "Bodies and Spaces Do Matter," 340.
[56] Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.
[57] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 139.
[58] Ibid., 134.
[59] Ibid., 139.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 42. See Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 139.
[62] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 139.

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Gilson adds that while becomings lie outside our volition, we can act to "[create] the conditions necessary for entering into a process of becoming."[63] This action involves cultivating what she calls "epistemic vulnerability," which she defines as an attitude of readiness to have our normative reality destabilized and subverted, paving the way for transformative change.[64] Yet, this attitude does not emerge from a vulnerable being itself, but depends (similar to Butler) on the notion of a subject who independently evaluates and identifies their own ignorance, articulates their own ideas, reflects on unfamiliar encounters and situations, and decides to make changes. In this independence, Gilson tacitly invokes the ideal of the libertarian subject, and in the end, she is not able to move beyond the active/passive binary. Her account of becoming is nonvolitional and looks a lot like conventional passivity: affects generate activity, but both play out in a realm beyond our control. And despite her efforts to avoid this outcome, her account of epistemic vulnerability effectively reinscribes libertarian forms of activity in the form of a rational, independent subject, evaluating, reflecting, and choosing to embrace epistemic attitudes and behaviors that enable flourishing. Though she moves closer than Butler to a theory of vulnerable agency, Gilson's account lacks the resources to show how human beings, whose bodies overlap with the world and are subject to its affect in ways beyond our control, can act in a way that is also *un*conditioned without relying on the intervention of a subject formed by the libertarian ideal.[65]

Zizioulas's Anthropology

As I will show, Zizioulas's theological anthropology provides resources to correct and augment the Butlerian accounts of vulnerability, which are limited by their immanent hermeneutical framework. Three key features of Zizioulas's thought will prove useful:

[63] Gilson, Ethics of Vulnerability, 139.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25. See also Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy," 36.

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the monarchy of the Father in the life of the Trinity; human existence as a paradox of biological and ecclesial hypostases; and *kenosis* as human agency *par excellence*.

The hermeneutical starting point of Zizioulas's anthropology is "top down," flowing from his doctrine of God, rather than from an empirical account of human life as it happens to be.[66] Zizioulas views this doctrine as integral with his neopatristic "duty,"[67] which is an "ideological continuity"[68] with the Fathers, rather than an attempt to retrieve a "pristine" historical meaning and perpetuate a mere theology of repetition.[69] Zizioulas's goal is to faithfully interpret the writings of the Eastern Fathers and apply "the special ethos that Orthodox tradition brings with it . . . to the problems of modern Western man, which are rapidly becoming the problems of humanity in its global dimension."[70]

From this starting point, Zizioulas argues that an anthropology that can respond to the malaise of fallen humanity in the modern world must be founded on the biblical identification of the "one God" with the Person of the Father that is affirmed by the Cappadocian Fathers and preserved in the Orthodox tradition.[71] Simply put, Zizioulas argues that God cannot give freedom to human beings as long as God's self is understood as subject to the necessity of the divine nature.[72] Only the biblical and Orthodox patristic understanding of God identified with the Person of the Fa-

[66] John Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (October 1975), 401, and *CO*, 4.

[67] Zizioulas, *CO*, 267.

[68] Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate," *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (July 2011), 700.

[69] Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology," 701.

[70] Zizioulas, "Communion and Otherness," 348. Cf. Gallaher and Ladouceur's characterization of the neo-patristic synthesis as a "perpetual theological return to and renewal in patristic thought" that responds creatively and synthetically to contemporary problems. See Georges Florovsky, *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 6.

[71] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 410; *BC*, 40–41; *CO*, 114–118.

[72] See Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 88–89.

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ther, who constitutes the divine Being in Absolute freedom, can offer fallen human beings a way to see themselves as gifted with personhood in God's image, that is, an ability to freely constitute their own nature in God's likeness.[73] As the "one God" and the "ground of unity" of the trinitarian Persons, the Father is the cause of the Son and the Spirit.[74] Aware of the danger of subordinationism and causal necessity in this claim, Zizioulas clarifies that in traditional Greek thought, subordination results from temporal causation, because what comes "after" is subordinate to what comes "before"; however, Zizioulas argues that the Cappadocian Fathers, by introducing the idea of the Person of the Father as creator *ex nihilo* into Greek thought, "made personal causation constitutive of being,"[75] separated the necessary association of causality with time, and rejected the notion of divine causation on the level of nature (that is, as necessity), but only at the level of personhood (that is, as freedom).[76] This freedom, for Zizioulas, is Absolute: not only is the Person of the Father not constrained by the divine nature, but communion with the Son and the Spirit "is not a constraining structure for His existence (God is not in communion, does not love, because He cannot but be in communion and love)."[77] As a Person, the Father "makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God."[78] As Zizioulas puts it more startlingly, "God owes His existence to the Father."[79] Thus, the priority of the Father means that both the existence of God's nature, or *ousia*, and the personal existence of the Trinity is contingent on the Father's personal, perpetual free willing.[80]

In asserting the radical priority of the Father, Zizioulas appears to uphold what Tom McCall calls "a robustly 'libertarian' notion

[73] Zizioulas, *CO*, 144–145.
[74] Ibid., *CO*, 118–119 and *BC*, 41.
[75] Zizioulas, *BC*, 88.
[76] Zizioulas, *CO*, 128. See also, "Human Capacity," 409–411 and *BC*, 39–42.
[77] Zizioulas, *BC*, 18.
[78] Ibid., 41.
[79] Zizioulas, *BC*, 18. See Tom McCall's summary of Zizioulas's argument in "Holy Love and Divine Aseity in the Theology of John Zizioulas," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (May 2008), 195.
[80] McCall, "Holy Love," 198.

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of divine freedom,"[81] that is, freedom without reference to anything other than Himself.[82] Yet, Zizioulas also affirms the "'Being as Communion' (BAC) thesis,"[83] asserting that the Father, while freely causing divine Being and the otherness of the Son and the Spirit, is always a "relational entity"[84] and thus "inconceivable without the radically other persons."[85] Thus, the Father "freely affirms his being, his identity, *by means of an event of communion with other persons*."[86] In a key passage of *Communion with Otherness*, Zizioulas discusses this simultaneity in the Father's freely constituting the divine Being in and through communion with the other divine Persons:

> In saying that "God as person—as the hypostasis of the Father—makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God," we automatically exclude the priority of substance over personhood, and at the same time its privileged possession by the Father, which would introduce the risk of inequality of deity in the Trinity. The co-emergence of divine nature with the Trinitarian existence initiated by the Father implies that the Father, too, "acquires," so to speak, deity only "as" the Son and the Spirit are in existence (he is inconceivable as Father without them), that is, only "when" divine nature is "possessed" by all three.[87]

The Father is prior in initiating trinitarian existence, but always as *Father*, begetting the Son and "spirating" the Spirit,[88] so that the mutual otherness of the Persons and their communion in the divine nature are *simultaneous*. Thus, Zizioulas understands "God is

[81] McCall, "Holy Love," 196.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 195.

[84] Zizioulas, *CO*, 122.

[85] Ibid., 36. See also *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today,* ed. Fr Gregory Edwards, Kindle (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010), loc. 882; "Communion and Otherness," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (January 1994), 353; and "On Being a Person. The Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 41.

[86] Zizioulas, *CO*, 18. Emphasis mine.

[87] Ibid., 140.

[88] Ibid., 120.

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love" (1 John 4:16) to mean "God's mode of existence [that] 'hypostasizes' God, *constitutes* His being"[89] as a communion in otherness and otherness in communion.[90]

As Zizioulas recounts it, the concept of the person developed in the context of the trinitarian controversies of the fourth century.[91] In a move Zizioulas calls "a revolution in Greek philosophy,"[92] the Cappadocian Fathers distinguished between two hitherto synonymous terms: *ousia* and *hypostasis*.[93] While denotating the former as the general nature of a being, they linked the latter with the particularity of *prosopon* or person.[94] In this way, they could speak of God as having a single nature (*ousia*), while existing in three distinct Persons (*hypostases*). For Zizioulas, this conceptual revolution has allowed for the possibility of seeing human beings made in God's image, not in exclusive reference to their nature, as in classical Greek thought, but as persons, freely constituting the "catholicity"[95] or totality of their shared nature with human beings in a way or "mode" that is distinct and unique.[96] Zizioulas thus defines persons as "*otherness in communion and communion in otherness,*"[97] where "communion" refers to the shared nature or *ousia* (the *what* of their being), and "otherness" refers to the way or *hypostasis* (the *how*) in which the common nature operates in freedom, uniqueness, and self-transcendence, or *ekstasis*.[98] While all created beings, "possess a *hypostasis*, a mode of being,"[99] only humans are made "gifted with the freedom to relate this hypostasis to the divine 'mode of being' which is not subject to death, and thus to allow or enable their hypostasis to exist for ever as particu-

[89] Zizioulas, *BC*, 46
[90] Ibid. and *CO*, 130.
[91] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 409; *BC*, 36–39; and *CO,* 155–161.
[92] Zizioulas, *BC*, 36–39.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 408.
[96] Zizioulas, *BC*, 39 and "Human Capacity," 408.
[97] Zizioulas*, CO*, 9–10. Emphasis in original.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 95.

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lar, truly personal and hypostatic."[100] Zizioulas thus views personhood as the image of God uniquely present in human beings,[101] forming the basis for divine-human communion or theōsis, which is "participation not in the nature or substance of God, but in his personal existence."[102]

Yet, the inherent longing of human beings to attain the divine mode of being is tragically unfulfilled.[103] Striving to overcome our inherent perishability, we are unable to do so because of a primordial sinful tendency to make ourselves "the ultimate point of reference in creation."[104] This impulse is bound to fail, Zizioulas says, precisely because the question of human identity cannot be answered with sole reference to our own nature, which is naturally subject to perishability, and thus, the limits of necessity and individualistic division, separation, and death. Such a mode of existence is the "biological hypostasis," freedom from which can only be found in the "new birth" of baptism, which gifts humans with the ability to constitute their nature according to the relationship between the Father and the Son,[105] a process that is perfected only in the age to come, that is, eschatologically.[106] Until then, human beings continue to exist in the ecclesial and biological hypostases in paradoxical simultaneity.[107]

Zizioulas views the dynamic tension of biological and ecclesial hypostases that characterizes actual human life as the arena for the exercise of agency. He views agency in this condition as "self-denial"[108]—that is, the abrogation of the "self-existent" being, "determined by its own boundaries"[109] that acts independently,

[100] Zizioulas, *CO*, 95.
[101] Ibid., 108.
[102] Zizioulas, *BC*, 50, "Human Capacity," 440, and *CO*, 166.
[103] Zizioulas, *BC*, 52.
[104] Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture Three," 5. See also "Human Capacity," 434.
[105] Zizioulas, *CO*, 240–241 and *BC*, 56.
[106] Zizioulas, *BC*, 59 and *CO*, 14.
[107] Zizioulas, *BC,* 50.
[108] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 428.
[109] Ibid., 409.

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introverted to its own created nature.[110] By contrast, genuine being, Zizioulas says, "is found ultimately in personal *communion* and not in the 'self-existent,'"[111] so that the proper task for human beings is to "deny any natural possession, any capacity—only by so doing he proves fully that he is free, and thus shows himself to be capable of something that no impersonal creature has."[112] Within the paradox of biological/ecclesial existence, then, humans affirm their freedom from slavery to necessity and death precisely through the denial of self-dependence.

The act of dying to oneself, Zizioulas contends, is nothing less than an ascetic act that is kenotic, rooted in the Incarnation:

> Since the Son of God moved to meet the other, his creation, by emptying himself through the kenosis of the Incarnation, the "kenotic" way is the only one that befits the Christian in his or her communion with the other—be it God or one's "neighbour."[113]

Self-denial through kenosis in the likeness of Christ involves the "breaking of one's own will,"[114] which signifies "the achievement of *freedom, par excellence*."[115] By rejecting the impulse for self-preservation and embracing the very depths of the perishability of the created condition, the ascetic breaks "the strongest of all necessities binding man"[116] and participates in Christ's own suffering: death on the cross, and descent into Hades.[117] At the same time, the ascetic comes to experience the "positive significance" of kenosis, "the reducing of oneself to nothing *so that* space may be made for the reception of the Other."[118] This yielding[119] of the self to the other is nothing less than kenotic agency as love, ultimately rooted in the love of Christ who "moved to meet the other, his

[110] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 406.
[111] Ibid., 445.
[112] Ibid., 430.
[113] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6 and 302–305.
[114] Ibid., 302.
[115] Ibid., 303. Emphasis in original.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Zizioulas, *CO*, 303.
[118] Ibid., 83. Emphasis mine.
[119] Ibid., 85.

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creation"[120] in his divine self-emptying love. Zizioulas, then, does not think of kenosis merely in terms of a negative movement, but the positive expression of self-denial *for* the other, so as to receive the other in a communion of love.[121] As he states, "Ascetic life aims not at the 'spiritual development' of the subject but at the giving up of the Self to the Other, at the erotic ecstasis of the I, that is, at *love*."[122]

It is worth noting that on Zizioulas's account, the full realization of the ecclesial hypostasis in the eschaton will effectively transcend the necessity, individualism, and death associated with biological existence.[123] He argues that this eschatological state, this state of being will "involve an ontology *which will mean the survival of our world* and thus will not amount to a denial of history and matter in a Gnostic or Neoplatonic sense."[124] Human beings will exist eschatologically *only* as ecclesial hypostases,[125] as communion in otherness and otherness in communion, but such an existence *will* be bodily, because the *how* of the human hypostasis, if it is to remain human, must hypostatize the *what* of human nature, even if that nature is entirely adapted and changed to a divine mode of being. It is unclear, however, how Zizioulas might view biological existence in an eschatological mode, free of those qualities that make it what it is, while remaining what it is. In the end, this suggests that Zizioulas tends to view biological existence as instrumental (though vitally so) to the attainment of personhood. Existing as ecclesial hypostases in the eschaton, human bodies seem to lose their active, dynamic capacities, with no other role than to be a mere platform for the staging of the event of personhood.

[120] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6.
[121] Ibid., 83.
[122] Ibid., 84.
[123] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 444–445.
[124] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[125] Ibid., 445.

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Zizioulian Support for the Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Having outlined Zizioulas's anthropology, I now turn to the ways it correlates to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. The linchpin of my argument rests on a claim I made earlier, namely, that interdependence and vulnerability are co-conditional. To restate that point briefly, if Butler is right that "who 'I' am is nothing without your life, and life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations with others,"[126] and if our dependency on others means that they can impinge upon us, then "vulnerability seems to follow from our being socially constituted bodies."[127] While Butler puts the point negatively in terms of loss and violence, Gilson's work shows that the converse also holds true: if human identity depends on relations with others, then we are not just exposed to possible harm from them, but also to the possibility of flourishing in relation to them.

Given the co-conditional link between interdependence and vulnerability, Zizioulas's relational anthropology tacitly supports a reappraised understanding of vulnerability and its role in human flourishing. While Zizioulas does not engage explicitly with vulnerability, other than pejoratively, as "necessity," his claim that all beings are constitutively interdependent means that they are *de facto* exposed to affect by others. Put another way, when Zizioulas speaks of dependence *on*, he can be read simultaneously as invoking vulnerability *to*. On this basis, Zizioulas's anthropology offers more support for a reappraised definition of vulnerability than it first appears. Specifically, his account of the biological/ecclesial hypostases supports the understanding of vulnerability as 1) a distinct potential for change for better as well as for worse that 2) can be said univocally of all beings, even as it is 3) experienced by different beings in different contexts, that is, *equivocally*. Finally, his view of kenosis as self-denial to receive the other in love offers a way to conceptualize human agency within the vulnerable condi-

[126] Butler, *Frames of War*, 44.
[127] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

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tion. Yet, Zizioulas does not follow the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability on all points. I will show that his "top down" hermeneutical framework ultimately leads him to diverge from these criteria laid out by Butlerian thought, as well as to offer theological solutions to problems raised (and still unsolved) in the philosophical accounts.

Zizioulas's view of the paradox of the biological and ecclesial hypostases supports an Orthodox reappraised understanding of vulnerability in two ways. First, in presenting the fallen human existence as a mode of being that refers to the biological hypostasis alone, Zizioulas joins philosophers in challenging a reductive view of vulnerability as "liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity."[128] Following the biblical and patristic affirmation of God as creator *ex nihilo*, Zizioulas understands the nature of all created beings, both human and nonhuman, as sharing a single fundamental characteristic: perishability. All beings experience this common perishability as an ontological necessity, which compels them to submit to their natural instincts. At the same time, they strive to perpetuate their natures beyond death through sexual reproduction, biological birth, and individuation, which leads to separation, division, and death, prompting the impulse to restart the reproductive cycle. This mode of being, Zizioulas says, is "not subject to the control of freedom";[129] it is mere susceptibility to impulses beyond the control of the creature. While for nonhumans, the biological hypostasis is a given, humans experience it pejoratively as tragic, because they have a unique capacity for freedom from givenness that they have perverted by turning it from its proper exercise in a relationship of love with their creator, and towards themselves.

Like Gilson and other philosophers of vulnerability, then, Zizioulas sees vulnerability understood as passivity as a bad thing. For Gilson, the reduction of vulnerability to passivity derives from a false philosophical ideal of the human being as invulnerable, self-sufficient, and independent, the so-called "libertarian

[128] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 5.
[129] Zizioulas, *BC*, 50.

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subject" discussed in the introduction. For Zizioulas, vulnerability experienced as passivity is a fact of human existence, but it stems from a profound ontological malaise: the breakdown of the relation between human beings and "the Other par excellence." Still, interesting parallels can be seen here between Gilson and Zizioulas, in that he links fallen human existence with the subject's bid for independence, a futile effort to define one's identity apart from others. Thus, Zizioulas's thought correlates with Gilson's notion of the libertarian subject—invulnerable, self-sufficient, and independent of others—as a false ideal of flourishing that human beings perpetuate through the willful denial of "epistemic ignorance." Zizioulas simply adds that the ideal and its continuing promotion result from a fallen mode of existence in which human beings, rebelling against God, persist in trying to define themselves with reference to themselves alone.

While Zizioulas converges with Butler and Gilson in asserting that vulnerability, understood or experienced as mere passivity, is bad for human flourishing, his anthropology supports a constructive view of vulnerability in a second vital way: as "a persistent openness to change . . . that enables continuing transformation."[130] As he states repeatedly, all being is relational, operating always in reference to others. In a fallen mode, humans attempt to exist independently of others and "the Other par excellence," but end up existing in reference to created nature, whether in themselves or other created beings, which leads to slavery to necessity and self-destructive individualism. In baptism, human beings receive the hypostasis of the Son of God in the Spirit, so that the *what* of their nature is made to exist, hypostatized, according to the mode of the Son's relation to the Father. Again, this "ecclesial hypostasis" is actualized historically always in reference to others in the eucharistic communion of the Church, which concurs with Butler's assertion that human beings are fundamentally "given over . . . to the world of others."[131] If that is the case, then humans are also always open to being *affected* by others, either for their harm

[130] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 135–136.
[131] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26. See also *Frames of War*, 23.

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(being "undone" by them, as Butler puts it), or (as Gilson would argue) for their good and flourishing, which for Zizioulas is theōsis.

Zizioulas sees the biological and ecclesial hypostases as simultaneous, paradoxical modes of existence integral to the mystery of the human being, even if the ecclesial hypostasis alone will remain operative in the eschatological state. This paradoxical condition means that human relations with others need not result in their subjection to necessity, leading to individualism and death. Put another way, their interdependent (and therefore mutually vulnerable) relations do not necessarily result in harmful expressions. Rather, they may actualize themselves in ways that are both tragic (when referred only to themselves) and transformative (when referred to the uncreated Other in baptism and others in the ecclesial network of relations). Thus, while Zizioulas does not present the ecclesial/biological hypostasis as a "virtuality" in the Deleuzian sense—that is, as a distinct entity capable of actualizing itself along creative lines, both positive and negative—his account affirms vulnerability as potentiality in the sense of being an openness to change that is *undetermined* in its expression.

Zizioulas also treats relationality as applicable to all beings "in the same sense," that is *univocally*. As Gilson argues, drawing from Deleuze, univocity is not a substantial property shared by beings, but a fundamental commonality of openness to affection that emerges out of the diverse relations of beings irreducible to one another.[132] While Zizioulas explicitly rejects Deleuze's (and Gilson's) postmodernist belief that "Difference is what determines existence,"[133] he affirms with them that ontological identity arises out of a relational dependence on others. He also agrees that relational, interdependent being does not derive from a common substance or shared properties. Zizioulas diverges from Deleuze and Gilson in that, rather than conceiving being as a "clamour"[134] that arises from the contrast or differentiation among beings, he ar-

[132] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 136–137.
[133] Zizioulas, *CO*, 52.
[134] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 35.

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gues that interdependent being emerges out of the participation of different beings in *personhood*, the relational event in which each being transcends itself to affirm the otherness of the other in a communion of love.[135] Nevertheless, his account meets the conditions of univocity in that he upholds personhood as a mode of being equally common to all humans.[136] To that extent, Zizioulas would also affirm that because interdependence may be said of all beings in the same sense, they are also univocally open to mutual affect, that is, vulnerable.

Zizioulas likewise demonstrates an awareness of the equivocity of vulnerable being, i.e., that not all beings experience their vulnerability in the same way. Nonhuman beings experience the biological hypostasis as a given of necessity, individuation, and death, which they attempt to avoid by adjusting and adapting, but to which they are ultimately passive. By contrast, human beings experience the same hypostasis as tragic, an unacceptable state of affairs from which they strive to escape, either in the destruction of the given (including themselves), or through its creative transformation.[137] In baptism and the eucharist, humans experience vulnerability positively as openness to transformation into the likeness of the hypostasis of the Son of God, that is, theōsis, while preserving their irreducible uniqueness as persons.[138] While for Zizioulas only humans experience theōsis directly, they can act as "priests of creation," affirming their interdependence with nonhuman beings and carrying them into "transcending relatedness with the 'other.'"[139] Thus, human and nonhuman beings experience openness to change, in ways irreducible to one another. To that extent, he supports the notion that vulnerability is not just univocal for all being, but equivocal in its manifestations among beings.

[135] See Zizioulas, *CO*, 55.

[136] Zizioulas also argues that nonhumans can participate in personhood through human mediation, becoming "humanised." See "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture Three," 4.

[137] Zizioulas, *BC*, 52.

[138] Zizioulas, *CO*, 167–168.

[139] Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture One," 2.

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Both ambivalence and ambiguity are features of Zizioulas's understanding of the equivocity of vulnerable human existence. In that the created experience of relational being can be both tragic (in reference to its own nature) and transformative (in reference to God in Christ through baptism and the eucharist), the resulting experiences of vulnerability are undetermined, and therefore, ambivalent. They are also ambiguous in that tragedy and transformation are located in one and the same experience of suffering that is the primary feature of created being.[140] Yet, Zizioulas diverges from Gilson's philosophical account in that he does not view this state of affairs as a "pervasive immanent condition,"[141] the only possible mode of human nature. The *telos* of the biological hypostasis in reference to itself is death, which for Zizioulas remains "the worst enemy of man, the most unacceptable of all things," regardless of how it may be viewed empirically in the natural world by scientists or philosophers.[142] The simultaneity of the biological and ecclesial hypostases are integral to the historical stage of the process of theōsis, but this process is not endless. It culminates in the eschaton and results in a condition in which the ambivalence and ambiguity of the empirical experience of vulnerability in history are resolved in a wholly ecclesial mode of being in the likeness of God.[143] Even in this eschatological state, though, Zizioulas remains clear that interdependence persists as integral to personhood.[144] In that sense, his account also continues to support the persistence in the eschatological state of vulnerability, though in a special form that is free from all necessity and individualism, and defined wholly by openness to loving communion with God and other beings.

[140] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 430–431.
[141] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 11.
[142] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 422.
[143] Ibid., 444–445.
[144] Ibid.

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The Reappraisal of Vulnerability: a Zizioulian Contribution

In envisioning an eschatological form of vulnerability that remains open to others even as it moves beyond the susceptibility to change for good or ill characteristic of human experience in history, Zizioulas's anthropology moves from "companioning" Butler's and Gilson's treatment to offering his own distinctly theological contribution. Specifically, he provides a way to address the difficulties of explaining how vulnerable human beings can exercise genuine agency without invoking, directly or indirectly, a libertarian subject. Both Butler and Gilson have attempted to meet this challenge, with limited results. Butler appeals tacitly to an autonomous subject within a field of vulnerability, while Gilson invokes an independent consciousness able to cultivate epistemic vulnerability and enable becoming. As noted previously, Zizioulas follows Butler and Gilson in rejecting the notion of agency as rooted in subjective independence. Such a view, he suggests, amounts to self-delusion, echoing the malaise of "epistemic ignorance" described by Gilson, in that a creature's bid for independence inevitably results in slavery to the necessity of its own nature—vulnerability reduced to mere passivity. Exercising agency in the creaturely state, then, means first engaging in active self-denial, by which Zizioulas means rejecting the claim of autonomous self-existence by embracing one's perishability—suffering—to prove oneself capable of freedom from the biological necessity of preserving oneself. Agency in this negative sense consists precisely in the exercise of vulnerability as a free yielding to the experience of necessity, rather than an attempt to resist necessity and preserve the illusion of one's self-existence. At the same time, this free yielding of oneself has the positive sense of making space to affirm others as unique and irreplaceable, that is, to love them.

One might object at this point that my reference to "free" self-denial tacitly invokes a subject who is independent from the biological hypostasis, and therefore *able* to deny themselves. Hans S. Reinders, for instance, has critiqued Zizioulas's notion of relationality as depending on an independent subjectivity, which down-

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grades the personhood of those with profound disabilities.[145] However, Reinders' critique does not sufficiently take into account Zizioulas's own assertion that self-denial to realize communion in otherness and otherness in communion, or personhood, "can only be realised from outside human existence"[146] in the trinitarian God, who is the model for the human being through the Son of God.[147] The ability to constitute one's personhood freely must have its origins in God, and since God cannot give what God does not have, the ground of human personhood rests ultimately in the Person of the Father, who constitutes the personal existence of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with Absolute freedom, through perpetual free willing.[148] Through baptism in the Spirit into the Son, all human beings, regardless of abilities or capacities, come to share in the filial relationship between Father and Son, and thus participate in the freedom whose origin is the Father.[149]

Yet, by grounding human freedom in the monarchy of the Father, is Zizioulas not merely positing a libertarian divine subject, as McCall argues?[150] If so, he is simply raising the libertarian ideals of independence and invulnerability to a metaphysical level, and so cannot account for vulnerable agency any better than Butler or Gilson. As I have shown, however, Zizioulas holds together both the ultimate priority of the Father (alone) *and* the ultimacy of the communion of the three divine Persons. He makes it clear that "There is no inconsistency in making communion primordial and at the same time making the Father ontologically ultimate,"[151] precisely because the notion of the person is relational, a relationality that is truly univocal because it can be said of all beings, including God. Thus, in positing the ground of human freedom in the monarchy of the Father as a Being who exists eternally in a communion of love with the Son and the Spirit (even as

[145] See Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008), 252-260.

[146] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 433; 402–403.

[147] Ibid., 402–403.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Zizioulas, *CO*, 140–145. See also, "Human Capacity," 410.

[150] McCall, "Holy Love," 196.

[151] Zizioulas, *CO*, 126.

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he himself freely wills that relation), Zizioulas is in fact conceptualizing not a libertarian divine subject, but a subject who freely wills to exist within a divine "network of relations" with the Son and the Spirit. God is therefore also vulnerable in a special sense, and this divine vulnerability is the ultimate model for vulnerability as human beings will experience it in the eschaton: beings eternally open to one another in a "movement towards communion which leads to a transcendence of the boundaries of the self and thus to *freedom*."[152]

Finally, Zizioulas's account of divine personhood suggests a trinitarian model for human vulnerable agency as kenosis. As Papanikolaou observes, this point requires more development in Zizioulas, though his thought is already well-positioned for such an interpretation because he allows for "reflection on the immanent Trinity based on the economic activity."[153] Papanikolaou clarifies, "If what is revealed in the economy is the *mode of existence* of the trinitarian persons, then the Son, by his incarnation and passion, reveals that such a *mode of existence* is *kenotic*."[154] Papanikolaou expands on how this kenotic mode of existence plays out between the divine Persons by arguing that "each of the divine persons as persons freely receives the *ekstatic* movement toward their person. Thus, an *ekstatic* movement is not complete without reception, which itself is a *kenotic* act."[155] I agree, but would suggest that before it can be a reception of the other, divine kenosis must first involve a yielding "in the context of an erotic ecstasis in which one lives the life of the beloved one, freely and fully embraced by him."[156] In the likeness of this mutual yielding of the divine Persons to one another, human beings exercise their own vulnerable agency as the yielding to suffering that denies the claim to self-existence, while making a space to receive and let the other be unique, irreplaceable, and beloved.[157]

[152] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 408. Emphasis in original.
[153] Papanikolaou, *Being with God,* 152–153.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., 153.
[156] Zizioulas, *CO*, 85.
[157] John D. Zizioulas, "Relational Ontology," 150.

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Conclusion

As I have shown, Zizioulas's anthropology supports an Orthodox contribution to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. Based on reading of the Cappadocian Fathers, Zizioulas's neopatristic anthropology upholds a relational ontology: being as communion. Assuming that interdependence and vulnerability are co-conditional, I have argued that his account of being as relational thus places vulnerability at the heart of his account of what it means to be human. This tacit invocation of vulnerability through a relational ontology meets the criteria for the reappraised definition of vulnerability as undetermined openness to change that can be said univocally of all beings and manifests itself equivocally among all beings.

Yet, Zizioulas's hermeneutical prerequisites, characterized by a "top-down" theological starting point for anthropology, offers a teleology of vulnerability that supplements and enriches philosophical accounts, which are limited to the empirical dimensions of the vulnerable condition. His neopatristic trinitarian theology, particularly his articulation of the monarchy of the Father, allows for his concept of "communion in otherness" to be understood as "divine vulnerability" that is the basis for the *imago Dei* in vulnerable human beings. In the light of this divine paradigm, Zizioulas reinterprets the Butlerian view of vulnerability as a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis," marked by the tragic inability to overcome our created nature subject to death, and the "ecclesial hypostasis," which embodies free, loving interdependence with (and thus vulnerability to) God in Christ through eucharistic communion, or "communion in otherness." Zizioulas also addresses the hitherto unresolved philosophical problem of vulnerable agency by presenting kenosis as an ongoing ascetic practice of self-denial, enabling one to receive the other and allow the other to truly exist as other.

I should note in closing that Zizioulas's anthropology is not without its problems from the standpoint of the reappraisal of vulnerability. As I have shown above, his eschatological vision of human existence tends to instrumentalize the biological hyposta-

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sis in history, and render it inert in the age to come. This tendency towards instrumentalism, downgrading the inherent value of the body, may perhaps be a symptom of Zizioulas's lack of emphasis on the Incarnate Son of God as the defining exemplar of the vulnerable yet agentic human being. This paucity in Zizioulas points to a need for a more rigorous application of Christology to the reappraised definition of vulnerability as more than mere susceptibility to harm, i.e. suffering, and suffering as the vital instrument through which humans come to experience an impassible condition *beyond* suffering. Instead, in the light of the Incarnation, our historical experiences of vulnerability can be seen and experienced as temporal-spatial "branches" on the cruciform tree of God's "divine vulnerability," which is His capacity to be the God who is truly love.[158]

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[158] See René, "Absolute Vulnerability."

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OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 139–158
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/76pr3z55
Original Paper
Received: 25 March 2025 | Accepted: 11 April 2025

A Negligible Rock, or the Chief Cornerstone? On Mission: A Dialogue with John Zizioulas

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Abstract:
In several places of his magnificent work John Zizioulas argued that mission does not belong to the very self of the Church. For him mission is historically conditioned, which means that it is only a transient activity, in sharp juxtaposition to the eschatological identity of the Church event. The following paper questions this approach on the basis that, since the Church is not the Kingdom of God, but the sign—the foretaste and the manifestation—of the Kingdom, she not only *has* a mission, but she *is* mission. Zizioulas's brilliant emphasis on the Church's task to transfigure the world and history is in reality an affirmation of the missionary nature of the Church; however, he remained impressively negative towards missionary engagement, in the sense that he conceived it as a Protestant emphasis on preaching which undervalues the sacraments and has an antagonistic attitude toward the Eucharist. This dichotomy does not do justice to a holistic understanding of mission as the symbiosis of action and sacrament. This paper articulates certain objections to Zizioulas' approach, claims that ontology has to take

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seriously into account the activity of God in history (activity which is the foundation of mission, i.e., the establishment of the Church as co-worker with God), shows that the Eucharist includes the missionary impulse, and asserts that not only the Eucharist but also praxis (the loving move of the faithful toward the other, and solidarity with the broken) are in history icons of, and witness to, the eschatological Kingdom.
Keywords: mission, eschatology, ontology, praxis, Eucharist, Kingdom

Introduction

Allow me to begin by making an introductory clarification with a personal note. This clarification involves a series of hermeneutical steps I took in a long personal research "program" on the place of mission in the ecclesiastical event. I inquired: does mission belong to the very core of the ecclesiastical "being," or conversely, is it placed on its margins? In many ways, my "program" received its impetus when our teacher, John Zizioulas, boldly claimed that mission does *not* belong to the core of the ecclesiastical event. I first encountered this claim in his classic *Being as Communion*, which I first read at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, I realized that the broader problem has been that it is not at all clear what someone means when they use the contested word "mission"—one gives it either a positive or a negative connotation.[1]

[1] The Greek word for "mission" in general is "ἀποστολή" (*apostoli*), from the verb "ἀποστέλλειν" (*apostellein* – Latin "mittere"). But since the beginning of the 19th century, when referring to so-called "external mission" (the evangelization of non-Christians) the term is "ἱερ-αποστολή" (*ier-apostoli*, i.e., holy mission) and its agents are called "ἱερ-απόστολοι» (*ier-apostoloi*, i.e., holy missionaries). Both the words are coined as neologisms. Until the 19th century, the Church spoke of *apostles, equals-to-the-apostles* and *enlighteners*. See my book *Η Εκκλησία γίνεται όταν ανοίγεται: Η Ιεραποστολή ως Ελπίδα και ως Εφιάλτης* (Athens: En Plo, 2008), 35–37. Sadly enough, among the Greek-speaking Orthodox the neologism helped create confusion between the term "holy mission" and the mission per se of the Church, as if the so called "holy mission" is some-

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Step by step (the rhythm established by the struggle between study and livelihood) I tried to clarify my questions and articulate my disagreements. In the beginning, I studied the broader issues with which Zizioulas' work dealt, and then proceeded to concentrate on that work itself. Every step I took was accompanied by the sense that I still had a long way to go, inasmuch as I labored with full knowledge of his greatness and so feared lest some aspect of his dense work escape me. I note, therefore, a few characteristic milestones in the following.

On July 3, 1995, I served for the first-time as a co-panelist with him, and I was awestruck. Distinguishing myself distinctly from his published views, I maintained that when magnificence in worship comes off as luxury, it no longer refers to the glory of the eschaton, but rather to an authoritarian presentism.[2] I also noted that the necessary emphasis on Pneumatology and Trinitarian theology must not detract from the Christocentricity of the Church.[3]

On February 24, 2001, I again found myself presenting with Zizioulas at the same conference—this time dedicated to the theme of eschatology. My contribution explored the relationship between mission and the eschaton, and indeed the concept of mission as a "sign" of the eschaton.[4]

From as early as 2000, my steps grew.[5] In 2009, in my study on the theology of Fr. Alexander Schmemann, the horizon of my

thing secondary, additional and hence not essential. Nevertheless, the term continues to be used out of necessity, as no suitable term (such as "witness") has yet replaced it.

[2] I later developed this into a study entitled "Η ομορφιά θα καταστρέψει την Εκκλησία;", *Theologia* 83.2 (2012), 199–219. Zizioulas was not receptive to this type of criticism, and he rejected any objection to luxury as pietistic. Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2023), 290.

[3] Thanasis N. Papathanasiou, *Ανεστιότητα και Παραπεμπτικότητα: Κριτικές Προσεγγίσεις στα Θεολογικά Δρώμενα* (Athens: Armos, 1998), 68–72.

[4] "Ιεραποστολή και Εσχατολογία," in *Εκκλησία και Εσχατολογία*, ed. Pantelis Kalaïtzides (Volos: Volos Academy of Theological Studies and Kastaniotis), 171–190.

[5] See my "Ιεραποστολή: Συνέπεια ή προϋπόθεση της καθολικότητας της Εκκλησίας," *Synaxis* 76 (2000), 70–79. "Ιεραποστολή και φύση της Εκκλησίας. Επισημάνσεις εισαγωγικές," *Synaxis* 78 (2001), 5–12 (both published later as: "Mission: A Consequence or, perhaps, a presupposition of Catholicity?" and "Mission, the self of the Church" in my book *Future, the Background of History: Essays on Church Mission in an Age of Global-*

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missionary reflection broadened.[6] Indirectly, yet to a large degree, my study referred to positions held by Zizioulas. In 2010, I formulated my disagreement with his conviction that the Eucharist alone images the kingdom.[7]

I did not engage our great theologian in detailed conversations on these matters, despite the fact that I collaborated with him often—both on issues of the Greek-language journal *Synaxis* (of which editor-in-chief I have been), as well as at conferences. As the years passed, I noticed that he viewed some aspects of my thought with interest, a view which he expressed in informal conversation.[8] I will limit myself to the last conversation we had in this life.

In September 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate organized an international conference at the Phanar on the legacy of Fr. Georges Florovsky. My paper pertained to his "sacred Hellenism" and the need (in my opinion) to reformulate the faith in the terms of other cultures, beyond (and in parallel with) the established onto-

ization (Montreal, Quebec: Alexander Press, 2005), 39–54 and 13–22. "Il sacramento dell'invito. Le specie eucharistiche e la missione della Chiesa nell'ottica liturgica di Cabasilas," in: *Nicolas Cabasilas e la divina liturgia* (Magnano, Italia: Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 2007), 165–191. "Μόνο με ψωμί; Μόνο με κρασί; Η δυνατότητα χρήσης άλλων υλικών στη θεία Ευχαριστία," *Synaxis*) 105 (2008), 55–73. See also my book review of the volume *Πρόσωπο, Ευχαριστία και Βασιλεία του Θεού σε Ορθόδοξη και Οικουμενική Προοπτική. Σύναξις Ευχαριστίας προς τιμήν του Μητροπολίτη Περγάμου Ιωάννη Ζηζιούλα* (Volos: Volos Academy for Theological Studies, 2016), *Synaxis* 149 (2018), 104–106. Specifically, I want to note that on April 12, 2008 I presented a paper at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies entitled "Eucharist and Mission." There my reference to Zizioulas was more direct, but unfortunately the paper remains unpublished. I reworked it in 2018, but again it went unpublished. The present paper represents its final correction and completion. I hope, however, that I will be able to carefully develop my thought further.

[6] "The Church as Mission: Fr. Alexander Schmemann's liturgical theology revisited," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 60 (2010), 6–41.

[7] "Οι εικόνες της Βασιλείας. Κάποια αθέατα του Καβάσιλα και κάποιοι πειρασμοί της Ευχαριστιακής μας θεολογίας" *Synaxis*) 114 (2010), 13–21. "Icons of the Kingdom: Overlooked topics in St. Nicholas Cabasilas, some dangers of Eucharistic theology, and the mission of the Church," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 15:2 (2024), pp. 9–25. See also my "Social Engagement as Part of the Call to Deification in Orthodox Theologies," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57.1–4 (2016), 75–84.

[8] Discussions with his student and friend, Fr. Stamatis Skliris, with whose permission I include this.

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logical categories of Hellenistic thought.[9] One late afternoon, after the end of the day's conference proceedings, the two of us spoke on this issue, and he told me that he believed it necessary to reformulate the faith for other cultural contexts, such as the African context, the basic semantic tool of which he considered the traditional African view of the ancestors. With joy, I told him that I had written on just this theme, and I asked him if he would like me to give him an offprint, which I happened to have with me.[10] He accepted it, and not only did he simply accept it, but he surprised me by reading the study that very night (something rare among the greats). He declared the next day his complete agreement with me and his conviction that the Orthodox world did not understand that it must move in this direction. I remember this conversation in particular as an example of amazing openness, considering that Zizioulas was one of the defenders *par excellence* of ontology!

Mission, the Issue at Stake

In Zizioulas' works I believe there are two difficulties with regard to mission. The first is that he does not leave room theologically for mission in the "being" of the Church—i.e., he does not consider mission *constitutive* of ecclesiastical identity. The second difficulty is what he means by "mission," and therefore what he actually opposes. I will comment here on the second difficulty, since I will dedicate the rest of my paper to the first.

In Zizioulas' writing lurks the ghost that has been haunting our theology for years: the vagary and inexactitude in our use of the term "mission." He understands and condemns "mission" as a Protestant emphasis on preaching which degrades dogma, undervalues the sacraments and has an antagonistic attitude toward the

[9] Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Fr. Georges Florovsky and mission: Witness 'to,' 'with,' or 'beyond' 'sacred Hellenism'?" in: *The Living Christ: The Theological Legacy of Georges Florovsky*, eds. John Chryssavgis and Brandon Gallaher (London: T & T Clark, 2021), 357–377.

[10] "Χριστός, ο Πρόγονος και Αδελφός: Μια Αφρικανική Χριστολογία," *Bulletin of Biblical Studies* 25.1 (2007), 59–82.

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Eucharist.[11] The big problem here is that he remained entrenched in this definition of mission, as if it had not been made clear—particularly with the monumental reflective work since the middle of the 20th century in the ecumenical Christian environment—that "mission" is identical with the existence of the Church. "*The apostolic work* and the proclamation of the Gospel, also known as *mission*, belong at the core of the Church's identity," as the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016) stated.[12] Mission is the Church itself when it crosses every kind of border, when it witnesses God's invitation directed at his creation, and when it ministers to this invitation with its very being, prayer, word, and action. Mission, in other words, obviously pertains to the combination of dogma, preaching, praxis, and sacraments.[13] I therefore believe that in Zizioulas' perspective, the notion of mission was trapped from the start, and I think that it would have been extremely beneficial if Zizioulas had made some critical distinctions regarding mission, as he did for other topics. (For example, regarding ontology—which some reject as totalitarianism over human existence—Zizioulas clarified that the term does not mean only one thing, inasmuch as eschatological ontology (which Zizioulas was presenting) is different from protological ontology, in which the past is constraining.)[14] Similarly, the pages he dedicated to the Church's task of transfiguring the world and history[15] are missiological in essence and essential for the study of mission. Furthermore, his conviction (though very rarely expressed in his

[11] See characteristically *Ευχαριστίας Εξεμπλάριον. Ήτοι Κείμενα Εκκλησιολογικά και Ευχαριστιακά* (Mazi, Megara: Monastery of St. Paraskevi 2006), 26–31 (also 136–137, 147, 169).

[12] "Encyclical of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church" 2, 6, https://www.holycouncil.org/encyclical-holy-council. The contribution of Anastasios, Archbishop of Albania to the deliberations of the Synod was a catalyst for this approach.

[13] Cf. Rommen's argumentation that mission theology lies in organic unity with the entire doctrine. Edward Rommen, *Into All the World: An Orthdox Theology of Mission* (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press 2017, Kindle edition 2018), 78–79.

[14] John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 36, 70.

[15] See characteristically *Ευχαριστίας Εξεμπλάριον*, 37, 124, 144, 169–172, 218–222; John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 181.

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writings) that in the Orthodox East complacency in the eschatological vision of worship tends to paralyze missionary activity to an unsettling degree is extremely significant.[16] And, of course, his immeasurable contribution to the reception of otherness (perhaps his crowning achievement) pertains directly to the mission of the Church: the rift in the world's conviction that the other is first and foremost a threat.

The Problem of the Starting Point

I now come to his theological perspective—that he does not consider mission constitutive of ecclesiastical identity. This issue is extremely critical, since it forms the basis of Zizioulas' individual views.

In the Christian faith, God reveals himself to human beings by acting in history. For Christians, this self-revelation—as it is recorded in (and comes to us through) the Holy Scriptures and the community's experience—is the starting point, the basis of Christians' ability to theologize (Gal. 4:9). Zizioulas, however, does not consider God's self-revelation—in other words, his unique and decisive actions in history (culminating in the Incarnation of the Son through the Holy Spirit, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension)—to be the starting point for theologizing.[17] Due to his deep suspicion that history subjugates whatever happens in it, Zizioulas posits that the true starting point for theologizing is the very existence of God, that is, Trinitarian theology.[18]

I consider his position here problematic. Trinitarian theology itself is only possible through the self-revelation of God; other-

[16] Ibid., 181–182.

[17] See characteristically John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, ed. Fr. Gregory Edwards (Alhambra: Sebastian Press 2010), 9–10 and 233. Cf. Nikolaos Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού και το Μυστήριο της Εκκλησίας: Γεώργιος Φλωρόφσκυ και Ιωάννης Ζηζιούλας σε διάλογο γύρω από τη θεολογική μεθοδολογία* and *The Mystery of the Church: Georges Florovsky and John Zizioulas in Dialogue on Theological Methodology* (Alhambra and Volos: Sebastian Press and Ekdotiki Dimitriados, 2023), 293, 321, and 379.

[18] Cf. Nikolaos Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού και το Μυστήριο της Εκκλησίας*, 432, 484–485, and 543.

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wise, it is simply philosophical speculation. The Christian God is constantly working (John 5:17) and calls the faithful to cooperate (1 Cor. 3:9) in the renewing of the universe, which God is working toward. Even the eschaton breaking into history only comes about through acts of God; it does not simply "happen" or "come."[19] I would go so far as to say that Zizioulas slights even the New Testament when he expresses contempt for the Hebrew concept of "being" as "acting" or "happening," accusing the Hebrew mind of being fixated on history.[20] His position here undermines the significance of action within history, and consequently mission.

Also related to this issue is Zizioulas' emphasis on the inverted direction of time. By this, he means that the Kingdom is not the end of history, but that which comes from the future.[21] Here I have no objection to the claim that the eschaton is breaking into history. My reservation lies in the fact that the direction of time from *the future to today* must never be conceived as replacing (or annulling) the movement of time from *today to the future*. Human beings (and creation as a whole) move experientially from the past to the future. That which comes from the future should contribute to the move toward the future—not invalidate it. Zizioulas is incorrect when he views *the movement from the present to the future* as clearly deterministic, as if it means that the Kingdom is a product of the world's entelechy. Theologically, it is settled that the Kingdom is God's initiative and work. Moreover, a host of theologians and philosophers (from Georges Florovsky to Savvas Agourides, to Nikos Nissiotis and Cornelius Kastoriades, Ilia Prigozhin, Ernst Bloch, and Hannah Arendt)[22] have demonstrat-

[19] Cf. my observations in "The Church as Mission," 85, and "Οι εικόνες της Βασιλείας," 15–16. Similarly, Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Ο μόχθος της μετοχής* (Athens: Armos, 2010), 185–188.

[20] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 68–75. I consider the crowning moment in this dialogue to be the article by Savvas Agourides, "Μπορούν τα πρόσωπα της Τριάδας να δώσουν τη βάση για περσοναλιστικές απόψεις περί του Ανθρώπου;", *Synaxis* 33 (1990), 67–78, and Zizioulas' "Το είναι του Θεού και το είναι του ανθρώπου," *Synaxis* 37 (1991), 11–36.

[21] John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 16–26.

[22] Characteristically cf. Thanasis (Athanasios) N. Papathanasiou, "Μια θεολογία έξω από 'δω, ή Μια θεολογία του εξαποδώ; Δοκιμές για τη συνδιάλεξη Φυσικών και Θεολό-

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ed in a myriad of ways that the practical march toward the future involves the dawning of something completely new—even surprising. For Christians, of course, this takes place in the framework of the created; yet, it is neither something produced mechanically nor a narcissistic drive to subjugate the future and construct the Kingdom via anthropocentric toil. If, however, the significance and uniqueness of the historical activity of both God and human is dismissed—if, in other words, the future is simply "coming"—then how much does it differ from a platonizing reflection of the eternal into the temporary, or an inverted determinism, with the inevitable located in the future rather than the past? It is no coincidence that Zizioulas himself confronted this head on, when he encountered the teaching of St. Maximos the Confessor on the capital importance of the historical movement of creation (a movement which is not a Fall, as in Origen, but creation's God-given ability to respond to the call it has received), intertwined of course with the saint's decisively eschatological vision.[23]

The Problem of the March Through History

My position is that mission pertains to the "being" of the Church, quite simply because the Church is a *sign*, an *icon*, and a *foretaste* of the Kingdom—not the Kingdom itself. The Church exists *because* of the Kingdom and *thanks* to the Kingdom: it manifests, witnesses, and serves the Kingdom and the invitation into the Kingdom. This invitation comes from God and is directed by God to all people. In this perspective, the Church does not simply *have* mission, but rather it *is* mission,[24] being the diachronic presence of the eschaton within history. This phrase of mine ("the diachronic presence of the eschaton within history") combines with my earlier phrase ("the Church exists *because* of the kingdom and

γων" in: *Φιόρα Τιμής για τον μητροπολίτη Ζακύνθου Χρυσόστομο Β΄ Συνετό* [in Greek; Festschrift In Honor of Metropolitan Chrysostom II of Zakynthos] (Zante 2009), 769–788.

[23] John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 93, 95.

[24] Cf. my "The Church as Mission."

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thanks to the kingdom") and affirms the eschatological nature of the Church in conjunction with (not in opposition to) its historical mission.

Not even Zizioulas would consider the historical Church identical with the Kingdom, but whenever he notes this juxtaposition (between the historical Church and the Kingdom), he does so in a way that eventually overlooks the centrality of mission. He was focused on the counterpoint that the authentic "being" of the Church is eschatological, which is made manifest in history with (and during) the Divine Eucharist.[25] In the spirit of this counterpoint, nothing besides the Eucharist is considered a decisive element of ecclesiastical identity.

All of this is related to the following as well: Zizioulas connects the Church's *apostolicity* with acceptance of the Apostles' teaching and with that which the Church experiences eschatologically in the eucharistic gathering of the Apostles with the Risen One.[26] Nevertheless, given that the Greek verb *apostellein* means *to send*, the Church is apostolic because it is *sent* (by its Lord) and *sending* (its members to witness to the world), a fact that is testified to by Jesus himself in his prayer to the Father regarding the establishment of the Eucharist (John 17:26). Such an approach to apostolicity recognizes mission as an element of the Church itself (as an element of its very being, according to the Nicene Creed, in addition to its *uniqueness*, *holiness*, and *catholicity*). However, Zizioulas has devalued this apostolicity from the outset and proceeded to sharply divide two different eschatological concepts: on the one hand, the mission of the apostles, in which the eschaton becomes present as a result of the march through history; on the other hand, the liturgical manifestation of the eschaton, which appears as a projection from the future and presupposes the end of mission. Zizioulas, of course, considers only this latter option foundational.[27]

[25] John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many*, 136–146. Cf. also Asproulis, 277.

[26] John D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 13–14.

[27] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 174–175. *Έργα, Α΄. Εκκλησιολογικά Μελετήματα* (Athens: Domos 2016), 616–18.

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My humble view is that the march through history on the one hand and the liturgical synaxis on the other are not in counterpoint. The eucharistic community is a marching community at the same time! It celebrates the Eucharist on the way. In other words, missionary activity is simultaneously a *march toward* the eschaton and a *reception of* the eschaton. Matthew's penultimate verse contains not only Christ's call to missionary activity ("go therefore and make disciples of all nations," 28:19), but also the assurance that the risen, eschatological Christ would remain with his disciples ("and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," 28:20)—in other words, he would be marching with them through history! Thus, the points where Zizioulas acknowledges an interest in a synthesis of the historical and eschatological approaches[28] could be among his most fruitful contributions and must be elaborated in future work.

The Problem of the Signs of the Kingdom

In support of his position that the Church is realized only in the Divine Eucharist, Zizioulas often resorted[29] to St. Nicholas Cabasilas' view that "the Church is represented in the mysteries" (meaning the Eucharist) and that if one could see the Church, one would see nothing but the very body of Christ."[30]

On one occasion (in 2011) in which Zizioulas made this reference, he added a sarcastic footnote that marveled how no one had yet accused Cabasilas of "eucharistic monism."[31] Let me add here that I had broached the issue of eucharistic monism, not in Cabasilas but in Zizioulas, inasmuch as Zizioulas failed to recognize Cabasilas' truly non-eucharistic-monistic vision! I propounded this issue on November 20, 2008, during a presentation of Fr.

[28] Ibid., 181–88.

[29] Characteristically: J. Zizioulas, *Ἔργα*, 277. *Ευχαριστίας Εξεμπλάριον*, 43–44, 200; J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 79; J. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 68; *Remembering the Future*, 301.

[30] Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, trans F. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 91–92.

[31] John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion*, 69.

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George Basioudes' book, *The Power of Worship: Fr. Alexander Schmemann's Contribution to Liturgical Theology*.[32] My paper, entitled "Are we in danger of eucharistic monism?", was the rough draft of a study I then published in 2010.[33] Allow me to summarize in the following.

I find it strange that everyone seems to pass over another identification that Cabasilas makes, indeed even in the very same work. It comes at the point where he is commenting on the people's plea, "Lord, have mercy" during the Divine Liturgy. "To beg God's mercy, says Cabasilas, "is to ask for his kingdom," because "the kingdom of God is signified by his mercy." "If," Cabasilas continues, "among the actions of merciful men, one wishes to contemplate the aim of the divine mercy, he will find that it corresponds exactly to the Kingdom itself." [34] Here, then, solidarity—an act of love toward our fellow human being—constitutes an *icon* of the Kingdom within history. This quotation of course is impressively similar to his classic quotation regarding the Eucharist. Cabasilas in fact uses the exact same words "represents"/ "would see." In support of his position, he brings forward Gospel passages which feature solidarity as well as eucharistic and eschatological elements: Christ's words about the final judgment, "I hungered and you gave me to eat" (Matt. 25:35–36), and the banquet table in his kingdom, where the householder himself will serve his guests eternally: "Truly, I say to you, [the Lord] will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them" (Luke 12:37).[35]

Cabasilas, therefore, neither ignores solidarity nor embraces it merely as a secondary and therefore non-determinative element of the Church's self. For him solidarity is certainly a determinative element of the Church's self. Someone here could object that solidarity is a non-determinative element because no one will be hun-

[32] In Greek: *Η Δύναμη της Λατρείας: Η συμβολή του π. Αλεξάνδρου Σμέμαν στη Λειτουργική Θεολογία* (Athens: En Plo, 2008). The presentation took place in the "Gallery (Stoa) of the Books," Athens, Greece.

[33] "Οι Εικόνες της Βασιλείας." Its English translation, "Icons of the Kingdom," was published in 2024.

[34] Cabasilas, 47.

[35] Cabasilas, 48.

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gry in the Kingdom. I think this objection should be overruled. A movement of love toward the other will continue to be an element of the Kingdom. The only thing that is certain to remain in the Kingdom is love (1 Cor. 13:13). For this reason, practical acts of love within history are essential elements of the "being" of the Church! It is revealing moreover that in the narrative of the Last Supper, the Gospel of John does not cite Christ's "words of institution" ("take, eat"), but rather puts in their place Christ's washing of the disciples' feet (cf. Cabasilas' eschatological image of Christ ministering in His Kingdom). In this way, John declares that service is inherent in the ecclesiastical event, an essential dimension of the eucharistic sacrament, and a witness to the Kingdom.[36]

Cabasilas (along with innumerable other Fathers) especially emphasizes human action. Action on behalf of social justice, inspired by the Kingdom, changes the world—i.e., it serves to bring the light of the eschaton into history. Here we find another imbalance in Zizioulas: He quite rightly posits an "eschatological ethics"—i.e., the believer's decisions and actions in everyday life in light of the eschaton. He also notes emphatically that, in this perspective, when love is not the center of the Church, a tremendous degradation takes place, and the social exclusion that results is sin, inasmuch as it denies love.[37] The areas of everyday life where Zizioulas sees the application of eschatological ethics include ecology, art, sexuality, and the positive sciences.[38] Political and social justice do not appear on his horizon. Zizioulas continually views these with suspicion and a negative predisposition. While he notes beautifully that love means the destruction of death and that love has no meaning if it is not interwoven with immortality, the example of deficient love (i.e., not interwoven with immortal-

[36] Petros Vasileiadis, *Eucharist and Witness: Orthodox Perspectives on the Unity and Mission of the Church* (Geneva & Brookline, MA: WCC Publications and Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996), 3–4.

[37] John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 195.

[38] John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion*, 79–82, 128–175; *Remembering the Future*, 141–159.

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ity) that he cites is the feeding of the hungry![39] Here I'm afraid his position starts to crumble. First of all, the feeding of the hungry in the Gospel is a criterion for eternity—for the last judgment—and secondly, any human activity (ecology included) can easily become disconnected from the perspective of eternity (which we observe constantly and brutally nowadays).

The Problem of the Source

In contrast to views that juxtapose the Eucharist and mission (the best case scenario of which sees mission as a non-determinative element of ecclesiastical identity, which however is nourished by the Eucharist), I believe that the missionary dimension is *inherent* to the celebration of the Eucharist.[40]

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," wrote Paul (1 Cor. 11:26). This saying concerns the proclamation we experience in the Divine Liturgy—not in its first part, in the so-called Liturgy of the Word, which concludes after the reading of the Gospel, but in the second part, in the Liturgy of the Faithful, the sacrament. Most of the eucharistic Anaphoras have included a phrase to the effect that the celebration of the Eucharist represents the proclamation of Christ's Resurrection, and some others have further added the proclamation of His Ascension (which does not simply represent Christ's historical epilogue, but also the glorification of his historicity and the manifestation of his coming return).

For Zizioulas, the Eucharist is clearly the source of all the structure and ministries of the Church.[41] I believe, however, that it is important to hold the Eucharist before us not only as the source, but also as an offspring. Its source is the Covenant, the agreement between God and human beings, human beings' acceptance of the invitation issued by God. The Covenant together with the implied human being's personal conversion is the foundational missionary event and the terms of the eucharistic synaxis (the faithful

[39] John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 43–62, 307–313.
[40] For what follows, see my "The Church as Mission."
[41] John Zizioulas, *Έργα*, 280.

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have to renew their fidelity to the Covenant in each moment and for this reason the reciting of the Creed precedes the celebration of the Eucharist). In God's unfenced spaciousness and his unyielding love, there *is* salvation without the Eucharist, but there is *no* salvation without the Covenant. St. Mary of Egypt may have concluded her monastic seclusion by communing (receiving the holy Eucharist), but the thief at Golgotha and St. Ardalion the Mime[42] became citizens of the Kingdom without communing and, to be exact, without even being members of a congregation—a eucharistic community. God himself mystically baptizes and communes anyone he wishes, acting voluntarily and freely expanding the boundaries of his Church, being himself the missionary and liturgist par excellence.

Zizioulas, naturally, recognizes that the Eucharist operates with presuppositions and that, in this sense, it also has its source in a way. For example, he repeatedly notes the obvious, that the Eucharist is inconceivable without baptism, which also forms the border of the eucharistic community.[43] Nevertheless, the force of his entire theological framework highlights the Eucharist as the ultimate source, a move which, as I said earlier, connects it with the devaluing of mission, among other things.

We find this same asymmetry in Zizioulas' notes on the *Didache*, a valuable text from perhaps the end of the first century AD, which was nearly included in the canon of the New Testament. Zizioulas frequently invokes its excellent eucharistic prayer (9:4), in which the community entreats God to gather his Church from the ends of the earth into his coming kingdom. Zizioulas connects this prayer with the emphasis on the Eucharist as a manifestation of the Kingdom and as the only determinative element of the ecclesiastical identity. This, however, in my view, begs the question of whether the *Didache*'s eucharistic vision pertains to the eschatological gathering of the now-existing communities or, more likely, the eschatological gathering of the *whole* world. I say

[42] Cf. Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "If I cross the boundaries, you are there! An affirmation of God's action outside the canonical boundaries of the Church," *Communio Viatorum* 53.3 (2011), 40–55.

[43] John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion*, 33. *Έργα*, 455 ff.

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unreservedly the latter, which is moreover highlighted in the Holy Scriptures.[44] But in this perspective, an essential dynamic of the eucharistic vision is the missionary tension: the concern for and ministry to the whole world, the invitation (to the Kingdom) of all creation, which does not at this moment participate in the ecclesiastical community.

At a certain point, Zizioulas affirms this concern. With amazing clarity, he emphasizes that the recapitulation of the whole world (not only the now-members of the Church) in the eucharistic worship contributes a new understanding of the Body of Christ, inasmuch as Christ is not only firstborn among the brethren (Rom. 8:29), but also firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15), with his Body being "the fulness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23).[45] I personally had the opportunity to present (in 2000) the powerful dynamic of the "completion" of Christ's body on the basis of John Chrysostom, Bishop Theophan the Recluse, and Fr. Georges Florovsky, exactly in organic relationship to mission, meaning serving the "filling up" of the Body of Christ.[46] Zizioulas, however, is surprisingly inconsistent, for while he speaks about an eschatological gathering of all the nations, he does not make room for mission. It is like someone believing that the eschatological gathering of the world will "happen," and that the Church need only "be"—without *acting* as its *constructive* element (one more manifestation of ontology's dominance). Thus, when Zizioulas proceeds to connect the *Didache* with the march through history, he makes intra-ecclesiastical observations (e.g., regarding the current problem of not gathering in one place due to the reduction of bishoprics in favor of parishes, chapels, and monasteries),[47] but he has no place for witness to the world.

An absence of this kind constitutes a void in Zizioulas' work, as well as an inconsistency in relation to elements in his own work that do correlate with the aforementioned missionary dynamic.

[44] Matt. 25:32; John 11:52; 1 Cor. 15:24–28, and elsewhere.
[45] John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion*, 32; see also 36–37 and 52–53.
[46] "Mission: A Consequence or, perhaps, a presupposition of Catholicity?", op.cit.
[47] John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion*, 46–47.

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Zizioulas himself explicitly maintained that work on ontology is necessary since it is the normative way of thinking of the Western world, which is especially bound up with Christianity.[48] As we mentioned, he also recognized (with rare vision among the Orthodox) that in other cultures it was necessary to reformulate the faith in non-ontological ways. However, this perspective, this sensitivity, and these theological ventures (both Zizioulas' own toward westerners, as well as the needed reformulation of the faith in other cultures) are precisely manifestations of the Church's missionary self, which continually translate the Gospel message into the languages (verbal, symbolic, cultural) of the contexts in which they enter—just as the Lord translated his very self into the human condition. Hence my belief that mission is the cornerstone of the Church's construction and not simply an overlookable, negligible rock (cf. Matt. 21:42).

Epilogue

One of the images that Christ gave us of the Kingdom is, as is well known, the parable about the yeast (Matt. 13:33, Luke 13:20–21). At first glance, there appears to be two different realities: the flour and the yeast. Flour is the world and yeast is the Kingdom, still at work in history. What is required is the working of the yeast all through the dough. Nevertheless, there is a third constituent: There is also the woman who mixes the yeast with the flour. The working of the yeast, in other words, does not simply "happen." It is activated through action. And all of this has to do with the very nature of the yeast. Its capacity to work all through the dough is determinative and not just an attendant element. Without this, whatever manifests as yeast is simply … stucco.

[48] John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 63–64; Nikolaos Asproulis, *Το Μυστήριο του Χριστού και το Μυστήριο της Εκκλησίας*, 305.

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OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 159–161
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/7f3chh91
Book Review
Received: 11 April 2025 | Accepted: 15 April 2025

Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology by John D. Zizioulas. Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2023. xii + 335 pp. ISBN 978-1-936773-95-4.

In the mid-1990s, when Metropolitan John Zizioulas and I first started planning what eventually became his book, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), one of the intended chapters was a paper first given by then-Professor Zizioulas at the University of Durham in 1982, but never published. Its original title was "The Existential Significance of Liturgical Time." As the volume developed, Metropolitan John changed the chapter title to "Redeeming the Time." However, late in the day, in 2005, he decided to withdraw the chapter from *Communion and Otherness* because, he said, he wanted to keep it for another book.

Now at last we have that book, published posthumously, just months after Zizioulas's death, and the revised Durham paper is its final and culminating chapter, with the title, "Eschatology and Liturgical Time." The editor, Bishop Maxim Vasiljević, describes in his Preface how Zizioulas steadily crafted *Redeeming the Time: Toward an Eschatological Ontology* over the course of many years, and aptly explains why: because the book offers a "Grand Unified Theory," analyzing how "eschatological ontology deeply influences the entirety of Christian doctrine."

In his moving Foreword, Pope Francis recalls that in their various meetings over the years Zizioulas "often brought up the topic of an eschatological theology that for years he had been hoping to turn into a book," and he precisely expresses the ontological thrust

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of the book: for Zizioulas, he says, the Future is "already in operation" as "the cause of all being." The Future here "comes *toward* history, [it] does not emerge *from* history." In a fascinating footnote in his book, *Being as Communion* (1985), Zizioulas already contrasted eschatology as *orientation* and eschatology as *presence*, and firmly espoused the latter.

Readily acknowledging that such a view is deeply paradoxical, and frequently highlighting its contrast with common-sense "protological thinking," Zizioulas proposes in his lengthy Introduction that Christianity "depends entirely on the experience of the intrusion of the *eschata* into history," because "all of Christian life and thought" is derived from the post-Resurrection encounters of Christ with his disciples, when he *ate* with them in a foretaste of the Kingdom, a foundational experience now prolonged throughout history by the Holy Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist. In Christian understanding, therefore, time is reversed and the Alpha derives from the Omega, as St. Maximus the Confessor in particular explained.

In a wide-ranging, closely argued, and hugely stimulating narrative, frequently engaging with thinkers both ancient and modern, and regularly returning to Maximus who said, famously, that "truth is the state of the future," Zizioulas considers his topic from many angles in successive chapters: "Eschatology and Ontology," "Eschatology and Creation," "Eschatology and the Fall," "Eschatology, Hell, and Final Judgement," and the aforementioned "Eschatology and Liturgical Time." One of the striking features of the book is the ample scriptural commentary that it offers, reflected in the very helpful index of scriptural references at the end. It is quite clear that Zizioulas is striving to interpret *biblical* faith, and especially "the apostolic *kerygma* of Christ's Resurrection."

Chapter one starts by noting the ontological import of "I am" in the book of Exodus and the Gospel of John, and steadily unfolds the eschatological and relational nature of God's self-revelation, and the ecclesial and cosmic implications of Christ's resurrection. Chapter two further investigates the survival of creation, asking whether "the being of creation [has] been fixed at the beginning, or will it be fixed in the end?" Chapter three intriguingly

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asks whether the biblical Fall is a fall from past perfection or rather from the future that God intends for humanity and creation? Chapter four pursues a truly ontological rather than juridical understanding of judgment, evil, and hell, and proposes that the Eucharist is the antidote to hell "because it transforms us from individuals into *persons*." As already mentioned, chapter five considers the redemption of time itself, and the experience of time redeemed that the disciples had in their post-resurrection meals with Christ and that the Church now has in the Eucharist by the intervention of the future. The challenge of living in accordance with this mystery is considered in an extended section of the book's Introduction, entitled "Toward an Eschatological Ethics," which focuses on love because "love is the only 'virtue' that will survive in the end."

If we wonder what all of 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."

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OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 163–166
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/j5xhfy17
Book Review
Received: 6 August 2025 | Accepted: 10 August 2025

Theologically Reading Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas: Orthodox, Ecumenical and Modern by Nikolaos Asproulis. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025. xiii + 234 pp. ISBN 978-1-0364-5005-2.

In *Theologically Reading Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas*, Nikolaos Asproulis offers us an intellectual *vita* for John Zizioulas's theological legacy and interpretation of the Orthodox understanding of church doctrines. He structures his theological presentation of Zizioulas's theological biography on three conceptual, pillar-like, dimensions: Orthodoxy, ecumenism, and modernity. Asproulis opts for this triadic presentation on the basis of his conviction that Zizioulas is one of the contemporary Orthodox theologians who was immensely versed in, and referentially learned about, the confessional and creedal doctrines of the church, especially those contained in the councils of 381 and 451 A.D. On the other hand, Zizioulas, according to Asproulis, "stands out as one of our times' most open and dialogical Orthodox theologians" (p. xi), since Zizioulas's ecumenical engagement is characterized by dialogues, not just with early patristic theology, but also with the theologies of other Christian traditions. Finally, Asproulis demonstrates the validity of his opting for his tripod's third leg, 'modernity,' by pointing to Zizioulas's focal concern about connecting the Orthodox patristic heritage to modern existential challenges and his endeavor to construct a soteriological connectedness between the past and the present for the sake of humanity's future: "Zizioulas developed his theological synthesis to address humanity's existential quests" (p. xiv).

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In his tripartite exposition, Asproulis pauses carefully at the methodological aspects and dimensions of John Zizioulas's theological concentration on eschatology and ontology from an ecclesiology-centered perspective. Zizioulas founded his centralization of the eschatological nature of God's salvific history of communion (*ecclesia*) on a strong and frank patristic personalist and trinitarian ontology gleaned directly from patristic orthodoxy. And, since Zizioulas's focus on the futural *eschaton* of God's ultimate communion did not divert him away from the divine, communal relation with humanity and creation in the present and contemporary conditions of humanity, Asproulis pays attention to the impact of Ziziloulas's eschatological-ontological preconceptions on theological anthropology, personalist theology, and the nature-person dialectic with its pneumatological nature. Asproulis takes these existence-based hermeneutics of eschatological-ontological theologization to their ultimate practical applicability when, in the last chapter of the book, he offers a theological understanding of the application of Zizioulas's project to five areas of reasoning and practice: political theology, pluralism, gender issues, climate crisis, and the theology-science dialogue. Asproulis eloquently articulates the crux of Zizioulas's theological legacy in the following words:

At the end of the day, what matters [for Zizioulas] is if our theology can fulfill human being's thirst for *theosis*, which is communion with the life of the trinitarian God, more specifically, a mutual and reciprocal encounter with God the Father in Christ through the Spirit in the banquet of the kingdom (p. xvii).

If Asproulis in the early sections of his book displays Zizioulas's theological legacy in a conscientiously descriptive manner, he offers an analytical deconstruction of Zizioulas's abovementioned theological crux in the ensuing parts of the volume. Probably one of the most accredited analytical arguments he offers is found in section 3.2.5, chapter 3, part 1, where he speaks about the hermeneutic premises of the relation between the Trinity, the Church, and the *eschaton* in Zizioulas's scheme. According to Asproulis, Zizioulas's understanding of the triadic equation of 'Trinity-Church-*Eschaton*' is grounded in his understanding of the escha-

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tological nature of the Eucharist. For Zizioulas, Asproulis argues, the Eucharist is not just a '*synaxis*' (a liturgical holy day), but primarily a *movement* towards the future, towards the *eschaton*. This eschatological dimension secures the Church's emancipation from imprisonment in any historical period and its continuous derivation of its hypostatic, personal-communal nature from the triune hypostatic reality of the God of the eschatological kingdom. The Eucharist, then, is the central, chronology-free *locus* for "the church's synthesis and link to the Trinity and the kingdom" (p. 120). This is, according to Asproulis, what makes the church "both an icon of the Trinity and an icon of the *eschaton*" (p. 122).

Ultimately, inviting in John Zizioulas's theology, according to Asproulis, remains his attempt at reasoning theologically about the modern, present human condition from the perspective of relational and personalist ontology. Asproulis is deeply aware of the place this ontology occupies in Zizioulas's overall theological *vita*, and he knows well the controversies and debates this ontology aroused among theologians and readers of Zizioulas's writings, starting from *Being as Communion*, to *Communion & Otherness*, and finally, in *Remembering the Future*. Aiming to transcend the logic of constituting being by means of nature, which according to him has dominated Western theology, Zizioulas spoke throughout his texts about an 'ontological revolution' centered in the 'being as communion' axiom of the trinitarian ontology of the patristic tradition. Zizioulas not only injected this ontology with hypostatized aspects of relationality that are derived from the Trinity, but Asproulis demonstrates that Zizioulas equally baptized his interpretation of patristic trinitarian ontology with serious eschatological dimensions and perspectives. According to Zizioulas, these eschatological aspects are manifest in the divine revelation of relational and personalist ontology in creation, thus in the realm of natural scientific reasoning. Science itself now perceives the ontological presence of relationality in nature, time and space, and in biology. In this tracing of the marks of relational-personalist ontology in the scientific, empirical realm of the natural order, Asproulis detects a unique Zizioulan attempt at offering a praiseworthy "thoughtful and constructive interpretation" of "the rich

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tradition of the undivided church," which demonstrates for Asproulis that "as a child of his time, [Zizioulas] engaged in continuous *dialogue* with the difficulties and challenges posed by the surrounding environment, addressing the *existential* demands of humanity" (p. 213).

The richness, multi-dimensionality, and quite diversified perspectives of Asproulis make his monograph a very serious invitation for scholars and readers who are already deeply and comprehensively versed in John Zizioulas's versatile writings and sophisticated discourses. This is a book which one needs to read with a sharply attentive and piercing mind, usually expected only from trained readers. This is not to discredit the book. To the contrary, it is a reliable and serious contribution, providing food-for-thought to stimulate other experts in the field to examine further and more rigorously one of the most seminal and influential Orthodox theologians in his generation.

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Photograph of John Zizioulas during his student years in Athens, 1950s.
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Language: English
Publishers:
John Zizioulas Foundation • https://zizioulas.org
St. Sebastian Orthodox Press • https://sebastianpress.org
Volos Academy for Theological Studies • https://acadimia.org
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print)
ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/bs47y087

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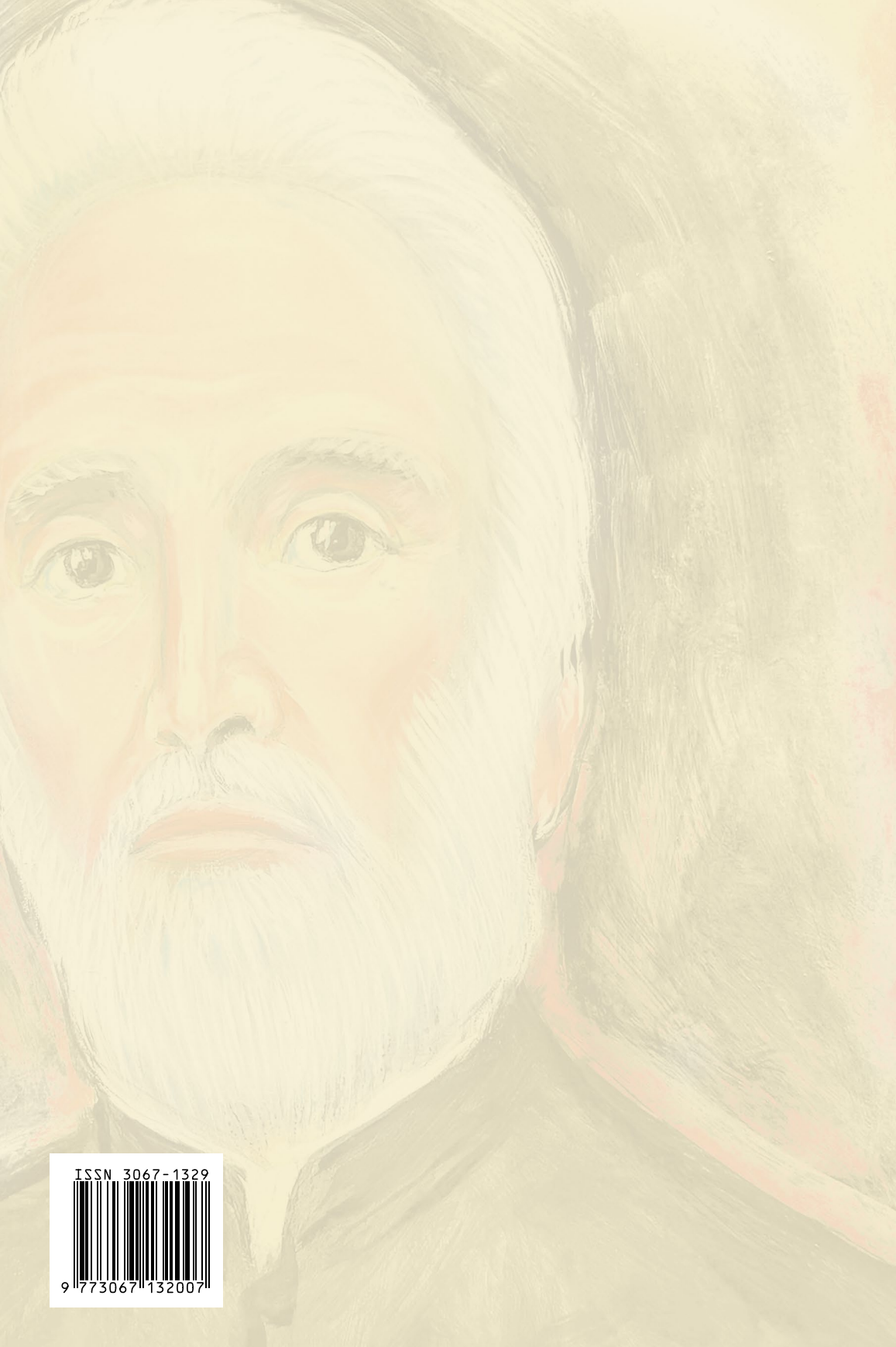
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ISSN 3067-1329